International Working Women's Day March 8, 2025

Speech by panelist Sarala Emmanuel, Co-Founder, Feminist Collective for Economic Justice at the IWD event organized by the Human Rights Commission Sri Lanka on 7th March 2025.

I am honored to be in a room with state officials working for the rights of all the citizens in Sri Lanka. I am also happy to be here among many of my fellow feminist activists, women and trans women, fighting for women's rights in Sri Lanka.

I am representing the Feminist Collective for Economic Justice, and I was invited here to talk about women's labour, economic empowerment, autonomy and micro finance. At the very outset, I would like to say that it is always extremely meaningful for me to speak about women's labour rights on International Working Women's Day as this is the history of how the IWD came into being more than 100 years ago - with working women demanding their labour rights.

I thought I will talk about women's labour, autonomy and empowerment, rooted in my context in Batticaloa. Batticaloa is one of the poorest districts in the country with women working primarily in informal economies of rural agriculture and fisheries. The only alternatives to this have been extremely precarious migrant work. Batticaloa also has a huge garments factory which employs close to 4000 women and several others as well.

As for micro finance and household debt, working women in Batticaloa, like many other districts in the North and East have been caught in predatory micro finance systems, often leading to increasing domestic violence and at times leading to suicides. In 2018, like in other districts, there were protests against micro finance companies in Batticaloa, after 17 people took their own lives due to debt. By 2024, victims of micro finance debt traps across the country challenged the Microfinance and Credit Regulatory Authority Bill. Victims petitions stated that the Bill did not propose caps to interest rates, excluded the big micro finance companies and did not protect victims from harm and instead criminalised those who were unable to pay back. This is a heartbreaking example of what should NOT happen in terms of laws and policies. The Supreme Court ruled that provisions of the Micro Finance Act was unconstitutional.

In December 2024, more than a hundred women gathered in Batticaloa to share experiences of the economic crisis and IMF-backed austerity measures. It was the first time since the economic and political crisis in Sri Lanka, that women from diverse economies were coming together.

Women from the fishing sector, farmers, home-based producers, plantations, and livestock and milk producer collectives and others, across six districts came together.

This conference “Ezhuga” (RISE UP!) was organized by the Suriya Women’s Development Center. The focus of our conversations were on the grounded experiences of women, particularly those who were invisible to the state. Therefore, we invited speakers from disability rights groups and queer groups to speak on their economic conditions.

One of the women leaders from a thrift and credit cooperative society in Batticaloa, spoke of the economic impact on the lives of working women such as herself, with increased indirect taxes (still at 18%) . it was impacting her ability to meet basic needs and making her ability to earn an income from home-based production impossible. This had led to debilitating household debt along with mounting debt to the new creditors - the CEB and the Water Board.

A trans woman shared her experiences of the difficulties of trying to earn an income or find work. She could not be registered on any voting list as she had been forced to leave her home and village, making her invisible to any government scheme for relief.

Women working in these economies have been battered by decades of war, discriminatory laws and policies that have led to land dispossession, colonial bonded labour practices, war injuries, loss of working family members, and predatory micro finance systems for decades.

The sharing was rich and there were many ideas for collective work and campaigns for socio-economic rights. Some of the recommendations from this conference are echoed by working women in many parts of the country.

First and foremost, policies and legislations that value women’s labour which could lead to empowerment and autonomy, need to enact structural changes in these exploitative, capitalist and precarious economies.

What does this mean? This means legal protections for workers in the informal economy. I am happy that Presidents Counsel Farzana Jameel already emphasized this point in her keynote speech. Legal rights and entitlements include decent and increased wages, leave, pensions, maternity leave and protection for workplace injuries and exploitation. Even if there are token pension schemes for farmers and fishermen, they are not easily accessible and the amounts are very little. These are also extremely gendered and certainly not universal. They do not cover for landless agriculture labourers and women fishers.

To give a concrete example, I want to share Vasanthy’s story. She is a woman living with disabilities due to war time injuries. She survives by working as a domestic worker in different households. She cannot afford the transport for her health clinics at the government hospitals anymore. The other day, on her way to work, she was knocked down by a car and injured her foot. She was hospitalized for 10 days. Now she is home and cannot walk. She cannot walk - she cannot work. Her household, along with an

elderly mother and school going son, survives on her daily wages. Her wage is not legally stipulated or protected. She has no protections for injuries such as this, she has no leave. Also, now the burden of caring for her, falls on her school going son and elderly mother, as she has no other support, from the state or otherwise.

