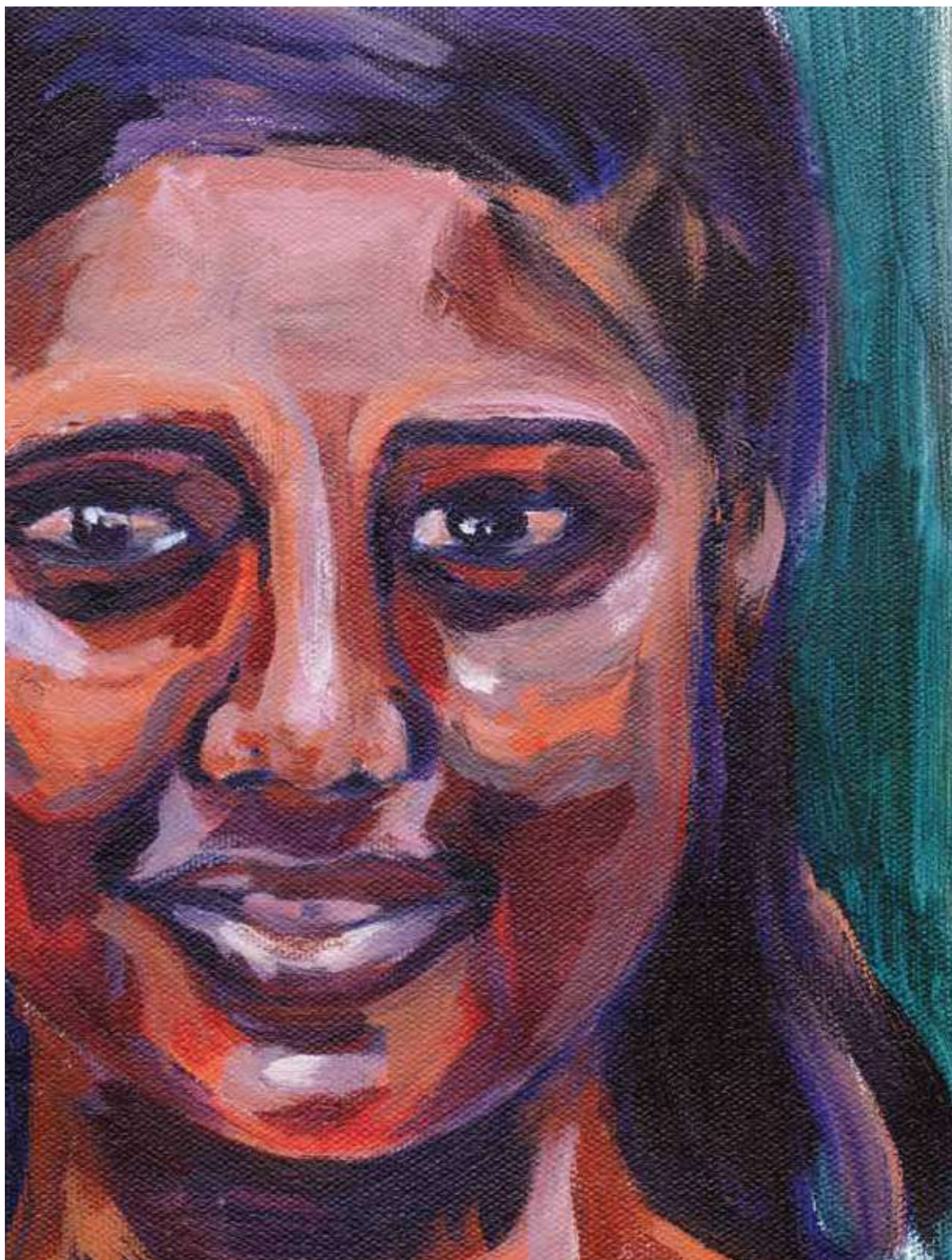


TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES:
VOICES AND CHOICES OF WOMEN AND GIRLS



TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

Voices and Choices of Women and Girls

This project was funded by the British Council

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The project, “Celebrating Voices and Choices of women and girls in the process of transforming their communities” and the final publication, under the grant of the British Council, Voices & Choices grant scheme, would have been a dream that is hard to achieve if not for the support of a number of individuals and networks. Therefore, we would like to extend our sincere gratitude to all of them.

First and foremost we are thankful to the British Council Sri Lanka and the Country Director Gill Caldicott for the confidence and trust she bestowed upon Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) and the entire project team. We are also grateful to Ms Manisha Ruwanpathirana, Assistant Manager Arts, British Council Sri Lanka for providing guidance concerning the implementation of the project.

Our sincere gratitude is also directed towards the Divisional Secretariats and Grama Niladhari Officers of our project locations in each Division in Anuradhapura, Hambanthota and Monaragala Districts for supporting us in order to find women leaders amidst their busy schedules.

And Ms Lekha Rathnayake – Consultant we are thankful for the effort you took in developing 18 stories of the women leaders with the long transcriptions we provided you with. We appreciate the hard work of Ms. Samitha Sugathimala and Ms. Dileesha Liyanage in developing the rest of the 42 stories. In addition, we would like to express our gratitude toward Ms. Nicola Perera, Lecturer, Department of English Language Teaching Unit, University of Colombo, for her excellent support in editing and final proofreading of the publication. We would also like to thank Ms. Maya McCoy; a fellow granted for FISD by the Asia Foundation, who helped us in the development of stories and for the amazing cover page painting that she did for us.

Last but not least, we are ever so grateful to the women and girls who shared with us their inspiring stories and we would also like to remember the support their family members and neighbors extended towards us without any hesitation.

And FISD project team, it was thanks to our unity and team spirit, we could end this project with much success and together we can do great things.

Thank you everyone and cheers to many more adventures !

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	vi
Message from the Country Director - British Council Sri Lanka	vii
Message from Chairperson - FISD	viii
Message from Program Director - FISD	ix
List of Acronyms and Definitions	ix
M. Nayana	01
Dulakshi Dilhani	02
Amila Samanthi	04
G.M.Anuralatha	05
Anuradhi Hansika	06
Chandani Kumudu	08
Chandrika Yapa	09
Geetha Kumari	10
D.M.Nirmala	11
S.A.Dayawathi	12
Deepa Samanthi	14
Duranjalee Siriwardena	16
Dinesha Virajani	18
Ganga Ishari	19
K.M.Gnanavathi	20
K.P.Roshantha	21
Karunalatha Liyanapathirana	22
K.A.Kusumawathi	23
U.G.A.Kumuduni	24
Mayuri Irugalabandara	26
Nilmini Irosha	28
Nilmini Kumudu Kumari	29
Padma Kumari	30
Sandya Perera	31
A.G.Ramyalatha	32
Sheela Widarathna	34
Thushari Liyanaarachchi	35
Tharushika Devindi	36
Olu Dewmini and Chamodi Sewmini	38
Vasana Sewwandi	40
Yamuna Nishanthi	42

Anusha Thushari	44
Nimmi Gunasekara	46
A.M.Madhurawathi	48
Emalin Nona	50
Shalika Heshani	52
Gayani Ediriweera	53
P.V.G.Sisiliyana	54
Shashini Nimesha	56
Iresha Dilrukshi	57
J.M.Dharmalatha	58
Dilani Anuruddhika	59
Madhurika Piyumali	60
Manel Malkanthi	62
Monika Kumari	64
P.M.Nandawathi	65
Nishanthi Udayakumari	66
Pramila Gamage	68
R.M.Premwathie	70
R.M.N.Gnanavathi	72
Tharanga Sandamali	74
A.M.Premalatha	76
Gayani Madhushika	78
S.G.L.Pushpalatha	79
Rohini Priyanthi	80
A.Rubasinghe	82
Soma Maddumage	84
Wasanthi Karunathilake	85
Sumithra Gunawardena	86
Sudharma Padmini	88

FOREWORD

Since time immemorial women as an integral part of any society have played a crucial role in community initiatives to transform and to improve the lives of their fellow women, girls and in the bigger picture; the entire community. Undeniably, this is a trend in rural communities where majority of the community led organizations, associations and societies thrive thanks to the priceless contribution of women leaders. Unfortunately, despite women's contribution as leaders and change makers, they remain to be unsung and unrecognized heroines owing to a number of reasons such as cultural, economic, and social barriers.

Having identified this unfortunate picture, we the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) with a grant from the British Council Sri Lanka, implemented a one year project 'Celebrating Voices and Choices of women and girls in the process of transforming their communities' in selected Divisions of Anuradhapura, Hambanthota and Monaragala Districts as an initiative to recognize uncelebrated women and girl leaders and to make their voices and stories heard by a wider audience. The rationale behind this effort was to broaden community understanding on traditional leadership of women beyond associations and societies and to encourage upcoming girls – leaders who aspire to become influential change makers in their communities.

Thus, it is with great pride we present you this collection of sixty stories of rural women leaders and girls; the final result the project which highlights the women-hood, the leadership and the contributions of women and by introducing women leaders to the larger society as role models for their younger generation. It was indeed a learning for the project team to interact with women leaders and to support them in realizing their contribution to society . The sixty stories we bring you, are diverse and inspiring in every aspect given that the barriers and opportunities in the respective communities for each women leader have enabled them to emerge and develop themselves as positive change makers. Therefore, we believe that this publication will be an eye opener for the reader to dive into the world of rural women leaders and to explore opportunities to encourage women and girls to succeed as leaders.

MESSAGE FROM THE COUNTRY DIRECTOR



I am delighted to provide a message for this publication which celebrates how women and girls are developing leadership skills to transform their communities. This is the culmination of a year-long project by the Foundation for Innovative Social Development with a grant from the British Council's Voices & Choices Grant Scheme which aims to promote women's empowerment and gender equality. The ambition to reach gender equity and eliminate disadvantage is at the heart of our Women and Girls work. We recognise that the key issues for Sri Lanka are a very high rate of domestic violence, sexual harassment, social media exploitation, suicide rates, over protection of girls, and under employment despite good educational achievements. Whilst addressing some of these issues directly, in the longer term our interventions are aimed at attitudinal change, tackling gender norms among women and girls, as well as men and boys, and thus enabling the former to participate fully in society. Women's leadership empowerment at the community level makes an important contribution to this ambition.

