

Women and Peacebuilding

An interaction with Ms Visaka Dharmadasa on International Women's Day

Compiled by
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&
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On 8 March 2025, Ms. Visaka Dharmadasa, the Founder and Chair of the Association of War Affected Women, engaged in an online interaction with students organized by the International Peace Research Initiative (IPRI) at the National Institute of Advance Studies (NIAS) in collaboration with Global Partnership for the Prevention of Armed Conflict (GPPAC) South Asia. The discussions were focussed on the theme: 'Women

and Peacebuilding'.

Awarded recently as the Fifth Annual Women Building Peace Award Laureate by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Ms. Dharmadasa has been in pursuit of advocating women-inclusive peace-building and decision-making. On the account of Women's Day, she shared her journey and the upcoming challenges she wishes to take on.

Following are the excerpts of an interaction with Ms Visaka Dharmadasa by a group of young scholars pursuing online courses at NIAS.



Gauri Gupta
Stella Maris College, Chennai

What policy changes would ensure equal representation of women in the decision-making roles related to security and peace?



Visaka Dharmadasa: I would say there is not much to be done but to implement the existing policies. We need informed decisions to uplift women. One example is the quota system that has been implemented in Rwanda and India, which is an excellent initiative. We have to do the right thing and cater the available

resources for both men and women. Women are involved in security, like in the roles of intelligent agents, but it is not documented or comes to light due to the nature of the job.



Aparna Nair

Madras Christian College, Chennai

Two questions. In one of your past interviews, you mentioned your efforts for a truth commission. What are your key priorities and hopes for such a commission in Sri Lanka's reconciliation process? We celebrate the 25th anniversary of the UN 1325 Resolution this year. As a strong women's Peacebuilding advocate, if you were to rewrite it, what would you add or change to make it more effective?



Visaka Dharmadasa: Yes, I advocated for it. Proper Judicial mechanisms need to be there. People want to know the truth and move forward. Everybody deserves it. I want to know the truth and move forward.

More grassroots-level changes are needed. That's how I believe a change has been made. There should be a difference in living, no matter what ethnicity or strata they belong to.



Joseph John

St. Thomas College Palai (Autonomous), Kottayam

Two questions. What are the biggest challenges you faced while engaging with both the Sri Lankan government and LTTE during the war? Second, do you believe it is possible for Post-war society to fully "forgive or forget", or should forgetting never be the goal?



Visaka Dharmadasa: The biggest challenge is to gain trust by showing that our only agenda is to save lives. Once this was emphasised, LTTE believed us, but the government did not believe it. It is easy to deal with non-state actors as we can know them and handle them, but the government changes, and so do their interests.

People don't forget when they lose their family members. I am a Buddhist, and once Lord Buddha said revenge is not the way to go, but compassion is. This is why India is great, as they know their colonial history and move forward. Humans make mistakes, sometimes deliberately, too. But we have to move forward for the common good. I would not seek revenge on the one who killed my son, as I would put another mother in my position. It is not about an eye to an eye or punishment but knowing the person who did it. It is my basic right.



Ganga Neeraj

Sree Narayana College, Kollam

AI is gaining speed and replacing humans in relationships, diplomacy, and conflict resolution. In my opinion, the algorithm is gender biased, even the use of deepfake. Violent content is targeted against minorities and even women. In light of this, what are your viewpoints and suggestions for tackling this crisis in conflict resolution?



Visaka Dharmadasa: I am no expert in talking about technology. But one thing is certain: the basics of humans are the soul. Nothing can surpass our soul, no matter how advanced the technology is. This is the truth. Even if AI creates well-developed communication tools or increases the production of food, the base would be human. Humans seek human relationships and connections over everything in the long run.



