

**Speech given at the Arria formula meeting, United Nations – 19th October 2010
by Mrs. Visaka Dharmadasa- chairperson Association of Aar affected Women**

Honorable Chairperson, Your Excellencies, distinguish members of the United Nations and civil society, Dear sisters,
First of all I wish to thank for giving me this opportunity.

September 27th 1998, is the day that the war came to my door step,. I received news that my second son, an officer in the Sri Lankan Army was missing in action from the battle field.

From that day I have never looked back. I wanted to see an end to the armed conflict that engulfed my country.

I contacted other women. We as mothers wanted to stop the war and we knew only one way we could do it, we had to work with the mothers of the other side of the divide. Our call was “**right to life for all.**” We also called on our government and the LTTE to agree to mutually beneficial activities such as the smooth transfer of dead bodies, treatment of the captives and wearing and respecting the identification tags. We wanted to build on these basic agreements to reach greater goals. We called it building peace from the heart of the conflict - the battle field itself.

Based on trust we made by way of writing letters and requesting both parties to respect the International Humanitarian law and Geneva conventions, I was able to lead a group of 7 women to the Tamil tiger’s territory in the height of war, to know the fate of our sons who were reported missing. I wish to specially mention here that because we were women we were able to make that journey and return safely.

We could connect very easily with the youth of Tamil tigers since we saw them as our own children. We as women, especially as mothers - do have the ability to understand the feelings of youth and win their trust. When we embarked on this mission our intentions were only to know the fate of our children, but once we reached there and met the youth of Tamil tigers we were able to understand their side of the story. That understanding and sharing of experiences with others, paved the way for Sri Lanka to move to a ceasefire. We were at the very center of that.

We also collected 70000 signatures from mothers and others calling for an end to hostilities and handed over the signatures to the Royal Norwegian government inviting them to facilitate a process of peace building in Sri Lanka.

We were able to make the connections with the women of the other side of the divide, together we were able to build the much needed trust to convince the very influential civil society members to come together to dialogue the core issues of the conflict.

We held our first conflict transformation dialogue's sessions before the peace talks started.

But the official process that started – based on our work – excluded us. The government hijacked it.

It is true that women's groups advocated and secured a sub committee for gender issues but that was not enough. We as peace women around the world are not simply asking to participate in talks to address so-called 'women's issues. There are 2 reasons why I say this: First because ALL ISSUES Are WOMEN'S ISSUES AND SO-CALLED WOMEN'S ISSUES ARE THE ISSUES FOR ALL OF SOCIETY AND ALL OUR LEADERS TO ADDRESS.

Second, we believe and we proved that it is important to take into consideration the values, attitudes and perspectives that women bring to the entire peace process. We can go places, say things, engage and build trust in ways that is not possible for other actors sometimes.

Having been marginalized from public life, we understand what it means to ensure and respect inclusivity – and why it matters so much in peacemaking – not at the end when the power deals are made, but from the very outset.

I am not suggesting that women have all the answers. What I am saying is that if we are committed to peace, then you – as governments and the UN – must acknowledge, respect and draw upon all the resources that are pro-peace.

Sri Lanka had the potential to have a comprehensive peace process, but it failed. One major reason is that by excluding women from the key talks, both sides lost major assets.

I believe to this day, that if we had women on both sides, they would have sensed the unease building up and acted early enough to salvage and continue the process. Second, there was no information shared with the public – people had no ownership of the process and did not understand what was at stake.

Third, If we had been there, we could have drawn upon our own networks to convey information and build the public support needed to sustain the process and push leaders on both sides to make the necessary but hard compromises.

You may think that Sri Lanka's war is over now, so what is the problem? You are right – my country is post-war but it is NOT a post conflict country.

The root causes of the conflict are still very much alive and in need of urgent attention. Displacement is a massive problem. While the government is taking some steps to address the needs of war widows, the lack of women in decision-making levels of the entire recovery process means that many women-specific issues are simply not thought about. For example women are not being consulted in community rebuilding plans.

We as women believe that it is only by negotiations and inclusivity that Sri Lanka can find a lasting solution to the country's conflict. We also believe that sharing power is essential not only as a solution for the ethnic conflict but also as a sustainable development strategy.

Our demands for inclusion are not for political correctness – they are for very pragmatic reasons of security and peace.

When we were introduced to the landmark UN security council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security we were so happy as it not only gave us the much needed recognition but also the endorsement of the importance of our work for peace and security in our countries and the world at large.

In the last 10 years, this resolution has been instrumental in opening doors for women to secure their due positions not only in domestic spaces but also in public spaces. I would not be here without 1325.

1325 is unique. What other resolutions from this Council are known and supported by people from Sri Lanka to Colombia, Liberia to Aceh?
It has helped women advance themselves, and it suggests that the UN actually cares about human security and peace.

This Council's task of sustaining world peace will be much easier if it is done in partnership with 'we the people of the United Nations' with the world population. This resolution has opened the doors for the first time for that very special partnership. We need to make the promise a reality.

You will hear many recommendations in these coming days. I offer you one: IMPLEMENT 1325, 1820, 1888 AND 1889 NOW.

You may ask how? I will not repeat all the ways it is possible to do so but will endorse just a few.

1. Ensure that the Civil Society Advisory Group (CSAG) under the guidance of the existing high level panel becomes permanent with regional and national partners, recognition and funds to operate. CSAG can be our voice and can help you.
2. As the MIT/ICAN report suggests, it is time to establish criteria for qualification of civil society groups into peace processes. Not all CSOs are qualified – but instead of being arbitrary, let's together set criteria ensuring that peace groups are shown the respect they deserve, and have a voice alongside those who use violence and oppression to get their way in all peace processes.
3. Hold regular 1325 forums where donors and women's groups can interact and monitor the progress in accordance with the indicators at national level convened by UN.

4. Keep increasing the numbers of women UN peace keepers. It is a matter of equality, as well as a matter of good security on the ground.

5. There should be gender sensitivity training for, and zero tolerance of sexual abuse by all unformed security personnel in all UN member states

There is no state security without human security. That is the essence of UNSCR 1325. You as the UN's Security Council must help other member states understand this and implement the women peace and security agenda fully.

Together we can pave the way for a new vision to be born in Defining Security the way Lord Buddha's Dharma teaches us:

“ Hatred will not be ended by hatred, it is only by compassion that one can end hatred”

Your Excellencies, We as women stand ready to support this vision; to apply the resolutions you have adopted; and to fulfill the promise of the UN to end the 'scourge of war'. Are you willing to work with us?

Thank you.

Visaka Dharmadasa
Sri Lanka