Gill Caldicott
Country Director
British Council Sri Lanka

MESSAGE FROM CHAIRPERSON - FISD



I have pleasure in sending this message to the publication, "Transforming Communities: Voices and Choices of Women and Girls" where sixty inspirational stories are related by women champions.

FISD believes that women can make a change and therefore works with communities to build capacities of women and girls, develop their agency and make them champions to monitor and act as change agents for women's rights in their communities. At the same time, FISD also works with men and boys so that the space for women to emerge and exercise their agency is available with no hindrance.

It was a great pleasure to take up this project under the grant of British Council Voices & Choices Grant Scheme. The stories that are reflected in this publication highlight the potential of women and girls as leaders as well as change agents. I look upon this publication as a promotional material for those who wish to work for especially rural women's and girls' empowerment.

I take this opportunity to thank the British Council for coming forward to fund this valuable project. I also thank and congratulate Samitha Sugathimala, Programme Director of FISD and her team for the unstinted efforts in collecting these stories and wonderful team work in bringing this project to a grand ending.

Champa Gunasekera

Chairperson

Foundation for Innovative Social Development

MESSAGE FROM PROGRAM DIRECTOR - FISD



"When women lead, communities succeed".

This publication fulfills a long felt dream of mine. It enabled me to follow my inner calling for creating a worthy space for women and girls in Sri Lanka. As a person who is very passionate about women's sense of self, self-worth and agency, I always wanted to appreciate women who had contributed and given the leadership to make that worthy change in their communities. When women and girls have their voice heard and have a sense of their agency – when they are truly empowered with social and economic opportunities and have a say over the things that affect their lives and their families, that's when we know that women truly exist. This publication presents such women and girls.

The stories in this collection are coming from three districts- Anuradhapura, Moneragala and Hambantota which consist of many marginalized communities in Sri Lanka. The stories provide the evidence of true leadership and intend to inspire more and more women from many other communities. It highlights how women's different capabilities and actions lead them to have more presence and influence in their communities. It presents the enabling factors for women and girls' voice, leadership and access to decision-making.

Women's leadership is mostly seen in terms of access to formal leadership positions, but too little is known about how women become leaders. How they navigate through the gender based challenges to enter in to the decision making processes in their communities. I strongly believe that, this collection of stories are helpful in understanding these processes. Although this collection may not provide a blue print of how women's experience of changes in gender relations and empowerment, at the individual, household level and also collectively at the community level, can happen since what works in one context to support women's substantive voice and leadership may be irrelevant in others. But these stories will definitely provide the motivation and inspiration for thousands of women leaders whose voices are not yet heard.

Samitha Sugathimala

Program director

Foundation for Innovative Social Development

LIST OF ACRONYMS AND DEFINITIONS

<i>Dayaka sabhava</i>	<i>Society of temple patrons</i>
<i>Dhamma</i>	<i>Buddhist religious instruction</i>
<i>FISD</i>	<i>Foundation for Innovative Social Development</i>
<i>G.C.E. A/L</i>	<i>General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level</i>
<i>G.C.E. O/L</i>	<i>General Certificate of Education, Ordinary Level</i>
<i>Kaantha Bala Mandalaya</i>	<i>Divisional Women's Federation</i>
<i>NGO</i>	<i>Nongovernmental organization</i>
<i>Praja mandalaya</i>	<i>Community forum to handle social issues</i>
<i>PHM</i>	<i>Public Health Midwife</i>
<i>Samurdhi programme</i>	<i>A state poverty-alleviation initiative</i>
<i>Sarvodaya</i>	<i>A national Nongovernmental organization</i>
<i>Saukyadana</i>	<i>Health services committee</i>
<i>SANASA</i>	<i>A federation of cooperative activities</i>

M. NAYANA

CHALLENGING GENDER NORMS



Nayana (47) is a mother of four children living in the remote village of Julampitiya in Weeraketiya, about 200km away from Colombo. Her husband is a mason, finding work as available in the village and nearby cities. Nayana had a difficult time feeding and schooling their children with her husband's wages alone and was determined to find additional sources of income to make ends meet.

Thus, she found work as a supervisor in a private educational institute. Her employer's intention had been to hire a man for this work. But Nayana proved that she has the firmness and sense of authority required for the role. It is very rare for a rural woman like her to be engaged in this position. She has become the students' close friend and says that they share a mutual understanding and trust which make her job easier. She earns around LKR 5,000 per month which she spends on her children's education. Apart from her regular job, Nayana has a small-scale business as a dressmaker, sewing clothes for neighbours and villagers. Nayana is proud and happy that her financial empowerment allows her to contribute to her family's welfare.

A courageous woman, Nayana not only supports her family but is a very active social worker engaged in village development activities as well. She is the chairperson of the Village Development Society and the vice-chairperson of the Community

Services Committee. She is also involved with the Samurdhi programme and welfare societies in the village. Nayana has participated in various leadership and skills development workshops, as well as receiving training on health and nutrition issues. She coordinates with local government officials and supports NGOs working in the village community.

Nayana says that being engaged in social work is no easy task. As chairperson of the Village Development Society, Nayana holds great responsibility for decision making: she makes sure to consult others and take decisions that benefit a majority of people in the village.

Nayana is an example to many rural women in Sri Lanka. Her determination to contribute to the family income empowered her in other ways. Her involvement in village welfare activities is remarkable in the context of rural society in Sri Lanka. Nayana admits that her community involvement has given her the strength to meet personal challenges. As a woman and mother, she values the high social esteem and regard her leadership has earned for her in the village. Her children and husband are very proud of her too. Nayana says that she is confident that she is capable of any type of work, regardless of whether it is seen as typically masculine or feminine, if she considers it appropriate for her.



DULAKSHI DILHANI

A COMMUNITY HEROINE

Hailing from Hinbunna, Hakuruwela, in the Hambanthota district, **G. A. Dulakshi Dilhani Bandara** (19) is a true youth leader. Inspired by her mother, Dulakshi is dedicated to improving the lives of those around her. Dulakshi's father died when she was six months old. Her mother moved back to her parents' home, where Dulakshi now lives with her mother and grandfather.

Sri Lanka has seen an increase in women-headed households in recent years: census data indicates that, by 2016, about one in four households in the country were headed by women.¹ Unfortunately, such women face unique challenges in terms of access to services and opportunities.

Growing up, Dulakshi had to contend with rumors and gossip because she did not have a father. Despite these barriers, Dulakshi excelled. She says that once she began to contribute positively to the community, people came to respect her, even seek her advice for personal problems.

Dulakshi was an exemplary student, was chosen as her school's head prefect, and completed the General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level

examination. She also earned recognition for her community service and accomplishments as an active Girl Scout.

In 2016, a chance meeting with an official of the National Youth Services Council led to an invitation to attend a meeting of a youth club, Sihanada, in her village. Recognised by her peers as a capable young woman, Dulakshi was unanimously elected as the secretary. The club had remained inactive up to then, but Dulakshi led a revival in club activities, encouraging other village youth to participate, and coordinating with local government and NGO officials for the club's projects. She gained experience and a network of contacts. Today, she is the president of the club.

It was during this time that the National Youth Services Council called for project proposals to the Gamata Kotiyak ("LKR 10,000,000 for the village") programme. Dulakshi's club proposal to construct a bridge was adjudged the winner; she accomplished the project almost singlehandedly, with little help from the club members and villagers who were not confident that they were capable of winning the money or completing the bridge. Dulakshi was

¹ <http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2016/03/13/empowering-female-headed-households-in-sri-lanka/>

supported by the police officer in charge of the area and some local politicians. But it was her great determination and courage that carried the day.

In a television interview following the project, she requested further support to concretise the gravel road to her village. A donor offered LKR 150,000 of the estimated LKR 350,000 cost of the task. Dulakshi raised the remainder from many sources and constructed the road. With this, she became a real heroine in her village, loved and respected by many. She has no intention of slowing down her work for the community.

A representative for the Southern Province Youth Parliament, Dulakshi was appointed Minister for the education, land, road development, and news and media portfolios. Cabinet Ministers of the Youth Parliament are entitled to a grant for small-scale projects. From her grant of LKR 50,000, she donated books to the Angunukolapelessa prison and conducted a recreational programme for inmates. Further, she is the secretary for the Youth Foundation of Hambantota.

Dulakshi works with NGOs to serve her community too. Following a training by the Foundation for Innovative Social Development's (FISD) Alcohol, Drugs, and Development programme, she helped convince 15 shop owners in the neighbourhood to ban the sale of cigarettes from their shops.

Many in Sri Lanka hold tight to the prevailing norm that women should take up domestic work and raise children when they finish school. This leads to a very low labour-force participation rate among women: only 39.5% of women were engaged in the labour market in 2015 as opposed to 75% of men. Dulakshi wants to see those numbers change—she believes women should not have to rely on a man for their income and livelihood.

Unlike many of her peers, whom she says have gotten married and begun having children, Dulakshi is fiercely independent. She is not interested in relying on other people and believes young women must use their skills to make their own decisions and build their lives. Dulakshi believes that when parents allow children to grow with a degree of freedom and openness, more young people will want to become involved and contribute to society.

Dulakshi does not feel that she ever faced discrimination based on her gender. Nevertheless, she adds that she has acted in the community “as if I were a boy/man”: therefore, people treat her as such. This implies that if she had been perceived as the stereotypical girl, she may have achieved less and not gained the same degree of social respect and admiration that she currently enjoys. She will continue to inspire those who come into contact with her, both old and young.





AMILA SAMANTHI

PROVING THE VALUE OF WOMEN'S WORK

Amila Samanthi (34), from the Central Province of Sri Lanka, is the youngest of five siblings. After completing her secondary education, she moved to Colombo to work in the apparel industry. Living in Colombo was not easy. In a boarding house with only basic facilities, Amila went through social, emotional, and economic hardships. Working day-and night-shifts to save up some money, she had a firm target to excel in her work and become skilled in garment manufacturing. She spent seven difficult years in Colombo pursuing her goal. She got married and relocated to Weeraketiya with her husband. She worked in a similar job in the area for another four years.

