



**Opening statement of the Hon. Saroja Savithri Paulraj, Minister of  
Women and Child Affairs, Head of Delegation to the CEDAW Review of Sri  
Lanka's 9<sup>th</sup> Periodic Report**

**13 February 2025, Palais des Nations, Geneva**

Madam Chair,

Distinguished members of the Committee,

Civil society representatives, particularly those who have travelled from Sri Lanka,

Good morning

As the Minister of Women and Child Affairs, I am honoured to represent the Government of Sri Lanka before this esteemed Committee. This is the first time that Sri Lanka's periodic report to CEDAW is being presented to the Committee by the subject Minister and it is a reflection of the government's commitment to upholding the rights of women and girls and in advancing gender equality. This review holds particular significance, as it is the country's first engagement with an international human rights treaty body since the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2024 and the formation of the new government in Sri Lanka.

Madam Chair

We are proud to have a member from Sri Lanka in this distinguished Committee, Prof. Rangita De Alwis De Silva. Her contribution to this Committee's work is highly appreciated.

My delegation, incidentally an all women team, includes officials from the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Attorney General's Department, Sri Lanka Police, and the Permanent Mission of Sri Lanka to the UN in Geneva. They will introduce themselves when taking the floor.

Madam Chair,

As a woman coming from an ethno religious minority and working-class background—a teacher, a mother, a trade unionist, a social reformer and an activist, and a first time Parliamentarian, I have personally experienced many of the challenges women ordinarily face, in having to balance personal aspirations with societal and familial expectations.

This is why I am particularly proud to be the first Tamil Member of Parliament elected from the Southern Province which has a predominantly Sinhala community. I represent the full diversity of women in Sri Lanka: cutting across ethnic, religious, rural and urban lines.

In celebration of this Madam Chair, I would like to express a few remarks in Tamil and Sinhala, the two national languages of Sri Lanka.

*[delivered in Tamil]* Diversity and inclusion are often said to be the cornerstones of progress and success. Women's representation in Sri Lanka's Parliament has risen from 4.8% to 9.7% with the election of 22 female Members of Parliament in the general election of November 2024. These women include individuals from the working class and marginalized communities, representing a diverse spectrum of Sri Lankan society, including, for the first time in history, two women from the Malayaga community.

*[Delivered in Sinhala]* Furthermore, for the first time, a male Member of Parliament with visual impairment has entered the legislature from the reserved National list. What is also significant is that none of them come from families with political backgrounds. We are also proud to have the third female Prime Minister, Dr. Harini Amarasuriya, who has broken the glass ceiling coming from a non-political family background, who received the highest number of preferential votes ever received by a candidate in the Colombo District.

One of the Government's key electoral pledges has been to increase women's political participation by 50% by making necessary structural and social changes in the coming years.

This commitment reflects our recognition that women's representation and leadership in decision-making at all levels is essential for inclusive and sustainable development. Although we still have a long way to go, the government has made achieving full gender parity a priority, as part of its pledge to strengthen democratic governance and to ensure equal representation of women in government.

Appointing a woman to the post of Deputy Chairman of Committees of Parliament was another milestone, as no woman had previously held the positions of Speaker, Deputy Speaker, or Deputy Chairman of Committees. The present Secretary General of Parliament is the second woman to hold that position.

A noteworthy achievement of **women's effective participation and decision-making in public life** is the percentage of women professionals in the public sector. The Sri Lankan judiciary has a high percentage of women at senior levels, which includes the current Chief Justice and 02 Justices of the Supreme Court as well as the Secretary to the Ministry of Justice and the Legal Draftsman.

As per the Women in Diplomacy Index of 2023, Sri Lanka had 32% female Ambassadors a position it shared with Austria, Botswana and Lithuania. This number included the current Secretary to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ambassador Arunatilaka who is part of my delegation. Across all levels of the Sri Lanka's diplomatic Service, women are in the majority.

During the reporting period, Sri Lanka Police has appointed four female Deputy Inspectors General of Police [DIG]. In December 2024, a Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP) was appointed as Director of the Criminal Investigation Department (CID), marking the first time a woman has held this influential role.

