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21 December 2004

LKA43212.E

Sri Lanka: The government response to violence against women, particularly in Colombo (January 2003 - December 2004)
Research Directorate, Immigration and Refugee Board, Ottawa

In July 2003, the National Committee on Women in Sri Lanka indicated that the level of violence against women, including "sexual assault, rape, incest, domestic violence, sexual harassment in [the] workplac[e] and abduction" of women, had increased throughout the country (*Daily News* 19 July 2003). Further, the Committee noted that

[c]riminal and other degrading acts of violence damaging and offensive to the integrity and dignity of the individual, previously common to areas of armed conflict, has in the last decade or more shifted increasingly to other vulnerable women sectors in non-conflict areas (ibid.).

In its *Freedom in the World 2004* report, Freedom House stated that rape and domestic violence continued to be "serious problems" in Sri Lanka (14 Sept. 2004). According to Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, "60 per cent of women in Sri Lanka faced some form of domestic violence" (*Daily News* 5 Nov. 2004). In addition, "the large majority of cases of violence against women go unreported in the media and at police stations" (ibid. 19 July 2003).

The Law

In 1995, the Penal Code was amended to criminalize sexual harassment and increase penalties for persons convicted of rape and incest (*Daily News* 19 July 2003). The amendments provided a prison term ranging between 7 and 20 years for rape, a non-bailable offence, and a prison term of 5 years for sexual harassment, also a non-bailable offence (ibid.).

In March 2004, the Minister of Women's Affairs indicated that two new pieces of legislation, the Domestic Violence Bill and the Women's Rights Bill, were presented before the legislature, and that they were also "made available for public comments" (*Sunday Observer* 7 Mar. 2004). In September 2004, one local newspaper reported that although these new bills were aimed at protecting women against violence, among other things, public interest in them was very low (*Daily News* 22 Sept. 2004). Information on the current status of these bills could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

In July 2003, the United Nations Rapporteur on Violence said: "[t]hough Sri Lanka has signed the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1981, we have not made it effective as part of our legal system" (*Daily News* 19 July 2003).

The Police

In May 2003, the Minister of Women's Affairs, Amara Piyaseeli Ratnayake, indicated that violence against women, including harassment, has been accepted as "normal [by Sri Lankan society] and sometimes even the police consider domestic violence as normal" (*Daily News* 1 May 2003). Similarly, in November 2004, the country's president stated Sri Lankan society has grown "accustomed to overlook [domestic violence] as a normal thing. This type of thinking has gone a long way to almost institutionalise violence against women in our society" (*ibid.* 5 Nov. 2004). According to Freedom House, "authorities weakly enforce existing laws" concerning rape and domestic violence (14 Sept. 2004).

In August 2003, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was making arrangements to train female police officers and to "strengthen women's and children's desks at police stations and increase the number of such desks covering all police stations in the country" (*Daily News* 28 Aug. 2003). This initiative was to begin in September 2003 (*ibid.*); however, information on its status could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

The Judiciary

Information on how the judiciary processes cases of violence against women could not be found among the sources consulted by the Research Directorate.

Government Initiatives

In 1996, the Sri Lankan government set up a presidential task force to ensure that consideration was given to women's rights in the development of government policies and action plans (*Sunday Observer* 7 Mar. 2004). In 1997, the Ministry of Women's Affairs was established (*ibid.*). Within this ministry, the National Committee on Women was established to enforce the Women's Charter, which is a "declaratory document [that] provides no mandate for investigation [or] punitive measures" (*Daily News* 19 July 2003). Specifically, the Committee is responsible for

... examining progress, monitoring achievement of its objectives, acting as an advisory body on matters relating to the status of women and those matters referred by the Minister to the Committee for its consideration. It can scrutinise complaints of gender discrimination, complaints [in] violation of provisions in the Women's Charter and channel complaints to administrative authorities, governmental and non-governmental, for redress, or mediation services (*ibid.*).

Complaints of infringements of the Women's Charter, including incidents of violence, are received and processed by the Gender Complaints Unit of the Committee (*ibid.*). The Committee also carries out public awareness programmes in urban and rural communities, as well as awareness programs for the police, concerning violence against women and human rights, among other gender-related issues (*ibid.*).

For information on social services and support available to abused women in Sri Lanka, please refer to LKA43213.E of 10 December 2004.

This Response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Research Directorate within time constraints. This Response is not, and does not purport to be, conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim for refugee protection. Please find below the list of additional sources consulted in researching this Information Request.

References

Daily News [Colombo]. 5 November 2004. Chula Bandara Kulasekera et al. "Domestic Violence Against Women Violation of Basic Human Rights: President." <<http://origin.dailynews.lk>> [Accessed 5 Nov. 2004]

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Additional Sources Consulted

Dialog.

Internet sites, including: Amnesty International (AI), BBC, *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2003*, European Country of Origin Information Network (ECOI), Human Rights Watch (HRW), Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), World News Connection (WNC).

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