Journal of Moral Theology, Vol. 15, Special Issue 2 (2026): 121–142

Can the Shrine to Our Lady of Madhu Promote a Secure Peace for Women in Post-War Sri Lanka?

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Abstract: The Shrine to Our Lady of Madhu has served as a place of refuge and hope for all affected by the Sri Lankan civil war and its aftermath. Both Christians and non-Christians alike, of all ethnicities, have made the pilgrimage to Madhu to pray for peace, reconciliation, and to seek Mary's protection and consolation. Catholic, Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist devotees, irrespective of racial and religious differences, are attracted to the Madhu shrine and Mary as a "holy Mother" and source of peace and unity. Although the shrine has demonstrated relevance and success as a site of peacebuilding, it has not fully lived up to its potential for addressing the unique challenges for women, during and after the conflict. This article describes how the shrine to Our Lady of Madhu has clearly contributed to inter-religious peacebuilding but could be more effective in promoting Women, Peace and Security principles. It specifically examines the shrine's shortfalls, and potential areas for improvement, related to sexual violence, trauma recovery, and women's leadership in peace-building.

THE PEACEFUL BREEZES THROUGH THE COCONUT GROVES and soft sounds of the waves lapping the shore on the Bay of Bengal belie the recent history of bloody conflict in Sri Lanka. Unresolved grievances persist among the minority ethnic Tamils and minority Christian and Muslim communities in this Buddhist-majority island country off the southern tip of India. The Christian population, which has remained predominantly Catholic, arrived through migration from India in the early centuries of the church and expanded later after the arrival of European colonization.[1] Amidst the carnage of the civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the separatist Tamil minority group in the north from 1983 to 2009, the Shrine to Our Lady of Madhu served as a place of refuge and hope for Sri Lankans affected by war. Pilgrims of all ethnicities and religions frequented the shrine throughout the war to pray for peace and reconciliation and to seek Mary's protection and

[1] Robert Frykenberg, *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 6–8.

consolation. The shrine was designated as a safe area for as many as forty thousand refugees in the northern part of the island country who sought protection and refuge.[2] Both Christians and non-Christians, including Hindu religious leaders and Buddhist monks, were attracted to the Madhu shrine and to Mary as a "holy Mother" who "showers blessings on all," irrespective of racial and religious differences, "to keep the entire nation united and peaceful."[3] Perceptions of the shrine as an interreligious peacebuilding center continued in the aftermath of the war, with Our Lady of Madhu described as "our peace maker, a peacebuilding bridge to the North and the South and a weaver of good relationships among all religions."[4]

These peacebuilding characteristics are not unique to Madhu, as the mutual love for Mary by the pilgrims who visit her shrine and "the shared expression of common human need" can supersede ideological, racial, and cultural boundaries.[5] Madhu, like other Marian shrines, should not be considered an inanimate object. While the physical infrastructure of the church and the glass encased statue cannot act on their own, the shrine is a dynamic combination of the building, its staff, the pilgrims, and the image, including its history and symbolic meaning to the faithful.[6] The shrine has demonstrated its potential to address many of the root causes of violence, mitigate the suffering of

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[2] R. Augustine Pushparaj, *Centenary Celebration of the Coronation of Our Lady of Madhu* (St. Joseph's Catholic Press, 2024), 7–8. While this article and the Centenary account of Madhu from Pushparaj help illustrate the connection of the Madhu shrine with peacebuilding, there is a lacuna in theological and peacebuilding literature regarding shrines and peace. One exception is a contribution from Indian theologian David Stanly Kumar that identifies how the Marian shrine in Vailankanni (Tamil Nadu, India) promotes communal harmony and peace through an atmosphere of religious harmony and spiritual friendships developed and strengthened by Mary's intercessory role. Young pilgrims at the shrine interact with those of other faiths, creating a sense of openness, reducing fear and misunderstanding, and enabling interfaith cultural celebrations. See David Stanly Kumar, "Apparitions of Vailankanni: Beacon of Religious Harmony in India," in *A Symposium on Apparitions: An Exploration Around the History, Bible, Theology, and Magisterium of the Church*, ed. Edward S. Johnson (Arokia Niketan Institute for Marian Studies, 2018), 105.

[3] Derived from author's discussions with pilgrims and clergy at the Madhu shrine in August 2024. These discussions, and others cited later in this article, were conducted for the purpose of research related to interreligious peacebuilding at Marian shrines in South Asia. The discussions were conducted with IRB oversight and approval from Villanova University.

[4] Theophane Croos, "The Pilgrimage Madhu Is Heart Touching," in *Centenary Celebration of the Coronation of Our Lady of Madhu*, ed. R. Augustine Pushparaj (St. Joseph's Catholic Press, 2024), 35.

[5] Robert Orsi, *History and Presence* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 56.

[6] Robert Orsi describes Marian shrines as sites where "the transcendent breaks into time" to become involved in the lives of people who visit the shrine to venerate the Blessed Mother. He recognizes Mary's "gaze" as a real presence where Mary "can see and hear" the prayers of the pilgrims. See Orsi, *History and Presence*, 54.

conflict victims, and serve as a catalyst to transform Sri Lankan civil society to become more unified and harmonious. Nevertheless, in a war and post-conflict environment that have exhibited high rates of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), it is not clear how effective the shrine has been for addressing the unique challenges facing women.

This article argues that the shrine of Our Lady of Madhu has clearly contributed to interreligious peacebuilding in Sri Lanka but could be more effective in promoting Women, Peace and Security (WPS) principles. Many of these shortcomings are related to widespread incidents of sexual violence, a need for a more deliberate approach to trauma recovery, and a lack of women's leadership or roles in formal peacebuilding processes. After first offering a summary of the Sri Lankan civil war and the shrine as a site of peace and reconciliation, I then examine how the shrine has exhibited the characteristics of Catholic peacebuilding models and the relevance of the WPS principles outlined in UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.[7] Subsequently, I analyze the shrine's effectiveness at meeting the WPS goals and assess its success or potential in relation to other Marian shrines, particularly in South Asia. Finally, I conclude with recommendations for activities or changes in how the shrine serves as a peacebuilding site to better support WPS goals as they apply to post-conflict Sri Lanka.