Swati Sood

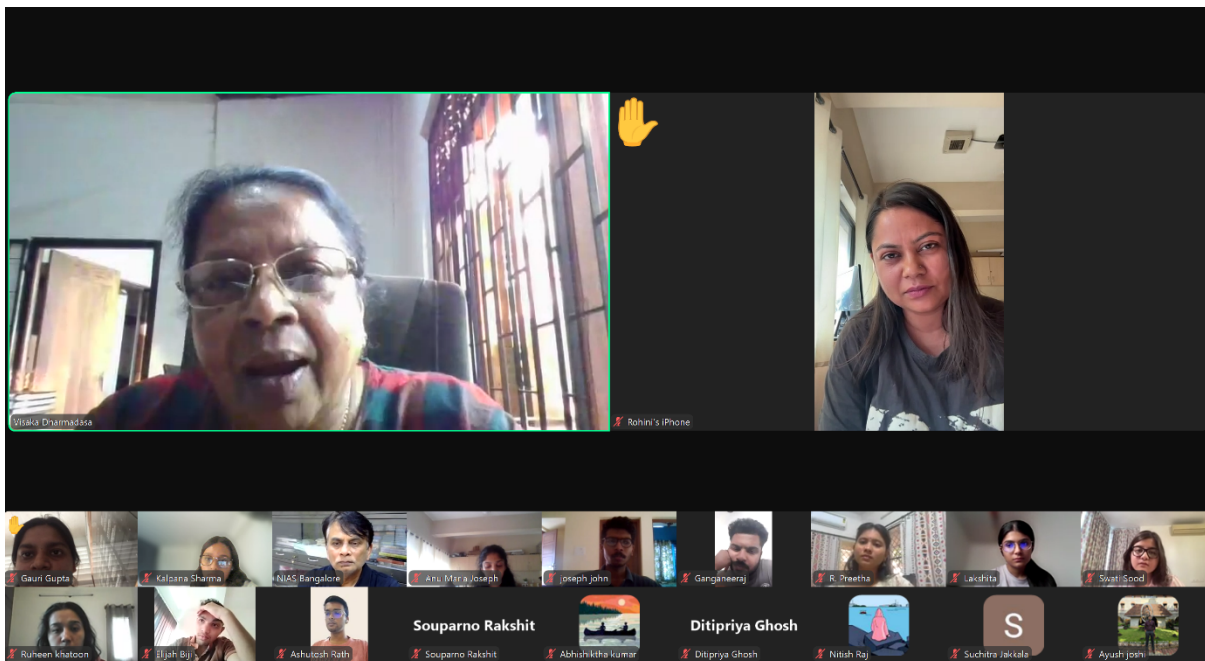
Vivekananda College, New Delhi

Peace from a policy perspective requires concessions. If we look at it from an emotive aspect, stakeholders in a post-war society still want justice and closure. How can we balance or rather reconcile making concessions and achieving justice to have lasting peace?



Visaka Dharmadasa: Peace requires concessions from both sides. Not just one but both sides. If we look at the Russia-Ukraine war, if we ask Russia to withdraw, it will not do so until the other side also reciprocates.

Regarding justice, there is a feeling on the side of families to know where their members are in the conflict, and they have a right to know that and demand justice. For families involved, war is very personal, unlike someone getting murdered or killed otherwise. It has a different impact on them, and their concerns need to be understood.



Elijah Rajan Biji

St Joseph's University, Bengaluru

Since you had emphasised the need for women to engage in politics, what advice would you offer to women leaders who are actively engaging in global forums and political activities to be more effective and impactful?



Visaka Dharmadasa: Women are indeed effective in the present generation compared to earlier times. There is nothing short of women being ineffective and non-impactful in terms of political engagement and representation in global forums. Mothers are multitaskers who are efficient in the things they manage. Just like the domestic responsibility of raising a child as a good citizen, it is with the men and women to decide the destiny of the country. There are examples like India's Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman. Her wit and instrumental role are examples of how women are effective.



Gauri Gupta

Stella Maris College, Chennai

As a woman who worked in both grassroots advocacy and high-level diplomacy, which arena did you find more impactful and why?



Visaka Dharmadasa: Both are important. They feed each other, and it is essential to know both. As a person who knows the grassroots-level reality, I feel an uninterrupted flow of high-level diplomacy. The important peacebuilding tool we need is communication, and each of these tracks supports the other. If not, it would be like the Srilankan talks, which stopped at a point.



Sindhuja R

SRM University, Chennai

Three questions. If you could shape the next decade of Women, Peace, and Security efforts, what key policies or actions would you prioritise to make lasting change? Second, where do we set back? What are the tangible improvements that have been made in women's participation in the peace process? What kind of resistance do women peacebuilders face from the government and security forces? How can policies be reformed to offer better protection and support?



