

The Women's Movement in Sri Lanka: An Interview with Kumari Jayawardena

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Wenona Giles: We have discussed women's movements and activism extensively in the Women in Conflict Zones Network. With your depth and breadth of knowledge of, as well as participation in, feminist activism for many years in Sri Lanka and in other countries, can you comment on the women's movement here?

Kumari Jayawardena: I think it is important to realize that there was not only a women's movement in twentieth-century Sri Lanka, but there was also a consciousness about women's issues in the nineteenth century. Women writers and poets raised issues that dealt with women's subordination, and also challenged patriarchal structures. Women's education expanded along with opportunities for employment, including the emergence of the first women doctors in the 1890s. But it was in the early twentieth century – perhaps also inspired by talk about suffragettes and women's rights in the West and in India – that Sri Lankan women started campaigning for the right to vote, which was obtained in 1931. By 1932, there were two women members in the legislature. So that was quite a dramatic start! But women of today do not know about those debates. It is just something we read in one line in textbooks. Recently, Malathi de Alwis and I wrote on this issue and we researched the Sinhala, Tamil, and English newspapers and journals in which the franchise issue of the 1920s was hotly debated.¹

Those of us who came into the women's movement in the latter part of the twentieth century had not realized that, in a sense, the grandmothers of this generation were already in the women's movement in the 1920s. We have now discovered that the women's movement was ongoing from the 1930s to the 1990s. For example, in the 1940s and 1950s, liberal middle-class women's groups were active. One of their inspirations was a Canadian, Dr. Mary Irvin Rutnam, from

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1 Malathi de Alwis and Kumari Jayawardena, *Castling Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 2000).

Toronto, a pioneer doctor of the period who married a Sri Lankan and came to the island in 1896.² She brought with her a lot of the experience of early women's struggles in Canada, including the suffrage struggle. In 1930-31, she inspired the Lanka Mahila Samiti, a rural women's organization, which spread to the whole of Sri Lanka. As a doctor she was able to start women's and children's education programs for health, hygiene, sanitation, and child care. When I recently read her school texts on health, I saw that there were also underlying social messages against the caste system and child servants and in favour of women speaking out for their rights and being active in public affairs. Women of the Left were also active from the 1930s onwards and, in 1948, formed a short-lived socialist women's organization that was autonomous. Women from Left parties were active in parliamentary politics from the 1950s onwards.

There were quite a number of middle-class women in the Women's Political Union of the 1930s and 1940s, and in the All Ceylon Women's Conference, which organized seven regional women's conferences in Colombo in the 1950s and 1960s. Actually, my mother was in these organizations, which took up many issues including equal pay, women on the jury, and the right to enter professions. I remember her travelling throughout Sri Lanka on women's issues and going abroad for international meetings.

So by the mid-1970s, when the United Nations International Decade for Women was declared, there was already a history of women's activity, which some of us had been aware of through our mothers. While it was a continuation of the earlier movement, in another sense the 1970s marked a new phase in which we got to talk about feminism, patriarchy, and violence against women – issues that had not been debated earlier. In the post-1970s phase, a whole new feminist agenda arose, and some of us women academics were asked to speak on trade union and political party platforms about the UN Decade for Women.

I wrote an article in 1976 entitled "Women of Sri Lanka, Oppressed or Emancipated?" There was a question mark in my article because I was not sure. When I looked at one area I thought women were emancipated. For example, women

2 Kumari Jayawardena, *Dr. Mary Rutnam: A Canadian Pioneer for Women's Rights in Sri Lanka* (Colombo: Social Scientists' Association, 1993).

in Sri Lanka had good quality of life indices as demonstrated in infant and maternal mortality, literacy, and life expectancy statistics. I remember when it suddenly dawned on me (it was in the middle of one of these speeches to a trade union group of men) that women were oppressed! Where were the women in the trade union leadership? How many women were in politics? Wasn't there male domination in the home, in the workplace, and in all institutions? So the research agenda also evolved, including both research and action. And, of course, by the 1980s we were in the middle of a civil war, which gave a new dimension to the women's movement.

WG: In what ways do you think that the current peace process in Sri Lanka has affected or been affected by the women's movement here?