When Amila had her first child, she decided to quit work. During this time, her husband did not have a permanent job. Working as a mason on construction sites, he had to support his family on the wages he received at the end of each day: financial woes and emotional stress made this a very difficult period for Amila and her husband. The arrival of a second child placed more strain on their fragile finances. Amila decided she had to make use of the skills she had acquired working in the apparel industry in order to help her young family climb out of poverty. She was already a member of the village's Samurdhi society and, with a loan from the programme, purchased a Juki machine as the foundation for her small business.

Drawing on the contacts she had made in the garments sector, she managed to secure tailoring work from an apparel company. She received the fabric, thread, and design accessories required to complete the order. This arrangement worked well for Amila since working from home allowed her to keep an eye on the two children. With a steady income, Amila's family became more stable. Financial empowerment gave her the agency to take care of her family's wellbeing and support her aging parents as well.

Around the same time, her husband found a job with the Petroleum Corporation in Colombo. During weekends and on holidays, Amila's husband began helping out with household chores and caring for the children. Amila says about her husband, "A woman gains a lot of strength when she is supported by her loved ones. I am lucky that I have plenty of support."

Furthermore, Amila has served as the chairperson, secretary, and treasurer of the Samurdhi society and her leadership has helped the members better themselves economically. Being a part of the Samurdhi programme has improved Amila's personal qualities too.

"I think women are amazing as we have the capacity to handle several responsibilities at the same time," says Amila. "We can do the work of ten men if we put our minds to it. So I will never accept that women are weak and soft." A strong and powerful woman, Amila took risks, learned from failure, and was unfazed by prejudice. She had the courage to fight for what she believed in, never surrendering no matter how hard the challenge. Eyes shining, Amila explains, "I see many women devoting themselves entirely to housework. They are not interested in developing a skill that could help them earn an income not just for their family's needs but for their own expenses too. I don't have words to express how good it feels to be economically independent, be your own boss, and decide for yourself. It's the ultimate freedom for any woman."



G.M.ANURALATHA

A KEY FIGURE IN HER VILLAGE

G. M. Anuralatha (59) is an outstanding leader in her Thisawewa, Anuradhapura, and community. After completing the final secondary education examination, she joined a Technical College where she followed a two-year course on business and taxation. Despite her qualifications, she couldn't find a job related to this field since such jobs are limited and not offered to women. So Anuralatha started working as a clerk in a private shop. She was in this job for ten years.

When she got married and became a mother of two children, she did not want to be confined to the home. Thus, in her spare time she began sewing bags, rugs, and curtains, assisting her husband to improve the family's financial security while earning respect for her contribution and feeling proud of herself for being able to do so.

Anuralatha started community work in 1990, helping to establish the Village Development Society. She was then inspired to form a Women's Committee and serves as a senior member. Moreover, she is an active member in the SANASA committee, the temple dayaka sabhava and the death donation society in the village. Men have generally held decision-making positions in these committees, a tradition which Anuralatha overturned through the social capital and trust earned for her community

engagement and the voice she has given to women in her community.

Anuralatha's strong intervention led to a course in tailoring and sewing being offered to the women in the village through an NGO. Moreover, thanks to her work with the Women's Society, a village student now receives financial support to continue her education. Another instance where Anuralatha's leadership played an important role is the allocation of funds for the maintenance expenditure of the Devanampiyathissapura Pre-School, the only pre-school in the village. Also, she has assisted the Village Development Society to provide three homeless people with houses. She will continue to lend her support to the development of her community—work which makes her feel happy and proud.

As secretary of the Women's Association in Thulana, she has attended several awareness programmes on child abuse, alcohol, and drug prevention, and domestic violence. She is always willing to share her knowledge with the women in her community. Many turn to her for advice when they have a problem. Anuralatha is a key figure in the village. Her vision is that everyone should contribute to the betterment of the community according to their own capacity, and gender should not be considered a barrier.



ANURADI HANSIKA

AN ADVOCATE FOR YOUTH

Anuradi Hansika (19), of Walasmulla, is one of seven siblings. She credits her happy family, especially her parents, for the fact that she has grown into a strong young woman and a leader of her community. An alumna of Walasmulla National School, Anuradhi is currently in her gap year before she enters university. Anuradhi is an avid sportswoman, did track and field in school and played a range of sports, including Kabadi, netball, volleyball, cricket, and carom. She was a member of the school choir and has participated in national music competitions. Anuradhi shares her love of music with the village's pre-school children, teaching them to sing and play instruments. She has acted in stage productions too. Also, Anuradi has completed the final examination in the Dhamma (Buddhist religious instruction) school and a nursing course

(by the National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority). A passionate youth leader, she helps to rally the village to carry out communal development work.

Her leadership qualities were clear at a very young age. She was a member of her school's environment and Saukyadana (health) societies, as well as of the Youth Club run by the Youth Services Council. She was the vice-chairperson of the Muthuhara youth club and the Dilena Tharu Sports Society and the current chairperson of the Youth Club organised in her village by the Foundation for Innovative Social Development. She is a highly vocal activist for the rights of women, children, differently-abled people, and other vulnerable persons in her community. Keenly conscious of the power of education,

Anuradhi was concerned about school dropouts in her village. So she organised a campaign to persuade parents and all children of school-going age to return to and stay in school. Knowing that poverty will often compel a child or youth to interrupt their education and prematurely enter the workforce, Anuradhi found donor families to support children from low-income families in buying basic school supplies.

Despite her youth, Anuradhi takes the lead in coming up with proposals for village development and is always in the thick of the work beside her neighbours and friends. She has earned the respect and admiration of the village elders, youth, women, and other groups engaged in social activities. Officials in local government and community organisations recognise and depend on Anuradhi's maturity and skills to lead Walasmulla's social development.

"Girls must participate in community activities, advocate for their rights, and be role models for other girls," Anuradhi says. In rural Sri Lanka, girls lack agency and space to make their own life-decisions. "If girls are given the chance to speak up, they can make a positive impact on their family and community. I believe my role is to facilitate that process and mentor young girls in my community." Anuradhi hopes to earn her degree and serve her community as a powerful woman in a position of responsibility.



CHANDANI KUMUDU

BROADENING WOMEN'S HORIZONS

Chandani (55) has committed herself to creating an inclusive community for vulnerable women. She moved to Palugaswewa, Ashokaramaya, in the Anuradhapura district 35 years ago after marriage. As a young woman of 20, supported by her husband (a school principal), she threw herself into community work, continuing even after she became the mother of two young children. Chandani's son (27) works in the private sector and her daughter (21) is studying to enter the university. Since the children are grown up, Chandani devotes her time to a number of community organisations.

Chandani's main concern is that women in her community are timid about dealing with the authorities in obtaining public services. Chandani frequently talks with her peers about how women are reluctant to demand their rights. "Women are trained to be dependent and believe that their problems are unsolvable, due to fate or karma," Chandani explains with some annoyance. "It's not an easy task to open their minds and bring out their authentic selves from the barriers they hide behind." Rather than merely delivering services to women, Chandani wants to convince women of their personal powers and capacities. In 2011, she set up the Liyaruwana Women's Society in Palugaswewa. Currently she is president of the Women's Federation of her village and represents the Madyama Nuwara Gam Palatha Divisional Secretariat area in the District Federation as well. Many women in her constituency were very happy to see Chandani assume this post because of her track record of service to the community.



"Each woman is different. Their attitudes also differ because of what they learn in their families. Therefore, their engagement in social activities is also different," Chandani says, explaining that her challenge is to bring women to a common understanding of their situation as women. She walks from house to house, talking to women, and sometimes their husbands and children and parents, about the importance of educating women and girls since their families and communities also stand to benefit from women's empowerment.

"I am happy that I have been able to make life better for at least 30% of the women in my community. I got them to participate in many trainings on women's empowerment and livelihood opportunities," Chandani explains. She is proud of having negotiated with the local authorities to secure improved housing for at least 15 families, as well as getting funds for repairs to the roof of the village community hall.

Chandani believes that in under-resourced communities like her own, people need to come together and work for each other. She says she will continue to offer her guidance, mentoring, and support to other women and young people.

CHANDRIKA YAPA

TEACHING BY EXAMPLE

Chandrika Yapa (45) from Unawatuna, Buttala, is a dedicated teacher at Vihara Maha Devi Vidyalaya, a state school in Moneragala. She aspires to see her students follow her footsteps by excelling in academics and becoming leaders who could contribute towards positive change in their communities. She recalls, "I was a very active student at Yudaganawa Junior School. I was very focused on my studies but also threw myself into extra-curricular activities. I held office in the Sinhala Literary Association and other school clubs."

In 1995, while waiting for her results in the first public schools examination, Chandrika wanted to do something useful. Young Chandrika saw that the youth club in the village, Nipuna Kala Kavaya, was dormant. Mobilising her peers, she completely revived the club and led the group in a range of community activities in Unawatuna: Buddhist public ceremonies, a festival for the Sinhala and Tamil New Year, and shramadana campaigns (where the community together labours to build or renovate public facilities). In addition, the club set up a small library for children to read exchange books. The village youth and school children participated eagerly in these projects, drawn by Chandrika's energy and spirit. Unsurprisingly, Chandrika's contemporaries say her tenure was the golden era of the youth club.

Also, she made time to work as a volunteer with the village Family-Health Officer, learning about reproductive health and sharing that knowledge with the community. "I found that many young people and even mothers knew very little about reproductive health," says Chandrika. "More, women feel embarrassed to talk about their issues openly. I wanted to give back what I learned."

At her parents' insistence, Chandrika became a typist at the Pelawatte Sugar Factory, where she remained for 16 years. Nevertheless, she did not want to give up her dream of education and earned a place in the external degree programme at the University of Kelaniya. Unwilling to ask her parents to bear the cost, Chandrika paused her education



for a short time. She got married, and with her husband's support and her savings as a typist, Chandrika got her degree. In 2014, she joined the staff of Vihara Maha Devi Vidyalaya. She says, "If we are determined and never lose sight of our goal, nothing is impossible. And age is not an issue. In fact, better late than never. I have a very supportive husband. While I was at my books, studying for exams, he looked after our daughter even better than I do," Chandrika smiles.

