
Women enjoy equal status in Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka tells UN

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Sri Lanka welcomes the convening of this discussion on women's rights with its special focus on equality before the law, and extends its appreciation to all the panelists for their excellent presentations on the different facets of this important issue.

Sri Lanka is committed to ensuring equality for women before the law. The right to equality, specifically the right against discrimination on the basis of gender, together with provision for affirmative action, is enshrined in our Constitution and has been reflected both in our laws and by our judiciary. The effectiveness of our legislative framework is testified to by national and international statistics. In the Global Gender Gap Report of 2008, Sri Lanka ranked 12 out of 130, with particular strength in health, political empowerment and education. Women in Sri Lanka have a high level of literacy, strengthened by equal levels of enrolment in schools, and better levels of enrolment than men in universities. Women's participation in the workforce has also increased over the years, with near or full equality achieved in a number of sectors, including the professional, manufacturing, education, health, and agriculture sectors. In the family, women enjoy status as an equal partner in the marriage. Women have equal rights with respect to property, as well as matrimonial property, with increased recognition by the judiciary of the contribution of the non-working partner. With respect to custody, the judiciary's focus is on the interests of the child, with preference for the mother in the case of young children. Reforms are continuing to address those gaps which are still present in this area of law. Addressing violence against women, Sri Lanka has reformed its criminal laws with specific reference to crimes against women through substantive amendments, particularly on burden of proof and punitive measures. In addition, Sri Lanka in 2005 enacted the Protection of Domestic Violence Act, which provides for the issue of protection orders against acts of physical violence which constitute criminal offences, of extortion and intimidation and of emotional abuse. This Act is supplemented by a National Plan of Action with focus on awareness raising and monitoring. In the public arena, Sri Lanka has enjoyed universal suffrage since 1931, and elected the world's first woman Prime Minister, and has elected a woman President. While representation in Parliament is currently low, women are not excluded from entering into politics and are, indeed, very active. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka recognizes that gaps exist in a number of areas which need to be addressed, and to this end, a separate Ministry exists for Women's Empowerment, whose activities include achieving policy objectives set out in Sri Lanka's Women's Charter and overseeing the work of the National Committee for Women. Sri Lanka looks forward to further work to look at and address challenges faced and best solutions in achieving complete elimination of all discrimination against women. Thank You.