Visaka Dharmadasa: Building the Women, Peace, and Security agenda is not easy, and there are still several setbacks that hinder progress. I advocate for the creation of an advisory council of women in the Security Council, which should comprise representatives from all continents to bring in diverse opinions.

We have not seen the tenure of a woman secretary-general yet. Weapons would be created if there is a market that we created for it. We should call for a timebound reduction of weapons for long-lasting peace.

Some governments would be supportive, and some would not. This is because the government changes and each government has varied interests. Peacebuilding is not easy. As for protection and policy reforms, there is a clear need for enhancement.



Ruheen Khatoon

Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi

In the case of the Israel-Gaza conflict, we have seen Women's organisations coming together from both sides and launching the collective peace initiative named "The Mother's Call", yet women's representation is missing from the policy table. What can be the factors behind it, and how the international community is lacking?



Visaka Dharmadasa: I had a similar interaction with my colleague, Lucy. She is based in Bethlehem. These efforts count and will hopefully lead to peacebuilding. What we see is a group of mothers coming together, and it is the nature of the mother that is reflected here. They want to save every life of someone who is also like their kids. This nature transcends the differences among groups in conflict. Several international organisations are trying to put forward women's issues, and hopefully, they will lead to peace.



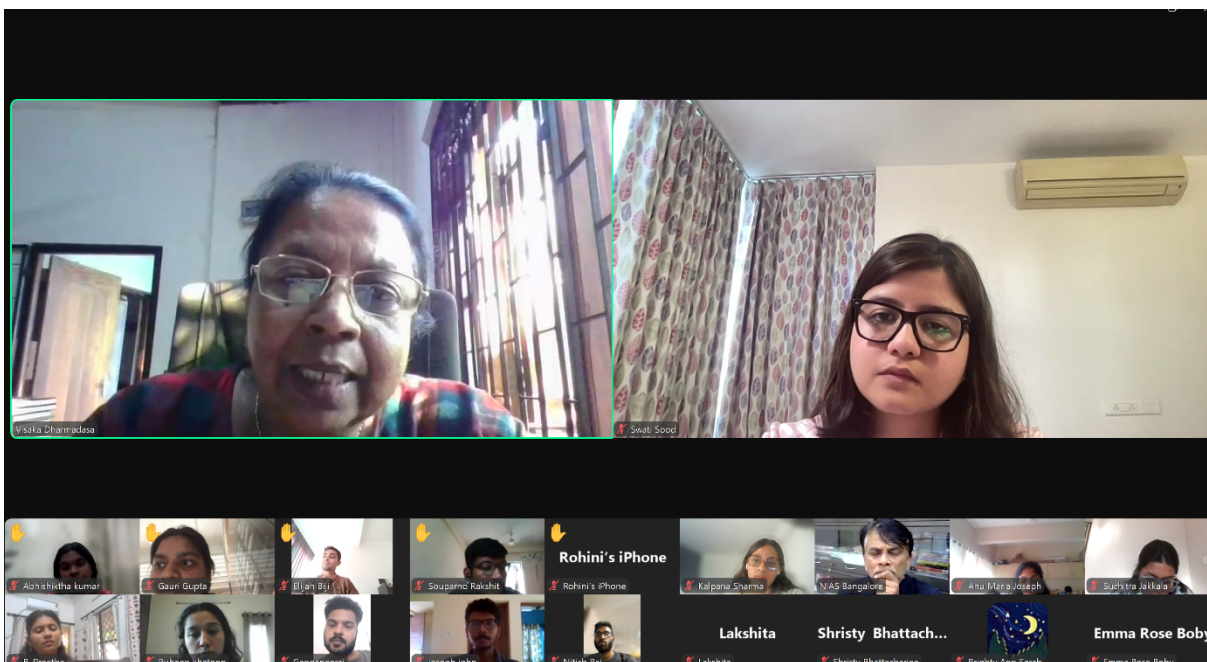
Santhiya M

Madras Christian College, Chennai

How does peacebuilding help in the social mobility of the women's community, and what is the extent of sacrifice she should make to reach this level of mobility?