Women have also been appointed to the National Labour Advisory Council (NLAC) as part of the Government's commitment to ensuring greater gender inclusivity in decision-making bodies. Apart from this, many women have been appointed to the government's decision-making councils, commissions, and boards in Sri Lanka. These appointments are part of a broader effort to enhance

gender representation and ensure that women's perspectives are integrated into the executive, legislature, judiciary, and administrative decision-making processes.

Madam Chair, allow me now to highlight some of the significant progress achieved in a multitude of areas since the last review of Sri Lanka in 2017, pertaining to the elimination of discrimination of women and the advancement of women's rights in the country.

We recognise that while passing laws is important, it is only part of the solution. Given Sri Lanka's economic challenges due to our external debt, we believe that economic justice must be a cornerstone for achieving gender equality.

Sri Lanka has achieved a fragile but grounded economic stability through the adoption of sound long-term economic and fiscal policy measures, accompanied by strengthening of governance, financial oversight and reform, as well as measures to reduce corruption vulnerabilities. These trends are reflected in improved economic data and indicators. The economy has returned to positive growth rates in 2025.

The Government is set to implement a policy framework focused on ensuring economic stability and social well-being through three key initiatives:

- 1) Eradicating rural poverty;
- 2) Digital transformation to minimize inefficiency and corruption; and
- 3) The "Clean Sri Lanka" project which aims to address a cleaner physical environment and a nationwide moral commitment to enhance ethical principles.

Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya was the first to speak about unpaid care work in Parliament when she first became a Member of Parliament in 2020. In a recent speech, she reaffirmed the importance of this issue, emphasizing the significant yet often undervalued contributions of women through unpaid and care work. The government has made a policy commitment to reduce the burden of unpaid care work by women.

As the Chair of the Women Parliamentarian's Caucus, I wish to mention here that we have proposed the creation of a childcare facility within Parliament premises for parliamentarians and parliamentary staff, as part of our ongoing efforts to empower women. The caucus wanted to set the tone and example for establishing a supportive working environment for women from the Parliament itself.

Women play a crucial role in driving the economy in Sri Lanka, with their contributions being essential in generating income across key sectors. Women make up the majority of the workforce in industries such as garments, plantations, and as migrant workers, all of which are vital in earning foreign exchange for the country. For the first time, a woman has been appointed as the Chairperson of the Sri Lanka Apparel Exporters Association in the corporate sector. While this marks a significant milestone, the broader reality remains that, despite women's pivotal role in driving the economy, their representation in top leadership positions—both in the corporate sector and in government—continues to be limited. This is a significant concern for the government, which is actively working to address and overcome this challenge.

The government is working towards providing training for skilled migration to reduce the vulnerabilities associated with unskilled migration, ensuring that workers are better prepared, empowered, and able to access higher-paying employment opportunities.

The government has also introduced several initiatives to support economic recovery and empower citizens, particularly focusing on women and youth. One notable proposal is the establishment of a new development bank aimed at providing new entrepreneurs with loans without the requirement for collateral. This initiative seeks to address the capital constraints faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, enabling them to start and grow businesses without the burden of securing traditional guarantees. This would aim to empower women, especially in rural and economically disadvantaged areas who often face considerable challenges in securing loans due to the lack of collateral, social barriers, and limited access to financial systems.

Madam Chair,

The government is dedicated to revitalizing the rural economy through comprehensive and sustainable initiatives that empower local communities. Our approach, which will be elaborated in the upcoming budget proposals, focuses on enhancing agricultural productivity, ensuring fair market access for rural farmers, and providing financial and technical support to small and medium-scale enterprises. Additionally, we have already commenced discussion on strengthening cooperative networks, which is a key player in economic development.

Sri Lanka Women's Bureau, operating under the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, is the national mechanism implementing projects and programmes for social and economic development of women from national to grass root level. It gives top priority to setup stronger network of women organizations for achieving the rights and opportunities in a collective approach.

Education, health, and transportation are essential public services and the Government plans to increase resource allocation in all these fields.