Peace and justice are integral and inseparable components of Catholic social thought. Based primarily on Jesus' reminder "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9), and numerous other examples from the gospels, the Catholic Church has emphasized the importance of building peace. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council redefined the church's concept of peace and peacebuilding, admonishing Catholics "to join with all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and bringing it about" and acknowledging that "the concrete demands of the common good are constantly changing as time goes on. Hence, peace is never attained once and for all but must be built up ceaselessly" (no. 78). The concept of a true peace in Catholic peacebuilding refers to a social peace within and among communities. Catholic peacebuilding scholar Theodora Hawksley, in her analysis of Catholic social teaching and peacebuilding, describes true peace as something that is received rather than grasped, as "forgiveness cannot be forced, for attempts to do so result in division going underground rather than being overcome. In many cases, the true peace of

[7] UN Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, urged all member states of the United Nations to increase women's representation in the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict. United Nations Security Council, "Women, Peace and Security," October 31, 2000, unscr.com/en/resolutions/1325.

reconciliation must be approached iteratively, and the encounters in which we give or receive forgiveness must happen over and over again."[8] Catholic peacebuilders attempt to engage with all components of society through interfaith dialogue and cooperation to protect human dignity and to address the root causes of conflict in pursuit of a sustainable and just peace. Peace is both an objective and a means pursued through dialogue, starting with the individual, growing at the grassroots level, and then expanding globally in a long-term commitment to counter injustice.

Peace is not necessarily the opposite of violence. Johan Galtung, the Norwegian sociologist widely considered to be the founder of peace studies, echoes Daoist and Buddhist epistemology to argue that "the both/and and the neither/nor possibilities [of peace and violence] should be considered," acknowledging that there may be a presence of "the *yin* in *yang* and of *yang* in *yin*." In other words, neither peace nor violence precludes the presence of the other.[9] Two types of violence relevant to both an armed conflict and post-conflict environment include both direct (the use of force) or indirect (systems that cause injustice). Galtung identifies "cultural violence" as aspects of culture that "can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence.[10] Each of these modes of violence are relevant to considerations around incorporating WPS goals into peacebuilding in post-conflict Sri Lanka. To move from the theoretical to the practical, Galtung insists on attending to these varieties while remaining specific "to serve as a basis for concrete action."[11] Therefore, this article will consider particular examples of violence related to the challenges of women during and after the Sri Lankan civil war.

Peacebuilding, as understood in this article, is a vital aspect of Catholic social teaching that encompasses a comprehensive approach to reduce violence and its effects to build a sustainable peace focused on human dignity and the common good. Three components of this approach include the prevention, mitigation, and transformation of conflict by incorporating all stakeholders through a long-term commitment.[12] Prevention includes addressing the root causes of violence

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[8] Theodora Hawksley, *Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 225.

[9] Johan Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means: Peace and Conflict* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 1996), 16.

[10] Structural violence can also be referred to as social injustice. See Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*, 196, and Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," in *Violence: A Philosophical Anthology*, ed. Vittorio Bufacchi (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 84.

[11] Galtung, "Violence, Peace and Peace Research," 80.

[12] This assessment is determined from the author's analysis of: peacebuilding practitioners, such as Catholic Relief Services and Caritas Internationalis; literature

and responding to unjust relationships and structures to build communal harmony. Mitigation of conflict relies on changing attitudes and addressing the effects and symptoms of conflict to protect and defend human dignity and the common good. Conflict transformation involves reconciliation and the restoration of sustainable structures to promote a peaceful and vibrant society. The social reality of South Asia can prevent the church from being directly involved in peacemaking, but the church can join other nongovernmental organizations in trying to bring out the truth and obtain justice to prepare people of different religious groups to understand and accept each other.[13] Minority status, politicized religiosity, and other concerns can prevent the Catholic Church from taking the lead or being the public face of peacebuilding or other social justice efforts because of potential political backlash.[14] This is particularly relevant to the religious plurality and ethnic tensions that persist in Sri Lanka.

SRI LANKAN CIVIL WAR AND THE MADHU SHRINE AS A PEACEBUILDING SITE

The three-decade civil war between the Sri Lankan government (predominantly Sinhalese) and the separatist Tamils killed more than seventy thousand people.[15] The conflict featured a complex dynamic of ethnic (Tamil and Sinhalese) and religious identities. The two primary groups of combatants were the government forces of the Sri Lankan military, which were mainly Buddhist but also included minority representation from Christians and Muslims, and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which were composed mainly of Hindus and a small percentage of Christians. The LTTE's objective was to create an independent state in the northern part of the

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from noted scholars that include John Paul Lederach, Lisa Sowle Cahill, R. Scott Appleby, Gerard Powers, Maryann Cusimano Love, Kenneth Himes, Robert Schreiter, and Theodora Hawksley; as well as Asian peacebuilders Tissa Balasuriya, Michael Amaladoss, Kwok Pui Lan, Rita Manchanda, and others. Many of these sources and their various texts are cited throughout the rest of this article.

[13] The term church is used to include not only the institutional aspects and hierarchy but the ecclesia of all members. This differentiates from how Atalia Omer describes "religious actors" as religiocrats that proclaim expert knowledge about religion and religious engagement. Atalia Omer, "Prophets Versus Religiocrats," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* (2020): 117.

[14] Michael Amaladoss, *Interreligious Encounters: Opportunities and Challenges* (Orbis Books, 2017), 220.

[15] Post-war analysts estimate that approximately seventy thousand to eighty thousand people were killed in the twenty-five-year war, with more than forty thousand non-combatants killed during the war. See Steven Ratner, "Accountability and the Sri Lankan Civil War," *The American Journal of International Law* 6, no. 4 (2012): 795, jstor.org/stable/10.5305/amerjintelaw.106.4.0795.

island country. An underlying objective of the separatist movement was to remove the Sinhalese and Muslim population from the provinces in the northern and eastern parts of the country.[16] In addition to devastating the country's population, infrastructure, and economy, the war caused numerous human rights violations and other atrocities, such as rape and other sexual violence, against both combatants and non-combatants.[17] Like most instances of armed conflict, Sri Lankan women were disproportionately affected.

