

Ladies and Gentlemen,

[The Parliament of Sri Lanka encourages all citizens to involve themselves in the democratic decision-making process. Especially Women Parliamentarians Caucus in Parliament pays attention to the issues relating to underprivileged women in Sri Lanka. The Caucus is an apolitical body, which aims to address crucial problems such as poverty, domestic violence, child marriages, teen pregnancy, nutrition and so on.]

The Women Parliamentarians Caucus was successful in achieving some of its goals. One achievement was the amendment to the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance (chapter 262) and obtaining a 25% quota for women in 2017. In addition, the opening of the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) Corner of Parliament can be cited as a successful attempt to promote gender equality. Furthermore, the Caucus looks into the establishment of an “Independent Ombudswoman” on gender issues under the Office of the Ombudsman to investigate and provide redress for injustices against women and to expedite the legal process in cases of violence against women. Further, we were able to establish a Select Committee of Parliament to Look Into and Report to Parliament its Recommendations to Ensure Gender Equity and Equality with special emphasis on looking into gender-based discrimination and violation of women’s rights in Sri Lanka. I strongly believe that through such efforts, we will be able to secure

Customary or Personal Laws, as applicable to the respective communities. Therefore, matters such as marriage, divorce, succession to personal property etc. related to specific communities or ethnic/religious groups are being governed by the personal laws applicable to them. As concerns were raised that some of these personal laws are discriminatory, particularly for women and girls, to ensure compliance with equality and non-discrimination provisions enshrined in the Constitution, Sri Lanka has included a policy commitment in its National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights to review all legislations.

Recently we experienced an unprecedented situation in the Sri Lankan political history. As never before in the country's history, citizens demanded to end the traditional way of governance to enhance accountability. This tensed situation, sent a message for us to rethink the democratic deliberations and give redress to the demands highlighted, especially by the youth. As a result of these demands, under the President's guidance, Parliament has taken action to give representation to the youth in the Parliamentary Sectorial Oversight Committees. To enable youth representation in Parliamentary Committees, we have amended the Parliamentary Standing Orders. Moreover, we held knowledge-sharing workshops to educate youth on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

[Parliament has the ultimate responsibility for sustainable peace and is the centre for creating an inclusive society. Parliaments are moreover an arena where underrepresented communities and marginalized groups can make a voice and seek formal political representation via elections.]

The Parliament of Sri Lanka has proved that the House represents all ethnic groups through the Parliamentary general election. Under the British rule our legislative bodies were represented on ethnic basis, which was changed in 1931. Thereafter all communities can represent political bodies through free and fair elections.

[I should especially mention here, Parliament as an institution, has always been trying to promote peaceful co-existence and inclusiveness through Parliamentary functions.] It is important to highlight here that the Constitution of Sri Lanka provides the necessary legal framework to practice representative democracy through Parliament. Parliament has the utmost responsibility to create an inclusive society together with all ethnic groups, youth, women, differently-abled persons and indigenous communities in Sri Lanka.

Taking into account the diversity of the demographic and cultural composition of Sri Lanka, the Sri Lankan legal system provides for a multiplicity of laws to accommodate and preserve the respective cultural and religious rites and traditions of such communities. The general law of the country takes a subordinate position in the sphere of

Article 15(2) of the Constitution establishes that freedom of expression shall be subject to such restrictions as may be prescribed by law in the interests of racial and religious harmony. In this context relevant laws have been strictly enforced against perpetrators of reported incidents.

[The Office of National Unity and Reconciliation of Sri Lanka is an entity under the Ministry of Justice with the goal of promoting harmony and unity among people of Sri Lanka. ONUR is in the process of developing a National Action Plan on Preventing Violent Extremism. They also conduct programmes to promote religious coexistence by interactive training including Buddhist, Islamic, Hindu and Christian clergy, professionals, opinion leaders and public servants.]

As you know, Sri Lanka is the oldest democracy in South Asia. Last month we celebrated our 75th Independence. [Our country was conquered by various foreign nations over centuries and was freed from Western imperialism in 1948.] We were able to win that freedom through the efforts made by all communities. Even though we faced a 30-year internal ethnic war, we have proven in history that we are a nation committed to peace and harmony. Following the conflict, the Government renewed its commitment to reconciliation and embarked on several initiatives towards this goal. We recognize that language policy implementation as the prelude to national coexistence and reconciliation. Sri Lanka implements a trilingual language policy.

As a multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-cultural nation, Sri Lanka remains committed to build a society where the rights of all communities are secured and their safety and security is ensured. Also human dignity is valued and equal treatment to every person irrespective of their religion, ethnicity or race is an accepted norm of public life.

Steps are continuously taken to ensure that all communities have the space to express their identity, including the right to enjoy their own culture, profess and practice their own religion and use, nurture and promote their own language. All communities participate fully in the life of the nation, whether it be at national, provincial or local level.

Article 12(1) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law. Article 12(2) guarantees the fundamental right to non-discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, language, cast, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any such grounds. All ethnic groups are free to elect their representatives to political bodies through free and fair elections.

Furthermore, the government maintains a zero-tolerance policy on any act of religious hatred or intolerance. In keeping with the international obligations, the Parliament of Sri Lanka passed International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) Act No. 56 of 2007. The primary purpose of this statute was to recognize the rights which are not already recognized under the Constitution. ICCPR Act criminalizes propagating or advocating religious or racial hatred.

When we discuss an inclusive society, such a society must be based on respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, cultural and religious diversity, social justice, democratic participation, and the rule of law. [It is important to note that in 1993 the seminal case of *Oberti v. Board of Education*, established -“***inclusion is a right, not a privilege for a selected few***”. So, creating an inclusive society must be accepted by all democratic governments. Especially countries like us with diverse communities should respect all citizens without discrimination on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex et cetera.]

Ladies and Gentleman,

Now, I wish to share with you my country's experience in that perspective.

Sri Lanka, a tiny island in the Indian Ocean, is home to diverse ethnic groups such as Sinhalese, Muslims, Tamils, Burghers, and Malays, who follow different religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Sinhalese are the majority community in Sri Lanka. Based on archaeological evidence, these ethnic groups have a long history of co-existence. Over the centuries these different ethnic groups have been maintaining social equilibrium and ethnic harmony among all communities. These different communities were able to live peacefully as Sri Lankans, because their religions taught the value of peace and co-existence.

“Democracy is not just constitutional and legislative rules: it is a culture and practice that adheres to the law and respects international human rights principles”

It is indeed true. Creating a democratic culture and practicing democratic values is more significant than mere words and principles of democracy.

[I believe we are bound to create peaceful coexistence firstly within families; then within neighborhoods; within cities; within nations and at large within the world.] We are responsible for the protection of the planet we have inherited and will have to pass it to the future generations as a safe place for coexistence.

We must be fully aware of the obstacles we have to face while transforming peace into effective action in today's world. The task is very challenging than ever before due to several factors. At present, in the international context, ideologies of nationalism, protectionism, self-interest, intolerance, xenophobia, disrespect for one's own population are on the rise, which leads to an increase in local and international conflicts. We must understand, that at present, many countries are facing a myriad of challenges in protecting viable democratic values. Further, the COVID pandemic may also have directly and indirectly exacerbated these unseen challenges, because the economic challenges that emerged with the pandemic ended up with political unrest in most countries. Therefore, it is time to search for a common solution.