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The Legacy of Sunila Abeysekera: An Inspiration



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It is with great sadness that Amnesty International learns of the death of Sunila Abeysekera in Colombo on 9 September 2013, one of Sri Lanka's most formidable human rights activists, a feminist and talented cultural performer. Her determined and generous spirit, her strength and her sense of humour will be greatly missed.

Sunila fought tirelessly to keep Sri Lanka's human rights crisis on the international agenda. She often risked her life by speaking out to condemn abuses by both sides during Sri Lanka's long and bloody armed conflict. She was a gifted researcher and an eloquent and compelling campaigner, whether conducting interviews with victims in remote Sri Lankan villages, or addressing the United Nations.

The role of women in campaigning for peace and justice was an issue close to Sunila's heart. In 2005 she was essential in the organization of a gathering in Colombo of Women Human Rights defenders (WHRDs) from across the world – which led to the development of the WHRD International Coalition. Sunila provided tireless leadership and inspiration to the Coalition - sharing her expertise and encouragement with other women activists, and those, like Amnesty International, who work to support them. From her deep knowledge of the working practices and expertise that women bring to human rights work, she brought a dynamic understanding of how women can support each other, prioritizing self-care and safety, in spite of the risks that they run, particularly in situations of conflict. Sunila understood that it is only with women's input and experience that true peace building and development can flourish, and her vision of women's empowerment and true equality will continue to inspire our work.

Sunila received a UN Human Rights award from the UN Secretary-General in 1999. Amnesty International honours Sunila's own commitment to the protection of human rights defenders by reasserting our call to the UN Human Rights Council to help protect human rights defenders in Sri Lanka from reprisal, intimidation and attack.

Sunila - an inspiration to the human rights movement and beyond.