

**Speech by Shreen Abdul Saroor**  
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In October 1990, the entire Muslim population of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka was expelled from their homeland by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). This followed the LTTE massacring 276 Muslims in the east, while they were praying, in August that year. Under threat of death the northern Muslim community was given 48 hours (in some instances only 2 hours) to leave their homes; they were allowed to take only \$5 per family and some clothes. My family was one of them.

Given the relatively low political importance of the Muslims in Sri Lanka in general and the Muslims of the Northern Province in particular, the plight of the northern Muslims received very little attention at the time of the expulsion and not much more in the subsequent 18 years.

When the eviction happened I was reading for my degree in the capital, Colombo, but felt a strong responsibility towards my community that was forcibly made homeless and I kept in close contact with it. My father, who was an active lobbyist for the welfare of this community, died a few months after the eviction. This not only made me the head of my family but also increased my sense of duty towards my community. I saw how camp life affected the youth and children. Children born in the camps were permanently labeled as refugees since the birth certificate indicated their birth place as refugee camps. It was also very painful to see a secular Muslim community turning conservative in the process of asserting a separate identity based on their faith. Women paid the highest price for this. They were desperate to get back home, and I knew I had to figure out how to make it happen.

Eight years later, I quit my private sector career and returned home with some of my fellow women IDPs. I was finally able to return to Mannar and make contact with our Tamil sisters. That's when we formed the Mannar Women's Development Foundation. In 2006 I started Mannar Women for Human Rights and Democracy to focus specifically on human rights issues – such as war crimes against women – when the war resumed.

We live in very conservative and patriarchal society and both men and women believe husbands have the right to discipline their wives. At the initial stage one of our main focuses was tackling domestic violence. Almost every day, women would walk into our office with bruises, even bloody wounds. One day, when an abused woman came in for help, someone in the office had a brilliant idea. Our staff and other village women went and stood in silent protest in front of the house where the woman was beaten. After a couple of days, the beating stopped. It sent a powerful message to the abusive man that this behavior would no longer be tolerated. What was once a private matter became a public issue.

The safety of women and girls has been one of the casualties of the long war in Sri Lanka. Soldiers and members of para-military groups rape women with impunity. Rape has been used as a tool to torture political detainees. A lot of people don't realize that one way to protect women and girls against violence and abuse is to help them earn a living. Our micro-loan program is one of our greatest successes. Let me tell you a story. In a far remote area of the north a group of ten women requested a loan of 800 dollars to buy a tractor. Usually our micro-credit does not exceed 100 dollars and we were bit reluctant but these women had a perfect business plan. They bought the tractor, used it for farming and also rented it out to other farmers in their village. Within a year they repaid the loan but what they did further with this tractor was amazing- they transformed it into an ambulance, offering free rides for emergency hospital visits. In their rural area, people often died of snakebites, and pregnant women would die during delivery if they didn't receive proper and immediate medical treatment. It was very inspiring to see that how a little bit more money in women's hands could serve the entire neighborhood.

During the war, many women got raped and “disappeared” after speaking out publicly against war related crimes. Many Tamil women who were violated by government soldiers found that their only option was to join the rebel group, where they became either frontline fighters or suicide bombers, believing their bodies were “polluted” by the enemy. In 2000, when two young women in Mannar were raped by twelve policemen and two naval officers, thousands of women filled the streets of Mannar with their mouths covered in black cloth in protest. This image grabbed the media’s attention and demonstrations spread all over the north and east of the country. The President was forced to order a special investigation. During the investigation, the two women pointed out the policemen and navy officers who’d tortured and raped them. The men were immediately transferred out of Mannar. This was a landmark case in the Sri Lanka women’s struggle, in particular, against war-related sexual violence. This was the first case in which women were allowed (or survived) to point out their attackers in court.

There’s so much work still to be done. This is a difficult and dangerous time in Sri Lanka – especially for those of us involved in humanitarian and human rights work. One of my main goals is to build a model resettlement village in my hometown that will re-unite the Tamil and Muslim communities and I want see this done through women. We Sri Lankan women have experienced the war relentlessly and differently and the model village will demonstrate what peaceful co-existence means to us. During 2002 peace process in Sri Lanka there was not a single woman at the main negotiating table and if at all there will be a peace process in my country we need to have 50 percent women at the main table. With the help of the Women’s Commission and other dedicated organizations I have great hope that these ambitions could be achieved.

Thank you.