GENDERED ASSUMPTIONS

AND

WOMEN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES:

Interrogating 'Violent Extremism' and political violence from the standpoint of women

POLICY BRIEF

Contemporary Political Violence
Role of Educational Institutions in Promoting Young Women's Experiences of Equality

Women and Media Collective
Established 1984

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PURPOSE

Women and Media Collective conducted a research study in 2021, aimed at developing new grounded knowledge on what is termed "violent extremism" from a gender perspective. The purpose of the research was to shift the narrative and resultant responses from one of counter-terrorism to that of the lived experiences of women and girls and, thereby the community, and to contribute to developing local pathways of change. The research also aimed at developing policy directives for national and international interventions, while strengthening women's leadership with particular reference to young women.

This policy brief draws on 50 interviews conducted in Batticaloa in the Eastern Province, Negombo in the Western Province, and Kurunegala in the North-Western Province of Sri Lanka, in the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks of 2019. This research explored violence by different sets of actors: violence by the state, violence by religious reformist groups (acting as community gatekeepers), violence by Islamist groups espousing jihad as armed struggle, violence by Buddhist supremacists, and violence within the home. It covered a wide range of experiences of women. This included how women and girls negotiated patriarchal family structures; cultural and social norms in their own communities; access to education, work and mobility; and violence, hate speech, threats and fears in the aftermath of the Easter attacks.

The standpoint of this policy brief is of young women who negotiate complex socio-political realities in their everyday lives.

WHY THE EDUCATION SECTOR?

In terms of both the structural factors that perpetuate inequalities for women and girls and their everyday lived experiences and negotiations in the public space, education, and educational institutions – schools in particular, emerged as an important site. Schools were also identified as important locations for building trust, understanding, and equality in the context of contemporary political violence.

This policy brief draws on women's experiences of contemporary political violence and suggests specific recommendations for the education sector to be addressed urgently. The key recommendations focus on the education sector as a site that can positively promote equality and address discrimination based on ethnicity, language, religion, and gender.

The purpose of this brief is to inform education policy on issues to be taken into consideration in both administrative decisions as well as in the content of syllabi. Though these recommendations are not exhaustive, they draw on the experiences of women and girls and bring in a gendered perspective, which become extremely useful to influence broader discussions on education policy and complement existing policy documents.

The policy brief is for institutions and actors involved in the education sector, including administrators, teachers, civil society organizations, and women's organizations working with and/or within it.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Batticaloa and the East[1]

The case studies from Batticaloa highlighted the fragility of the relations between the Tamils and the Muslims where separations and boundaries of gender and ethnic/religious relations were carefully maintained by community structures, religious institutions, interfaith bodies, and state bodies, including school administrations. One aspect of this was the strong push to maintain schools segregated along ethnic and religious lines. In the aftermath of the Easter attacks in 2019, there were incidents where Muslim teachers were particularly seen as "dangerous" with the risk of converting Tamil Hindu students (i.e., girls) to Islam. Teachers who wore the abaya[2] were strongly pressured to come to school in sari. Even though certain relationships, particularly of trade, were "allowed" between the ethnic communities; religious conversion, and inter- religious/inter-ethnic relationships and marriage, were seen as crossing a boundary.[3]

In February 2022, in Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College in the Trincomalee District, young, uniformed school girls and their parents from the Tamil community, protested against the reappointment of a Muslim teacher in the school. This conflict started in 2018, when the teachers and parents of students from the Tamil community, objected to some teachers coming to school in abaya.[4]

Even within mono-ethnic schools, girls' behaviour was heavily controlled. For example, In Kattankudi, in the Batticaloa district, in 2014, Zaharan, the leader and members of his National Thowheed Jamath (NTJ), attacked a girl's school on social media for organizing a dance programme for year 5 students. In their interpretation of Islam, dancing and singing was haram. Zaharan publicly shamed and criticized girls who were participating in sports and musical programmes.[5]

Schools, therefore, were sites in which separations and boundaries on gender and ethnic/religious identities were often played out. This included administrative segregation of schools, suspicion around Muslim teachers teaching in non-Muslim schools, discrimination on the abaya, and control of the behaviour of girls, particularly their engagement in extracurricular activities within the school.