Education is provided free of charge upto tertiary level and efforts are being undertaken to further ease the financial burden on families, particularly those struggling to afford the basic necessities for their children's schooling. The overall aim is to enhance access to education and ensure that all children, can attend school without being restricted by financial limitations.

Some of these efforts include

- Introducing a financial assistance program that provides children with 6,000 Sri Lankan Rupees (LKR) for educational expenses
- Provision of free school uniforms, and shoes to the children from economically disadvantaged families.
- Sanitary napkins are provided for all girls over 13 years in school.
- The free school meals program will be strengthened further.

Financial allocations will also be increased to the public health sector to develop it as a more effective public service.



A comprehensive social welfare policy has been articulated by the Government which includes the implementation of a **Universal Social Protection System**, which ensures support across the entire life cycle for all citizens.

This policy also emphasizes the **integration of existing programs**, aiming to streamline and enhance current social protection systems to improve efficiency and broaden their reach. Special attention is given to the **focus on vulnerable populations**, with targeted support for women, children, elderly individuals, and persons with disabilities, who are often disproportionately affected by economic hardships. **Strengthening governance and institutional frameworks** is a priority, with efforts to enhance transparency, accountability, and efficiency in the delivery of these services, ensuring that the most vulnerable groups receive the assistance they need.

Madam Chair, allow me now, to highlight some of the **key policy and legislative reforms** put in place to strengthen the implementation of CEDAW in Sri Lanka.

The **Women Empowerment Act of 2024** is a milestone in Sri Lanka's commitment to CEDAW as the law recognizes introducing mechanisms to give effect to the obligations undertaken by Sri Lanka in relation to CEDAW. Women's rights are defined as meaning the rights of women to equality and non-discrimination as enumerated in the Constitution of Sri Lanka and the goals described in the CEDAW Convention.

A key component of this Act is to establish an independent National Commission on Women, and to provide provisions for appointment of a Woman Ombudsperson on ensuring women's rights and setting up a National Fund for

Women. The administrative process to appoint the Commissioners is already underway.

The **Anti-Corruption Act of 2023** gives effect to certain provisions of the United Nations Convention Against Corruption and other internationally recognized norms, standards, and best practices; it also provides for the establishment of an independent commission and institute prosecutions for offenses to detect and investigate allegations of bribery, corruption, and offenses related to the declaration of assets and liabilities and associated offenses. A key feature of this Act is the inclusion of sexual bribery as an offence.

The **Land Development (Amendment) Act of 2022** has brought in provisions to ensure gender equality and non-discrimination in land inheritance.

The Government is also attentive to certain clauses in **personal laws**, which continue to give rise to concerns. In this regard, I would like to mention that the Women's Parliamentary Caucus has suggested setting a minimum age for marriage in bringing amendments to the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, and stipulate a minimum age, in recognition of the rights of the girl child. The Caucus, has proposed the establishment of a multi sectoral committee comprising all stakeholders including civil society to address this issue. We are fully committed to ensure that all children have the benefit of enjoying their childhood.

Madam Chair,

Sri Lanka strongly condemns all forms of violence against women and girls, including sexual harassment. Addressing sexual and gender-based violence is a

key priority for the Government, and we are committed to raising awareness among key state actors with a view to combating SGBV. The Government will establish mechanisms to prioritize and expedite the resolution of cases involving sexual offences against women and minors, ensuring that victims receive timely redress.

Additionally, we will strengthen the judicial process by establishing provincial branches of the Department of Government Analyst, facilitating swift forensic analysis and contributing to the efficient administration of justice.

On 6th of December last year, the Parliament turned orange when the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus joined hands with UN Women to organize a number of activities in support of the **Sixteen Days of activism against Gender Based Violence**. This was not mere symbolism: it was a public pledge from the country's legislature to end gender-based violence and promote gender equality. The Women Parliamentary Caucus has also put forward a proposal to establish a sexual harassment grievance handling mechanism within Parliament.

