



DOMESTIC VIOLENCE COMPLAINANTS DURING PANDEMIC RELATED TRAVEL RESTRICTIONS

Statement by the National Forum Against Gender Based Violence

The National Forum Against Gender Based Violence in Sri Lanka urges immediate attention to the challenges faced by victims of domestic violence during the pandemic related lockdowns. Domestic violence was recognized globally as a widespread violation of human rights even prior to the pandemic. In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, countries including Sri Lanka have employed restrictions on travel, directions to stay and work from home, and limited access to courts. These measures have directly resulted in a manifold increase in domestic violence and have placed unprecedented challenges in the way of victims. The UN Secretary General recognizing the 'horrifying global surge in domestic violence' has called for a 'ceasefire at home'.

Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, there has been an increased demand for support services in regards to domestic violence to which the Members of the National Forum have been responding in various capacities. Whilst we acknowledge and commend the response taken by the Government to operationalize the National Hotline 1938 for 24 hrs, there are further challenges that require the immediate attention. The concern is that failing to respond may result in serious harm or fatalities.

The legal obligation to protect is reflected in the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005 (PDVA) and the Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act, No. 4 of 2015. The current challenge is to offer practical and effective responses to these incidents, particularly by first responders. We are concerned about instances of failure to believe victim narratives that cause fear and inflict blame and shame on the survivors, demanding victims to return to their abusers and the failure to provide them with support and referrals

We, as a national body of state and non-governmental organizations working against gender-based violence in Sri Lanka, call on the

- (i) **Respective Sri Lankan authorities in law enforcement and social services** to urgently adopt standard protocols on responding to domestic violence specific to the pandemic. Ensure that calls for assistance are responded to promptly, that survivors are not burdened or re-victimized by being compelled to return to abusive homes or attend inquiries during travel restrictions, survivors are assisted in terms of securing medical treatment, examinations by Judicial Medical Officers for maintenance of official records, and referred to public and private institutions providing care, assistance and protection during this time;
- (ii) **Justice sector of the country** to deploy without delay, a mechanism for survivors in need of urgent protection orders to secure such orders by means of online applications in terms of the PDVA. The support of the Sri Lanka Police to communicate protection orders to respondents, and to monitor and respond to breaches of such protection orders; and
- (iii) **Leaders of political and administrative offices** to highlight the importance of safeguarding the rights of and providing safe and non-judgmental protection to survivors of violence is crucial at this juncture.

Bearing in mind that the impact of the violence experienced during this time is likely to have long term socio-economic costs and inter-generational consequences, the urgency for public messaging and measures cannot be overstated. Such messages and measures will make a difference to those needing assistance and will embolden and empower communities to assist survivors of domestic violence. Let us work together to make this difference.