Unfortunately, while the war ended in 2009, many of the challenges remain as the country has sought to address the trauma and root causes. Fr. Rohan Silva, the director of the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo, the nation's capital, states that "Sri Lanka has not addressed the issues that led to the war, nor the human rights violations that occurred during the war."[18] The failure to resolve the human rights violations has not only hindered the peace process but has often resulted in further injustice. For instance, human rights lawyer Suren D'Perera lamented the lack of progress related to war crimes in the last several years by noting that "cases were filed by the regime in 2015, but the subsequent regime filed cases against those who filed the previous cases in 2019."[19] Likewise, the politicization of the post-war period and rising Sinhala Buddhist nationalism, which was a root cause of the civil war, are creating additional tensions in the country. Tamil and Muslim minorities are becoming further marginalized, resulting in ethnic and religious conflict that was intensified by the "Easter Sunday" bombings in 2019 and other attacks on religious minority places of worship.[20]

Effects of the War on Women

The trauma inflicted by the war, along with other social factors, has caused many women to remain internally displaced. Like much of South Asia, the gender inequality that persists in Sri Lanka predated

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[16] Sara Davies and Jacqui True, *Hidden Wars: Gendered Political Violence in Asia's Civil Conflicts* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 113.
[17] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 113.
[18] The Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) was founded by Tissa Balasuriya in 1971 as part of the National Peace Council when Sri Lankan youth began to take up arms against the government. CSR continues to have a reputation as one of the only neutral actors and voices in the country. Derived from author's discussion with Fr. Rohan Silva, OMI, Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 16, 2024.
[19] Derived from author's discussion with Suren D'Perera at the Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 16, 2024.
[20] A.R.M. Imtiaz, "The Easter Sunday Bombings and the Crisis Facing Sri Lanka's Muslims," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 55, no. 1 (2020): 3–16.

the war and remains present in most ethnic and religious groups.[21] Unfortunately, the conflict has exacerbated the subjugation and oppression of women through the humiliation and forced submission that result from violations committed by combatants and militants.[22] The portrayal of women as grieving mothers, widows, refugees, or victims of sexual violence, while often true, neglects the full scope of their experience and disregards their agency. In Sri Lanka's ethno-nationalist struggle for national identity, Tamil and Muslim minorities are further marginalized, while women are often presented in these narratives as victims or survivors rather than heroes or warriors.[23] An understandable social reluctance to speak about or report sexual violence during and after the war further hinders these violations from being addressed.[24]

The Sri Lankan government, for more than a decade after the conflict, has yet to establish a meaningful transitional justice process to address war crimes and human rights violations, including sexual violence. A 2021 report to the United Nations Security Council states: "Survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, particularly those who came forward to engage with the transitional justice process, are experiencing increased barriers to attaining justice in the current context. War widows and other marginalized groups are at heightened risk of sexual violence, in particular in heavily militarized areas such as the Northern Province, owing to an entrenched post-conflict culture of violence."[25] The reluctance of the Sri Lankan government to respond to persistent gender discrimination and allegations of SGBV from the civil war has resulted in a heavy reliance on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to document the cases. In many cases,

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[21] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 119. Unfortunately, the justice system also remains paralyzed, as it may take seventeen years to simply have a trial for gang rape. This remains particularly problematic for Tamil women who are not empowered to complain or seek justice. From author's conversation with Suren D'Perera, Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo, Sri Lanka, August 16, 2024.

[22] Several characteristics of the region reinforce the likelihood of conflict, including minority ethnic groups, a sacred attachment to the land, poverty, contested water resources, and terrain that is conducive to insurgent warfare. See Dinesh K. Singh, "Women, Security, Peace, and Conflict in South Asia," *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 2 (2010): 656.

[23] The rare possible exception to this is for women who joined the LTTE as combatants. Post-war reporting of sexual violence was viewed as divisive and dangerous because it was seen as a means of continuing the conflict rather than moving forward toward peace. Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 111–112.

[24] This is a manifestation in Sri Lanka of the cultural violence that Galtung describes as leading to structural violence or social injustice. See Galtung, *Peace by Peaceful Means*, 196.

[25] United Nations Secretary-General, "Conflict-Related Sexual Violence—Report of the Secretary-General," § 65, UN Doc. S/2021/312, March 30, 2021, securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2021_312.pdf.

there is a preference among NGOs to manage the reporting because of a "mistrust of the state." Nevertheless, documenting the cases must then be followed up with meaningful action from the government to hold perpetrators accountable.

Role of the Catholic Church

Amid the ethnic and religious tensions in Sri Lanka's divided society, the Catholic Church remains in a complex position. On one hand, the Catholic Church does have power in Sri Lanka, and Sinhalese Catholics are near the top of the social hierarchy.[26] Nevertheless, the majority Sinhalese Buddhists are the only sub-group that can hold political leadership.[27] Alternatively, concerns remain about Catholicism because it was introduced by Europeans and maintains a strong network of contacts outside of Sri Lanka. Within the church itself, tensions remain between Tamil and Sinhalese Catholics. The former feel that they were abandoned by their co-religionists during and after the war.[28] The Sinhalese Catholics felt neglected when they expected accompaniment or solidarity. There is interaction between them, but it remains limited and superficial because of language barriers and persistent suspicion.[29] During and after the conflict, many of the Sinhala-speaking Catholics have been more likely to sympathize with the Buddhist majority than with the suffering of fellow Catholics who spoke Tamil.[30] This is a case of linguistic bonds becoming stronger than a shared faith tradition.

The Sri Lankan church is doubly affected by patriarchal traditions, both from the Catholic tradition and the influence of South Asian societal norms. Many women face social injustice and exploitation amid the plurality of religions and cultures.[31] Radhika Coomaraswamy,

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[26] More than 30 percent of Sri Lankan Catholics speak Tamil, yet the conflict from 1983 to 2009 left a gaping divide within the Catholic Church as many Sinhalese Catholic communities have supported Sinhala nationalist discourse to avoid becoming marginalized like other religious minorities. Bernardo Brown, "Cultural Deference, Community Survival: Sri Lankan Catholicism and the Perils of Religious Nationalism," *Social Sciences and Missions* 34 (2001): 288–289.

[27] Although there are public efforts to promote harmony and interreligious relations through interreligious ceremonies and efforts to address shared concerns, these programs hinge on the interest and participation of the Buddhist majority. Discussion with Suren D'Perera, August 16, 2024.

[28] Discussion with Fr. Rohan Silva, August 16, 2024.

[29] Within Sri Lanka's social hierarchy, Tamil Catholics are a distant third behind Sinhalese Buddhists and Catholics. Derived from discussions with Suren D'Perera and Fr. Rohan Silva.

[30] Brown, "Cultural Deference, Community Survival," 290.

[31] Tissa Balsuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text* (Trinity Press International, 1997), 89.

the former Chairperson of the Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission, argues that despite a "spirit of equality in most religious traditions," cultural practices and interpretations "have led to ideological manifestations which inhibit women's equality."[32] Although women religious are mostly respected in Sri Lankan society, this esteem is rarely manifested among the male clerical hierarchy.[33] For instance, unlike nearly every other report from countries in the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) related to becoming a synodal church, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka made no reference to women or their role in the church.[34] Such trends can hinder the church and its institutions, such as the shrine to Our Lady of Madhu, from contributing to the WPS goals stated in UNSCR 1325.

