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Publisher Routledge

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Social Work Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information: <http://www-intra.informaworld.com/smpp/title-content=t713447070>

'I Want to Have My Future, I Have a Dialogue': Social Work in Sri Lanka between Neo-capitalism and Human Rights

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Online publication date: 05 November 2010

To cite this Article Zaviršek, Darja and Herath, Subhangi M. K.(2010) 'I Want to Have My Future, I Have a Dialogue': Social Work in Sri Lanka between Neo-capitalism and Human Rights', Social Work Education, 29: 8, 831 – 842

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02615479.2010.516987

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2010.516987>

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'I Want to Have My Future, I Have a Dialogue': Social Work in Sri Lanka between Neo-capitalism and Human Rights

Darja Zaviršek & Subhangi M. K. Herath

Sri Lanka is one of many developing countries where poverty, neo-liberal economic exploitation, economic migration and traditional long-term injustice towards ethnic minorities, children, people with disabilities and women, have created difficult conditions for social work to truly become a human rights profession. This article links poverty issues with some social work issues such as the child's perspective and disability issues, both being important parts of universal human rights. Despite a long social work tradition—early social work training was established in 1952—social work is still a developing profession. The article gives a descriptive overview of the development of social work education since 1952 and provides an example of a successful international collaboration between the University of Colombo and the University of Ljubljana in order to develop social work education at the university level and to establish it as an academic discipline. It gives a case study analysis of the absence of the child's perspective in children's institutions and presents an example of good practice in working with children with disabilities. Both analyses show a need for more professional social workers in the country.

Keywords: Social Work in Sri Lanka; Child's Perspective in Sri Lanka; Children with Disabilities in Sri Lanka; Academisation of Social Work in Sri Lanka

Introduction

'I want to have my future, I have a Dialogue' is not a slogan on the doors of social services or social work university departments, but a recent slogan from a

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multinational phone corporation which sells mobile phones and other communication technology devices (Ethnographic notes, 2010). The slogan might well be a promotion for social work, as social work is not possible without a dialogue, communication, mutual respect for multi-layered truths.

'Singer', another multinational company with a poetic name, is a global corporation which was selling sewing machines to our grandmothers in Europe before WW2, and is today selling everything, including washing machines, to women in Sri Lanka. Imagine there could be as many social work services as there are stores of the global companies with as much money as Dialogue and Singer have. Then, professional social workers would have a secure base for engaging in a dialogue with people who need support and advocacy, and service users would be able to come out of poverty and 'sing' during the course of their lives.

This article will connect poverty issues with social work human rights principles and will provide a descriptive overview of developing social work education in Sri Lanka since 1952. In the conclusions the article challenges the belief that the academisation of social work will inevitably bring positive effects to social work practice.

Neo-capitalism vs Human Rights in a Social Work Perspective

Historically, critical social work thinkers have always defined poverty as a state of injustice, de-personalisation and in-humanity. Defining social work as a human rights profession means that it reflects upon and fights against the conditions which allow some people to economically exploit others and that make some people's lives more valuable than others.

Sri Lanka (population of 18,924,000) is a developing country where existent poverty is reinforced by the exploitation practices of neo-capitalism. A large economic disparity prevails between rich and poor, with the majority of the population living in rural areas of the country (76.4%). The zones of neo-capitalism, the so-called free trade zones (FTZs), use the labour of the poorest people to create a super-profit for the urban capitalists.¹ The government made deals with the global capitalist profit-makers and allowed special laws, special access to resources like electricity, and special attention from police and authorities (including the prevention of revolutionary and trade union organisations) to rule these zones of worker exploitation. The Sri Lankan free trade zones, promoted by the IMF and the World Bank, especially in the textile and clothing sector, have had disastrous consequences for Sri Lanka's workers. Particularly badly affected are women who have moved into the spatially segregated areas where the corporate capitalists fail to respect basic labour rights, like job security or proper working conditions and wages. Currently a total of 830 garment factories employ over 400,000 workers directly and another 100,000 workers indirectly.

For poor people an alternative to working in these FTZs is migration abroad. Sri Lanka has a 4.7% emigration rate and the main destination is Asia with 54.1% of emigrants living there.² Many of them are women working as domestic workers in households, who send money back home, most often to their closest family members.