KJ: Women were already organizing and agitating for peace by the 1980s when the war began. We started making links with women in the conflict zones of Sri Lanka. The women's groups gave the peace movement a big push because they had networks already in place. Women were already networking here and abroad on other issues and meeting each other at conferences in Sri Lanka, in the region, and internationally. South Asian women's solidarity was there from the beginning of the war and throughout it. Women have always been part of the peace movement, but we have to remind the public not to forget that during the darkest days, it was the women who held up the peace banners. The peace movement often led us to work with women in India and Pakistan. We travelled a lot, speaking on platforms that often included Sinhalese and Tamil women together. In India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka women would come together, irrespective of what their governments were doing. We have often openly opposed the policies of our own governments, and were always critical of their warmongering.

A group called Women for Peace, which started in the 1980s in Sri Lanka, took out a half-page advertisement in the newspaper with a hundred prominent women in Sri Lanka signing for peace. Other peace activists went into schools, talking about the need for ethnic harmony and peace, and distributed our material. Activities included contacts with women's groups throughout Sri Lanka in spite of criticisms that we were "unpatriotic." Today, everybody is talking peace, and there is a lot of renewed activity after the ceasefire and peace initiatives. There are visits between women from the south, north, and northeast of the island. The state is also interested in publicizing this networking. We have been transformed from "suspicious characters" into "good citizens" and are asked, "Why don't you do more?" It is amazing how attitudes change! In the early days of the war – in the 1980s – participants in marches would be charged by the police. It was illegal to hold meetings or to participate in processions and demonstrations, even on International Women's Day!

WG: Can you comment on transnational feminism, that is, the recognition of difference, or working across or with difference, towards achieving an international women's movement?

KJ: With our South Asian friends, we have taken up issues on peace and democracy, human rights, and women's rights. Also, many feminists have travelled widely, more frequently than they were able to do in the past. In the early twentieth century, many Indian women in the independence movement and suffrage campaigns – most notably Sarojini Naidu and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya – visited Sri Lanka. Western women campaigners for women's causes also travelled in Asia, among them Margaret Fawcett, Marie Stopes, and Margaret Sanger, and a few South Asian women spoke on platforms in the West. After the 1970s, we had more contact with women in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, Europe, North America, and Latin America. An important visitor to Sri Lanka was Nawal El Saadawi who, in the late 1970s, inspired us with her lectures on women's rights.

The international links with both Western and other feminists have been very useful for us. I believe that women raise issues based on their own history, experiences, and current problems. These may or may not be applicable in other countries, but we are interested in seeing how women have tackled such issues. However, I also believe that we have to get away from the idea that there is a serious Third World – First World division between feminists. Feminism was not imposed on the Third World by Westerners. Each country has had its own history of feminism.³ Also, if you say "First World – Third World," you aren't taking into account the fact that Europe and North America have a history of dissent, into which we have tapped. Indians and Sri Lankans have been in contact with many of these dissidents over the decades, and have had links with anti-colonial movements, free-thought, theosophy, socialism, and feminism in the West. Such subverters of their own societies were well known in India and Sri Lanka, but if you mention their names in Britain or North America they are unheard of!

Personal acquaintance with such dissidents – often through my parents – led me to write *The White Woman's Other Burden*,⁴ in which I explore the way foreign women in South Asia were not only those "Women of the Raj," whom we see depicted in films as the wives of bureaucrats, but were also women with their own agendas, which had nothing to do with their own governments and which sometimes went against colonial policies of their own countries. They included Annie Besant, Helena Blavatsky, and Margaret Cousins, who spearheaded the women suffrage campaign in

³ Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books, 1986).

⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden* (London: Routledge, 1995).

India in the 1920s and 1930s. Even some of the missionary women in South Asia had a “feminist” agenda against their own patriarchal bishops and clergy.

Many famous Indian “gurus” had foreign women soul-mates. Gandhi had the English woman Madeline Slade, the daughter of a British admiral, as his disciple, secretary, guide, philosopher, and friend. When she went to London with him, she caused a huge stir, wearing a sari, washing Gandhi’s feet, giving him his breakfast, and doing his correspondence. The British found this to be a very strange thing, but in India she was honoured. Similarly, Sister Nivedita, an Irish woman (Margaret Noble), was a disciple of a famous Indian reformist leader Swami Vivekananda at the beginning of the twentieth century. She was a revolutionary and a friend of many socialists and anarchists in Britain, and was very influential in Bengal. Another such figure was the “Mother” of Pondicherry, spiritual partner of the Indian savant Aurobindo. The “Mother” – Mira Rachel Alfassa of Sephardic Jewish origin from Egypt and France – was a great modernizer and reformist and is revered even today, thirty years after her death.