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1. Though the research was conducted in Batticaloa, the incidents that took place in the neighbouring district of Trincomalee at the Sri Shanmuga Hindu Ladies College, also in the Eastern Province, had a tremendous impact on most schools in the province.
2. A robe-like dress worn by Muslim women.
3. https://www.themorning.lk/teacher-allegedly-threatened-assaulted-for-wearing-abaya/; https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/muslim-teachers-can-wear-abaya-human-rights-commission-of-sri-lanka-rules/
4. https://dbsjeyaraj.com/dbsj/archives/75943; https://www.thehindu.com/news/international/fear-of-the-abaya/article61827761.ece; https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/7/14/hindu-group-protests-against-muslim-teachers-wearing-abaya;
5. A. Firthous, S. Emmanuel, & P. Arasu (2021), Of Continuing Injustices and Continuing Conversations: Women's Collective Support Across Ethnicities in Batticaloa, in Shreen Abdul Saroor (Ed.), Muslims in Post-War Sri Lanka: Repression, Resistance and Reform, Alliance for Minorities.

Negombo

Negombo is known to be a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious town. However, there are segregations in terms of areas of residence which in turn leads to segregation in schooling. Negombo can be spatially-marked along ethnic and caste lines.6 This is directly reflected in the composition of schools. There are also fewer and fewer schools which offer both Sinhala and Tamil mediums since the 1980s. Schools that had Tamil medium closed the Tamil medium during the 1980s and now function only in the Sinhala medium.

Christian schools in Negombo have very few Muslim students, most students are from the Sinhala, Tamil and Burgher communities. Both Tamil-speaking and Muslim communities have often chosen to access education and to speak in Sinhala in Sinhala medium schools. There is a perception that this provides a way of ensuring safety and access to a better life.[7] Furthermore, if one were to go to a school of a different religion from one's own, it was compulsory to study the religion of the school. That was seen as a burden by the young women who were interviewed for the research study.[8] Apart from this, internal conflicts exist, like the Ahmadiyyas[9] being discriminated against within the Muslim community.[10]

Kurunegala

Kurunegala had seen terrible violence against Muslim communities in the post-Easter attacks context. A significant aspect of this was the reactions of Sinhala women to the Muslim community. While these women did not perceive themselves as having extremist views, they expressed fear about sexualized attacks on the Sinhala Buddhist population – including by the inclusion of vanda pethi (infertility drugs) in food and through pills placed in underwear. The most tragic example of this was the phenomenon of women who came forward to make complaints against Dr. Shafi, a Muslim gynaecologist who was based in Kurunegala. In this case, there appears to have been systemic complicity and deliberate actions from the health sector, the police and law enforcement, as well as the media that came together to create a false "truth" targeting Dr. Shafi as having engaged in unethical practices. For one of the Sinhala Buddhist women, a teacher by profession, who had made a complaint, the aligning of state systems that she perceived as "neutral" – health professionals, the police, other agents of the law, powerful Buddhist monks and mainstream media – authenticated these allegations and justified attacks on Dr. Shafi. The relationship between long-standing deep-seated racism in the Sinhala community against Muslims and the consolidated propagation of racism by structures of power are intertwined.[11]

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6. Peter Kaniyut Perera (2020), Aluth Ahasak, Aluth Polowak: 40-year journey of Janavaboda Kendraya, Negombo; FGD conducted for this research study with Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.
7. Interview with male Ahmadiyya journalist, also a former school principal.
8. Case study interview with young Muslim woman (2) in her twenties.
9. Ahmadiyya is an Islamic revival movement that originated in nineteenth-century British India and has since spread across the globe. Ahmadis are widely stigmatized (by Wahhabi groups in particular) and sometimes persecuted; Ahmadiyya's claim that its founder was the Muslim messiah is deemed heretical. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ahmadiyya
10. FGD Sinhala and Tamil (Catholic and Hindu) women activists' group, Negombo.
11. Civil Samaja Ekamuthuwa (2019) Fact-finding report on Kurunegala, Deva Sarana, Ibbagamuwa.

One of the women interviewed spoke about administrative segregation of communities on ethnic lines even though their everyday lives were intimately connected. "There is a mosque in front of my house. There is a Buddhist temple close by also. There are two other Muslim villages close by. Even though we live close to each other our GN divisions are different."[12]

Similar to the context in Batticaloa and Negombo, many large schools in Kurunegala were segregated by religion and ethnicity. The bigger Buddhist schools did not allow Muslim girls to wear trousers with a shawl, as everyone had to wear the same uniform which was a knee-length white dress with short sleeves. These schools did not have Muslim teachers or prayer rooms. Sometimes the segregation in schooling was enforced from within the household. One Muslim respondent stated that as a child her father didn't want her to go to a Sinhala school because she would mix with and get influenced by other cultures.