The total remittance inflow is US\$2.527 million per year which makes an average of US\$131 per person annually.³ Women who emigrate often experience a similar pattern of patriarchal ostracism as women living in the segregated areas of the FTZ settlements. While looking for employment they are blamed for living on their own, accused of possible promiscuity and are often made to feel responsible for violence which happens in their homes during their absence. A group of social work students recalled:

Child sexual abuse that happens in families is often interpreted as the consequence of mothers leaving children and their homes while seeking jobs as domestic labour in the Middle East. People say that when the mother leaves the man has no other sexual partner than the oldest daughter who becomes the sex object. Not the men but the women who left are accused of being guilty of child sexual abuse done by men who stay home.⁴

Social workers need to reflect upon the patriarchal interpretation of women's responsibility for violence in such cases and to uncover the power relations in such types of traditional gender explanatory models. A paradox is that during the time when the FTZs were established in the late 1970s (1978), the government simultaneously tried to establish a modest universal health and welfare system and universal education.

Since more than 20% of people live below the poverty line, poverty is one of the most urgent social work issues which results in other crises and suffering, like suicide, mental health crises, disability, ill-health, violence and children's institutionalisation. As Chandraratna notes very clearly: 'The correlation statistics between crop failures and suicides among the farmer populations have always been high' (2008, p. 18). In addition to the traditional poverty of the class and caste divided society (Tudor Silva *et al.*, 2009), ethnic war between Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups, internally displaced Tamil people and the tsunami of 2004 have contributed to the poverty of a large number of people today. The ethnic war also affects today's generations of social work students. A Tamil social work student said:

Before I came here to study I believed that nobody being a Sinhalese is a nice person, that they only try to kill other people. Since I'm a student here I experience something else. (Ethnographic notes, 2010)

The figures show that free trade zones often have not made people who work there wealthier, and that the GDP per capita in Sri Lanka is approximately US\$4,500. Nevertheless, the Human Development Index as well as the Human Poverty Index-1 show that well being in Sri Lanka is increasing and that despite widespread poverty a decent standard of living, proper education and a long and healthy life are human rights values held in the country.⁵ Compared with India for instance, Sri Lanka today has a higher literacy rate (90.8%, based on 18 out of 25 districts, while the rate for India is 66%),⁶ which is an important step towards better human rights. The life expectancy at birth is 74.0 years of age, which is more than in most East European countries. Nevertheless, 18% of people are still not using an improved water source, and 29% of children under five are underweight.⁷

This societal context makes it harder for social work professionals to be critical advocates for their clients and the promoters of social justice in a globally un-just world. Therefore it is not surprising that in most countries with a modestly developed social work tradition, social work professionalisation has been moving more in the direction of managerial, rational, positivist ‘know-how’ social work training than towards the social science discipline that teaches critical thinking, reflects upon power imbalances and ideological and value systems upon which different actions are based. Even more so,

In spite of social work’s academic development and the “third mandate” derived from its theoretical foundation and critical standpoint (Staub-Bernasconi 2007), in everyday practice, social work skills are being reduced to the skills primarily needed to serve the interests and needs of the state instead of the service user and the critical profession itself. (Zaviršek, 2009, p. 229)

The Development of Social Work Education in Sri Lanka

As in most countries with a written history of social work education, Sri Lankan history also shows international influences, from the United Nations to India and Europe. Therefore, it is hardly possible to distinguish between indigenous and non-indigenous social work thinking and practice. In 1952 the need for training and education in social work was identified as a priority following the UN promotion of social work in the world. The Institute of Social Work was thus created in 1952 in Colombo, the first formal attempt to establish professional social work in the country. Dr Dorothy Moses, first principal of the YWCA⁸ School of Social Work (later on the Delhi School of Social Work under Delhi University),⁹ provided the initiative to create the Ceylon Institute of Social Work in 1952. The School of Social Work has become part of the National Institute of Social Development (under the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare). The school has trained workers in different fields of social work, such as voluntary organisations and the private sector, family welfare, probation and prisons, health and community and rural work. A diploma was granted at the end of the course that involved classroom work, field placements and practical work. In keeping with the international standards of social work, a two-year full-time diploma course was started in 1978 using the international training and higher educational opportunities that were made available under UN patronage.