One aspect of the Catholic faith that is relevant to peacebuilding amid the religious plurality and complex ethnic context in Sri Lanka is Marian devotion and the Blessed Mother's model and example for building peace. Mary, as a model and inspiration for Catholic peacebuilders, can be a source of comfort and a guide through her message and example of peace.[35] One of the Blessed Mother's most important contributions toward building peace is promoting unity. Orthodox theologian Jaroslav Pelikan describes Mary's "most profound and most persistent" role in history as her "function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, and other religions."[36] Mary not only acts as a bridge to connect faith traditions, as indicated by the shrine in Madhu and shared veneration, but also helps promote justice with her attention to the poor and message of peace. Sri Lankan liberation

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[32] Radhika Coomaraswamy, "Foreword," in Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation: The Story and the Text* (Trinity Press International, 1997), ix.

[33] Derived from author's discussion with Sr. Dayalini Maria, AC, Puttalam, Sri Lanka, on August 18, 2024.

[34] "Summary Report of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka for the 2nd Session of the Synod on Synodality 2024" in *FABC Papers: The Asian Response to Deepening Aspects of the Synthesis Report of the Synod*, no. 187 (2023): 36–47.

[35] Further explanation of Mary's unique role and contribution for building peace is described in Joe Evans, "Marian Approach to Catholic Peacebuilding in the Himalaya," *Asian Horizons, Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 15, no. 3 (2021): 639–652. A practical example of this approach can be found with the Le Menach Foundation's Mary Initiative that incorporates Mary into interfaith peacebuilding between Christians and Muslims. See lemenachfd.org/Groups/175360/Le_Menach_Foundation/The_Mary_Initiative/The_Mary_Initiative.aspx. Additional specific examples of how Marian devotion can be applied for building peace are described in Lenart Skof, Emily Holmes, and Pavlo Smytsnyuk, eds., *Marian Reflections on War and Peace: Trauma, Mourning, and Justice in Ukraine and Beyond* (Routledge, 2025).

[36] Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (Yale University Press, 1996), 67. Although the Madhu shrine and other Marian shrines and places of Marian devotion demonstrate Mary's bridgebuilding function, it is not always effective with extremists who are prone to violence or uninterested in unity.

theologian Tissa Balasuriya asserts that Marian devotion can provide motivation for a "commitment to justice, interfaith dialogue, action for peace, and the liberation of women."[37] These are the essential attributes for a peacebuilding approach that can address the challenges outlined in UNSCR 1325.

Mary's interreligious appeal is critical and evident in how Buddhists are attracted to Mary as a humble maternal figure who will always protect and love, who has seen her son suffering, knows pain, and is easy to approach. Buddhist veneration of Mary may be attributed to comparisons of female deities and their motherly characteristics. Many Buddhists connect Mary to their local goddesses, especially those related to peacefulness, compassion, and motherhood. For example, Mary's miracles and depictions are comparable to those of the Bodhisattva Quan Âm, the most popular and revered goddess in Asian Buddhism,[38] Many Sri Lankan Buddhists, including monks, come daily to the Catholic churches and the Madhu shrine to pray to Mary.[39]

Despite her relevance to peacebuilding and the minority status of Catholics, Mary was appropriated by Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics involved in fighting during the Sri Lankan civil war. Catholic fighters from both sides of this conflict sought her intercession and portrayed images of Our Lady of Madhu in a manifestation of a militarized Mary.[40] The Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu was designated as a neutral space in the conflict. Nevertheless, the statue of Our Lady was moved into rebel-held areas for safe-keeping when government forces moved into this area of northern Sri Lanka. This is evidence of how a Marian symbol can be relatable across cultural and religious boundaries but renders her a complex component of an interreligious pursuit of peace and justice.

The Madhu Shrine

The Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu is the most popular Catholic shrine in Sri Lanka and a place of devotion for Tamil and Sinhalese Catholics, Hindus, and Buddhists. The statue of Our Lady of Madhu

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[37] Balasuriya, *Mary and Human Liberation*, 19.
[38] Dong Zhao, "The Christian Bodhisattva in China: Sinicization of the Virgin Mary in Chinese Literature," in *Representations of the Blessed Virgin Mary in World Literature and Art*, ed. Elena Shabily (Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 97.
[39] Observed by the author at Fatima Church in Colombo and the Our Lady of Madhu shrine in August 2024. Reinforced by statements from OMI priests at the shrine and Centre for Society and Religion, Colombo.
[40] Mathew Schmalz, "Catholics, Buddhists, Muslims Honor Mary at Madhu Shrine, Sri Lanka," *Catholics and Cultures*, January 9, 2015, catholicsandcultures.org/sri-lanka/our-lady-madhu-shrine.

is believed to have been introduced by Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century.[41] During a period of Dutch Protestant persecution during the mid-seventeenth century, many Catholics fled to the jungles of Madhu where the statue was placed in a small shrine.[42] For centuries, the shrine has attracted Buddhist Sinhalese, Hindu Tamils, and both Sinhalese and Tamil Catholics. The statue is recognized for its protective power during times of war, famine, and epidemic.[43]

Anton Croos, the Bishop of Ratnapura, described Mary as "a beacon of hope and strength for all" during this time of crisis, with the shrine of Our Lady of Madhu bringing everyone closer to Mary as "a place of shelter for all who come in search of protection."[44] Her appeal reached many Sri Lankans, regardless of religious affiliation or ethnicity, which contributed to the image of Our Lady of Madhu being transformed into a peace symbol during the post-conflict period.[45] In this case, both sides of the conflict could claim a connection to the Marian image and recognize her powerful intercessory attributes.

The Basilica Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, as a symbol of hope, resilience, and unity, has become a sacred center for peace and reconciliation, consolation, healing, and strength for all who make the pilgrimage.[46] The former President of Sri Lanka, Ranil Wickremesinghe, a Sinhalese Buddhist, recognizes the Madhu church as a "beacon of faith and unity" that transcends ethnic and religious divides to foster "unity, understanding, and harmony among all communities."[47] Although interaction among pilgrims may sometimes be limited because of language difficulties and past suspicion, the shrine remains a bridge across ethnic and religious boundaries and a site of peacebuilding, as clearly demonstrated during the war.

WPS AND CATHOLIC PEACEBUILDING AT THE MADHU SHRINE

The components of religious peacebuilding described earlier can help to address WPS concerns in the Sri Lankan civil war and post-conflict environment. There is substantial evidence to show that women suffer

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[41] Johann Roten, "Our Lady of Madhu: Sri Lanka," *All About Mary*, University of Dayton, udayton.edu/imri/mary/o/our-lady-of-madhu.php.

