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FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS CAN BE STRONG DRIVERS OF DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION IN SRI LANKA

The fast-moving progressive world has ensured a seat at the table for many able and willing females in various sectors, ensuring equity and equality. However, the road to success is still a long journey for most women due to the many hardships they face. Female religious leaders have faced many gender-based challenges historically and continue to face them in the contemporary, grossly patriarchal religious hierarchies in Sri Lanka and elsewhere. Today's society is more progressive in inclusion, with more opportunities for women. However, instances can still be observed where women are discriminated against or not recognized for what they can offer, even when they might be female religious leaders. While acknowledging the urgency and priority of addressing such challenges, the focus of this policy brief and the accompanying Female Religious Leaders for Dialogue and Mediation (FREEDOM) initiative is to bring attention to the importance of engaging female religious leaders in dialogue and mediation in addressing contemporary social issues in Sri Lanka. This policy brief was developed based on information gathered through consultation workshops, key informant interviews, an online survey, and a review of the available literature, which was carried out from 1 - 25 March 2023. A female religious leader is a female ordained or lay person holding a leadership position in a religious or spiritual community. All four major religions in Sri Lanka, namely Buddhism, Christianity/Catholicism, Hinduism, and Islam, have female religious leaders recognized by the respective organization, which is a progressive step (Fact Box 1 and Figure 1).

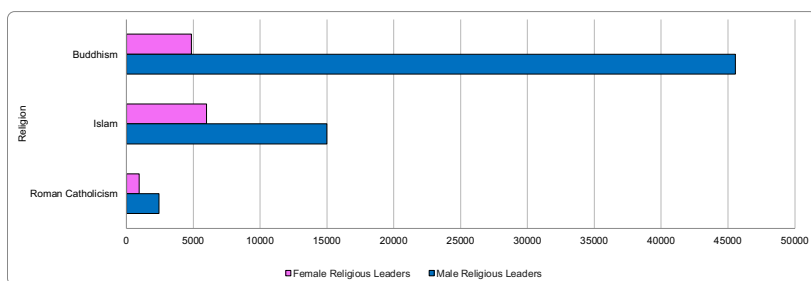


Figure 1: Gender Distribution of Female Religious Leaders in Sri Lanka

Fact Box 1: Statistics of Female Religious Leaders in Sri Lanka

The latest census report by the Department of Census and Statistics had no published information on the religious leaders, total or gender segregated.

Buddhism:

There are 2874 Dasa Sil Meniyos and 723 Aramayas where they reside, as per communications with Ministry of Buddha Sasana. The ordination as Bhikkhunis commenced in 1998, though the state still needs to fully recognize them. By 2023, there will be around 2000 Bhikkhunis who are residing in about 500 Aramayas, as per personal communications with some Bhikkhunis. This is in the backdrop of 45 560 male Buddhist monks, of which 20 364 are fully ordained, as per Ministry of Buddha Sasana. In addition, there are 10 206 temples where male Buddhist monks reside.

Roman Catholicism:

The Roman Catholic Church representative stated that it has 25 religious congregations of men, 33 religious congregations of women, and 05 contemplative congregations of religious women. The number of male priests is 788. The number of sisters is 2280. There are also 165 religious brothers and 165 contemplative sisters.

Islam:

According to All Ceylon Jamiyathul Ulama sources, there will be 15,000 moulavis and 6000 moulaviyas in Sri Lanka in 2023.

Hinduism:

A distinct category of female religious leaders could not be identified in popular *Shaivism*, *Shakthism* or Worship of Murugan/Lord katharagama in Sri Lanka. *Chinmaya Mission and Rama Krishna Mission*: Few ordained female religious leaders are available in Sri Lanka. *Brahma Kumaris*: The Brahma Kumaris is a spiritual movement promoting Raja Yoga Meditation with around 5000-6000 followers in Sri Lanka. A personal communication stated that over 80% of it's members, as well as the leadership, consists of females.

“Female religious leaders are discriminated against twice: Once for being a woman and then for being a religious leader.”

AVAILABLE FORMAL PLATFORMS FOR DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION EXCLUDE FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS

Sri Lanka has several platforms operational at the national and district level for dialogue and mediation, for instance, Mediation Boards, District Inter Religious Committees, and District Reconciliation Committees. However, the participation of female religious leaders in such platforms could be improved (Fact Box 2 & 3).

