

The International Day for Elimination of Violence against Women -November 25 - rolled back with resolutions and meetings to create awareness of and the need for strong measures to implement the

United Nations Resolution. The White Ribbon Campaign, which symbolized these sentiments, was the order of the day.

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence against women as:

"Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life."

Violence against women encompasses, but not limited to, the following:

(1). Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation;

(2) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the community, including rape, sexual abuse, sexual harassment and intimidation at work, in educational institutions and elsewhere, trafficking in women and forced prostitution;

(3). Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetrated or condoned by the State, wherever it occurs.

According to a UN Report, "Worldwide, a quarter of all women are raped during their lifetime. Depending on the country, 25 to 75 per cent of women are regularly beaten at home. Over 120 million women have undergone female genital mutilation. Rape has devastated women, girls and their families in recent conflicts in Rwanda, Cambodia, Liberia, Peru, Somalia, Uganda and the former Yugoslavia".

In Sri Lanka, as in some other countries, these events occur but at not so alarming a rate. Although there



is a new awareness and emphasis on women's equality and rights, violence against women has not unfortunately reached a low level but, on the contrary, violence appears to be on the increase. Traditionally, domestic violence is tolerated as a part of married life in order to avoid the social stigma and to show that everything is "good" in such families. Unfortunately, such action covers reality and slows down the progressive approaches to the

vexed social problem. The most pressing problem

faced by women in Sri Lanka is that, although women-dominated industries such as garment export industries and tea exports, and remittances from migrant workers in the Middle East, are now the main foreign exchange earners of Sri Lanka, the workers' conditions of service and living standards are grossly below the optimal level and are fraught with misery and despair. This trend in foreign exchange earnings is, in fact, a reversal of the traditional foreign exchange earnings that existed a couple of decades ago.

There are about one million Sri Lankans working in the Middle East and women make up more than 80 percent of the workforce. Remittances from these workers are now the number one foreign exchange earner. In 1998, the remittances amounted to Rs 64 billion.

These workers work under trying conditions and are often subjected to physical, psychological and sexual assaults perpetrated by their employers and other household members. Some workers have, in fact, committed suicide in frustration. They have neither fixed hours of work nor proper health facilities and are at the mercy of their employers. To add to more, they are even exploited by local employment agencies to find contractual employment abroad by charging excessive fees. The successive governments have not taken stronger action to prevent such inhumane treatment by regulating employment contracts for fear of losing valuable foreign exchange sources. It is great that the present government is pursuing a course of action to safeguard the interests and safety of these workers in consultation with relevant authorities in those countries. It is also encouraging to note that the President of Sri Lanka who recently summoned the country's overseas envoys for a "ginger up" session in the course of which he had stressed the need to treat the workers with compassion and gratitude and to attend to their grievances in a more acceptable way, whenever the affected workers approach their offices.

The other sector, where most women are employed, is the garment industries, which is the next on the list of foreign exchange earners. Workers employed by garment factories are often exploited, denying them minimum wages and other acceptable working conditions. Foreign companies have made huge investments in these industries and their main motive is to make substantial profits at the expense of workers who have no way of fighting for their rights in the absence of trade unions to take up their cause. Their gender, lack of sufficient education and organizational capabilities often work against them.

Tea plantations in Sri Lanka account for two-third of all plantations, and the tea export industry becomes the third foreign exchange earner. Tea planta-



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lion.

tions provide employment to a very large number of women in plucking tender tea leaves on tea estates and in work in tea factories as unskilled or semi-skilled workers. They receive low wages and still live in primitive conditions lacking proper housing, sanitation, adequate medical facilities and educational services for their children. Though steps have been taken to ameliorate their conditions, more is yet to be done

Women account for 49 per cent of the total population of Sri Lanka, and 37 per cent of the country's total workforce, and their contribution to the economy is enormous. There is, therefore, an urgent need to give priority to women's issues and end the vicious circle of deprivation, discrimination, exploitation and oppression and make them responsible, dignified and equal partners of the society.

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