Now, she is not the kind of teacher solely focused on completing the syllabus. She encourages her students to engage in extra-curricular and welfare activities, telling them of her experiences. Chandrika is immensely proud says that her charges seem inspired by her example. Under her guidance, the students have formed a children's club, Pipena Kaekulu ("blossoms"), that works to enhance the quality of the environment. Cheerful and friendly, Chandrika is often surrounded by her students: "As a woman, mother, and a teacher, I feel it is my responsibility to guide children, especially the girls, to become unafraid and determined. I believe that I am a leader and also a maker of leaders." Chandrika proves that leaders are made not born.

GEETHA KUMARI

SHAKING UP HER VILLAGE'S WAY OF LIFE

D. M. Geetha Kumari (41) is from Katupellela, Madulla, in the Moneragala District, and uses her role as a Montessori teacher to engender change in the community.

Both during school and later while trying to find work, Geetha was stymied by local politicians' interference in favour of their supporters. Frustrated and disappointed, she left her village for Colombo in order to find a job. After marriage, she moved back to the village with her husband. She has two children, a son (14) and a daughter (9). Geetha is adamant about creating change within her community, so that women like her are more empowered to fight back against corrupt politicians and political practices. "To look at me, no one would take me for a fighter. It is only later that they realise that they have tangled with the wrong woman," Geetha smiles.

Geetha became deeply involved in community work, developing a talent for public speaking, and growing in self-confidence. She says that a woman needs to be skilled and courageous if she wants to make changes. She is glad that her husband is very supportive and did not try to control her social interactions.

When Geetha had her first child, she realised that the village had no Montessori school for young children in the community. Parents had to travel a long distance to take their children to the nearest early childhood development centre. Geetha's mother offered to take over care of her baby while Geetha trained to become a Montessori teacher in 2011 with the support of the local Samurdhi society. Her work as a teacher has allowed Geetha to both work in the community and contribute financially to her family. She earned a pre-school teaching diploma in 2012-13. With support from CARE International, she constructed a permanent building for her new pre-school, called Ekamuthu.

With each new group of children, Geetha builds relationships with their parents. She holds meetings with them to discuss problems and provide training on how to handle potential family issues. For example, she has invited a nutrition specialist to discuss healthy lifestyles in an attempt to improve her students' quality of life. She also uses these meetings to educate parents on issues of good governance and the need to challenge corrupt systems for the sake of their children's future.



It hasn't been easy. "One child's father scolded me saying that I am doing useless things and I am destroying the way of life in the village," she said. But she stood up for herself and reminded him that she isn't doing anything wrong, and she has gained a positive reputation for her good work in the community. She challenged fathers to not just be providers but loving husbands and fathers. She knew this would ruffle feathers, but she wouldn't give up. Supported by many NGOs, Geetha organised community-based family relationship-building programmes; many women in particular appreciated her efforts, since they created a positive environment for the women to negotiate their role within the household.

Geetha believes that women should stand up for themselves and be their own voice—she embodies this belief in all that she does. "I am very silent and calm on the outside but very strong and determined on the inside," she says.

D.M.NIRMALA

CREATING A SAFER SOCIETY FOR FUTURE GENERATION

D. M. Nirmala (35) has blazed her own path through life.

Growing up in a farming family in Dambagalla, Moneragala, Nirmala had eight siblings. Even as a child, she was interested in community service and joined the youth group of Plan Sri Lanka (an NGO). On completing her secondary education, Nirmala's parents tried to arrange a marriage for her, but she rejected it and instead moved to Colombo to find work and further opportunities for education. She worked while studying for an external degree from the University of Kelaniya. Nirmala says that it was not easy for her to adapt to the city, especially since she's an attractive woman as well. She knew that she could make a stable life for herself back in the village if she worked towards it, not as a vulnerable, dependent woman but as a courageous and determined one with the skills to stand on her own feet.

In Colombo, she worked for a period to support herself at the Rural Development Bank and other organisations, equipping herself for her goal in life. She met her husband and moved back to Moneragala with him in 2010. She began a furniture shop with the support of her husband's family. Starting out with only Rs. 100,000 in capital, Nirmala is proud of how far the shop has come and says that she feels economically empowered.

Nirmala's husband works in Ampara; therefore, she is tasked with raising their two children, managing the furniture store, and working to contribute to the community. She can often be found working in the store with her baby, in her dual roles as mother and businesswoman—something that is rare in a village context. At first, Nirmala faced some disapproval within the community at not choosing to be a stay-at-home wife but gradually earned respect when other women started looking up to her as a role model.



Nirmala believes that she is very strong to be able to take care of her family and business by herself, and she is confident that women can do anything they set their minds to. She thinks that no one should have to limit themselves to choosing between family on the one hand, and economic empowerment, education, work, and community service, on the other.

Even from a young age, working with civil society organisations in her village (such as FISD), Nirmala began to notice that many people involved in community service did so for personal gain rather than for the sake of the community. Nirmala understood that this must change and decided to dedicate herself to community work, even when it would be more financially advantageous for her to use her time in other ways. She says building a positive environment in the community would create "a safe and happy environment for all our children to grow up and that would be my gain." She further adds, "That is what a leader should do irrespective of whether they are a woman or a man. But women like us, are special. We are unstoppable."



S.A.DAYAWATHI

COURAGE IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY

S. A. Dayawathi (59) is a prominent leader of her Aluthwewa community, in Nachchaduwa in the Anuradhapura district.

After schooling at Kumara Vidyalaya, Aluthwewa, and Central College, Anuradhapura, Dayawathi followed a diploma in sewing and handcrafts offered by the Aluthwewa Village Development Society. In 1976, she married her husband, at the time a labourer in the Department of Archaeology, and had three children. Dayawathi says theirs was a happy and satisfying life, but tragedy struck when her husband died in an accident. For a while, Dayawathi felt like her whole life had fallen apart. Nevertheless, she was determined to face the future with courage for the sake of her children. The income she earned from several odd jobs, like cleaning, was insufficient to meet the family's expenses, and she thought she had no option other than to travel to the Persian Gulf region to work as a housemaid. This was a difficult decision as she knew the children would be deprived of their mother's presence and affection: however, she left the children in her mother's care and packed her bags.

Dayawathi explains, "Most women like me who lose their husbands early in life and have no support systems have very limited options. Our only choice is to migrate to the Gulf to work as domestic aides. I still wish I had had a better option and didn't need to leave my children."

Dayawathi laboured as a housemaid for ten long years in Jordan, Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait, and Qatar. Even at a distance, she made sure to encourage her children to study hard. Now she is immensely proud of her educated children. Her daughter is being trained as an English teacher at a Teacher Training College, while one of her sons is a graduate of the University of Kelaniya. Also, Dayawathi managed her income carefully to build a house. When she felt that her hard work had paid off and her children's lives were more stable as a result, she decided to change things for the women in her village.

"I know how vulnerable I became after losing my husband. That's because I was totally dependent on him and didn't have any support system. I don't want any other woman in my village to face such vulnerability. Women need to be independent

and strong,” Dayawathi insists. “I also suffered a lot thinking about how vulnerable my children were [while she was away from home] and if I would ever be able to bring them up as good people.”

Dayawathi now has a mission to transform her community into one where women are respected and empowered individuals. She is determined to create better income options for women than domestic work in the Gulf countries. Dayawathi leads community support to women through her roles as the secretary of the Women’s Farmers’ Association, the Praja Mandalaya (community forum to handle social issues) and the Civil Defense Force Committee in her village, organisations that once used to be led only by men. Dayawathi says that since women are visionaries, hard workers, and committed social actors, they have increasing acceptance as leaders even among the traditional community leadership.

She strives to make Aluthwewa an alcohol- and drug-free village. “Our children need to have a safe community, and I know women want nothing more than that,” says Dayawathi. She insists that women too need to shed their misconceptions about alcohol and drug use by men; if not, women become passive promoters of alcohol and drugs in accepting the latter as an excuse for violence against women and children.





DEEPA SAMANTHI LABOURING FOR THE COMMUNITY

Although she had once been the president of her village's Youth Society, **Deepa Samanthi** (47) had no abiding interest in being involved in her community. Married to a retired police officer and the mother of two girls (15 and 24), Deepa lives in Maligawila, Moneragala. Her younger daughter is still in school, while the older one works at the Bank of Ceylon branch in Wellawaya.

It was only after marriage that Deepa became actively involved in social work, with the village temple serving as a bridge to connect her to the community. She was a member of the Temple Society and then joined the village's Rural Development Society. "I initially felt that I shouldn't waste my time in these societies, but my friends persuaded me to join. Once I had engaged in a few community activities, I felt a sense of satisfaction that I'd never experienced before," Deepa revealed. "The feeling that you were part of something which benefited the whole community gives so much pride and builds your self-esteem."

As her peers saw her social involvement and contributions, Deepa was invited to join the Vishaka Women's Society and even assumed the presidency just an year later. "If you take up a position of responsibility, then you need to act

and become a role model to others who will be the future leaders," stated Deepa sternly, explaining how she led the Society to build a fully-equipped community hall for the village. Although she is not invested in party politics, she developed good working relations with local politicians, obtaining a LKR 800,000 for the construction of the community hall. Although this amount fell short of the estimated cost, Deepa didn't give up. She knew that with free labour, she could manage the budget: thus, she mobilised and mentored the Society's women to undertake the construction work themselves.

"I know many men in the village mocked and laughed at me behind my back, believing that women can't do physical work," she explained. However, under Deepa's leadership, the women didn't care about the sexist jokes. They finished the project in 2018, proving that women are equally capable of physically-demanding construction work if they put their minds to it. "Women are mentally strong and can face any obstacle that society, especially men, throw at them," Deepa proudly asserts. Through her courage and leadership, the women built and furnished the community hall, disproving the stereotype that women are weak. Today Deepa's social

commitment means she is well respected in the village. Her friends who stood by her have won the same admiration. They say, "We always knew that Deepa akka [older sister] would not let us down, and we were also determined that we would not leave her side in the midst of all the men's sniggers and comments."

But Deepa has her worries too. She hopes that the young girls in the village will rise to the challenges facing them in the same way as the older generation of women. She is worried that most mothers will not pass down a passion for social change to their children. "They all want their children to study, get government jobs, and leave the village to go live in the towns."

Although Deepa understands these mothers' dreams and concerns for their children, as a passionate social worker, she means to remain active in the community until she develops a new generation of women leaders. She is also determined that there should be a more active and sensitive engagement by men and boys in the future.