One of the young Sinhala women said that she had Muslim friends because they went to the same school. She firmly believed that this was how trust and good relationships could be built. This example highlighted the important role educational spaces could play for young children to interact and build understanding and trusted relationships among diverse communities.

Educational spaces – Ensuring young women's leadership towards developing local pathways of change

Many schools in the research locations were segregated by language, religion, and ethnicity, as appears to be the common practice in Sri Lanka.[13] Out of a total of 10,000 schools in Sri Lanka, only 75 schools had both Tamil and Sinhala mediums.[14]

Drawing from the experiences of young women in the three research sites, it is clear that schools become an important space where segregation, discrimination, and fear of the "other" are instilled in young people. Schools in all the communities are also the sites in which gendered norms were enforced, including uniforms and dress codes for female students and teachers, and monitoring of extracurricular activities that girls could or could not participate in. Young women from Muslim and Tamil communities in Sinhala majority areas (who spoke Tamil at home) chose to carry out their education in Sinhala to enable access to employment.

Students often did not have the option of studying and practising their religion (if different to the main religion taught in the school) in school. Muslim girls had to negotiate within their families to continue their education and not be pressured into marriage at a young age.

12. Grama Niladari (GN) division is the smallest government administrative unit and is the state structure through which most entitlements can be claimed from the state, including the national identity card and being registered to vote.
13. S.A. Balasooriya, Lal Perera & S. Wijetunge (2004), Education Reform and Political Violence in Sri Lanka, in Tawil, S. & A. Harley, Education, Conflict and Social Cohesion, UNESCO International Bureau of Education, Geneva, pp. 375–433; Mieke Lopes Cardozo (2008), Sri Lanka: In Peace or in Pieces? A Critical Approach to Peace Education in Sri Lanka. Research in Comparative and International Education. 3. 19–35. 10.2304/rcie.2008.3.1.19.
14. https://moe.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/School-Census-Report-2017.pdf

On the whole, the mapping of ethnic divisions upon spatial segregation and its lasting effect on school composition is not a factor to be ignored. The segregation of schools along religious, ethnic, and language lines makes for a structural separation of communities from childhood. This is a system that is least conducive to peaceful coexistence. Instead, it keeps in place structures that can be used for long- and short-term deep-seated feelings of hatred, vengeance and violence amongst communities, despite their shared histories.

In the post-Easter attacks context, with presumed fear of schools being the sites of possible follow-up attacks, heavily militarized personnel were placed in and around schools for surveillance. The dress of Muslim women and girls became a target of attack and "checking" by institutional authoritative figures, the media, state bodies such as the police, and military and ordinary non-Muslims. Young women also shared rare experiences of having classmates from different communities and making friends. They highlighted the fact that discussions promoting understanding and respect for children from different communities were rare in schools because of the religious and ethnic segregation.

BACKGROUND TO INSTITUTIONALIZED EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka has had a long history of institutionalized education going back to pirivena schools.[15] In the colonial period, educational institutions spread in the form of missionary schools. In the 19th and 20th centuries, Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim schools were established as part of the anti-colonial movements. With the passing of the Free Education Act of 1943, and with the introduction of vernacular education, the number of girls from the lower- and middle-classes who accessed education increased exponentially. Schools were often gender segregated, some becoming centres for propagating narrow ethno-religious and nationalist ideologies.[16]

The 1981 Educational Reform created a shift in the envisioning and values of higher education and ensured the slow dismantling of the egalitarian values that were embedded in the free public education system. Instead, it made way for elitist and market-oriented interests and values to take precedence in the formulation of education policies. Sri Lanka's total allocation for education has stagnated at just 2% of GDP in the post-war years.[17]

However, educational spaces became the grounds of diverse conflicts. The 1970s saw youth discontent due to lack of social mobility even with access to public education – culminating in the 1971 Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP)-led insurrection. Similarly, the introduction of district-level cut-off marks for university entrance was seen by Tamil youth in the North as a move towards curtailing the educational advancement for Tamils, becoming a critical root cause for the Tamil struggle for self-determination.