[42] The shrine was expanded through the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries as more pilgrims began to visit the sacred site. This information was derived from plaques and information boards at the Basilica Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu, Mannar, Sri Lanka, on August 17, 2024.

[43] Roten, "Our Lady of Madhu."

[44] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 11.

[45] Quintus Colombage, "Sri Lanka Declares Catholic Site Sacred," *UCA News*, August 29, 2018, ucanews.com/news/sri-lanka-declares-catholic-site-sacred/83149.

[46] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 24.

[47] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 4.

disproportionally both during and after a war.[48] The three key elements of Catholic peacebuilding (prevention, mitigation, and societal transformation) are helpful to address the five pillars outlined in UNSCR 1325. The five pillars, as described in UNSCR 1325 and most corresponding National Action Plans, include: equal participation, protection of human rights, prevention of SGBV, access to relief and recovery assistance, and integrating these principles into all programming.[49] When the WPS principles and Catholic peacebuilding approaches are collectively applied, they can help to promote a just peace, especially for the most marginalized and vulnerable, that can then reduce the likelihood of further conflict and encourage a flourishing civil society.

As described earlier, the Madhu shrine has demonstrated its contribution to building peace and promoting harmony among different ethnic and religious groups, as well as helping to mitigate the trauma of war by providing refuge and sanctuary. For example, Sr. Theophane Croos, a Holy Family sister from the northern region of Sri Lanka, describes Our Lady of Madhu as "our peace maker. . . . She embraced all refugees during the massive displacement and ethnic war."[50] Like many other Marian shrines in South Asia, Madhu has an interreligious appeal and promotes unity among diverse communities where there is often tension or violence. Nonetheless, harmony does not imply justice, nor does it ensure security for women, as indicated by the SGBV that occurred before, during, and after the war. Having a motherly figure that can offer comfort through her spiritual embrace does not mean that women will be decision-makers during the peace process or even that their voices will be heard.

Mary's presence as a mother to all Sri Lankans is exalted by societal respect for mothers but has also been politicized by the civil war and religio-ethnic tensions. Korean American theologian Min-Ah Cho notes that "when motherhood is used for militaristic aims, it blurs the line between nurturing and nationalism," leaving a lasting impact on all levels of society as "motherhood serves as a steadfast pillar of

[48] The suffering includes disruption to family and social networks which amplifies existing gender inequalities, as well as an increased threat of human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and hindrance of basic rights like education and safety (United Nations Security Council, "Women Suffer Disproportionately During and After War, Security Council Told During Day-Long Debate on Women, Peace and Security," Press Release SC/7908, October 29, 2003, un.org/press/en/2003/sc7908.doc.htm).

[49] A more detailed analysis can be found at "Women, Peace and Security," US Department of State, 2021–2025 Archived Content, 2021-2025.state.gov/women-peace-and-security.

[50] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 35.

support and validation for nationalism."[51] Thus, for the shrine of Our Lady of Madhu to contribute to a just peace in Sri Lanka, it must contribute to a transformation of civil society, given the persistent challenges and nature of society that led to rampant SGBV. This is particularly frustrating given that Madhu is a place recognized as a site of peace where hundreds of thousands come together to venerate a woman. Unfortunately, neither the Catholic Church nor the Sri Lankan government have made any substantial effort to resolve the structural inequalities that lead to gender discrimination and violence.[52] The church, at least regarding the shrine, seems to want or need to remain separate from politics and the conflict, and the SGBV associated with the conflict is seen as a political issue that belongs in the past.[53]

The Marian devotion in Madhu may seem best suited to promote trauma healing for the victims of SGBV, which is essential given the psychological effects of sexual torture and rape that are exacerbated by "inadequate legal protections" and social stigma.[54] Likewise, while the current narrative about conflict-related SGBV in Sri Lanka remains focused on what happened during the war rather than its aftermath, the violence continues and often remains unreported.[55] Nevertheless, there are other WPS principles beyond trauma recovery that might be addressed through the peacebuilding efforts in Madhu, including women's participation in the peace process, an emphasis on human rights, and societal transformation. The next section will assess Madhu's contribution to WPS in relation to other regional shrines and how the image of Mary is presented in its given context.

COMPARISON OF MADHU TO REGIONAL MARIAN SHRINES

Madhu's attraction to non-Christians and its bridge-building role are not unique among Marian shrines in South Asia. In a study of interfaith pilgrimages, Dionigi Albera cites the millions of non-Christians that visit places like Our Lady of Lanka, in Sri Lanka; Our Lady of Health in Vailankanni, India; and the National Marian Shrine

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[51] Min-Ah Cho, "Mary, A Mother and Sister of All Wounded: A Transnational Feminist Reading of Mariology in Response to Militarism," in *Marian Reflections on War and Peace: Trauma, Mourning, and Justice in Ukraine and Beyond*, ed. Lenart Skof, Emily Holmes, and Pavlo Smytsnyuk (Routledge, 2025), 185.
[52] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 121.
[53] This assessment was conveyed to the author by the Director of the Centre for Society and Religion and a human rights lawyer from the Sri Lankan Accountability Project in Colombo on August 16, 2024.
[54] Freedom from Torture, "Tainted Peace: Torture in Sri Lanka Since May 2009," *Report* (2015): 62–63, freedomfromtorture.org/sites/default/files/2019-04/sl_report_a4_-_final-f-b-web.pdf.
[55] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 112.

in Mariamabad, Pakistan, to claim that among all religious sites, Marian shrines encourage the most interreligious gatherings.[56] These shrines attract devotees from different religious traditions who meld together as one congregation. Catholic peacebuilders should emphasize the different-yet-united nature of Marian veneration, as seen at the shrines and pilgrimages, as an opportunity for promoting communal harmony through the shared experiences.[57] Across the subcontinent, women tend to visit Marian shrines more often than men; often, this is for intercessory prayers related to fertility or comfort in abusive relationships.[58]

Despite the commonalities in these regional Marian shrines, one notable difference is in the Marian image's appearance or origin. For example, Mary's encounters in a late sixteenth century apparition in Vailankanni were with Hindus, rather than Catholics. She appeared as a Tamil mother, carrying the Christ child, in local dress. She is portrayed at the shrine in a golden sari, adorned with gold jewelry, and standing over a crescent moon, which resonates with Hindu imagery. She became known as Our Lady of Health after healing a lame Hindu boy and subsequent healings attributed to her intercession at the shrine.[59] The National Marian Shrine of Pakistan, in Mariamabad, was established in 1892 for the first Christian village in Pakistan. The Marian statue was carved by a local Muslim craftsman. Unlike many other images of Mary created in the British colonial period, the artist used only his interpretation of Mary from the Qur'an, rather than using an existing Christian image of Mary as a model.[60] Illustrating the value of Mary as a source of harmonious interfaith relations, Mariamabad was declared the National Shrine by Prime Minister Z. A. Bhutto in

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[56] Albera notes that the interreligious attraction to Marian shrines occurs throughout the world, but highlights the overwhelming numbers of Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Muslims that venerate Mary in South Asia. See Dionigi Albera, "Mary and Multi-Faith Pilgrimages," in *The Oxford Handbook of Mary*, ed. Chris Maunder (Oxford University Press, 2019), 621.