In 2005 the National Institute of Social Development became a degree granting authority (BSW) (Chandraratna, 2008). The master programmes in social work (MSW) were established in 2008. After the tsunami disaster of 2004, the need for social workers became greater, and the University of Colombo started to develop a stream of social work within the Department of Sociology together with the University of Ljubljana (Lešnik and Urek, 2010).

In early 2005 a team from the University of Ljubljana Faculty of Social Work, led by two senior professors, engaged in a joint action research project with the Department of Sociology, initiated by Mr Jagath Wellawatta, a senior lecturer in the department in a tsunami-affected village in the South, which led to the signing of a memorandum of

understanding between the two universities for academic collaboration in the field of social work. In 2006, 12 students from the department, accompanied by a senior lecturer, visited Slovenia to participate in a one-month intensive training programme in social work. The preliminaries for establishing a stream of social work were discussed there and the department was invited to take part in the INDOSOW programme (International Doctoral Studies in Social Work) in which several European universities participate.

In March 2008, two members of the department visited the University of Ljubljana for a three month period on invitation as visiting scholars. During this period the final decisions were made to introduce social work as a stream within the special degree programme in sociology, for a limited number of students as an initial step since the programme involves extensive practice training and close supervision. The Department of Sociology was privileged to receive the consent of seven senior and highly reputed members from the Faculty of Social Work of the University of Ljubljana, who have contributed immensely to the development of social work in Slovenia, to come to the University of Colombo to teach and conduct the courses in the initial three years until the first batch of students complete their degree. It was agreed that in the mean time the department should take steps to train its own academics in the field. In order to support this goal, the Faculty of Ljubljana agreed to offer two studentships for two doctoral students and the department nominees for these two positions have been accepted by the University of Ljubljana and the student registration procedures have been completed. Both the Department of Sociology and the Ljubljana Faculty of Social Work are searching for funding to further facilitate the doctoral studies programme.

So far there are no social work departments at any university, except for the above mentioned social work modules within the special degree course in sociology attached to the Department of Sociology at the University of Colombo. Recently the University of Ruhuna has started a Community Development Diploma Programme and the University of Kelaniya and University of Perdeniya are planning to introduce some courses in social work.

Despite a long history of social work education in the country, there is still a great need to increase the number of social workers and for good quality social work education to go beyond the formal 'welfare officers' style. According to expert estimations there were some '800 practicing social workers, while the country would need about 30,000 trained social workers' (Lešnik and Urek, 2010, p. 273). Governmental figures estimate that by 2008 there were 'about 31,303 untrained, according to international standards, workers working in the positions where trained social workers should be employed' (Chandraratna, 2008, p. 27). Out of 9,765 schools in the country, there are only 14 school social workers, which again shows the need for the development of a qualified profession (p. 28). There are about 516,150 people (Chandraratna, 2008, p. 29) in the country who have been affected by man-made and natural disasters, such as the political conflict and tsunami, and who are in need of social work support because of economic shortages, disability and mental health, trauma or other problems. Government statistics talk about 353,000 refugees and IDPs

due to war, while IDPs resulting from the 2004 tsunami amount to 450,000¹⁰ (Herath and Lešnik, 2008). Herath and Lešnik have emphasised: 'Nevertheless, social work has neither been developed in Sri Lanka to become an independent profession nor have the existing resources in the field of social work been effectively utilized in addressing the issues of IDPs' (2008, p. 95).

The approach to social work in Sri Lanka mainly adopts the reformative notion, defining social work as help in many instances. This is true in the state-run as well as in the voluntary or religiously based services. Many institutions for children, for instance, are run by a Buddhist organisation with no professionally trained staff. Social work students, due to the lack of professional practice placements, often have to complete their practice placements there as well.

Child Perspective as a Human Rights Issue in Social Work

One such establishment is the Institution for Female Children and Girls in Colombo, where about 140 children between the ages of 3 and 18 are currently placed (Ethnographic notes, March 2010). They have been sent to the children's home either because their parents have died, abandoned or maltreated them or because they are no longer able to take care of them because of poverty and health issues. Some of the children come on the basis of a court order, while others are brought there by parents or other people. The government does provide some financial support, but the majority of the money comes from private donations, mostly from religious middle and upper class families and individuals who bring money, food and clothes for the girls in the institution.