DURANJALEE SIRIWARDENA

YOUTHFUL VISIONARY

Duranjali Ruwankumari Siriwardena (24) is a young woman from Angahalanda, of Horewela, Walasmulla, in the Hambantota district. One is most likely to meet her along the footpaths of her village, as she is frequently out and about in the community rather than at home, her parents' only complaint about their child. Duranjali has five siblings. She studied at Medangoda Maha Vidyalaya and currently helps her parents run their livestock farm.

Duranjali showed resilience and tenacity at a young age. Just before she was due to take the first public schools examination (G.C.E. O/L), she met with an accident and was forced to miss the exam while she convalesced at home. But Duranjali waited another year, sat and passed the exam. Similarly, she was compelled to sit out the G.C.E. A/L due to inadvertent errors in her application. But she plans to do the exam this year. Duranjali is determined to achieve her goals, regardless of obstacles.

Duranjali is a young leader of her community and involved in numerous social activities. She has completed a three-month leadership training by the Youth Corps under the Ministry of Youth Affairs. Additionally, Duranjali won a prize in the children's category of an educational software development competition in 2010.

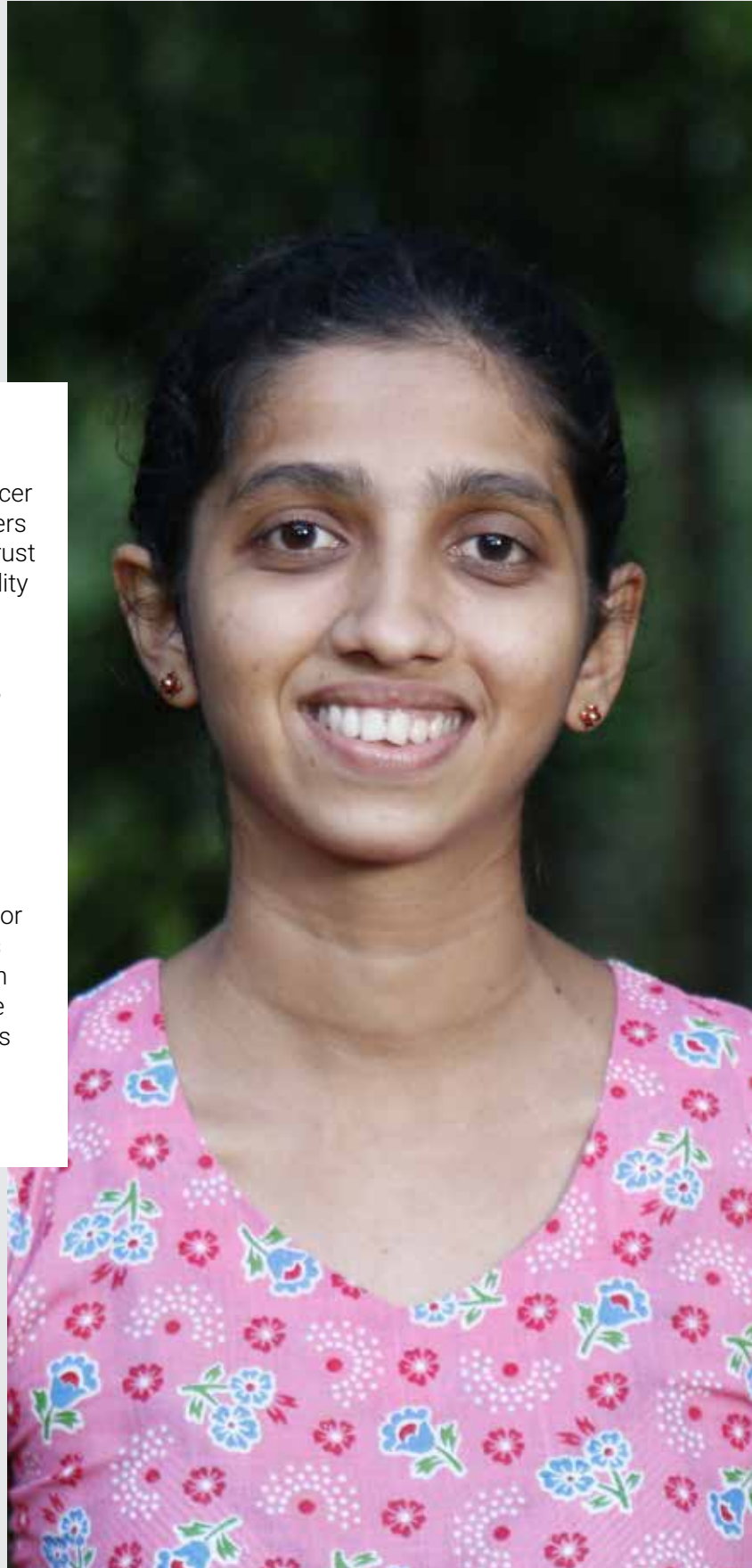
She says that her school experiences, especially in sports, have made her very persistent. Whenever she fails, she is determined to overcome challenges and do better. She has many awards and certificates for excellence in track and field. In 2011 she represented the Chandana Sports Society at the 37th National Track and Field Competition organised by the Southern Provincial Council and the Walasmulla Divisional Secretariat Office, winning third place in the 5,000m event. Also, she has captained the village sports club. Duranjali credits the principal and teachers of her school in helping her to prepare herself mentally and physically for any task.

Not only is she an athlete, Duranjali is a talented dancer too. In 2008, she took part in a dance competition for World Children's Day organised by the Samaja Niyamaka Foundation, a social development organisation in the area. Representing the Horewela Ran Tharu Children's Society, Duranjali was placed second in the 12-15 years group.

Duranjali says that these experiences have helped her gain a degree of maturity and propelled her to become an active youth leader in the village's development and welfare activities, liaising with local government official and NGOs. She also works closely with the local Buddhist temple to

organise religious events. Furthermore, Duranjali volunteers with the Mothers Society, helping to link up the Medical Officer of Health (MOH) and other service providers with the group. “The adults in my village trust me and expect me to shoulder responsibility for this kind of work,” she says proudly. Duranjali conducts dengue eradication programmes in coordination with MOH office, while also supporting the Womens’ Development Officer of the Walasmulla Divisional Secretariat on welfare work for women and children.

This young woman is a social activist who can influence young and old alike, a changemaker who never accepts failures or challenges as barriers to her community’s progress. Duranjali shows that investing in young women’s leadership will change the course of their lives and their communities as well.





DINESHA VIRAJANI

BLAZING HER OWN PATH AT WORK AND LIFE

G. M. Dinesha Virajini (21) believes in the transformative power of education.

Growing up in Aluthwewa, Anuradhapura, Dinesha consistently received the highest marks of her class at the village school. She had to help her parents to support their family, but unlike many children in similar circumstances, she completed school and earned the final G.C.E. A/L qualification. In fact, her parents' support was crucial as they pushed her towards education. Also, Dinesha was determined that her future roles would not stop at making a home as a housewife and mother. When she didn't qualify for university education, she trained instead as a computer assistant, up to Level 4 of the National Vocational Qualification. She is currently in the third and final year of study before she is professionally qualified by the UK Association of Accounting Technicians. She counts a one-year accountancy course under her belt and has also completed an English language course.

Dinesha is quite significant among many young women sharing her background. Her parents are hardworking labourers determined that their children will have better lives. Dinesha says that many girls her age married young, have children, and lead isolated lives totally dependent on their husbands: minus a voice of their own or the power of choice over their lives.

When at 21 she was recruited into an audit firm, Dinesha had to face many questions about whether she was truly qualified for the position. Such skepticism wasn't based on her skills or capacity but alluded to her family's economic background. The society in which she lives is not ready to accept that girls can do different things and enter professional fields dominated by men. Dinesha says that through hard work and determination, she has proven herself at work.

Dinesha received a vocational training qualification in IT, a crucial skill in the contemporary job market. She says that even though many of her peers are getting married and building families, she prefers to work hard and give back to the community. She will think about marriage later and has strong opinions about the kind of partner she wants: she will not go into a marriage that will restrict her ability to make her own life choices.

She hosts computer classes for the local children, sharing her knowledge so that they can empower themselves for the future. The rural community of Aluthwewa is definitely proud and happy that one of their own is guiding their development with her young leadership.

GANGA ISHARI

AGENCY THROUGH ENTREPRENEURSHIP



Ganga Ishari (35) is mother to three children and lives in Mulkirigala, Weeraketiya. She completed her secondary education at the Weeraketiya Rajapaksha Central College, where she participated in school and zonal sports tournaments and youth society activities.

After completing school, Ganga found work in the garment manufacturing industry in both Weeraketiya and Colombo. She continued to work even after marriage. She belonged to the skilled worker category, fixing and stitching buttons and button holes with patient and meticulous care. After nine years, Ganga left her job to join her husband in the small business they had started sewing cushions. The skills she'd honed in the garments industry were crucial to developing the business which also employs six workers.

A courageous and ambitious woman, Ganga started a small enterprise at home making curtains, decorations, and other accessories for vehicles, hotels, catering services, etc. She receives a good income from this work, particularly since she purchases raw material from fabric wholesale markets in Colombo. Ganga's home business is thriving and she often has to recruit her sister and mother to complete the continuous flow of orders. The family businesses allowed Ganga and her husband to gradually build their own home in a beautiful location and purchase a van and a motorcycle.

Further, Ganga is an active social worker in the area with good working relationships with various administrators, such as the Grama Niladari, Medical Officer of Health, and so on.

Ganga has played a significant role in the economic and social development of the village, while contributing to her family's wellbeing. This has changed her from a traditional housewife to an independent businesswoman.

K.M.GNANAVATHI

A WOMAN'S PLACE

K. M. Gnanavathi (52) took on the role a community leader late in life as she used to be a very shy and reserved young woman. The lack of opportunities for women to engage in community development also played a part since it is the men in a village who traditionally come forward in such situations.

A mother of three children, Gnanavathy reflects, "Men think that women should just look after the home and take care of children. Women also do not question this as we believe that a woman's place is in household. At least, that is what we have seen the women in our families do."