Many European and American socialist and communist women married Indian and Sri Lankan nationalists and Left leaders, and lived and worked for these causes in South Asia. Their “foreignness” was not at issue, since they were not only serving local causes but were also opposing the colonialism of their countries of origin, and even the politics of South Asian governments in the post-independence phase. These women were accepted; a few of them even becoming elected members of the legislature.

WG: Perhaps this consistent political involvement of women in Sri Lanka is related to the view expressed by the Sri Lankan participants in the Women in Conflict Zones Network. They always said, “We are both academic and activist at the same time and we don’t want to be identified as one or the other.”

KJ: In many Third World countries, that is indeed the case – you can’t avoid activism, because there is always something going on which calls for intervention and protest on both social and political issues in one’s own country, or in another country. So, it is difficult to isolate yourself from action in the streets, drafting resolutions, collecting signatures, and lobbying. Also in normal everyday life, if you are in any movement, there is no big dichotomy between action and research. As Sri Lankan academics, that has been our social practice for a long time. And a lot of the inspiration did come from both university women and from the struggles of working-class women. Peace was one issue that brought us all together irrespective of ethnicity, religion, and class.

WG: What is your view of comparative approaches to research and activism?

KJ: These are crucial debates for the women’s movement. One criticism has been that Western feminists do the theory

and we do the action. This is, of course, not strictly true and not a serious allegation. But in Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, many feminists come from another political tradition – namely, a socialist and anti-colonial one. You don’t tell a socialist, “Hey, that is a white man/woman.” Instead you ask, “What are his/her politics, which class is she/he working for?” and other such questions. Similarly, Western feminists have a political approach to people that is not based on race. Maybe Third World women living abroad where racism prevails are more sensitive about such issues and have raised issues of race, because of the societies they are living in.

Another important point is that problems affecting women – such as dowry, caste, and so forth – may be part of a more feudal society. And that is where politics becomes important. Many of us are against cultural relativism that argues, “Our culture is the best; we don’t need to change, and local women who come and say how terrible child marriage is, say so because they are Westernized and don’t understand their own cultures.” Here we fall into a trap, trying to defend ourselves and our cultures.

WG: In your view, what are some of the difficulties of working across academic-activist boundaries? Does working across such boundaries enhance research and activism?

KJ: I know it is not easy because both academics and activists sometimes feel awkward in the presence of the other. The academic always feels guilty that she/he is not activist enough, and the activist is always apologizing by saying, “I am not an academic, but. . .” So there is a certain uneasiness, but nevertheless, I think the experience of the Women in Conflict Zones Network has shown that it can work. When I met some of the Yugoslav women in Colombo, I couldn’t tell the difference between activists and academics. The activists talk in a way that academics understand and the academics are constantly referring to various actions that are taking place and the progress made by women through struggles. Perhaps it is in the feminist movement that the boundaries are crossed more easily, and awkwardness is not a major problem; it is just the predicament of being slightly apologetic – “I am sorry, I’m only an activist,” “I’m sorry, I’m an academic.” But it is not really a serious problem because feminists can’t avoid being both. A certain humility is also needed; it is not that some women are just pushing their way in, saying they are academics. They are actually learning from the others, who are more activist than they are.

If you are doing cross-country research, you cannot leave out activists and only bring a few university people together. And I am not so sure about this word “activist.” I don’t know whether we should have another word for activist-cum-researcher. Academics of course have more time to think and read, but they can also be directly in touch with working women, peasant and plantation women, and women in conflict situations, including women displaced by war. In addition, when academics go to a village or a plantation, organize

meetings and give speeches – then what are they? They are speakers, political speakers with commitment – so no one asks, “Which caste are you, activist caste or research caste?”

WG: Are we then challenging another boundary when we do comparative research – the so-called activist-academic caste divide?

KJ: Yes. It is like finding the third way. However, once you start labelling people, you are getting into unnecessary debates and arguments. The same women can be sometimes activists sometimes researchers, and sometimes writers and participants in political debates – so who are they then?

Perhaps the dichotomy drawn between “academic” and “activist” is a false one. First, what is the definition of “academic”? Is an academic only a person teaching at a university? At a high school? Does conducting “research” place one solely in the “academic” category? Clearly not, for research spans the “activist-academic” spectrum. Is writing and research not activism? Are well-researched publications put out by “activist” organizations “academic” in nature? In the end, use of such terminology can serve to strengthen stereotypes, and thus divide individuals and groups. Whose purpose does this serve? In Sri Lanka, and mostly likely everywhere, the use of this dichotomy is entrenched and plays out in negative and positive stereotypes. Part of the agenda of women’s groups should be to counter this thinking and to reclaim the use of language, and to value contributions of all sorts equally.

