

Women's Call

End Impunity and Ensure Non-Recurrence with Enforced and Involuntary Disappearances in Sri Lanka

We, as conflict affected women and victims, have searched for disappeared loved ones and witnessed thousands of others searching for their loved ones. Many have gone before numerous state initiatives including several commissions of inquiry appointed by successive governments with no answers given or effective steps taken to prevent future disappearances. After many years of empty promises, we were heartened by the Government of Sri Lanka's ratification of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance in May 2016 and looked forward to domestic legislation being introduced to criminalise enforced disappearances in Sri Lanka and make it meaningful locally. In February 2017, the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance Bill was gazetted and we waited for Parliament to debate and thereby criminalise disappearances. On 5th July, we were disappointed to hear of the indefinite postponement of the debate without any reasons given. We believe the Bill is essential for reconciliation as it will prevent future disappearances, end impunity and ensure that no loved ones will have to experience the pain many have experienced for decades.

We are also aware that several actors are spreading false information of the proposed law and attempting to prevent the Bill being taken up for debate. Such persons through their actions are effectively sending the message that no action should be taken on enforced and involuntary disappearances and thereby promoting the culture of impunity. We are indeed saddened by such irresponsible statements and action, as it shows that many are unaware of the pain and suffering caused by disappearances to families and communities and are encouraging a crime that has a devastating impact and perpetuates the suffering faced by thousands across Sri Lanka, in the north, south, east and west.

Numerous commissions over the years and most recently the Public Representations Committee on Constitutional Reform and Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms from 2016 highlighted the plight of victims of enforced and involuntary disappearances. Many women who came before the consultation processes in 2016 spoke of the need for guarantees of non-recurrence in relation to disappearance. We believe criminalizing disappearances in Sri Lanka is a critical step in this process. Therefore, we call on the Government of Sri Lanka and political leaders to take a firm stand on a crime that has been unaddressed for too many years and to take immediate steps to debate and enact the Bill into Sri Lankan law. Such a measure will provide confidence to us and the many affected persons in all communities that genuine steps are finally being taken to stop future disappearances and ensure non-recurrence.