15. Kumari Jayawardena (1986), Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World, Sanjiva Books, Colombo, Zed Books ltd, London New Jersey; Suanthri Jayawardena and Niyanthini Kadirgamar (2021), "Values Education in Sri Lanka: An Exploratory Study," Strategic Inspirations Colombo.
16. Suanthri Jayawardena and Niyanthini Kadirgamar (2021), "Values Education in Sri Lanka: An Exploratory Study" Strategic Inspirations, Colombo.
17. https://island.lk/funding-fallacies-in-education/

Since the 1980s, the fully blown armed conflict stifled the space for intellectual freedom for several decades, across all strata of Sri Lankan society. Open economy policies and structural adjustment programmes introduced in the 1980s, pressured governments to restrict budgets, resulting in a decline in investment in education, which still remains acutely underfunded. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted the education sector and deepened the crisis.[18]

PEACE AND VALUE EDUCATION

Comprehensive proposals to introduce peace education into the curriculum to promote ethnic harmony were given prominence by the Chandrika Kumaratunga government which came to power in 1994. The General Education Reforms of 1997 focused on five areas: 1) extending educational opportunity, 2) improving the quality of education, 3) developing practical and technical skills, 4) education and training of teachers and 5) management and resource provision. Concepts of national harmony, democratic principles, human rights, gender equality and environmental conservation were to be integrated into existing subjects. Extra-curricular activities were to be introduced to develop qualities of leadership, teamwork, ideas of cooperation, organisational and practical skills, concern for others, and a sense of justice and fair play. Though the proposals were introduced with political will and backing from the top, their implementation faced several roadblocks, including a lack of resource materials and trained personnel, a lack of cooperation and coordination among the different government institutions responsible for education, structural factors such as segregated schooling, and language barriers.[19]

There have been several policy documents addressing reform to the education sector due to the multiple youth-led movements that had challenged the authority of the state. The National Policy on Education for Social Cohesion and Peace (2008) focused among other things on curricula, teacher education, the second national language, and integration (linking and twinning) of schools. The National Youth Policy of Sri Lanka (2014), points out the lack of opportunities for interaction among youth of different communities due to language, religion, and sex segregation in educational institutions, and put forward policy recommendations to address them. In 2015, the Office of National Unity and Reconciliation (ONUR) rolled out several programmes targeting the education sector. However, these policies did not address discrimination on access to education on the basis of class, ethnicity, or religion, segregation of schools, and urban-rural discrepancies in resources.[20]

However, a study conducted by the Regional Centre for Strategic Studies (RCSS) in September 2019,[21] a few months after the Easter bombings, exposed the gross inadequacy of all these initiatives. It involved interviews with 2,800 youth aged 15-29 years from the Northern, Eastern, Southern and

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18. P. Manuratne (2017), Kolambata Kiri Apita Kekiri, Neoliberalism and the 1983 Education Reforms, Polity, 7(2), pp. 14-22.
19. Suanthri Jayawardena and Niyanthini Kadirgamar (2021), Values Education in Sri Lanka: An Exploratory Study, Strategic Inspirations Colombo; Mieke Lopes Cardozo (2008), Sri Lanka: In Peace or in Pieces? A Critical Approach to Peace Education in Sri Lanka. Research in Comparative and International Education. 3. 19-35. 10.2304/rcie.2008.3.1.19.
20. Kasun Millawithanachchi (2020), Peace Education and Truth and Reconciliation in Sri Lanka: Assessing policy effectiveness as panacea for Post-Conflict Reconstruction. 10.13140/RG.2.2.27040.61448.
21. Regional Centre for Strategic Studies in September (2019), The Potential Role of Young Leaders and Volunteers in Preventing Violent Extremism in Sri Lanka, UNFPA, UN Volunteers and the UN Peace Building Fund.

Central Provinces. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of Sinhalese youth either felt ambivalent, distant or had a sense of animosity towards Sri Lankan Tamils, Up-Country Tamils, and Moors/Malays. The majority of the ethnic groups believed that there was a hierarchical order of ethnicity in Sri Lanka. Across the four ethnicities, language has been the most common factor that caused discomfort. In addition, 25% of Sri Lankan Tamils, 24% of Moor/Malays and 20% of Up Country Tamils indicated feeling uncomfortable due to their ethnic identities. The majority of discrimination, for respondents from all four ethnic groups, took place mainly within schools and public offices/ workplaces. The study identified gaps in the establishment and implementation of current national policies relating to youth in the context of sustainable peace and preventing violent extremism. One of the starkest conclusions of the RCSS study was that while gender-based discrimination was prevalent in all parts of Sri Lanka, there wasn't a gendered form of radicalization into violent extremism. The research study conducted by the Women and Media Collective in fact aimed to address precisely this gap in knowledge and analysis and to contribute a gendered perspective on contemporary political violence.