[57] Interreligious pilgrimages include devotees from multiple religious traditions together at one shrine. There is no specific Catholic teaching about interreligious pilgrimages, although *Nostra Aetate* exhorts dialogue and collaboration across religious traditions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church specifically prohibits veneration of deities other than the one true God (*Catechism*, no. 2112), which does not preclude praying with non-Christians at Catholic shrines.

[58] The subject of intercessory prayers was determined by input from the shrine rectors, supporting religious sisters, and letters sent to the shrines. Author's discussions with the shrine rectors in Mariamabad and Vailankanni were conducted in May 2022 and in Madhu in August 2024.

[59] *The History of The Shrine Basilica of Our Lady of Health, Vailankanni: The Lourdes of the East* (Sixth Computers Printing, 2019), 25.

[60] The origin and background of the shrine were determined from a typed letter dated 1927 in the shrine's archives. There was no title or signature on the letter. This was observed by the author on May 30, 2022.

1974 to promote unity and recognize the contribution of minority religions to the Islamic country's social fabric.[61] In contrast, the statue of Our Lady of Madhu is a European image that was brought to the country by missionaries.

The interreligious nature of these shrines, and the fact that they attract mostly women, is an important attribute for contributing to WPS goals while promoting unity and harmony. In societies where women struggle with discrimination and exploitation under patriarchal cultural norms, Mary is a motherly symbol of strength, comfort, and hope.[62] Ultimately, Mary can facilitate interreligious peacebuilding, as her power and compassion can promote trauma healing, her relatability and authority can enable societal bonding, and her appearances and attraction to non-Christians illustrate her capacity to build bridges between communities. Nevertheless, the gender and racial imagery present in the shrines and corresponding devotion require consideration. This is necessary to determine if the image contributes to problematic gender or racial stereotypes and how this compares to the practical value of such devotion.

The protective imagery of Mary is particularly relevant to women who are among the most vulnerable during and after armed conflict. In the case of Madhu, this imagery is presented in the statue introduced centuries earlier by European missionaries, unlike her appearances in Vailankanni as a Tamil woman, La Vang as a Vietnamese woman, or other shrines and apparitions as a native or indigenous woman. Asian feminist theologians argue that "the traditional portrayal of Mary as a White virgin not only underpins heteropatriarchy and colonialism but also overlooks the multifaceted identities of women, which encompass intersections of race, culture, and socio-economic standing."[63] Our Lady of Madhu is a White woman but a small statue that is encased in glass and placed high above the altar so that her features are not readily visible. Moreover, other larger images, especially of her face, are not prevalent in or around the shrine. The devotional focus is not on her image or how she looks, but on her comforting and protective presence.

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[61] It is notable that Mariamabad was chosen to be the National Shrine over other Muslim Marian shrines in a country that was founded as a home to Muslims and remains over 95 percent Muslim.

[62] This is a particularly complex component of Mary's role as a symbol or model in South Asian culture, where women are culturally expected to fulfill roles as wives and mothers. Some feminist theologians acknowledge Mary's autonomy and authority, while Jenny Ponzo notes the wide spectrum of positions regarding women in different religious traditions where some progressive thinkers cite Mary as a model for bravery and an affirmation that women should have a leadership role in the faith. See Jenny Ponzo, "The Model of Mary between Islam and Catholicism," *International Journal of Legal Discourse* 5, no. 2 (2020): 309.

[63] Cho, "Mary, A Mother and Sister of All Wounded," 194.

In a South Asian context, the use of Christian symbols, such as images of Mary, must account for perceived connections of Christianity to Western colonialism and imperialism. In the Sri Lankan embrace of Our Lady of Madhu, both sides were local Tamils and Sinhalese rather than Westerners, which contributed to the image being transformed into a peace symbol during the post-conflict period. In this case, both sides of the conflict could claim a connection to the Marian image and recognize her powerful intercessory attributes. While external observers, including some Asian feminist theologians, may be concerned with the devotion to a White European image of Mary in northern Sri Lanka, Sr. Rasika Pieris stresses that it is "the impression that the people have that is important."[64] While there may be a benefit to crafting a more culturally and racially appropriate image of Our Lady of Madhu, her image has proved successful in building bridges and offering comfort to those who suffer from the Sri Lankan civil war.

Recommendations for the Shrine to Have More Impact on Promoting WPS

Although there is a growing consensus of the importance of women's involvement in the process for peace and security, gender discrimination continues to restrict the participation of women in Sri Lanka's post-war peace process. There are several ways that the Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu could make a more effective contribution to promoting WPS in Sri Lanka. There are four components of the WPS agenda outlined in UNSCR 1325 that may be relevant to how the Shrine to Our Lady of Madhu can integrate women's perspectives into peace and security efforts.[65] Given the nature of devotion to Mary as a motherly figure with a liberative message of peace and protection, the shrine could contribute to these four pillars with attention given to encouraging women's participation in leadership, protection of human rights, the prevention of SGBV, and trauma recovery. This section considers possible ways that the shrine could become a more impactful location for promoting WPS in each of these areas.

Failing to have a proportionate level of women's participation in the post-conflict peace process hinders the effectiveness and breadth of perspectives. This exclusion is an example of Galtung's concept of

[64] Author's conversation with Sr. Rasika Pieris, July 29, 2025.