WG: How do we deal with a cultural politics versus a human rights approach in a comparative research project such as ours? Does comparative work push us to challenge more cultural relativist kinds of perspectives?

KJ: I strongly believe in a human rights approach. I am not so geared to cultural relativism or culture and religion based on diversity and customary laws. I think, as women, we had better look at what the constitution of the country says about fundamental rights, what the International Conventions (especially CEDAW) say, and then uphold them. I and many others would not uphold anything customary if it is oppressive to women. Of course this does not mean denying diversity.

But also when you undertake comparative research, I think you group together those who are fairly like-minded. You know, there is a kind of a middle-of-the road agenda, where we may have differences but we all agree on women’s rights and human rights and can adopt the guideline “universality in diversity,” which Nira Yuval-Davis argues should be the inspiration.

WG: Can you discuss why comparisons between Sri Lanka and the post-Yugoslav states may be useful and important?

KJ: I think Sri Lanka and the post-Yugoslav countries are a good choice of countries for comparison. Countries that have been through a socialist experiment recognize that there can be a social system which is not feudal or capitalist, but rather

aims at some kind of socialist model. When you talk about Yugoslavs of a certain generation, trying another pattern, but not totally subservient to Stalin or the Soviet Union, it rings a bell here in Sri Lanka. There are many people here who went to socialist Yugoslavia. In fact, at this conference, I met a Sri Lankan woman who told me that her father, as a young man in a Left political group, went to build railways in Yugoslavia.

There was also the non-aligned movement that presented an alternative to the two superpowers of the time. Yugoslav experience and history thus resonates with the Sri Lankan experience; we unsuccessfully tried a form of socialism and then we watched those experiments collapse. But other movements continue, including the women’s movement! There is also a basis for comparison insofar as both Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia have been through civil war, ethnic pogroms, and turmoil in recent years.

WG: Could you comment on the importance of research on class inequities in post-conflict and conflict research? Do you think we have adequately addressed class in the WICZNET project? I am concerned about this because it is often difficult to ask questions about class when discussing ethnicity and nationalism.

KJ: That is very much a generational question, because when I was young, class was all we talked about. And we would not only refer to “working-class women” and “upper-class woman” but we would also ask, irrespective of their social origins, which class they claimed to represent? This question arises all the time in the Third World in situations where political leaders from other classes represent workers and peasants. For example, trade union leaders may not be from the classes they are fighting for, namely, from working-class or peasant origin.

When you first come to the feminist movement, there is a slight contradiction that you have to face. Feminism problematizes class issues, because if you go among the working-class in a trade union group and you talk about feminism, they say you are dividing the class into men and women. If you go among women, they may not want to hear about class issues. They say there is only one class and that is women. So our task of bringing class issues into women’s groups and bringing women’s issues into political party or trade union groups could make feminists unpopular. But, actually, that is why feminism is challenging and interesting – from an intellectual perspective. It is not simply a kind of dogma that you hang around your neck. It really is a very live issue.

Context is very necessary, and those of us who have a certain line of thinking believe that we should give as much of the total picture as possible. I do not mean that one has to write a book on the history of Yugoslavia, but we need to know a bit about the country, the class structure, and the background of the society. Then we can better understand the issues. Recently, when I asked a woman these questions, she said, “It is not relevant which class these people belong

to, because I am talking about Islamicism.” But you can’t just say a bunch of women are Islamicists, without saying whether they were peasants in the fields or women in their golf clubs. So my reaction is then twofold. First, I would like to know the society and class a woman is coming from, the country of origin, who she is, and what her political agenda is; and second, who are the people she is studying?

WG: What is the relationship between globalization, international corporate investment, and conflict in Sri Lanka?

KJ: The business community in Sri Lanka and abroad would welcome prospects of peace, and they visualize rapid economic development linked to global markets. In formulating projects, new issues do come up pertaining to globalization. I don’t think it is a bad word – in fact, it has been good for women in some respects. Particularly pertaining to the contact women can have with others and the immediate action that is possible. You can press a button and reach women around the world to begin a protest. As Amartya Sen says, globalization is not new; it has been here for some time. But within open-market and globalized structures it is important to understand the nature of the exploitation between rich and poor, between the powerful and the less powerful, between some strong multinationals and those with fewer resources. How do the policies determined by these structures, including those of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, affect women? These are our serious concerns.

