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A voice for Sri Lanka's women

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Their mouths were tied with cloth, silenced. There was no need to speak, however - every other woman in Sri Lanka knew their story. Along with those in the crowd they too had lost sons and husbands to a raging conflict; they too were bearing the brunt of the crippling rise of food prices, slipping into malnutrition because as women they always fed their family first. In this eerily silent protest, one thousand people, the vast majority women, stood in front of the consulate building in the Sri Lankan capital Colombo as the civil war raged on around them. They had come from across the country. The day before, there had been a bomb blast in the city. But they still came, and although they stood in silence they knew that they had a voice.

http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L298xH397/W_Becky_P2260530-28fe7.jpg

They had been given this voice by Padma Pushpakanthi, a graceful young woman who, as national coordinator of the Savisthri women's network, has ceaselessly encouraged Sri Lanka's women to stand up and be counted. In so doing she has empowered them to take control of their lives.

'We work for the poorest of the poor, telling them they have rights. They have no idea,' says Pushpakanthi. 'We want to see political and social progress, from a woman's perspective,' she says.

Savisthri works by assisting charity groups in six districts of the country, helping them to think creatively on how women can find alternative ways to support themselves. As well as training and conferences, this also includes human rights networks and advocacy strategies to campaign against policies that impact upon women's livelihoods in fishing, plantation and farming. It began in 1994 as part of a network of groups, becoming an independent women's association in 2001. Today it has 2000 members in 79 villages in the country. Pushpakanthi encourages poor women to use their vote, to gain additional income through joining the micro-societies set up by the organisation, having home gardens and selling produce, but most of all to be aware of their rights at home, at work and in society.

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Savisthri encourages others to speak up in a country which has an appalling track record for suppressing free speech. Newspaper columnist Prageeth Eknaligoda has been missing since 24 January this year, and there are fears that his fate is that of Lasantha Wickrematunge's, a journalist assassinated by gunmen as he was driving to work in January last year. The appointment of Dr. Mervyn Silva, a man accused of intimidation and attacks on journalists, as new deputy minister for media has led many journalists to flee the country. 'There is a suppression of the media, disappearances, killings, attacks on the media,' says an activist who declines to be named. 'They say the government is doing it. The government is concerned about power, not about settling matters.'

Meanwhile, despite the end of the 25-year civil war that took the lives of 80,000 people, the situation for Sri Lanka's poor continues to be horrifying. Leela Marambe, also from Savisthri, describes it as an 'abyss'. Almost 40% of the population survive on under £1.30 a day. In the north and east, there are still 25,000 families in the government-run camps, thousands more are displaced and much of the area is riddled with landmines. 'Prices are going up and people are suffering. Not enough is being done to remove landmines or relocate people,' continues the activist. Organisations such as Savisthri are forbidden from visiting the areas, although members did donate money through religious organisations, the only groups permitted to go to the camps.

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For Pushpakanthi, sitting back and staying silent in the face of such poverty was never an option. She has always worked in the NGO sector; before Savisthri, she helped poor Tamil boys with their education. 'It is our responsibility as citizens, as women, to get involved in this,' she says. Graceful, poised, her long black hair tied loosely to one side and falling on a light pink and grey sari, there is something almost stately about her presence. 'What we want is peace,' she says. 'Real peace.'

She works out of her office at Savisthri, a building nestled among white-painted houses. Inside, a couple of steps

lead down to an open and light-filled space; to the left, a small pond curves round an island of luscious green plants. Light from the windows catches the orange fish. There are tables, chairs, shelves piled high with colourful leaflets. A tall glass cabinet houses delicately hand-loomed saris. It is only 10am, but the hot Sri Lankan sun is shoving its way in through the open door of the small office in the corner where Pushpakanthi and Marambe have laid out sweet tea and bourbon biscuits. On the wall, a mural shows two women, one a fisherwoman, the other a farmer.

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The issues Savisthri deals with are many and varied. They helped a group of women write to the government Central Environmental Authority because a rice mill was polluting a river, making people ill. Another time they got involved with the campaign for the return of the 7.15am bus that was the only way children could get to school. More recently, in the district of Anuradhapura, famous amongst tourists for its well-preserved ancient ruins, Savisthri bought farm land from the government. It is infertile land, the soil dying from over-cropping and over-use of chemicals. But Savisthri knew this when they bought it: in fact, that's why they took it on - to teach women and children how to prepare the soil and make it fertile again. In this way, taking small steps, one village at a time, it hopes to bring about change for the country.

Post-scriptum :

Links :

<http://www.savisthri.blogspot.com/>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/sinhala/news/story/2010/03/100305_sandhya_mahinda.shtml

http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/7817422.stm