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## Commission on the Status of Women

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Alliance Creative Community Project, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council\***

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

There are pressing challenges confronting upcountry women of Sri Lanka in regards to gender equality and women's empowerment. The aim of this statement is to underscore the critical importance of tackling these issues within the overarching framework of the United Nations' strategic priorities.

As we convene to deliberate upon the acceleration of gender equality and the empowerment of women, with emphasis on poverty alleviation and the reinforcement of institutions, it becomes unequivocally clear that we must embark on an exploration of the distinct adversities faced by upcountry women in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, it is imperative that we align our discussions with the overarching review theme, which pertains to social protection systems, access to public services, and the establishment of sustainable infrastructures to foster gender equality.

The upcountry women of Sri Lanka represent a unique and resilient demographic, whose struggles are deeply intertwined with historical, cultural, and socioeconomic complexities. It is our shared responsibility, as global advocates, to acknowledge and address these complexities while charting a path towards gender equality and sustainable development.

## Context

In the vibrant tapestry of Sri Lanka's cultural heritage, a mosaic of diverse ethnicities adds to its rich social fabric. Among these, the upcountry Tamil community occupies a distinctive place, its roots tracing back to indentured laborers brought to Sri Lanka during the colonial era. Over time, this community has grappled with a lengthy legacy of marginalization and discrimination such as lack of proper housing, no education or proper health care services. They do not even have an address.

Women had to deal with systemic violence and abuse, tough and demanding working conditions, cultural and societal prejudices and numerous other forms of exploitation such as low wages, limited access to medical services and a lack of government administrative information. "Women and girls have been disproportionately affected by contemporary forms of slavery in Sri Lanka. This demonstrates persisting, significant levels of gender inequality, patriarchal attitudes and intersecting forms of discrimination," said UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, including its causes and consequences, Tomoya Obokata, in his final report on Sri Lanka. Mr. Obokata visited the country in November and December 2021.

However, within the upcountry Tamil community, women face and bear the weight of a dual challenge that sets them apart. First, as women, navigating the complexities of gender inequality, and second, as members of an ethnic minority, contending with a history of systemic hurdles deeply entrenched in the country's social, economic, and political landscape.

Their experiences shed light on the intricate interplay between gender dynamics and ethnic disparities, offering a unique perspective that calls for attention and action. As we embark on a journey to empower these women, we recognize the imperative to address these complexities and strive for a more equitable future, not just for them but for all women worldwide.

## Empowering Through Education

In the journey toward the empowerment of upcountry women, education emerges as a fundamental building block. However, poverty, limited infrastructure, and entrenched cultural norms represent barriers that hinder these women from accessing higher learning opportunities. Within this marginalized community, there are also stark gender disparities, with male literacy rates significantly outpacing their female counterparts.

While education has the power to uplift individuals and entire communities, realizing its potential specifically in the upcountry region demands concerted efforts. To combat this challenge effectively, Sri Lanka must take a proactive stance in prioritizing the development of educational infrastructure, with a particular focus on enhancing opportunities for girls.

Comprehensive measures and targeted interventions such as scholarships, mentorship programs, and affirmative action policies must be implemented in order to both boost female enrolment and to ensure the retention of girls in schools and universities. Moreover, the introduction of comprehensive sex education programs play a pivotal role in dismantling regressive gender norms and stereotypes that hinder girls' educational progress, and in creating an inclusive educational environment. By embracing these multifaceted initiatives, Sri Lanka can bridge the educational disparities, fostering an environment where girls have equal access to quality education and the opportunities it provides.

## Economic Empowerment

The upcountry Tamil community faces economic vulnerabilities. Women in this community often find themselves trapped in low-paying, physically demanding jobs, with limited access to social protections. Breaking the cycle of poverty for upcountry women requires multifaceted interventions that address their unique challenges comprehensively.

One of the primary strategies to empower upcountry women economically is by encouraging diversification of livelihoods. Over-reliance on tea plantations as the sole income source perpetuates economic vulnerability. Initiatives promoting alternative income-generation activities can be transformative. This includes programs in entrepreneurship, vocational training, and access to credit.

Encouraging women to explore entrepreneurship can unlock their potential for economic independence. Tailored training programs on business management, marketing, and financial literacy can equip them with the necessary skills to start and manage their businesses effectively. Support in identifying viable business opportunities can open doors to new income streams.

Vocational training programs enable upcountry women to acquire in-demand skills that expand their employment prospects beyond the tea plantations. Skills like tailoring, food processing, or IT training can lead to better-paying job opportunities or self-employment ventures.

Facilitating access to credit and microfinance services is crucial for empowering women economically. These financial resources enable them to invest in income-generating activities, expand their businesses, and enhance their financial stability. Microfinance institutions with gender-sensitive lending practices can play a pivotal role in this regard.

Ensuring wage parity for female workers in the tea industry is not just an economic necessity; it is a matter of gender equality. The persistent gender pay gap must be eliminated to allow women to contribute fully to their households' financial stability. This involves:

**Pay Equity Policies:** Wage discrimination based on gender should be outlawed and vigorously enforced. Implementing policies that mandate equal pay for equal work, and pay transparency measures can help identify and rectify pay disparities.

**Skill Enhancement:** Upskilling can lead to higher-paying positions and better opportunities for career advancement. However, the opportunities for women to enhance their skills and qualifications within the tea industry must be proactively provided to them.

**Collective Bargaining:** Unionization can be a powerful tool in advocating for gender equality in the workplace. Women in the tea industry must be empowered to collectively negotiate for fair wages and improved working conditions.

## **Social Protections**

Strengthening social protection systems is vital for upcountry women. This includes:

**Maternity Benefits:** Ensuring that women have access to maternity benefits, including paid maternity leave.

**Access to Healthcare:** Guaranteeing easy access to healthcare services, including maternal and reproductive health services as well as mental health services via regular health check-ups, family planning, and prenatal care are essential components of women's well-being.

**Childcare Support:** Providing affordable and accessible childcare facilities to alleviate the burden on working mothers allows them to maintain their employment while ensuring the welfare of their children.

## **Access to Healthcare and Sustainable Infrastructure**

In line with the review theme, access to healthcare and sustainable infrastructure is a pressing concern for upcountry women. Many reside in remote areas with limited access to healthcare facilities. The provision of adequate healthcare, including maternal and reproductive health services, is non-negotiable. Additionally, investments in sustainable infrastructure, such as improved transportation and sanitation facilities, can significantly enhance the quality of life for upcountry women. Sustainable development should be a priority in these regions, with a strong gender perspective.

## **Political Participation**

Empowering upcountry women also involves increasing their political representation and influence. Gender-sensitive institutions can facilitate their participation in decision-making processes. Quota systems and support for female candidates from marginalized communities are effective strategies for promoting inclusivity.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the empowerment of upcountry women in Sri Lanka is an essential component of sustainable development and the achievement of gender equality. As we discuss accelerating gender equality and women's empowerment, we cannot overlook the unique challenges faced by marginalized communities. We urge the United Nations and its member states to prioritize the needs of upcountry women in Sri Lanka and similar communities worldwide. The empowerment of these women is not just a goal; it is a promise of a brighter, more equitable future for all. Together, let us work towards a world where every woman and girl, regardless of her background, enjoys equal opportunities, access to quality education, economic empowerment, and the ability to participate in shaping her community's future. Only then can we truly accelerate the achievement of gender equality and sustainable development for all.

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