The change occurred when Gnanavathy realised that her village, Waguruwela in the Moneragala district was in great need of a nursery; so she simply went ahead, mobilised the resources, and set one up in 1981. This led to the opportunity to join a residential pre-school and women's leadership training programme by Sarvodaya (a national NGO) in 1983. "I had many challenges in attending the training," says Gnanavathy. "The other women in the village encouraged me to go, so I somehow negotiated it with my family. They were not used to women being away from the home for even a day." Supported by the organisers of the training programme, however, she convinced her family that it was to the community's benefit, not just her own, to take advantage of this opportunity. After the training, Gnanavathy was better equipped to run the pre-school and motivated to mobilise mothers to come together to create a better community. She had understood the importance of self-value and was eager to practice what she learned.

"The children needed a good care centre to give them a happy start to life. More than that, I was really concerned that many mothers spent so much time on the road carrying their kids to faraway pre-schools," said Gnanavathy. "I wanted to give mothers the time to come out into the community, since I know that they are sometimes frustrated at the lack of time and opportunity



to socialise." Thus, Gnanavathi handed over the management of the village nursery to a young teacher to focus more on women's empowerment.

She became involved in the Gami Diriya Project (the state initiative for village development) in 2003. Moreover, capitalising on the goodwill she had built up as the village's pre-school teacher, she formed a community-based women's group so women could take on decision-making roles. The work done by this women's collective led to the creation of the Pragathi Women's Society in 2017.

Then her family grew disgruntled that she was spending less time at home. Despite their disapproval, Gnanavathy managed her days so that she spent quality time with her family. She began to organise meetings at home to show them the positive impact she was making in the community. This brought them around and they now accept and support her work.

Gnanavathy believes that women leaders should have confidence and work to improve the lives of women and promote their rights. She will continue to challenge the stereotypes that limit women's participation in social life.



K.P.ROSHANTHA

FIGHTING SOCIAL PREJUDICES AGAINST WIDOWS

K. P. Roshantha (42), of Weeraketiya, has worked hard all her life. Her parents were poor labourers. Roshantha was determined to help her family and did a part-time job while still in school. At 16, when her father passed away, she decided to stop school altogether and work, hoping to support her siblings' education instead. Roshantha met and married her husband in 1996, unaware of his previous involvement in criminal activity. He abandoned her and their child in 2001, and she has not seen or had any news of him ever since. "I think life was testing me," she says.

To support her young daughter, Roshantha started working as a supervisor in a factory making garments but was compelled to give up the job when alternative childcare arrangements became too difficult. So she got herself trained in batik design, and supported by the Weeraketiya Divisional Secretariat, started her own business designing and sewing clothes. Roshantha says that she has earned a good reputation in the community because she strives for perfection in her work and will not compromise on her values. She explained how on

numerous occasions people tried to take advantage of her vulnerability in being a single mother working to support her child. On such occasions, she says that she is not afraid to be rude or stand up for herself.

Roshantha is also an active social worker. She is the treasurer of a Widows and Women-Headed Households organisation. "There are many women in my community who have either lost their husbands or were abandoned. Most are so vulnerable because they were utterly dependent on their husbands. Our organisation makes sure that these families led by women receive proper direction to manage their lives with a stable income source," Roshantha states. "Women are born strong. It is this society that makes us weak. We women have to change that and prove we are neither weak and nor objects to be used by men as they desire," she asserts strongly. Roshantha fights for the rights of widowed and abandoned women, educating the young women of her community to be economically and emotionally strong.



KARUNALATHA LIYANAPATHIRANA LEADING THROUGH NON- TRADITIONAL FIELD OF WORK

From Julampitiya, Weeraketiya, in the Hambantota district, **Karunalatha** (60) is the mother of four adult children. She and her husband cultivate banana and other field crops for a living. Karunalatha grew up helping her parents in their home garden, gaining a lot of knowledge about farming.

She is an active social worker involved in village development, as well as in its social, religious, and welfare activities. She leads many community-based organisations in the village, striving to find solutions to problems faced by women and girls. Karunalatha is especially keen on efforts to prevent domestic violence and alcohol dependence and strengthen women's empowerment.

Karunalatha serves as the treasurer of numerous village societies: the Kuda Bibula South Lalana Kekulu Women's Association, the Kapruka Society, the Samurdhi Society, the Village Development Society, the Lanka Seva Society, and the Divi Naguma Society. She is an excellent bookkeeper and accountant, and her transparent financial management makes her a valuable asset. Karunalatha was trained in accounting by the Kapruka Society and makes it a point to pass on what she has learned to other women. She explains, "Many women do not like to assume the responsibilities of the treasurer since it requires accounting and bookkeeping skills, as well as patience and discipline. I am really proud of my skills and discipline as treasurer in the village societies." Karunalatha says that it's not always

about becoming the leader of an organisation or society, but about women recognising their skills and capacities and being willing to learn.

Karunalatha has received many accolades for her dedication and commitment to the social development of Weeraketiya. For instance, the Weeraketiya Divisional Secretariat awarded her a medal for her contributions to the people's economic empowerment. Also, many reputed organisations in the area have recognised her capacities and offered her advanced training in accounting and bookkeeping. "I believe that one should know what one is working on. I may not be highly educated and didn't go to university, but I am an expert on accounting and bookkeeping when it comes to running the village development societies. I am confident and people have confidence in me," Karunalatha smiles.

Many of her women peers feel that she is better than any male accountant they know and particularly good at empowering women and girls through the village's educational programmes. "She is an inspiration to many of us and we always support her and encourage her so that she can continue the good work she is doing," a neighbour states.

Women like Karunalatha prove that the importance of recognising women's contribution in rural development. She is a role model for young women who want to become leaders of their communities.



K.A.KUSUMAWATHI

LEADING A FAMILY OF ACTIVISTS

K. A. Kusumawathi (68), from Kappetiya, Weeraketiya, is an active social worker in the area. She got married to a farmer after completing her secondary education. They grow fruit and vegetables. Soon after marriage, they decided to diversify farm operations by going into dairy farming, an initiative that has developed over the years. They rear buffalo and other cattle and sell fresh milk and curd in addition to the fruit and vegetable produce. Kusumawathi and her husband have built a new house from this income.

Kusumawathi, her husband, and their four children are keen social workers. They have established positive working relationships with the temple, government officials, and community-based organisations engaged in the village. Kusumawathi coordinates with political leaders, local government authorities, and NGOs. Her support and active involvement are often crucial in helping NGOs initiate village development activities, with Kusumawathi taking the lead in many of these programmes.

Kusumawathi's husband leads the campaign against tobacco and alcohol use in their area. This is a very useful movement in the village. Additionally, the family is involved in shramadana campaigns, water supply and sanitation projects, and community development activities.

Also, Kusumawathi serves as the treasurer of the Divi Naguma programme and a World Vision project in the village. She leads the Women's Organisation, the Senior Citizens Society, and other community groups in the village. Her male counterparts frequently appoint Kusumawathi as the leader of village activities because of her clear capacities for planning and fearless decision making.

She has received training in skills development, leadership, management, as well as livestock and farm management. Also, she has dressmaking skills.

Kusumawathi is an exemplary woman who is highly skilled in diverse areas and helps to empower others in the village. Women like Kusumawathi are the backbone of their families and broader village community.



U.G.A.KUMUDUNI UNDAUNTED BY TRAGEDY

U. G. A. Kumuduni (50) lives in Egodabedda, Kirama, a rural village in the southern province of Sri Lanka. It was her childhood dream to study well. But when she moved to a national school in Walasmulla for secondary education, she experienced many difficulties due to economic hardship and discrimination by the teachers and other students.

Despite many challenges, Kumuduni participated in extra-curricular activities and social work through school and the village temple. Thus, by the time she finished school, she had already earned a reputation for a keen interest in community service and became an office-bearer in the Gramodaya programme (state-run, focusing on rural development) and in SANASA activities. Leadership in such community support organisations is usually reserved for the village elders, predominantly men; however, Kumuduni had worked beside experienced social workers in the village from a young age and gained renown as a youthful leader.

On leaving school, Kumuduni followed an apprenticeship programme at a technical college and obtained a diploma in accountancy. By the

time she got married, she had climbed the ranks through a series of promotions to become the Loans Manager at the SANASA district office. She eventually gave birth to a baby boy. But Kumuduni's personal life took a turn for the worse as her husband grew steadily abusive and violent. She recalls that she resigned from her job due to the situation at home and even attempted to kill herself with an overdose of sleeping pills.

Eager to start working again, Kumuduni applied for a position in the government's Gami Diriya community development project. When her husband intervened and forcibly removed her application from the selection process, she lost the opportunity to regain her economic independence. So, in 2009, Kumuduni decided to divorce her husband and take care of her son by herself. Her family, relatives, and the community disapproved of her actions, and Kumuduni could not find work in the village. Undeterred, she travelled to nearby villages to work as a labourer. She was compelled to build and start living in a makeshift mud hut with her son. At night, in the light of a kerosene lamp, she cleaned and prepared coconut fronds for market.

Kumuduni reapplied to the Gami Diriya project and was appointed the chairperson for her village's activities. The project had been declared a failure in the village when Kumuduni took over. Drawing on the courage and strength she'd summoned in the face of personal adversity, Kumuduni began to turn the project around. Kumuduni recalls that this was a very difficult period, for as a single mother without a steady income, she had to continue to work as a daily labourer as well.

In 2011 Kumuduni experienced another disaster when her mud hut collapsed to the ground. She negotiated a loan from the Divisional Secretariat office and started constructing a house by herself. She even mined sand from the river for this purpose. Then community organisations offered assistance, and she gradually completed the two-room house she lives in at present.

Today, Kumuduni's untiring efforts have established a strong Gami Diriya foundation which provides development loans, self-employment loans, and other social assistance to the villagers. She is a powerful woman with reservoirs of strength and courage to take risks, learn from failure, deal with insults, and fight for what she believes in. She never gives up, no matter how hard the challenge. She serves as chairperson of the Gami Diriya village committee in Warapitiya and the Walasmulla Samurdhi executive board. She now owns a scooter, which has increased her mobility.

Kumuduni says that she had strong self-confidence and self-belief even when those around her did not support her. She inspires others to do the same. Today, the villagers appreciate her courage and her leadership. She plans to continue her support to community development and empower others. Her future plan is to become an entrepreneur by opening a home business making bags.