Fact Box 3: Participation of Female Religious Leaders in some Dialogue and Mediation Platforms in Sri Lanka

Community Mediation Boards:

Community Mediation Boards were established in 1990 in Sri Lanka by the Mediation Boards Act No. 72 of 1988¹. The intention of establishing mediation boards was to remedy delays of law in the formal justice system by providing an alternative to expensive and time-consuming litigation which is quick, cheap, community-led, and accessible to people. Community Mediation Boards are managed by the Mediation Commission, which functions under the Ministry of Justice, Prison Affairs, and Constitutional Reforms. There are 329 Community Mediation Boards with over 8,500 active volunteer Mediators nationwide. Female religious leaders could be provided opportunities as there is no single female religious leader among the 8,500 volunteer mediators in Sri Lanka.

District Interreligious Committees (DIRCs)

There are 17 district interreligious committees (DIRCs)². There are around 40-50 female religious leaders in these DRICs. Most were Buddhist and Christian leaders, whereas only very few were from Islam. There was no Hindu religious leader representation in these DRICs.

For example, though male religious leaders are involved in mediation boards, female religious leaders often need to be more engaged. In addition to the state-driven Community Mediation Boards, other dialogue and mediation platforms are led by Non-Governmental and Community-Based organizations. As per the statistics of Fact Box 3, it is clear that the participation of female religious leaders needs to be improved in both the state and non-state-driven dialogue and mediation platforms.

The Asia Foundation, in a report in 2016 titled "Understanding Women Mediators: An in-depth study of women in Community Mediation Boards in Sri Lanka," highlighted that it is essential to involve women in such discussions due to their lack of presence to ensure that all discussions conducted would have a holistic outcome and the ability to cater to unseen facets of discussions³. In addition, the above report highlighted that women are severely under-represented in the community mediation boards in Sri Lanka: Females account for 20.6% of the total cadre of approximately 8500 mediators nationwide.

Fact Box 2: Dialogue and Mediation

Dialogue and mediation are essential tools to address conflicts constructively⁴. These approaches can be employed both to prevent and resolve conflicts. They could also be used before, during, or following a conflict.

Dialogue is a tool used to build understanding, trust, and relationships. Dialogue can be public but often takes place in private and confidentially. The format can range from one brief conversation to initiatives conducted over an extended period. In addition, they can involve individuals or groups of communities.

Mediation is another tool used to help resolve conflict and stop violence from escalating – involving bringing opposing individuals or groups together to find a solution. Mediation, often facilitated and/or supported by a neutral third party, can be crucial in deescalating conflict and healing wounds after division.

Source: www.peaceinsight.org

The role of female religious leaders in dialogue and mediation should be unrestricted to such formal and organized platforms. Nevertheless, their engagement in dialogue and mediation is negligible, even in such informal spaces.

FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS CAN PLAY A UNIQUE ROLE IN ADDRESSING CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL ISSUES IN SRI LANKA

Many a times and across the world, it has been proven how women could contribute effectively for conflict resolution and peace building⁵⁻⁷. Female religious leaders can play a significant role in addressing conflicts at inter-personal, community, and national level through dialogue and mediation in Sri Lanka too.

"Female religious leaders should be given more opportunities to engage in dialogue and mediation"

In addition, they can also be a source of support through dialogue and mediation in addressing women and child protection issues at the community and national levels.

When civil or inter-religious tensions occur, female religious leaders could have a more profound approach to addressing them through dialogue and mediation, both with men and women.

During the current socio-economic crisis that the country is experiencing, female religious leaders can help prevent, resolve, and even transform conflict through compassionate interventions that could divert assistance to needy segments of society.

EXISTING INSTITUTIONS AND MECHANISMS FOR DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION IN SRI LANKA SHOULD GET FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS ENGAGED MORE

Given female religious leaders' unique role in dialogue and mediation, the leadership of existing dialogue and mediation mechanisms, such as Community Mediation Boards and District Interreligious Committees, should create an inclusive and safe environment for their active participation and contribution.