[65] These recommendations were further developed in UNSCR 1820, 1888, and 1889 to address the problems of sexual violence and ensure the equal participation and full involvement of women in promoting peace and security.

structural violence.[66] Asian feminist theologian Kwok Pui-lan recognizes the absence of women in dialogue for peace, arguing that interreligious peacebuilding and all dialogue "must include those marginalized voices that have not been invited to the table."[67] Nevertheless, simply including women as a symbolic gesture is inadequate if they are not given a voice. The mere presence of women at the table is insufficient to ensure women's voices are heard and incorporated into the peace process.[68] A shrine which is recognized as a peacebuilding site, promotes interreligious gatherings, and is dedicated to a woman seems to offer an opportunity to promote women's participation. Unfortunately, this is not happening in Madhu. In fact, women were not even allowed to approach the statue behind the altar at the conclusion of the war because of Sri Lankan cultural norms.[69] However, just as the shrine has evolved to allow women to approach the statue, there is an opportunity for Our Lady of Madhu to become a catalyst for women's participation in the peacebuilding process. For instance, feminist Mariology has the potential to challenge and transform patriarchal and nationalistic ideologies.[70] One of the first steps to incorporate such concepts into the experience and messaging at the shrine is to persistently address the role of women in the church and their unique challenges after the war to the reluctant male clerical hierarchy that run the shrine.

Sri Lankan women must become agents of social transformation as decision makers to advocate for alternative social structures and a theology that reflects the struggles of women and minorities in "a more inclusive image of God."[71] Magisterial teaching can be a means both for encouraging women to act and the clergy to understand their importance. For example, Pope John Paul II insisted on strict equality between men and women in terms of human dignity and human rights,

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[66] Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167.

[67] Kwok Pui-lan, *Globalization, Gender, and Peacebuilding: The Future of Interreligious Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2012), 4.

[68] Vanessa Newby and Alanna O'Malley, "Introduction: WPS 20 Years On: Where Are the Women Now?" *Global Studies Quarterly* 1 (2021): 2–3.

[69] Sr. Rasika Pieris notes that the shrine rector attributed this prohibition to local Hindu influences. Derived from author's discussion with Sr. Rasika, July 28, 2025.

[70] Min Ah Cho describes how reclaiming the Marian symbol from patriarchal interpretations can help to overcome the marginalization of women and lead to greater agency. See Cho, "Mary, A Mother and Sister of All Wounded," 194.

[71] Rasika Pieris, "The Role of Women for the Church in Asia," *Federation of Asian Bishops Conference*, October 17, 2022, fabc2020.org/post/role-of-women-church-in-asia-sr-rasika-pieris.

noting an "urgent need to achieve real equality in every area."[72] Likewise, he encouraged the Asian bishops to "more visibly and effectively uphold women's dignity and freedom" with their roles and opportunities in the church. Accordingly, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) has publicly agreed to "commit ourselves to uphold the dignity of women as equal partners."[73] Reminding the Sri Lankan clergy of these teachings may facilitate efforts to address women's challenges following the civil war.

The Sri Lankan Catholic Church continues to promote human rights and development toward addressing the challenges of women in the post-war environment.[74] Davies and True argue that human rights and development should be linked, as "any program for gender justice in Sri Lanka must provide access to social and economic resources to ensure political and economic equality" that may provide more opportunities for women who have been "disenfranchised and harmed by war."[75] The shrine to Our Lady of Madhu, given its role as a peacebuilding center, could emphasize these challenges for women through its programs and messaging. Conceptually, these efforts could benefit from the perception of many pilgrims who visit the shrine of Mary as a protector who—unlike the government—is willing to listen.[76] The clergy who plan activities at the Madhu shrine, as well as other groups who plan pilgrimages, can focus on the Marian feminine principle of protection and peace, which Lenart Skof describes as "protecting the world from evil, Mary safeguards the possibility of peace among humankind."[77] Messaging during organized pilgrimages, annual festivals, daily masses, and other activities should integrate these themes of protection and peace. This can enable the shrine to

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[72] Pope John Paul II, "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women," June 29, 1995, vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1995/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_29061995_women.html.

[73] Federation of Asian Bishop's Conferences, "BILA on Women I: Final Statement," FABC, January 1995, fabc.org/offices/olaity/Women's%20docs/BILA%20ON%20WOMEN%20I.pdf.

[74] The Centre for Society and Religion (CSR) remains primarily focused on human rights violations related to religious freedom in Sri Lanka. CSR also works with the human rights office under the Bishop of Kandy on torture, sexual violence against women, and prisons. Derived from author's discussion with D'Perera.

[75] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 138.

[76] Author's discussion with Rasika Pieris, July 29, 2025. This aspect of Marian devotion was also recognized by Pope Francis, who described Our Lady of Madhu as "the mother of every home, of every wounded family, of all who are seeking to return to a peaceful existence . . . [who has] protected the people of Sri Lanka from so many dangers, past and present." Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 5.

[77] Lenart Skof, "Marian Peace for the Children Who Suffer in War: A Theory of Matrixiality between Literature and Philosophy," in *Marian Reflections on War and Peace: Trauma, Mourning, and Justice in Ukraine and Beyond*, ed. Lenart Skof, Emily Holmes, and Pavlo Smytsnyuk (Routledge, 2025), 120.

become a place that promotes WPS objectives through a foundation of its existing bridge-building characteristics. Such events should also encourage contributions and participation from those who support Sri Lanka's legislation in support of UNSCR 1325.[78]

Although SGBV remains a global problem and particularly problematic in post-conflict Sri Lanka, the clergy in Madhu can attempt to intervene when they are aware of specific cases. Nevertheless, the shrine can be a place of security as the problems persist through a slow process of societal transformation. The persistent gendered political violence in Sri Lanka, that is often manifested through sexual violence, is rooted in structural gender inequalities and perpetrators who feel that they can act with impunity.[79] Given these societal characteristics, women need a place where they can go to feel safe. The shrine offers this, as Sr. Rasika Pieris notes that "after the war, the Madhu shrine became a place of security."[80] As a peacebuilding center, the shrine can enhance this aspect of security with a deliberate pastoral approach and make the most of Mary's motherly protection and comfort to offer healing for the victims of SGBV.

Many Sri Lankan women suffered immense trauma during the war from SGBV and other human rights violations. Trauma healing is an essential component of Catholic peacebuilding that allows the person, whether a victim or a perpetrator, to prepare for reconciliation with others.[81] The Basilica Shrine of Our Lady of Madhu is recognized as a symbol of hope, resilience, and unity for Sri Lankan society. The shrine has the capacity to encourage societal healing but can make the most of the recognition of Mary as a protecting and healing mother to focus on women's conflict-related trauma. Considering the personal dimension of conflict and peacebuilding, reconciliation and healing must account for the "deep disruption in relationships that then need radical healing," which, in the "language of Catholic social teaching," suggests that the task of peacebuilding must be "shaped around the recognition that reconciliation cannot be less profound than the

[78] Contributors to Sri Lanka's National Action Plan for women peace and security including the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment, other elements of the Sri Lankan government, international and civil society organizations, could be invited to participate in events at the shrine.
[79] Davies and True, *Hidden Wars*, 119.
[80] Rasika Pieris, July 29, 2025.
[81] Binding activities, a component of Catholic Relief Services' process for interreligious peacebuilding, focus on promoting self-transformation, including trauma healing and dialogue. Atalia Omer, "Introduction," in *Interreligious Action for Peace: Studies in Muslim-Christian Cooperation* (Catholic Relief Services, 2017), 6–7.

division itself."[82] Healing and the foundational aspects of reconciliation occur at the shrine—through Mary's motherly care and the devotion.