MAYURI IRUGALABANDARA

CARING FOR THE COMMUNITY'S YOUNGEST MEMBERS

Mayuri Irugalbandare (42) wants to educate her community in Mahayaya, Walasmulla.

Born and raised in Colombo, Mayuri was a very active child. She loved dance and music. Her life underwent a dramatic change when she migrated to Hambantota after marriage. Initially, she did not feel the need to do a job although she had completed school up to the G.C.E. A/L examination. However, with the passage of time, she realised that she wanted to work, feeling that by staying at home she was not contributing as much as she could.

Mayuri looked for avenues to earn a living and contribute to her community at the same time. As an educated woman and mother of three children, she thought of becoming a teacher. Therefore, she followed a one-year diploma offered by the National Pre-School Development Foundation in Ambalanthota, Nonagama. With this qualification in hand, she decided to open a montessori to improve the quality of education for children in her community. The challenge was tremendous but Mayuri was not deterred by any obstacle.

When she began running the nursery, named Mayuri Pre-School, she had 58 students. The nursery is now the largest in the Walasmulla area, and she has needed to hire a building to accommodate her nearly 100 students. Mayuri's pre-school is open to any child in the area irrespective of gender, ability, and income status. She accepts all students, including those with disabilities and those who have trouble paying school fees. She says she does this out of a desire to see others achieve—she doesn't want students to be





prevented from getting a good education because their parents can't afford to pay for it. Appreciating Mayuri's effort and her students' progress, Seylan Bank offered her a loan to buy land and expand the school. Some parents have made donations too on seeing her commitment.

Since starting in 2012, Mayuri has employed four qualified assistant teachers who benefit from gaining an income and giving back to their community. Mayuri says she does not earn a huge profit and at times must pay her staff's salaries from her husband's income. She says that she is very lucky to have a husband who is supportive of her goals and her desire to contribute to society. Mayuri's husband works at the Fisheries Department but finds time to help improve the school building with painting and carpentry.

Mayuri believes in caring for the students. She provides them healthy meals at the school and wants them to be involved in things they are interested in, like music and art.

She also assists the children's club in Mahayaya to organise various events. She is a member of the Village Development Samiti and president of the Pathuma organisation which provides assistance to families to improve sanitation and electricity facilities in their homes.

Mayuri believes in remaining humble and helping others. She thinks that those who see the education of children as a chance to turn a profit are missing the point. She wants other women to not be afraid and work towards their independence.



NILMINI IROSHA CULTIVATING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Nilmini Irosha (44) of Mahanelwewa, (in Nachchaduwa) Anuradhapura, has always been driven to make the most of her time and contribute to society. After completing her secondary education, she worked at the Bank of Ceylon for two years. Similar to many Sri Lankan women, once she gave birth to her children, she resigned in order to spend more time caring for them. However, Nilmini had other plans too and, once the children didn't require her constant care, she started to look for work. Her first step was to become a member of various community-based organisations that offered such support and opportunities for women.

Nilmini received some training and began a small-scale mushroom business to provide a better income for her family because she didn't want her husband to work around the clock, limiting the time they spent together as a family. From there, her business has diversified: she started making ornaments with discarded coconut shells, as well as shoes and slippers. Her business has become so successful that she has traveled to Colombo to exhibit her products at trade fairs, a rare opportunity for someone from her rural background. Nilmini is justly proud of her achievements.

Throughout this time, she has continued to develop her skills by attending training programmes held by various institutions, such as the Industrial Development Board and the Sri Lanka Exports Development Board. She believes that women must be prepared to make their own way in life instead of waiting for opportunities to be handed to them.

Nilmini makes it clear that her drive as a businesswoman is centered around her family—she wants to be able to provide for them just as her husband does. Nevertheless, she has been able to give other women in the neighbourhood a start by offering them work and leading by example. She knows that not every woman will have the courage and vision to shape lives for themselves beyond their purely domestic roles. She is determined to change that situation and support other women to come up in life by engaging in some economic activity, empowering them to influence decisions within their homes and society. Currently she serves as the president of the Women's Society and is always willing to share her skills and passion with others.



NILMINI KUMUDU KUMARI

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATIVE

Nilmini (42) of Thuruwila, Anuradhapura, isn't afraid to use her influence to improve her community. As an active member of various community groups, Nilmini maintains goodwill with everyone, irrespective of their support or their opinions of her.

Reflecting on her difficult childhood, Nilmini believes it is her duty to contribute to the social life of her community so that no child will have to go through the hardships she faced.

Nilmini studied up to the G.C.E. O/L examination and married a soldier. Her daughter was just two when he died in battle. Her life as a widow has not been easy. Remarriage is not approved of in her community, especially when one's husband dies in war. But she chose to defy society and get married again for her sake as well as for her child. Nilmini now has three daughters and leads a happy and fulfilled life with her family.

She wanted to let her community know what a woman can do if she applies herself. Nilmini's leadership as secretary of the Thuruwila Women's Society is highly recognised in the village. She became the bridge connecting the women of her village with the outside world. She

supported women to access many resources and opportunities available through the Divisional Secretariat, such as self-employment opportunities; educational programmes on sexual and reproductive health rights, legal and social rights; etc.

Nilmini won the hearts of the people through her hard work and was motivated to stand for local government, winning election to the Pradeshiya Sabha. In 2016, the Sri Lankan parliament passed the Local Authorities Election (Amendment) Act No. 1 introducing a mandatory quota of 25 percent for women nominated to local government seats. Despite difficulties in implementing this policy, it represents a shift towards inclusion of women in decision-making bodies. Nilmini leads this change and mentors other women to follow a similar path

Nilmini says that she has had a smooth journey to political life due to the recognition she had gained over the years and believes that her influence is due to her positive relationships with many in the community. She has not encountered corruption or inefficiency in office and believes that she can create a positive attitude towards more women entering into politics.

PADMA KUMARI

RESISTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

Padma (29) lives in Thampalawela, Katupellalla, in the Madulla division of Moneragala District. She is married with one child.

Padma was a gifted young woman. At school, she was a champion performer in sports, as well as in the artistic and literary fields. She led many school societies and was a role model for many of her peers. While Padma is proud of her achievements as a young girl, she reflects that she was unable to figure out ways to build upon them and work towards life goals—a problem common to many accomplished young women in rural societies like Padma's. The lack of a good mentor in a woman's youth can also be a factor in limiting their options and life path.

Padma knows that she didn't set a long-term goal for her life in line with all her talents and achievements. Instead, she married early, at 20. Similarly, for many young girls, marriage becomes the only life goal set by their families and society. If they do not have strong plans to strike out in a different direction based on their talents and potential, it may be difficult to negotiate the pressures to get married and confine themselves to a domestic situation. A few women like Padma still manage to make the most of their inherent potential. She had proven her leadership skills as a young girl; she only had to put it to work and find the space to realise her talents.

Padma decided to join most of the community-based organisations in her village, becoming an active participant in their work. Padma says she would have been very unhappy if she had not carved out a place for herself in her community. Although she didn't realise where her abilities would have taken her had she capitalised on her talents and achievements as young girl, she now knows that she has a role to play in the lives of other women and girls, especially to make sure that young girls are able to set their life goals properly and are mentored towards achieving



them. Padma followed a training programme on active citizenship and community leadership for women in her community, which was conducted by the British Council in partnership with FISD. As a result, she became deeply invested in developing a community-based project to address violence against women and girls. "I have had my concerns for a long time about the violence women and girls go through in my community. They were unable to come out of their homes and report or find support, as it was a taboo. Women tolerated and suffered," Padma sighs. So she was thrilled to be part of an effort to fight violence against women.

Padma is an amazing example to many women to understand that leadership is not built overnight but developed over years of engagement and commitment, with sensitivity and a social conscience.



SANDYA PERERA

AN INDUSTRIOUS ENTREPRENEUR

Sandya Perera (46) believes that she is a very courageous woman. Born in Gampaha, Sandya studied at Rathnawali Balika Vidyalaya. She then worked in a garment factory for five years. She moved to Nachchaduwa, Anuradhapura, after marriage and gave birth to two sons. Initially, life in a new region out of Colombo and away from her parents, siblings, and friends was a challenge. Drawing on her work experience, she started a home-based business of sewing bedlinen for sale, in addition to a joint industry with her husband making brooms. These endeavors brought her into contact with other women and the village community. Sandya believes that earning an income is not a male prerogative and women should be economically independent too. Despite not doing well in school, she was determined to start earning as a young woman and not be dependent on anyone.

Although women's abilities are not recognised in her community, Sandya says that she has the capacities to simultaneously manage several businesses. After being trained by the Veterinary Medical Office, she started raising dairy cows. She also shares the knowledge she gained from this training with her community. She knows how important it is for a woman to acquire a skill to engage in any economic activity, to grow strong and capable and enhance their self-esteem. Sandya has become a voice for women and girls in her community by engaging in social work through various committees and organisations. She is a

member of Civil Security Force, temple welfare committee, treasurer of the Women's Society, president of the Women Farmers Association, a former secretary of the Suwa Sahana Committee (addressing issues of public health), and an audit officer of the Pradeshiya Bala Mandalaya.

During her tenure as secretary of the Suwa Sahana Committee, she took the lead in transforming an abandoned building into a clinic, a crucial need in the village. Her contribution to dengue prevention and control campaigns is also significant.

Sandya strikes a balance between her social work and family life. She never neglects her responsibilities and duties towards the family. She is proud of her two sons, one who is awaiting admission to university and the other still studying in Royal College, Colombo. Her husband, now retired, wholeheartedly supports her work. They have a grocery shop and during their free time they do gardening. Sandya says the secret to a happy family life is mutual understanding, respect, and trust.

Sandya is an all-island Justice of Peace (an honorary social position) and a key figure in Aluthwewa. Other women and girls seek her advice and support. She is also well known for her excellent coordination and leadership skills which she uses to mobilise people for community events and other campaigns.



A.G.RAMYALATHA

A COMPASSIONATE SOCIAL WORKER

A. G. Ramyalatha (45) is a key figure in her community of Kondagala, Mulkirigala, in the Weeraketiya division of Hambantota.