This type of children's institution has most of the characteristics of a total institution in the 'Goffmanian' sense of the word (Goffman, 1963). A closed world for children and young girls provides total care and control at the same time; there is no privacy, no personal belongings and no individuality. The children are forcibly fed if they do not finish the food on their plates, as food is scarce and everyone has to be grateful for the donations from outside. One of the staff members working with the children said: 'They have to eat everything what they get on the plate; if they will be hungry later on, there is nothing to eat until the next meal'. The girls are disciplined to obey the institutional order as well as the order of the religious faith. They are taught to be thankful and submissive. The total institution provides food, housing and schooling and even arranges marriages for some of the girls. The staff were proud to show wedding pictures of some girls hanging on the wall, proof of their long-term care.

An important characteristic of the place which gave an additional tone to the institution was the fact that the majority of the female staff members were former social orphans themselves. Having once been abandoned children themselves, they became carers of others, receiving no payment for their services but food and housing. They have prolonged their seclusion in the orphanage for their entire life, and have reproduced the pattern of care they experienced in their childhood. One woman came to the place as a small child and has been there for 45 years, while another managed to move out but came back to do voluntary work 'serving the poor'.

The staff have no professional knowledge on how to work with children and the concept of a 'child perspective' does not exist. The definition of the child perspective includes the notion of self-reflexive adults, who are able to perceive and understand the everyday life of the child from a double perspective, that of both the child and the adult. Adults respond to the children's needs and respect the children's views of the world. Children are seen as being as equally valued as adults and are not seen as their property. In what is the complete opposite of the child's perspective, children in institutions learn to grow up fast, to obey adults and are not seen as subjects in their own right. The girls are taught to be grateful for the religious charity of the 'good people from the community' who bring money, food or clothes, which is the pattern that the staff—former inmates have learned before them. One of the staff members said: 'We teach them how to obey, because this will give them better chances in their future life' (Personal communication, March 2010). Obedience is a well known survival strategy for people living in closed institutions.

The lack of a child perspective and the particular view of a child from the adults who design and shape children according to their own images has been the major source of violence against children in every society. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that some of the largest, and not yet really discussed social work issues are linked with violence against children, child labour, especially in the domestic sector (employment of children as domestic workers), trafficking, prostitution of children as a part of the tourist trade, and issues of children forcibly becoming part of the armed forces.

The issues of violence can be best observed among children with disabilities. Numerous research has shown that children with disabilities are most prone to violence and abandonment and that disability itself is often the consequence of survived violence:

Research conducted by social workers has shown that in spite of the fact that disabled people were portrayed as asexual and therefore seemingly protected from sexual violence, they experienced gendered violence to a greater extent than non-disabled people. An important contribution was made by research that showed that many disabilities, including intellectual disabilities, are the consequence of early childhood violence or trauma in later life. (Zaviršek, 2004, p. 28)

One of the students reported about disciplining babies by shaking them, which has caused death or brain injury in babies (Ethnographic notes, 2010). According to Sri Lankan cultural, religious and popular social beliefs it is often assumed that a child is born with a disability or becomes disabled after birth as the result of a curse, 'bad blood', an incestuous relationship, a sin committed in a previous incarnation or a sin committed by that child's parents or other family members. Parents sometimes respond with violence because of the shame of having a child with impairments, or respond with violence because of a lack of social support. But even more than that: sexual violence is a consequence of hatred; belief that children with disabilities do not feel at all; and the knowledge that by abusing a person with disabilities nothing will happen to the perpetrator (Zaviršek, 2002).

In the final few months of 2009 and early 2010 there were some indicative examples of violence against children and adults with disabilities. In eight reported cases, all

perpetrators except for one were either family members or people close to the family: there were two cases of rape of young women with intellectual disabilities in their homes;¹¹ an example of peer violence against a girl with a language impairment;¹² violence by two male siblings who raped their sister who had severe speech impairments at home;¹³ a boy who raped his friend's sister with intellectual disabilities while visiting their home;¹⁴ a physically disabled seven-year-old daughter who was raped and burnt by her father;¹⁵ and a daughter with Down's syndrome who was sexually violated by her father and is now expecting a baby.¹⁶ All these cases of violence happened in the homes of the victims, which is supposed to be their place of safety.

