

Australian Tamil Congress

A Unified Voice for All Tamils



Women Rising Above Conflict

The Australia Tamil Congress (ATC) in conjunction with Tamil Women's Development (TWDG) Group with support of several human rights and women rights organisation initiated a forum that spotlighted 'the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women' on 21 November 2013 at Wesley Conference Centre in Sydney CBD.

This was part of a 16 day global campaign to raise awareness against gender based violence. Globally, the incidences of violence towards women have sadly increased. A recent global survey reveals that 35% of women globally have experienced sexual violence as well other forms of violence. Though these figures relate largely to violence by partners, another more sinister cause is militarised violence, where sexualised violence targeting women is becoming an integral part of war and armed conflict. Australian women from Tamil, Afghan and Kachin (Burma) communities were invited to share their experiences to highlight the insidious role militarism plays in perpetuating violence against women in their respective countries.

We were fortunate to hear the discourse of Olivia Welesley-Cole from the Australian National Committee on Refugee Women (ANCORW), who has worked closely with both the UNHCR and Action Aid. She advocated strongly for action against gender based violence and issues for accountability. She highlighted the importance of documenting any sexual violence using whatever media is at hand; as it becomes critical evidence if an investigation eventuates, and provides impetus to launch an investigation. More importantly it becomes difficult to discount documented claims. Olivia also urged that educational campaigns high lighting gender based violence, be targeted towards empathetic men, as they were the best ambassador for this cause. Statistics have shown that men are more likely to listen to other men rather than women.

The second guest speaker was Najeeba Wazefadost. Najeeba is currently the President of Hazara Women of Australia. She works as a case manager with SSI (Settlement Services International). She was also a finalist of the Young Human Rights Medal Award and in 2011, she won the 'Young Woman of the West Award' for her work in not-for-profit organisations. Her message highlighted the issues of many male dominated societies; and once again the solution pin pointed to the education of men. Due to the absence of a judicial system in a male dominated society, many women find themselves in conflict and punished for any expressions of their human right. Moreover, women are increasingly becoming the targets of persecution and assault; and there is great concern that after the withdrawal of foreign troops from Afghanistan, the situation may escalate. Regrettable, after so many years of war and unrest, most men have forgotten what normal behaviour is, as they are so caught up in a world of hatred and death. They themselves urgently need help and need to be educated on how to reconnect with themselves and others in a more positive way.

The third speaker was Seng Maw Lahpai, who spoke about state sanctioned violence against Kachin women in Burma. In June 2011, the 17 year old ceasefire was broken by the Burmese government in an attempt to permanently remove the Kachin from their ancestral for foreign investment. This has led to the Kachin government and its people fleeing for safety and their very lives. Unfortunately, as is too often the case, the Kachin women became centrepieces for military attacks by the Burmese governments. Gang rape and other forms of sexualised violence are the 'norm', in addition to other crimes against humanity by the Burmese government. The Kachin are forced to pin their hopes and security on make-shift camps as their villages are destroyed, making the women and children extremely

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vulnerable to attack by Burmese militia with few options for escape. Furthermore, in addition to having their access to finance and food cut off;

they are prevented from any form of regrouping to offer some resistance to the government and to protect themselves and their fragile communities.

The last speaker was Neerajah Shanmugarajah. She spoke of the continuing violence in the north of Sri Lanka, all be it by stealth under the flag of reconciliation. She highlighted the militarisation of the north despite the fact the war had long since ended. She spoke of the death and displacement of old women and children, making them extremely vulnerable, as the male figures that served a protective role in their lives are no longer there. They routinely face rape and other sexualised forms of violence by government forces in their daily lives. The numerous check points are notorious for such abuses. Most cases are ignored with very few incidences being actively investigated and even fewer resulting in punishable offences. Finally she also spoke about the forgotten women, who were more actively involved in the conflict. Their lives are now shattered as they try to forge a new existence for themselves in an already marginalised society that has chosen to ostracise them for their past actions that left them with little choice. They have been reclassified as the community prostitutes, and degraded to such an extent that suicide seems to be their only form of escape.

In summary, the forum was very sobering to many of us, who live fairly sheltered and relatively affluent life styles. We need to speak out not remain silent about any issues against human rights, especially when they target the weak and vulnerable. These are human beings, who are being denied a voice to speak out about the atrocities and abuses being done to them and their communities.



Hon Sophie Cotsis MLC -NSW Shadow Minister for Women



Speakers at the Event



No Fire Zone being screened