Visaka Dharmadasa: I did it for my son. There are so many other women like Lucy who would sincerely engage in peacebuilding. Peacebuilding is a necessity. It drives you with will and comes from your heart. It is not just theories and classes that we learn but a grave reality. Many hardworking women go undocumented and unseen.



Ayush Joshi

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

Women are often emphasized as peacebuilders and mediators in conflict resolution. What unique strengths do women possess that men may overlook in peacebuilding activities?



Visaka Dharmadasa: When I first crossed the border to inquire about my son, we were not perceived as a threat. Because we are women, they did not fear us. Women are seen as either secessionists to violence or as victims. However, there are nuances that only women grasp due to their intuition. Women even have the skills to interact with infants who do not know how to speak. Thus, women bring unique strengths to peace negotiations, often fostering inclusive and long-term solutions. They excel in trust-building, mediation, and grassroots mobilization. Their collaborative negotiation style prioritizes human security, justice, and reconciliation, bridging divides across conflict lines. Unlike traditional approaches, women emphasize socio-economic stability and transitional justice, making peace agreements more sustainable. That is one reason the UN and other international organizations have come to emphasize the role of women as peace negotiators.



Emma Rose Bobby

St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru

How did you deal with the criticisms from the Minority groups and communities on the Himalaya Declaration?



Visaka Dharmadasa: We had developed a position-paper building on the Himalaya Declaration's six articles. The report was only the first step in the talks. However, to resound with the backlash, we spoke to all the minority communities. To redraft the document to benefit everyone equally.



Aastha Panda

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

Asian and Brown parents would seldom want young girls to join politics.

Why is this stereotype curtailing young women from joining the field as politicians and peace negotiators?



Visaka Dharmadasa: People have the perception that politics is corrupt. It is unsafe for young women to join a field. Most parents would want to look out for their daughters and young women in their families. However, figures such as Indira Gandhi paint a completely different picture of women in politics.



Ditipriya Ghosh

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

What risks do women face as peacebuilders? Has there been a change in the risk that they take?



Visaka Dharmadasa: It may not be popularly known, but women have been put behind bars just like men. Women are outspoken and take issues head-on. When we call for discontinuing global weapon production, we take a risk, too. However, there is now a support mechanism in place. Support networks allow us to rely on our sisters and brothers.



Abhishiktha S. Kumar

St. Joseph's University, Bengaluru

*What are the drawbacks of women not being included in formal negotiations?
What are the reasons for the slow progress towards gender equality?*



Visaka Dharmadasa: We need women in the top positions to be included in formal negotiations. We are calling to establish an advisory council in the United Nations Secretary-General composed of 5 women from each continent, rotating in two years. We must ensure a 33% representation of women in all formal platforms. We need to recognize and respect the contributions of women and make them more visible.



Souparno Rakshit

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

If women have always been effective in peacekeeping, why do they only constitute less than 10% of the military peacekeepers globally?



Visaka Dharmadasa: We are trying to head towards a situation where the number gets increased from 8% to 25%. Recently and historically, India has also sent women to be United Nations peacekeepers on critical missions. It is definite that intervention from women is required to anchor peacekeeping. Women of communities in places of crisis are more comfortable with women peacekeepers in reporting issues they face, such as sexual abuse.



Souparno Rakshit

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

How do women activists in the space of war, peace, and security deal with disinformation and being targeted disproportionately?



Visaka Dharmadasa: In this aspect, women and men face similar issues with disinformation. Why do humans waste their time spreading disinformation, harassing others, and don't do better? It is absolutely disgusting and annoying to get calls that are irrelevant and waste our time. It is quite alarming how such people get our numbers and try to target us.



Souparno Rakshit

Pondicherry University, Puducherry

In Myanmar, women have been forcefully conscripted by the Junta. What problems do women face upon being forcefully conscripted? What about families who are unsupportive and unaccepting of women in such cases?



Visaka Dharmadasa The women diaspora of Myanmar in peacebuilding has been doing very well. The Myanmar network has received much recognition for their work. However, there is a presence of societal stigmas and barriers that disapprove of the acceptance of such women. Their honor and chastity often become the point of uncertainty, leading to unacceptability by their families.