The provision of space and leadership in dialogue and mediation could start small and gradually increase. In addition, hierarchies in religious organizations, both male and female, should bless and facilitate the participation of female religious leaders in such dialogue and mediation both in micro and macro level platforms.

Although the platforms are present for female religious persons to be a part of such institutions and organizations, based on the discussions conducted with the mediation boards, the tedious process of getting a slot at the discussion table is a bottleneck that many of these female religious leaders face especially due to the inability of these persons to receive a recommendation from their male counterparts for the same.

FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS SHOULD BE PROVIDED WITH CAPACITY-BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES IN DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION

Compared to male religious leaders, female religious leaders are not identified as potential participants in most formal and informal training on dialogue and mediation. However, female religious leaders must have the proper knowledge, attitudes, and skills to play their desired role in dialogue and mediation. Hence, dialogue and mediation training should be included in the formative and ongoing training programs for female religious leaders to further capacitate their ability to effectively and efficiently participate in dialogue and mediation.

However, disseminating knowledge and developing skills will be helpful only if a platform is offered to such leaders to network and execute above roles. Therefore, those in power should create an enabling environment. At the same time, a demand should be initiated at the community level for the engagement of female religious leaders for dialogue and mediation.

This repeatedly highlighted recommendation emerged as a priority during the research behind this policy brief. In addition, this recommendation also backs the theory of change of the FREEDOM project (fact Box 4).

FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS FOR DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION

FREEDOM

Fact Box 4: FREEDOM Project

The female Religious Leaders for Dialogue and Mediation (FREEDOM) project aims to create a favorable environment for and build the capacity of female religious leaders to be active stakeholders in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation environment of Sri Lanka through Dialogue and Mediation. It is a project supported by the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemaker's Asia Working Group small grant program, funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland and implemented by Resilience Research, Training, and Consulting.

The Network for
Religious and
Traditional
Peacemakers



Ministry for Foreign
Affairs of Finland



“Female religious leaders should be continuously engaged in the peacebuilding process.”

WHAT CAN DECISION-MAKERS DO TO INCREASE THE ENGAGEMENT OF FEMALE RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN DIALOGUE AND MEDIATION IN SRI LANKA?

- **The leadership of the religious organization**
 - ✓ Encourage Intra religious dialogues to revisit the original religious texts and rethink the role of female religious leaders in the globalized world.
 - ✓ Highlight & encourage the engagement of female religious leaders in dialogue and mediation.
 - ✓ Create and expand the space for female religious leaders in engaging dialogue and mediation.
 - ✓ Include dialogue and mediation skills in formative and ongoing capacity-building programs.
 - ✓ Influence the government to fill the gaps related to the legal status and legal documentation of the respective fellow female religious community.
- **The leadership of Dialogue and Mediation Platforms**
 - ✓ Invite female religious leaders to engage in dialogue and mediation. platforms to make them more inclusive and productive.
 - ✓ Allocate an equitable portion of the intervention table for female religious leaders and progressively increase such opportunities.
- **The leadership of Civil Society Organizations**
 - ✓ Provide opportunities for female religious leaders to build their knowledge, skills, and attitudes in dialogue and mediation.
 - ✓ Identify needs and design new initiatives to enhance the participation of female religious leaders in mainstream social and religious activities.
- **Female Religious Leaders**
 - ✓ Seek out opportunities to get engaged in dialogue and mediation
 - ✓ Improve their capacity for dialogue and mediation.
- **Government Institutions**
 - ✓ Create a conversation around the legitimacy of female religious leaders to secure inclusion, acceptance, and respect as a principal requirement of female religious leaders for them to enter into the mainstream religious environment, including dialogue and mediation.
 - ✓ Strengthen collection of information on female religious leaders for evidence-informed decision making.
 - ✓ Enhance involvement of the Ministry of Buddhasasana, Religious and Cultural Affairs, Justice Ministry, and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs to cater to creating a more inclusive environment for female religious leaders to be recognized and accounted for in such processes
- **Community leaders**
 - ✓ Develop favorable attitudes and trust towards female religious leaders.
 - ✓ Demand engagement of female religious leaders in dialogue and mediation during community issues.

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"Female religious leaders should educate their younger members on dialog and mediation."