So if we are talking today about empowerment and autonomy for women, then we need legislation and policies that protect Vasanthy's rights as a worker and a citizen, including ensuring social protection for her as well as supporting the additional burden of care on her family, while she is unable to work. This requires a structural rethinking of the economy itself. Don't forget! Vasanthy still pays indirect tax of 18% while being bedridden which is going towards increased state revenue, a condition of the IMF.

Therefore, there needs to be a gender audit of the impact of austerity measures on women. A gender audit always a rigorous audit from the margins of society as a whole. There should be continued monitoring of the impact of rising household debt burdens and predatory micro finance schemes in the context of this economic crisis.

Another core dimension or working women's rights is universal social protection.

There seems to be some confusion about what is universal social protection– the current budget includes EPF/ETF, gratuity within the allocations for social protection. On the one hand, these are rights accorded to workers ONLY in the formal sector. This is in a context where existing formal sectors such as the plantations are being informalized at a rapid scale. On the other hand, the arbitrary and precarious targeted social safety mechanisms remain unchanged. To simply include existing legal rights within 'universality' to increase numbers is an eyewash. It hides the reality that poor households primarily working in the informal economy remain left out of social protection schemes and are subject to violent processes of targeting that leave them immensely vulnerable and competing with their fellow poor for crumbs.

In terms of policies and budget allocations, "universal" does not mean putting different schemes into one pot and saying there are schemes from birth to death. Universal means every citizen has the right to it. It is one thing to not enact the system change required to bring in universal social safety. One can extend the understanding that this requires time and cannot be done overnight. However, the misrepresentation of the meaning of universal and the connected public image building seems deliberate and harmful.

Why is Universal social safety important for the working poor? For working people from most informal labour economies in Sri Lanka, their main asset is their bodies. Without functioning bodies they cannot survive. There is alarming data showing unprecedented death rates, infant mortality, stunting and wasting of children under five is increasing, particularly in districts like Batticaloa. This is a direct indicator of the impact of austerity measures imposed by the IMF and accepted by successive governments. Increased taxes, continued low wages, removal of subsidized electricity, energy and water, and

limited targeted social protection is impacting women's bodies as well as the next generation. Here we are "celebrating" International Working Women's Day, in a big hall in Colombo when we know from even government data, that women and children are being gradually deprived of nutritious foods? Even the existing state schemes have REDUCED their budgets, not increased them.

Universal social safety makes basic needs accessible to the working poor. It builds social cohesion and does not pit poor citizens against one another. This is essential to stop the violent march of the economic crises and IMF-backed government policies that will destroy Sri Lankan society for generations to come.

In, 2016, when the public consultations for a new constitution were taking place, poor women from my district, came in front of the committee and gave their recommendations for social protection – that it should be an entitlement, a legal right enshrined in our constitution. In fact, the final report of the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform recommended in Chapter 12 on fundamental rights –

12 – right to health,

13 – right to food, water, housing and social security

14 – right to education.

In terms of education the report proposed the following "Every person has the right to education which shall be directed to full development of the human personality and the sense of its dignity and to the strengthening of respect for democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms."

On this International Working Women's Day, I would like assert again that we need similar language in the constitution that states that "every person to have the right to food, water, housing and social security which can be directed to full development of the human personality and sense of its dignity and to the strengthening of respect for democracy, human rights and fundamental freedoms." The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka has a crucial role to play in framing this articulation.

I want to end with the current government's development plans to establish industrial zones, and free trade zones in the East. This is happening in the context of absolute lack of space to organize workers in the garments sector and the IMF directly threatening against trade union action. Without vibrant trade unions working freely with a large membership of working women, how can we imagine that workers' rights will be protected? Our history has shown us again and again, the exploitation that takes place in the garments sector, the recent pandemic made it even clearer. A vibrant trade union movement with many trade unions and women worker leaders, is essential for democracy and to ensure women's labour rights. Any conversation on women's labour rights, empowerment and autonomy, without having this as a core foundation, has been

proved over and over again to be perpetuating exploitative and precarious economies that most women work in. An actual system change and a push back on the IMF and other international actors can only take place with the political will of those in power backed by a strong peoples' movements, trade unions and women's leadership. That is what the International Working Women's Day actually stands for. Without this, the working poor of this country, especially the women, especially those battered by war and by exploitative economies for generations will remain dehumanized and disenfranchised as workers and as citizens. And that is a shame on any country. I can only wish on this women's day that Sri Lanka will stand firm on protecting its working poor as they are the backbone, not just of our economy but of our society as a whole.