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## **Giving sisters more choice**

**A Sri Lankan who was honoured by the UN for her community development work talks about her efforts to bring together Tamil and Muslim women displaced during the bitter civil war**

Behind the cheerful countenance of this petite, yet gutsy woman lies a heavy heart. Shreen Abdul Saroor has experienced war and homelessness in her native land, that remembered pain making her all the more determined to be an agent for social change and racial harmony.



Shreen Abdul Saroor has fought tooth and nail to offer women in her native Sri Lanka a shot at freedom.

A peace advocate and community development worker, Saroor was raised in a Muslim family on Mannar, a small island off the northwestern coast of Sri Lanka. In 1990, she, her relatives and 70,000 other Muslim residents were evicted from five districts in the north of the country, whose population is predominantly Tamil. They were forced out by the Tamil Tigers (aka LTTE) who wanted to make the north into a completely mono-ethnic area.

Saroor's birthplace had been a multi-ethnic community where people of different faiths had coexisted peacefully for many generations. But more than two decades of civil conflict between the Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups, had driven a wedge between Sri Lanka's Muslims and their Tamil neighbours. Saroor wasn't to see her hometown again for another seven years. Since the ceasefire in 2002 many other displaced people have returned to their old neighbourhoods to find they have been stripped of their property, lack opportunities to earn a living and often have no access to even basic social services.

Now 42, Saroor has used her background in human rights advocacy and the experience she gained while working with the Canadian International Development Agency to restore a sense of normalcy to the lives of women on Mannar. Her commitment to implementing projects for community development and social well-being recently earned her an N-Peace award from the United Nations Development Programme. She was presented with the prize, created to toast women at the grassroots level who have to cope on the frontlines of conflict, at a function held in Bangkok.

Saroor's Model Resettlement Project is one of a handful of undertakings which have helped internally displaced Tamil and Muslim families to move back to the island, giving preference to war widows, rape victims, the disabled, young female heads of households and people living in refugee camps.

To empower women with the right tools to choose better lives for themselves, Saroor founded the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF) and an organisation called Mannar Women for Human Rights and Democracy.

"When we started our work it was clear that both Tamil and Muslim women had been doubly victimised. First, the war displaced them from their homes, made them the heads of their families and forced them to earn an income," Saroor noted.

"Second, they were marginalised by the social structures that had restricted their access to resources. The challenges that both Tamil and Muslim IDPs [internally displaced persons] experienced were identical. We cannot convince women to think about various women's issues when their children are hungry. I believe that equal rights for women and social empowerment are very vital issues to be addressed, but we can't tackle them effectively unless we first address their need for economic empowerment.

"It is the same with domestic violence. We can't expect women to stand up for their rights while they are still dependent on their husbands for financial support. Women must be economically empowered to enrich their quality of life.

"After the MWDF began their successful micro-credit programmes and women began to earn a decent income, it began empowering them to combat domestic violence while offering them access to a sustainable livelihood. My ultimate vision here was for them to have the right to choose."

While Sri Lanka has outlawed domestic violence, Saroor says that most of the men who are physically abusive in the home believe that they have the right to discipline their wives. This mindset has almost institutionalised such violence against women, she said. Most civil society organisations and government bodies in Sri Lanka prefer not to address this social malady openly since it is widely regarded as being a private family affair. And in rural areas, like Mannar, raising the issue is an especially difficult task.

"The MWDF has successfully countered domestic violence," Saroor said. "We have a comprehensive programme to deal with this malicious crime against women. We offer counselling, a community network, legal aid, protective shelter/custody, medical treatment and skill development and micro-loan facilities for battered women. And we are in the process of establishing a model 'women-friendly' police desk in Mannar to assist with filing complaints."

But the improvements made by Saroor and her colleagues have not been achieved without blood, sweat and tears. They have endured public humiliation, instigated largely by traditional, chauvinistic men who are opposed to the work of her foundation, the primary intention of which is to bring together Tamil and Muslim displaced by the war to collectively address rights violations.

"I am proud to say that we have achieved this goal to a certain extent," Saroor said. "Most importantly we have created a stage for younger women from the grassroots level to speak as one voice. With economic stability and know-how to overcome social and cultural impediments, their confidence continues to rise."

When asked to update Life on the current situation in Sri Lanka for minority groups, Saroor said the government had failed miserably to win the hearts of Tamils since the ceasefire.

The war may be over in Sri Lanka, she noted, but the culture of impunity and militarisation continues to dog the population, while its impact on women is appalling. For fear of ruffling feathers, she said she'd rather not discuss this in more detail. But gender-based violence is a grave concern and women's organisations, particularly those in the north and east of the country, are struggling to deal with a problem that's on the rise and receives little attention from law-enforcement officials.

"It is time for our military to get back to their barracks and hand over the civil administration to civilians and law enforcement to the police. Women should be given space to participate in vital aspects of peace and security such as ending impunity for conflict-related sexual violence and holding the perpetrators accountable while addressing the needs of women and girls as war-torn communities are rebuilt. We women have experienced the wars differently and have a unique perspective and gender-specific concerns to bring to policies in connection with demilitarisation, social justice, reconciliation and development."

Asked what had sparked her interest in this type of advocacy, Saroor recalled how, after being made homeless in 1990, she and her family had lived for a while in refugee camps in Puttalam, a northwestern province.

"What bothered me most was witnessing a secular group of Muslims become extremely religious in their rhetoric as they strived for a collective Muslim identity. Girls who had once been encouraged to study and compete for top scores in university-entrance exams alongside their Tamil sisters were now being coaxed to drop out of school in their early teens. Before even turning 16, they were married off. Women of my age were forced to wear purdah [garb that covers the body from head to toe] and their daily commuting and activities was completely controlled.

"Liberation from this type of bondage for me meant taking the womenfolk back home. With this in mind a few of us returned to our hometown of Mannar in 1997. And what we witnessed there was horrific. Prolonged government shelling had destroyed the homes and the

neighbourhoods of most of the Tamil women. Being displaced had become an ongoing experience for most of these women, who were told to continue producing offspring to keep the war going. It took us a while to come to terms with the fact that extreme nationalism, which affected the lives of Tamil women, and religious fundamentalism, in the case of Muslim women, were marginalising women. We founded the Mannar Women's Development Federation to address precisely these issues collectively.

"This is how I began my peace-building efforts. I felt that unless we came together as one voice nothing would change for us!"