The Progress Review of the first National Action Plan to Address SGBV for the period 2016-2020 found a 70% level of implementation. Thereafter, a **second Multi-sectoral National Action Plan (NAP) to Address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) for the period 2024-2028** was launched in 2024. The current Action Plan indicates the national commitment of the Government to address SGBV at all levels engaging all actors. The SGBV – NAP II has 13 sectors and 5 sub-sectors focusing on prevention programmes in schools, places of work, community-based initiatives as well as programmes on engaging men to

address GBV among others. It further strengthens response efforts of service provision by state and non-state actors in the area of counseling, legal assistance, shelters, ensuring access to justice and a continued strengthening of the SGBV referral mechanism.

The starting point in addressing SGBV is the sensitization of law enforcement officials who are the first respondents in many instances of complaints against such violence. In a significant development, Children and Women Desks have been newly established in police stations ensuring that each police station has a dedicated unit headed by a female police officer to respond to complaints on sexual and gender based violence.

The Government has identified the need for **safe shelters** for women who become victims of violence and abuse. A decision has been taken to support women, by doubling the allocation for the year 2025 for establishment and expansion of shelter homes for women. Beyond providing immediate refuge, they offer essential services such as counselling, legal assistance, and skills development programs to help women regain stability and rebuild their lives.

Sri Lanka's first **National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security for 2023 to 2027**, has been launched with the support of the Government of Japan and UN Women. The Action Plan was developed through an inclusive process of broad consultations based on the understanding that, in order to reflect ground realities, it should reach beyond Government to non-government entities and the general populace. The Government is committed to realizing the full promise of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda including a "survivor-centric" approach and reparations to women and their families who

are survivors of conflict. The consultations included stakeholders from all 25 administrative districts, as well as victims, survivors of conflict, military widows, Female-Headed Households, women with disabilities, survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, ex-combatants, women working in the estate sector and fisheries, and women providing care for partners and children with disabilities.

Regarding land release, President Anura Kumara Dissanayake has reaffirmed his commitment to returning civilian lands remaining under military custody and the government is actively reviewing land disputes in the Northern and Eastern Provinces and expediting efforts to ensure the swift restoration of these lands to their rightful owners.

Madam Chair,

**Technology facilitated gender-based violence** is another pressing challenge that Sri Lanka is currently facing. With the rise of digital platforms, women and vulnerable groups are increasingly subjected to harassment, cyberbullying, online threats, and exploitation. This form of violence is particularly harmful as it often goes unnoticed or unaddressed by traditional legal frameworks. The government is working to implement stronger laws and policies to protect individuals from such harm. This includes addressing issues related to privacy violations, online stalking, and hate speech, all of which disproportionately affect women and other vulnerable groups.

Sri Lanka actively participated at the negotiations leading to the UN Convention on Cybercrime adopted at the end of December 2024, and takes very seriously

the need to address cyber trafficking and online sexual violence which is becoming increasingly challenging given the rapid advancement of technology.

Sri Lanka is a party to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime which has a focus on addressing online and technology-facilitated violence against women.

The alarming growth in crimes committed using digital technology and online platforms has necessitated the strengthening of measures to safeguard rights of individuals and the society against their misuse. The **Online Safety Act of 2024** is aimed at addressing this issue of growing public importance and to protect the vulnerable sections of the society in line with international standards.

In conclusion, Madame Chair,

I want to reaffirm Sri Lanka's commitment to upholding human rights, gender equality, and social justice. As a newly elected government, we recognize both the progress we have made during the last 3 months and the challenges that lie ahead. While we focus on economic recovery, our foremost priority is to ensure that no one is left behind—especially women, children, marginalized communities, and those most vulnerable in our society. We believe that meaningful change is rooted in systemic transformation and collective action, and we look forward to working alongside all stakeholders—both locally and internationally—to implement our policies.

Sri Lankan women have been active participants in the country's development agenda and there is increasing recognition of this fact among the wider population. The Government is committed to address existing challenges and

ensure women's ability to continue in this role as equals for the progress of the nation.

We are further mindful that progress requires not only celebrating achievements but also critically reflecting on the challenges and gaps so that genuine concerns can be addressed effectively.

It is in this spirit that we engage in this Review to share the progress made and acknowledge the remaining challenges in terms of our obligations under CEDAW. We look forward to an open and respectful dialogue and welcome constructive feedback from the distinguished Committee.

Thank you.