

Feminist from Sri Lanka visits



Dr Hema Goonatilake.

Woman's activist, sociologist and UNIFEM programme consultant, Dr Hema Goonatilake, recently visited Namibia. She spoke to us about *Voice of Women*, a woman's magazine in Sri Lanka, and about her work at UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women).

Dr Goonatilake was one of the founding members of the first feminist group in Sri Lanka. The group started its activities in the early 1970s in the wake of International Woman's Year. They started a magazine, *Voice of Women* (*Kantha Handa*) in 1979. The magazine is published in English, Tamil and Sinhala and is distributed throughout

Sri Lanka.

In *Voice of Women*, issues such as violence against women, the negative portrayal of women in the media and the subservient position of women in society are examined. These are clearly problems women in Namibia also face.

Women in Sri Lanka, however, are better off than their Namibian counterparts. Hema attributes this to the high level of literacy in Sri Lanka which is almost 100%. Everybody in Sri Lanka has access to free education from kindergarten up to university level. Women also constitute 50% of the university population.

Hema argues that education is the key to development. She

feels that literacy is a major vehicle for expression. This has important implications for development in Namibia where 60% of the population is illiterate. Of these, the majority are women.

The result is that a large percentage of the population is excluded from decision making processes on a national level.

Hema and her colleagues at the university in Sri Lanka started a centre for women's research in 1984. This was the first centre of its kind and is still one of the major centres organising publications, lectures and seminars on women's issues. Hema has been the coordinator of the centre until she left the country in 1989. She is now working at UNIFEM in New York.

D I C T I O N A R Y

sociologist: - A person who studied the development, structure, and functioning of human societies.

subservient: - Of inferior importance or rank.

constitute: - Make up.

implications: - What is involved in, or implied by something else.