WG: What about the relationship between patriarchy and post-conflict situations?

KJ: I certainly think that it is in post-conflict times that we have to be really vigilant. In conflict situations and anti-colonial struggles, patriarchy breaks down a bit, sometimes quite a lot. Women are in battle dress, carrying bombs, and are even suicide bombers. They also do a host of “unwomanly” things and even become empowered as heads of the households. Some huge social changes take place in the attitudes of men towards women, and this is reflected in times when women are in the armed forces and guerrilla movements, as in Sri Lanka where there are women in the army, navy, airforce, and police. We see them at checkpoints, in fatigues and boots, and carrying guns. During times of war and revolution, such changes are accepted. But afterwards patriarchy says, “Thank you very much, now you can go back home.” People don’t want to hear about them let alone marry them, and that is where patriarchy enters and says, “women must be chaste,” and “these girls have been in the army and we can’t vouch for them,” and “they have been carrying guns and will be a menace.”

Many countries including Colombia, Vietnam, and Mozambique have encountered this problem of stigma. And now it has come here. Traditionalists in the east of Sri Lanka are saying that women should be traditional in dress and behaviour, should wear the sari and put flowers in their hair, and

so forth. Feminists are warning against the Talibanization that is possible with regard to women and dress codes. Thus this post-conflict period can be a defining moment for women. It is also among the best of moments, because when peace prevails, women’s sons and daughters are not going to get killed. But it is a time for greater vigilance, since the patriarchs will now assert their authority and will tell you how to behave, what to wear and whom your daughter should marry. So you have to watch out for patriarchal backlash, and monitor the way in which it tries to come back into the lives of women and girls. That is an interesting issue.

WG: What are some future directions for research that have arisen from this Women in Conflict Zones project, in your view?

KJ: The post-conflict situation has many problems – the treatment of displaced women, women in the army, women and girl guerrillas, and war widows. Here a comparison of the situation in the former Yugoslavia and in Sri Lanka on the “comeback” of patriarchy would be revealing. Further, the political economy of peace brings with it problems of rehabilitation and transformation. Marie Aimée Lucas, of the organization Women Living Under Muslim Law, has analysed the Algerian experience to show that although the bitter anti-colonial war may have occurred a long time ago, the practices of war continue in various ways, especially in ultramacho attitudes – for example, in the use of violence against women and children.

But also, what does “rehabilitation” really mean? Does it signal a mythic going back to “home sweet home,” doing what your grandmother did, reconstructing the old patriarchal society? Rebuild it like it used to be and you will feel secure and forget the war? That is one danger. But there is also a chance for “transformation,” and we have to think about what kind of transformation we would like. Often the fighting groups haven’t thought about an economic plan, nor have they visualized the new society. They have been too busy fighting and sometimes do not even have a political wing that thinks through policies. Transformation is often a question that neither side has thought too much about. On occasion, foreign agencies and the governments give money that nobody knows how to use because they haven’t thought it through.

WG: I would like to end by asking you to say a few final words on something that has been a central concern for the WICZNET and that you have been touching on throughout this interview – how would you define conflict zone?

KJ: In Sri Lanka, there were periods of ceasefire, but in those times, we never said there wasn’t a conflict. In fact, the conflict could even extend into the capital city, with its five-star hotels. We were in a country at war, where even one checkpoint near a big hotel meant life was not “normal.” So one can’t say that there wasn’t any part of the country that was not affected. The war was at the back of everyone’s mind.

It is true that some places were more dangerous than others and there are some areas that we haven't visited for twenty years because they were in "conflict zones."

Now that there is a ceasefire, huge crowds and middle-class tourists are going to places in the north and east that they have not seen for a long time – Sri Lankans are filling up all the hotels. Even poor people want to go. One person said to me, "Oh, I want to go to Jaffna!" and I asked him, "What for?" and he replied, "Just to see!" Today a conflict zone also means that you are conscious that there have been tremendous restrictions on the spaces where you could previously go. When that is lifted, everyone wants to fill the space, and to see the devastation caused by war. The last time there was a ceasefire in Sri Lanka in 1995, everybody wanted to rush on a train to Jaffna – trade unions, women's groups, the Girl Guides, and the Federation of University Women. They wanted to revive their organization's branches in the conflict zones. Such attempts to return to normalcy prevail today. So we can only be cautiously optimistic and at the same time vigilant about issues of women's rights, children's rights, and democracy, in this difficult period of our history.