In the Buddhist children's institution, the social work students met a teenage girl who started to communicate with them and observed them while they were playing with the smallest children. She was a 13-year-old girl with black hair and a nice white and blue dress and was the only girl her age to be seen in the institution during the morning, when the girls attended school. It was obvious that the girl had some intellectual impairment, but nevertheless she talked and communicated with interest and attentiveness. She looked as if she was desperately looking for someone to be with, maybe to talk to or even to just be together in silence. One of the staff members told the students 'she is stupid, crazy', and confirmed that she was not sent to school. Having impairments often means that a child is not seen as being able to attend school; this is thought of as a waste of time, resources and human capacities. Not being worth enough to get a good quality education is often a gender issue, and girls are especially vulnerable to not receiving a proper education, since they 'can still be used as domestic workers', for the lowest types of household work. This too, has to be seen as a form of violence against children and young people with disabilities. Either the traditional attitudes of the untrained staff or the double standards of social workers prevent everyday violence against children with disabilities from being seen without minimising and denying it (Završek, 2002, 2004).

The number of children in institutions across Sri Lanka is highly underreported in official data. One study from 2005 found 329 institutions in only four provinces (including 30 institutions for children with disabilities) caring for 15,068 children, while governmental figures reported 11,495 children in 223 institutions for the whole country in 2002 (Jayathilake *et al.*, 2005). The same research has shown that only 8% of children in voluntary institutions were without both parents although they are usually labelled orphans. Some 50% of children had both parents alive, but they were separated in 18% of the cases, and 29% had only one parent alive (including single mothers). Also, 50% of children admitted to institutions were there due to poverty. There was patchy and limited use of services to enable children to stay with their parents and families, and little use of alternative forms of care such as fostering. In voluntary as well as in the state-run institutions poverty was the main cause for the institutionalisation of the children, since all the children were from low income families.

The same research has also shown that many institutions had rigid regimes and some beat and verbally abused children. In addition, children who entered state

institutions because of abuse were treated as offenders and received no therapy (Jayathilake *et al.*, 2005).

In addition to large old-fashioned institutions, new community services for children have been developed. The Child Guidance Centre—Maharagama on the outskirts of Colombo for instance, employs professional social workers and other experts who provide support for both children with disabilities and their parents, who seek information and emotional support. The Centre was established in 2003 and is an inclusive pilot project for pre-school children who are supported to achieve some physical and emotional skills in order to be better prepared for pre-school and primary school, as well. The majority of children are below five years of age and the Centre aims to be an early intervention community service as well as a stimulator for inclusion of children in pre-schools and primary schools (either special or ordinary). Therefore, the community service also works with the schools in the area in order to provide both awareness raising and knowledge for teachers in schools so that they will accept children with different impairments.

The Centre is far from the main road and the parents can get some money for transportation ('100 rupee a day and a tee'), as many of them cannot afford to bring the child to the Centre without this support. The director of the Centre said that she was looking for land in the city and this was the only thing she could afford to buy. Another type of double advocacy and empowerment done by the Centre is advocacy for children with disabilities and their parents. When the parents are discriminated against and not given proper support and information, children will be doubly discriminated against, too. Parents of disabled children, who are very often disqualified as having inadequate parenting skills or blamed for the disabilities of their children, need as much support as their children. An empowered parent can be the best advocate for their own child.

Concluding Remarks

The academisation of social work in Sri Lanka is facing rather difficult times. On the one hand it lacks a critical and autonomous tradition in professional practice and research which could be used by social workers today to resist the new global inequalities and advocate against poverty as a human rights issue. On the other hand, current global trends are turning social work into a managerial positivist activity.

It is often assumed that the academisation of social work has a unilaterally positive effect on professional practice and will inevitably strengthen the discipline, but it seems that today the opposite is true. The two different societal sub-systems—the social realm of neo-liberal states and academia—actually encourage each other's dependency on market- and profit-oriented thinking. In spite of the expectation that academic processes would strengthen critical reflection upon the hybrid, dual and heterogeneous mandate of the profession manifested in the multiple roles of social workers (helpers of the needy, bureaucrats of the state, welfare officers, managers and advocates), it seems that neo-liberal, (nearly) bankrupt states have had their way in determining academic education. Critical thinking is no longer necessarily a

constitutive part of academic discourse, nor is an orientation towards social action, development, change and social movements an inevitable component of social work curricula.

