

# Sri Lanka: Shield of Empowerment

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**Malayagam women are one of the ethnic minority groups who have immensely contributed to the economy of this country for the last 200 years. However, they are also among those who have endured all forms of violence, including the worst forms of structural and political violence. They made history when they elected three Malayagam women to Parliament, with one of them even becoming a Cabinet Minister.**

Against this backdrop, PREDO (Plantation Rural Education and Development Organization) has decided to adopt an appropriate theme in line with the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence.

The upcountry Tamils, previously referred to as Plantation Tamils or Indian Tamils, are now known as Malaiyagam Tamils. The term “Malaiyagam” is derived from Malai (Hills) and Agam (Habitat), signifying people who inhabit the hills.

The campaign runs from November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, to December 10, Human Rights Day. It culminates on December 10<sup>th</sup>, emphasising that women’s rights are human rights. The objectives of this campaign are to:

- \* Raise awareness about gender-based violence.
- \* Mobilise people for a movement to end violence against women and girls.
- \* Promote the need for gender equality in society.
- \* Highlight the necessity of “system change” to eliminate violence against women.

Although the global campaign for the 16 Days of Activism has a specific theme this year, PREDO has crafted a unique theme reflecting the political and social changes in our country, particularly in the Malayagam, after the recent parliamentary elections. The theme is:

“The political emancipation of Malayagam women is a shield against violence.”

Globally, various strategies have been implemented to eliminate violence against women, gradually moving toward success. The United Nations aims to completely eliminate violence against women by 2030. In this context, the change in the Malaiyagam regarding women’s roles is remarkable and marks the beginning of a new era, especially for Malayagam women.

The historic election of three women from the Malayagam to Parliament, with one appointed as a Cabinet Minister, is a significant turning point. This can be described as a miraculous change, unlikely to have occurred under the so-called traditional Malayagam leadership in the next fifty years. Notably, Malayagam traditional leaders have avoided congratulating the elected women or acknowledging the historic achievement of the Malayagam community in electing three women to

Parliament.

Instead, these traditional leaders are preoccupied with securing a National List slot for a member of their political party, ignoring the significance of this political milestone. Such an attitude is also a form of violence against women, perpetuating a mindset in the political arena that encourages violence in other forms at the grassroots level in the Malayagam.

Looking ahead, a significant number of Malayagam women are expected to be elected in the upcoming Local Government elections, and some may even assume leadership roles, such as heading a Pradeshiya Sabha. This political awakening among Malayagam women has empowered them to fight against and resist violence with political strength.

This shift in attitude among Malayagam women represents a new era of political emancipation, equipping them with the courage to defend themselves and address the violence committed against them.

Let us examine another scenario. In the past, there were instances in the Malayagam where wives were chased around the line rooms by their husbands to escape bodily assault and violence. If neighbours intervened and told the husband to stop using violence against his wife, the typical response would be, "Who are you to question me? This is my wife, and I have every right to do anything with her. You better mind your own business."

However, as women have become more aware of the laws and Government mechanisms established to protect them, things are gradually changing. Interactions with Government officers, such as Women Development Officers and Child Rights Protection Officers, and even their occasional visits to plantation areas, have fostered a sense of "social security" among women. These interactions make women feel that the Government is closer to them, while simultaneously creating a "social environment" where men perceive a greater risk of punishment and public humiliation if they commit violence against women.

This shift has significantly reduced incidents of overt violence against women by men in plantation areas. Nevertheless, the Government machinery responsible for ensuring this progress still needs to be further strengthened. While the number of Divisional Secretariat units has increased in plantation districts like Nuwara Eliya, they remain underutilized, and smaller Grama Sevaka units have not yet been established. This gap in infrastructure has created a situation where the government machinery is not fully functional in these areas.

In this context, the women members of Parliament elected from the Malayagam must prioritise this issue. They should ensure that Divisional Secretariat units operate effectively and advocate for the creation of smaller Grama Sevaka Divisions. By doing so, Government services will be more accessible to the people. Additionally, when Government officials tasked with preventing violence against women become more active in plantation areas, violence against women and girls will naturally decrease.

The political power now held by Malayagam women can be utilised to pressure their parliamentary representatives, particularly the women MPs and the Cabinet Minister, to address this matter urgently.

During the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, these ideas must be shared widely among Malayagam women. Efforts should focus on encouraging Malayagam women MPs to take immediate and effective action.

When analysed critically, the theme "The political emancipation of Malayagam women is a shield

against violence” can serve as a powerful rallying cry for the 16-day campaign. Promoting this theme among the people can significantly enhance the campaign’s effectiveness in combating gender-based violence in the Malayagam.

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**P.S.**

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