

# Northern Pre-School Teachers' Quest for Survival

Pre-school teachers from all over the country gathered in Jaffna on a peace and reconciliation mission.

Most of us, having spent over a decade growing up with schools as much as we did with our families, are constantly reminded about the importance of school education. In Sri Lanka, the social vision forged by free education policies lasting eight decades is what translated into overwhelming support for teachers during their strike actions last year.

However, there is a gaping hole in our educational system that goes right to the foundation of a child's development. That is the neglect of our pre-schools; including the demeaning exploitation of pre-school teachers and lack of resources for these important institutions.

***"The commitment of thousands of women in the north who have chosen to spend years nurturing children, yet their profession is only met with indignity by the state and community leaders"***

A few months ago, the Northern Province Pre-School Teachers Union – perhaps the only trade union of its kind in Sri Lanka – approached us to research their predicament and extend our solidarity. The pocket discussions with the preschool teachers in many corners of the North revealed the commitment of thousands of women who have chosen to spend years nurturing children, yet their profession is only met with indignity by the state and community leaders. Amidst the pandemic and the economic crisis, these preschool teachers often working in the most rural and isolated regions of the North are struggling to sustain their own families and care for their students.

## **Precarious employment**

There is a vast infrastructure consisting of 1,610 pre-schools, with 3,181 teachers for over 34,000 children in the 13 Education Zones of the Northern Province. These teachers are only guaranteed a meager salary of Rs. 6,000 per month paid by the Education Department of the Provincial Council. There is no job security or proper contracts. For these teachers, there is no maternity leave and not even a system for medical leave. And

as for the many pre-schools with only one teacher, she has to find a trustworthy substitute, to take leave. For the experienced teachers, including the trade union leaders, many of whom have toiled for decades as preschool teachers there are no retirement benefits, no pension scheme, and not even EPF and ETF contributions that would at least have provided a dignified exit with some sense of financial security for their future.

In the North over the last decade, through the efforts of 'Aaruthal', an NGO, many of these preschool teachers have gone through a one-year training program and gained a Diploma in Pre-School Education. Despite having secured such Diplomas and undergone various training programs conducted by different institutions including through government institutions, there has been little change in these pre-school teachers' salary. As a result, they either become dependent on their husbands or end up mired in debt to care for their families.

Most teachers reach the pre-school around 7:30 am and they leave their work only after Noon and often after 1.00 pm, as they wait for the parents to pick up the children. They also work extra time during festivals and special occasions, arranging cultural and sports activities for the enjoyment of their students. Hours of exhausting work, consisting of running behind children, facing their tantrums, cleaning them, and comforting them, are neither recognized nor compensated.

### **Neglected institutions**

The preschool buildings in the North are often properties of local social institutions like Rural Development Societies, community centers, and religious associations. Although the Department of Education pays the teachers, the power of appointing teachers and dismissing them lies with these institutions that claim the pre-schools. Therefore, the teachers have to comply with their demands, which restricts the teachers and the pre-schools from functioning autonomously. Most teachers fear that they can be thrown out of their jobs if they fall out of favor with zealous community leaders.

The preschool teachers are pulled in different directions and are at the beck and call of various officials. The Department of Education, the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, the Divisional Secretariats, the Ministry of Health, and similar local authorities claim to monitor and manage the preschool teachers, with no clear line of reporting. These officials request data when necessary and insist on workshops and 'training' for these teachers. The informal character of the preschool management including no clear

allocations and cadres legitimised by the state means there is no clarity of oversight and development.

The pre-school teachers lack proper documentation including employment identity cards to ensure recognition. This lack of documentation marginalizes them from accessing various support systems of the state, including the banks for credit services. Even at the social level, they are barely respected and recognized as teachers, and where only their dress in the form of the saree they wear, becomes an indicator that they are teachers. And they are often scoffed at when they mention that they are pre-school teachers.

### **Dignity and struggle**

The string of protests that concluded recently in the North by pre-school teachers is a first step to making their struggles heard. Various institutions have recognized the value of preschool education for children; however, we have yet to acknowledge and appreciate the arduous labor of preschool teachers, who lay the social foundation for future generations. This neglect is symptomatic of the gendered exploitation in many other sectors. Moreover, it also comes with moral and emotional blackmail, where women are expected to carry the social burden of nurturing children while their suffering is ignored by the public.

In every village and every urban quarter, there is a preschool, and amidst the severe economic crisis devastating the country, the social and economic situation of the teachers and children is going to be one barometer of our future troubles. One great strength of the preschool teachers in the North is that they had registered a trade union in 2016, and now have close to 1,600 members. As the trade union gears for a membership drive and a campaign for a fair salary along with dignified and permanent employment, their gains in the North may become a model for the rest of the country. We owe it to ourselves and to our future generations to transform the vast structure of pre-schools into nourishing and progressive institutions, where not just the little children but also their teachers are not left behind.