Recommendations for promoting young women's leadership and experiences of equality in the context of contemporary political violence

There are extensive policy documents already in place and implemented in relation to peace-building, social cohesion, and reconciliation in Sri Lanka. At the very outset, there should be a critical review of these programmes in terms of what was implemented, what was not, and why, as well as what has worked and what has been merely superficial. This critical review must be carried out through a gendered lens that captures young women's and girls' everyday experiences in accessing education institutions.

Accessibility and administration – possible policy actions

The state to ensure schools have admissions open to children from different community backgrounds by phasing out of having only specific ethnicities, languages, or religions and opening up the schools to the public of all denominations.[22]

The state to ensure putting in place a trilingual education system so that children speaking any language can join any school.[23]

The state to ensure that in Sinhala and Tamil medium schools, four subjects be taught in English to overcome issues of communication between children of different groups.[24]

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22. These recommendations are drawn from the Consultation Task Force for Reconciliation Mechanisms which held public consultations across the country in 2016 and received submissions from over 7000 citizens.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.

As language-based discrimination and secondary status has been identified in several studies, education in the Tamil language should be encouraged and valued through special promotion programmes, and students should learn both languages. Currently, the second language (Tamil and Sinhala) is taught only until grade 9 and is an optional subject for the Ordinary Level exam. There should be a review of this to highlight the impact of this subject and to put in place further measures to ensure second language learning.

The state to ensure a selected number of schools in each zone have a Tamil medium stream.

Any incidents of discrimination and targeting of students based on their ethnicity or religion, including their dress, should be addressed immediately by the school and higher administration within the education system as well as through the Human Rights Commission. Schools need to have a code of conduct with clear guidelines for remedial measures if such incidents occur.

Capacity building – possible policy actions

Since many of the previous policies have initiated programmes for teacher training, it is essential to carry out a review of the outcomes of these policies.

Teachers should undergo compulsory training as part of their teacher training, on gender, women and girls' rights. These training components should be run with gender sensitive methodologies and tools.

The training methodologies and administrative functioning of teacher training institutions should promote gender sensitivity and women and girls' rights and abolish discriminatory procedures.[25]

Teachers should undergo compulsory training as part of their teacher training on democracy, pluralism and respect for multiculturalism and on conflict sensitivity in teaching history and conflict in Sri Lanka.

Guides and training programmes should be developed to enable teachers to run classroom discussions on contemporary political violence and how it particularly affects women and girls. This is extremely important when these incidents have taken place in a particular local context.

Teacher guides to be developed on how to support children to do local histories projects. These guides should particularly focus on how to discover and document local women's histories.

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25. https://bangkok.unesco.org/sites/default/files/assets/article/Teachers%20Education/GenderAssessment-May2017/Sri%20Lanka.pdf

ROLE OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN PROMOTING YOUNG WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF EQUALITY

Syllabus and extra curriculum – possible policy actions

The following recommendations are drawn from several existing policy documents as they emerge as relevant to the research findings of Women and Media Collective.

Schools should have pluralistic education on religion, with options for choosing any religious education.

The study of comparative religions should be introduced at schools to impart a basic understanding of the different religions of Sri Lanka.

Syllabi should be designed to expose students to all religious practices, particularly in Sri Lanka and South Asia.

Primary and secondary education sector reforms are needed to include appropriate subjects or integrations into existing subject/s that will build the knowledge and understanding of diverse ethnic and religious cultures.

Materials need to be made available on rich local cultural histories including activities that help students to explore, document and share local cultural histories from diverse communities.

The issues of the armed conflicts and their multiple impacts to be included in school and university curricula. The war to be included into history, citizenship, civics, and political science subjects in a meaningful way that would not incite resentment but foster recognition, reconciliation, and restitution. A timeline outlining a brief history of post-independence Sri Lanka be published and distributed widely to schools, public libraries, public and private institutions, and to the general public.

A core component of civic education should include materials on the histories of women and local women leaders from diverse communities, particularly progressive female roles.

Implement youth and community-based programmes across different communities, in collaboration with civil society organizations at the zonal and provincial levels, to give youth the opportunity to engage in activities with diverse participants. Equal participation of girls should be made a priority in such programmes along with gender-sensitive methodologies and content.

It is imperative that there are budget allocations made to ensure equality for girls within the education system, including review and development of syllabus, teacher training, and investing in extracurricular programmes including sports, intercultural programmes, and civic education programmes.