

75 years of the UDHR – what progress have we made?

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) celebrates 75 years in 2023. It is also 75 years since Sri Lanka gained independence from colonial rule. It has been 75 years of building human rights norms, and 75 years of fighting to advance the principles embodied by the Declaration: universality, interdependence, indivisibility, equality, freedom, and dignity. (Extract from the joint civil society statement)

Over the past 75 years, States have built on the rights enshrined in the UDHR and have increased their political and legal commitments under international human rights law, including through the ratification of treaties. Over the past 75 years, scholars, treaty bodies, and Special Procedures mandate holders have continuously clarified and deepened these protections for all people in support of sustainable development and peace. (Extract from the joint civil society statement)

Sri Lanka and the UDHR

Let's reflect on Sri Lanka and its progress towards human rights in the past 75 years. The general belief among the population has been that politicians and their political parties have not done enough to protect the fundamental rights of the citizens. That politicians have violated the Universal Declaration and their treaties for their own gain. That there has been no accountability for their actions that have led to Sri Lanka's social, economic, and political deterioration and collapse.

Whilst there were perhaps a handful of success stories, the bigger success stories were ones that were handed out to us from the colonial era like education, health, and literacy. We failed to capitalise on these successes with the times. We continue to bask in those glory times and do not have anything very significant to showcase in the modern era. Our politicians were quite happy to ride on the back of these successes as if they were instrumental in their achievements.

The pandemic and the collapse of the economy in 2022 created a trust issue among the population. This has been the worst ever time in Sri Lanka. Governance was questioned, which led to widespread demonstrations and an exodus of people leaving the country stating there is absolutely no hope for a revival, at least not in the near term. Young people continue to show absolute dissent towards the political leadership in the country.

Successive governments since independence were responsible for malpractice, lack of accountability, violation of human rights, disregard of the laws of the country, and corruption. This parasitic trend continues to-date. It has throttled the nation into an utter abyss, setting it back to many decades.

As a national civil society organisation, we have witnessed this slide during our 45 years of existence. We strive to uplift the living standards of the underprivileged and vulnerable population by promoting a rights framework, knowledge, and livelihood opportunities. We work with intersecting communities and in labour migration.

Our governments have failed to recognise people with different sexual orientations. This has resulted in serious breaches and violations of the human rights of these people, it has led to discrimination in society and in the workplace, it has led to stigmatising them, it has led to the restriction, and the freedom of mobility, it has restricted them from free speech for fear of reprisal. This kind of regression by the government has led to these communities not being able to live normal lives in freedom.

A classic example is that with 40 years of HIV in the world and with the advancement of treatment, a PLHIV is still not able to disclose his or her status for fear of stigma and discrimination. In Sri Lanka, many PLHIV are living their lives without disclosure even to their own families. One can only imagine the mental health and trauma of these people and the lack of opportunities afforded to them.

We continue to witness the wide gender inequality gap that exists in our society. It is more than a patriarchal society or a patriarchal political leadership. It is the blatant nonrecognition of women and what they can achieve for themselves, for their families, and for their communities. The patriarchy conveniently fails to recognise this fact and continues to want to let women play a secondary role in society and in their families.

Over the years the democratic and civic spaces have been eroded with political and government threats between the people and the government. Governments are stifling civil society's presence in the right to assemble, the right to express views, and the right to safeguard democratic and human rights values. Governments are not only strangling this space, but they're also calling it names such as being undemocratic, unpatriotic, troublemakers, and progress stallers.

Our governments are postponing the right of the citizens to exercise their universal franchise, as we're witnessing right at this very moment in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka relies on labour remittances to boost its economy. It has, however, failed to recognise the migrant worker community by upholding their fundamental rights in its discourse. Bilateral negotiations fail to uphold worker rights, undocumented workers are ignored of their social and economic rights, there is considerable worker abuse that is overlooked, recruitment practices are corrupt, their health rights are overlooked, and their social welfare programmes and economic and social reintegration programmes are not fully invested in.

In a similar vein, Sri Lanka's plantation sector workers and their families have been overlooked throughout the past 75 years. Politicians have made unfair use of this population for their political gain and neglected their fundamental rights. Many still live in abject poverty with meagre incomes for generations. Their nutrition and quality of life have not improved.

Women working in the lucrative garment sector have been denied their rights and freedoms. They are paid below-normal wages and factory owners, and global brand owners continue to strangle them with overwork and underpay. Their health is at risk, and they don't enjoy any decent social welfare from their employers. It is a hire-and-fire attitude that these workers have to live with.

Sri Lanka's economy is lubricated by its informal economy which is over 50% of the labour force. The government continues to take this large workforce for granted with very few privileges and benefits offered to them. They too live on the fringe of poverty.

The recent political and economic collapse together with the covid pandemic has brought about many medium to long-term concerns. Poverty rates have risen to over 25%. The health sector has had a near collapse with severe shortages of essential drugs and an exodus of medical professionals leaving the

country. The education sector at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels has deteriorated with no signs of showing change to cope and compete in skills in the modern world.

Governance is at an all-time low as the average citizen has lost complete trust with the political leadership and their institutions. People want to see visible changes and they want their freedoms and rights brought back. They want accountability and transparency. They want law and order enforced on all citizens without favour. They want political corruption, impunity, bigotry, and dictatorial political leadership brought down to zero levels.

They want the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to be meaningfully revived and enacted as we are witnessing a rapid change in population demographics. The population also wants meaningful engagement in the economic and social space in the country where respect and dignity must be key pillars in the human rights discourse.

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