While on the one hand, schools of social work promote the 'scientisation of social work', on the other hand, neo-liberal states are responsible for the de-professionalisation of social work. For example, many governments are not willing to open new workplaces for professional and critical social workers, but are rather interested in employing masses of unemployed and non-professionally trained workers in the social sphere. It is a paradox that, at a time when social work schools are witnessing both a horizontal (number of schools and programmes) and vertical (level of degrees offered) expansion, governmental bodies are keener than ever to employ less trained workers, pursuant to their goals of controlling the social sphere, decreasing the unemployment rate, and maintaining social stability through non-critical masses of welfare workers.

It is therefore obvious that academisation does not inevitably strengthen the profession's autonomy and social work's ability to engender social change and critical reflection. The problem is particularly acute in cases where:

- academic processes and current social work practices demand *utilitarian knowledge without theoretical reflection*;
- there is a *widening gap between scientific, reflected knowledge and social processes* that happen in practice;
- social work is being developed at the level of higher education (the development of social work departments at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels), but, at the same time, the *social work profession is losing its generic professional autonomy through fragmentation into many different occupations (case manager, care planner, personal assistant, child's advocate etc.)*;

Despite the rapid growth of schools of social work since 1989 in China, for instance, the government has employed millions of low paid workers in newly developed community services in order to serve its economic interests through the employment of newly unemployed workers who were previously employed within the state social apparatus or young unemployed persons (Yan and Tsang, 2008). At the same time, the government intended to lessen the welfare burden by establishing a large number of state-controlled community centres. Yan and Tsang have shown how serving social needs has been interrelated with serving the political and economic needs of the state, which is interested in modernising its professionals through the implementation of a new social science discipline, but, at the same time, is not keen to challenge the existing social order. Critical social work would inevitably clash with the Chinese understanding of democratic rights and social justice in the areas of disability, gender, ethnicity etc.

Similarly, in Sri Lanka social work has educational institutions but still needs to develop its own theoretical foundation of research and academic credibility. This indicates that social work should be defined as a human rights profession and that

human rights issues like poverty, equal rights of people with disabilities, ethnically sensitive social work practice and women's rights should be regarded with less shame and taboo. This will prevent future social workers from being widely viewed as tools in the hands of social policy welfare players (politicians, religious humanitarians, international stakeholders) who are pursuing their own 'dialogue' of particular economic and political goals.

Notes

- [1] The first Sri Lankan Free Trade Zone was opened in Katunayake in June 1978, followed by one in Biyagama in 1982. By 1992, the whole of Sri Lanka was considered to be a single free trade zone. See *Sri Lanka and the Free Trade Zones*, Transnational Information Exchange [online]. Available at: http://www.tie-germany.org/what_we_do/new_organising_-_exchains_-_sri_lanka.html, accessed 29 July 2010.
- [2] See http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_LKA.html, accessed 28 July 2010.
- [3] See http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_LKA.html, accessed 28 July 2010.
- [4] I am grateful to the students of the Theories and Methods in Social Work module from the University of Colombo, Department of Sociology, whom I taught in winter 2010 for many thoughtful discussions.
- [5] See http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_LKA.html, accessed 28 July 2010.
- [6] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_literacy_rate, accessed 28 July 2010.
- [7] See http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_LKA.html, accessed 28 July 2010.
- [8] YWCA was established in 1882 in Colombo and it is considered to be the first NGO in the country.
- [9] See <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:aVJzDZ07qKkJ:www.ywcaindia.org/vol.asp+dr+dorothy+moses,+YWCA,+india&cd=1&hl=sl&ct=clnk&gl=si>.
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- [11] *The Island*, 16 February 2010, p. 5; K.J. Jayaruk, *Daily Mirror*, 7 December 2009, p. 6.
- [12] K. Gamage, *Diwaina*, 25 November 2009, p. 19.
- [13] K. Jayakodi, *Diwaina*, 11 January 2010, p. 22.
- [14] In this case the perpetrator had only to pay a fine for the rape of an intellectually disabled woman (W. Keerthi, *Diwaina*, 18 February 2010, p. 23).
- [15] J. Samantha, *Diwaina*, 5 October 2010, p. 13.
- [16] H. P. Karunaratne, *Lakbima*, 7 April 2010, p. 19.

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