

Remembering Maheswary Velayutham

It is two months since the assassination of Maheswary Velayuthan, human rights defender and colleague. While we repeat our condemnations of her killing and express our condolences with her family and friends, as civil society groups we wish to remember and celebrate Maheswary.

She left an indelible mark in her long history of involvement with social movements and her active and very vocal advocacy of women's rights. Leaving Sri Lanka in the early 1980s due to political and ethnic violence, like many of her generation, she continued her work in the promotion and defence of human rights through her association with the Tamil Information Centre in Madurai and her work in providing relief and support for Sri Lankan Tamils who had sought refuge in south India.

Upon her return to Sri Lanka, she continued this work and founded the Forum for Human Dignity (FHD). Through FHD, she and her colleagues provided legal aid and assistance to persons charged under the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA) and the Immigration & Emigration Act. Moving away from the traditional format of legal aid alone, the Forum adopted a holistic strategy to addressing long term detention with out bail under these laws; providing not only legal assistance but also supporting the families of detainees.

Since the 1990s, Maheswary worked with several government institutions, promoting the protection of human rights in a range of arenas. With the Ministry of Hindu Affairs, she campaigned for reform of laws that discriminated against women. In her work with the Ministry of Social Services and Social Welfare, she championed the cause of the socially marginalized, including single women and persons with disabilities.

Her position within the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP) provided her with the resources to advocate and address key issues and she saw it her duty to defend the party's right to democratic participation. Her politics were an essential part of her, but it was her deep humanistic concerns that fuelled her commitment to work for oppressed groups. While perceived as a traditional Tamil woman she saw the need to challenge patriarchal positions in order to avoid victimising disempowered and vulnerable groups.

As a Tamil woman active in social issues, she also played an important role within an extremely polarized polity by facilitating and supporting dialogue between politicians and human rights activists of all ethnic and religious communities. The right of self determination for all people of Sri Lanka was an important aspect of her advocacy.

Maheswary's untimely death will be mourned by all who knew her and worked with her. We will remember her larger than life persona and infectious laughter that was a constant feature of any conversation with her. She will be missed for her capacity to combine highly technical legal approaches to addressing rights violations with quick practical steps to resolve urgent matters. Her death leaves a void that will be hard to fill.

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