Motherhood, despite the complexities in how it can be used to confine women to culturally defined expectations, can be used as a powerful source of social transformation necessary for integrating WPS principles into activities and messaging at the shrine. The cultural importance of motherhood is exceptionally helpful for integrating Mary into South Asian peacebuilding, yet these cultural expectations can also be a source of oppression by limiting women to their role in the family instead of actively participating in civil society efforts to build peace. Indian theologian Metti Amirtham acknowledges that although motherhood "is given the highest position," this can be an "entrapment as motherhood is particularly centered on the biological processes of childbirth."[83] Asian feminist theologians, however, have reclaimed Mary from traditional interpretations by making her life, suffering, and love sound familiar to Asian women.[84] Cho suggests that women can "harness the concept of motherhood to construct their agency, foster communities, and strategically employ the ethos of their distinctive position to effect political change."[85] This emphasis on Mary's motherhood makes her relevant both for peacebuilding and promoting WPS across religious traditions, as a mother's love, comfort, and strength are invaluable for victims and germane to all faiths. As described above, many Buddhists relate Mary to their local goddesses, especially those related to peacefulness, compassion, and motherhood. For example, both Mary and the mother goddess are venerated primarily because of their motherhood, as maternal protection and presence are vital in the lives of believers.[86] The presence of female symbols of the divine in Buddhism and cultural importance of motherhood allow Mary to be a bridge for interfaith cooperation in promoting WPS.

The shrine, Our Lady, and Catholics seeking to build peace in Sri Lanka can most effectively work to promote WPS in collaboration with others. Religious peacebuilders can help to address many of these

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[82] Theodora Hawksley, *Peacebuilding and Catholic Social Teaching* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2020), 8.

[83] Amirtham further explains that the "female body is made significant only by its exercise or role of motherhood." Amirtham, *Women in India*, 91–92.

[84] For example, Chung Hyun Kyung finds it helpful to emphasize the motherhood aspect because Mary is a rare mother "who is not domesticated by the patriarchal order" because she is a virgin. Nevertheless, virginity is not revered among adult women in South Asian society, which makes the emphasis on Mary's perpetual virginity both confusing and less relevant to the cultural context. See Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again*, 78.

[85] Cho, "Mary, A Mother and Sister of All Wounded," 193.

[86] Zhao, "The Christian Bodhisattva in China," 103.

issues by cooperating within a broader network that includes governmental and non-governmental organizations. Various directives and guidance from national governments and international organizations reinforce the ethical and strategic reasons for incorporating women in peace processes.[87] For example, Sri Lanka has a National Action Plan to implement UNSCR 1325.[88] Unfortunately, religion is only used in a negative sense to describe ethno-religious tensions or refer to persecution of religious minorities throughout most of the document. One exception is a recommendation to encourage existing interreligious committees to further social dialogue.[89] Through such cooperation, the shrine can become an active location to foster a preferential option for the vulnerable. The shrine has been the site of interreligious dialogue programs, which must also deliberately address ethnic barriers between Sinhalese and Tamil Sri Lankans.[90] Dialogue, at the shrine, could be an effective means to encourage further collaboration toward implementing the goals of the National Action Plan.

The peacebuilding characteristics of the shrine to Our Lady of Madhu illustrate how it contributes through healing and as a physical place of security. Nevertheless, the shrine has the potential to offer much more, especially in the areas of women's participation and to join other parts of the Sri Lankan Church in the defense of human rights. The possibility remains that Madhu can help transform post-war Sri Lankan society, as a Sri Lankan Hindu scholar observes that "Mother Mary showers blessings on all—irrespective of racial and religious differences—to keep our entire nation united and peaceful. Even Hindus make the pilgrimage to her shrine, expressing their love and piety towards her—we firmly believe that the Madhu *Matha* (mother) remains a symbol of unity and peace."[91]

CONCLUSION

The shrine of Our Lady of Madhu has been recognized as a site of interreligious peacebuilding over the past half-century amid violence

[87] Several countries throughout the world have adopted National Action Plans to implement this UNSCR. See Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 12 September 2017, peacewomen.org.

[88] Sri Lanka's NAP has been updated multiple times with the current version offering a strategic plan from 2023–2027. "Women, Peace and Security: Sri Lanka's National Action Plan for the Implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security 2023–2027 (2022)," *Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment,* asiapacific.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-07/lk-NAP-FINAL2023-eng.pdf.

[89] "Sri Lanka's National Action Plan," no. 8.3.

[90] Rasika Pieris, July 29, 2025.

[91] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 31.

and ethno-religious tension in Sri Lanka. The President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Sri Lanka, Bishop Harold Anthony Perera, noted that "pilgrims of all ethnicities and religions frequented the shrine during the civil war, braving all risks, to pray for peace and reconciliation, seeking the protection and consolation of Our Blessed Mother."[92] The shrine has not only contributed to building peace but also shows promise for promoting WPS goals through its capacity for trauma healing, the devotion to a protective mother, and as a refuge for those seeking a place of security. Nevertheless, its potential to play a role in achieving the goals set forth in Sri Lanka's WPS National Action Plan remains unfulfilled.

The recommendations offered in the previous section are not exhaustive, as there are other areas that may prove useful to generate women's participation and work toward societal transformation. Each of these suggestions, however, are based on the principles of Catholic social teaching and require personal responsibility to allow them to be realized. In addition to the emphasis on human dignity and human rights in Catholic social teaching, there are corresponding duties and responsibilities. These principles have been articulated in Sri Lankan contributions to liberation theology.[93] A responsibility to care for the least and ensure the rights and well-being of all should inspire institutes like the Centre for Society and Religion and other organizations promoting interfaith dialogue to support the voices of younger theologians whose voices are often marginalized in support of women's rights and equality. M

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[92] Pushparaj, *Our Lady of Madhu*, 8.

[93] Sri Lankan theologians like Aloysius Pieris and Tissa Balasuriya were instrumental figures in the growth of Asian Liberation Theology throughout the last two decades of the twentieth century. Their legacy continues with their respective research institutes near Colombo.