Her childhood was spent in a remote yet beautiful village in Heenbunna, Agngunukolapelessa, where she was raised with twelve siblings. She cherishes her childhood memories. Having been sent by her parents to Colombo to study, Ramyalatha completed her secondary education at Maradana Central College.

Ramyalatha was different from her peers in the village who wanted to live a traditional life. Instead, she spent hours and hours in the school gymnasium as she began to love gymnastics. Having moved to the city from a village, she was brave enough to take up this novel challenge despite many people telling her it was more appropriate for boys. Her family supported her in pursuing her interest in gymnastics. She has represented her school and placed in gymnastic tournaments. While at school, she had little understanding of gender discrimination; but Ramyalatha recalls instances where she felt herself to have been treated differently but thought such

differential treatment, owing to the fact that she was a girl, was somehow her own fault.

After completing school, Ramyalatha followed a training course in typesetting and returned to her village. She knew there would be little opportunity in her community to use her education or sports skills to earn a living. Thus, she began farming alongside her family. Ramyalatha got married at 27 and moved to Kondagala, where she currently resides. She is now an affectionate mother to five children. Wanting to support her family, and without worrying too much about where life had taken her, she began work in a yoghurt production company on a daily-wage basis. She reflects sometimes that if she had had the proper guidance and mentoring into social and economic engagement, her educational and sports background would have led to a different life. Therefore, she realises the value of education for her children to access better choices in life.

Despite economic difficulties, Ramyalatha enjoys working for the welfare of her community. She has served as teacher for three years under the Nawa Jeewana Project to assist disabled children. She volunteers as a senior teacher at the Sri Buddha

Rakshitha Sunday School, in Agunukolapalassa, Kumbukella, and believes that religious education helps to shape children's discipline and character.

The villagers appreciate Ramyalatha's contribution to their welfare and recognise her leadership. She can mobilise people and serves as a bridge connecting local authorities with the villagers, especially women affected by poverty and domestic violence. However, Ramyalatha mentions that she has faced many challenges and credits her education and exposure to society beyond the village for giving her courage in such situations. She currently holds the posts of vice-secretary of the Women's Society, vice-president of the Weeraketiya Mothers' Society, Women's Federation, and secretary of the Housing Committee. She says that she is fortunate that her husband and children support her social work. For a woman to become recognised as a leader in her community, first her domestic role should change from a traditional reproductive role to a more shared and equitable one: Ramyalatha, a very reflective woman, has drawn upon her life experiences to negotiate this transformation. Her children have been inspired by her example to engage in social work as well.

Ramyalatha is famous in her community as a befriender. Whenever women come to her for support, she is compassionate and listens actively in line with the trainings she had received from her social work organisations. Ramyalatha is a social worker in its true sense and her genuine concern for others is a rare quality.



SHEELA WIDARATHNA

A MULTI-FACETED CAREER

Sheela Widarathna (65) has not let minor setbacks in life prevent her from blazing her own trail. She had very good results at the G.C.E. A/L examination but didn't find a good job because jealous neighbours stole the job offer letters coming to her house. This didn't stop her from trying to find her position in her community, in Ashokaramaya, Palugaswewa, and she decided to turn to something that she loved, art.

Art became her voice to the world about what she is capable of as a woman from a remote community. Her paintings were noticed by the Minister of Cultural Affairs through her father who was a laborer at the Department of Archeology in Anuradhapura. He was impressed and decided to assign her a stall to sell her work near the Samadhi statue. She even did paintings on the spot for tourists and visitors to the site. From these beginnings, she developed her career. Sheela also has a tremendous desire for knowledge. She jumped at the opportunity to work as a trilingual demonstrator at the cultural sites in Anuradhapura after completing the language course required for the job.

With this experience, she was offered an opportunity to be trained as a tour guide for foreign tourists. At the time, it was not conventional for

women to be engaged in this kind of work, but Sheela had the bravery to seize the opportunity with both hands, the only woman among 28 men in that area. She was recognised for this at district and national levels and even got the opportunity to travel to Thailand and India to attend cultural programmes.

Sheela has had a fulfilling personal life, although she faced some hardship when her husband died and was left to take care of the family alone. She has been adamant about giving back to her community. She has written books for children on Sinhalese art and culture to be used in schools. She is an active member of the women's club and many other community-based organisations in her village.

She is a role model and a mentor for other women and girls in the village and has inspired them to realise and develop their capabilities to achieve their full potential. She leads by example, showing others that you can live an exemplary life without fitting into the conventions of womanhood. She continues writing books and sets an amazing example for the young generation of women who limit themselves due to social barriers.

A photograph of Thushari Liyanaarchchi, a woman with dark hair, wearing a black shirt, styling the hair of a younger woman with dark hair who is lying down. The setting is a home salon with orange curtains in the background and several framed certificates on the wall.

THUSHARI LIYANAARCHCHI

STRENGTH IN BEAUTY

Thushari Liyanaarchchi (46) is a professional beautician and self-motivated entrepreneur in Manupa, Anuradhapura. Although her business depends on making women look beautiful, Thushari does not come from a community that gives high priority to the idea of using makeup or other beauty techniques to make oneself look better and feel more confident. It is not common for women to use makeup every day even if they might want to. If they do so, they may be looked upon as “too much” or “up to something,” perhaps even a “bad influence to young girls.” Thushari knows that she has a long way to go if she wants her business to go beyond bridal dressing. Despite these challenges, Thushari believes strongly in inner and outer beauty for women.

Thushari exemplifies a confident, independent woman. As the head of her household, she supports herself and her mother by running her own beauty salon. She has worked through multiple hardships to make a life for herself and her family, and she enjoys giving her skills back to the community she loves. She volunteers in multiple ways, always open to helping younger women and girls without the means to obtain formal qualifications in beauty culture or business. Also, she teams up with a cameraman and a tailor to work with Ranaviru Sewana, helping disabled soldiers with bridal dressing and photographs. Thushari strongly believes that by engaging in community organisations and social work, she has become a selfless woman who can be happy seeing others succeed.

When you first walk into Thushari’s home, you can see evidence of all her accomplishments displayed with pride. Diplomas, certificates, and graduation photos line one wall, facing the space that she uses to maintain her business as a beautician.

Thushari has her failures in life too.. She completed the G.C.E. O/L examination but was unable to finish school. After that, she worked at the Electricity Board office in Trincomalee for five years during the war, until she witnessed a bomb blast firsthand. That event spurred her to take control of her own life, and she quit her job to move home.

She was married, but due in large part to her husband’s addiction to drugs and alcohol, she separated from him. She supported herself for nine years by working in West Asia, sending money home. There, she worked for two years as a maid until she got herself trained and started working as a beautician.

She believes that she could not have achieved what she has without the confidence she has gained through years of providing for herself. She thinks that many women are held back by men, because women are afraid of the consequences if men believe women are behaving in ways they should not. She says that women can move forward in their lives and careers by removing such fear and being brave enough to advocate for themselves and make their own decisions.



THARUSHIKA DEVINDI

TRANSFORMING HER LIFE THROUGH EDUCATION

Tharushika Devindi (18) of Walasmulla, Hambantota, is a selfless and generous elder sister who aspires to see her two younger sisters do better than her in their lives. Their mother is a housewife, while their father works as a mason. Tharushika is studying for the G.C.E. A/L examination.

She says, "I want my sisters to see how I succeed in life one day as a result of my education. I want to make them understand that education gives us wings to explore the world. By education, I do not only mean examinations and lessons but also extra-curricular activities that enhance our leadership qualities and self-confidence." At 18, Tharushika sounds mature and shows significant leadership qualities. One might wonder how at such a young age, Tharushika has perceived the array of opportunities education can offer an individual, especially a woman. The answer is that she has

effectively utilised the opportunities which her two schools, Horewela Maha Vidyalaya and Walasmulla National School, have given her, undoubtedly broadening her horizons.

She is an outstanding student, has served as a prefect, as a committee member in the Saukyadana (health services) committee, and as a traffic warden in her school (the latter a task for which mostly boys normally volunteer). Tharushika believes that gender roles are not an excuse to stop women from experimenting with new things and seizing opportunities. During her tenure as a school prefect, she took part in leadership training programmes conducted by the Ministry of National Policies and Economic Affairs. Also, Tharushika she is a great athlete. She placed second in a 5,000m walking event at the 2013 National Youth Sports Festival and first in the 100m event at her school sportsmeet. She also plays netball.

In addition, Tharushika is a very aesthetic person. She is a famous singer in her school and has won music competitions representing her school. During her leisure, she loves to engage in reed weaving and paper quilling. She believes that a girl should have alternatives in life; if you fail in one, you have plenty more to utilise, and you are equipped to face life's challenges. She understands that one should have determination and willpower to make your own opportunities—a perception many of her peers lack. Her family supports and encourages her to fully realise her potential.

When it comes to social and welfare work in Athpitiya village, Tharushika takes the lead in representing the youth in the village. She serves as the president of the Children's Club in Athpitiya and also serves as a coordinator/organiser in the youth club. She was one of the key organisers of an initiative to renovate the Sri Wijayaramaya temple, Athpitiya. She always tries to contribute to welfare activities in the village. Her involvement in these activities over a couple of years have enabled her to build strong working relations with the Grama Niladhari Officer, Child Rights Promotion Officer, Samurdhi Officer and other local government and religious authorities.

Tharushika reiterates that education should be a priority for all the children, that youth, irrespective of gender, should develop skills and leadership qualities to face challenges and succeed in life.





OLU DEWMINI AND CHAMODI SEWMINI A TALENTED DUO

D. Olu Dewmini and D. Chamodi Sewmini (both 19), pretty siblings, are respected and admired for their extraordinary talents and personalities in their community of Aluthwewa, Anuradhapura.

The only children of their parents, these identical twins so far share a similar yet exciting life story. Their parents were intent on educating their daughters, having well realised the opportunities education would offer. Their parents were especially pleased when Dewmini and Sewmini became outstanding achievers at Walisinghe Harischandra Central College, Anuradhapura. They were not only academic but also threw themselves into dance and music. Both were members of the school dance troupe and the Eastern music band, and there was hardly any concert or competition in which the twins would not participate. They have represented their school at Zonal and Provincial school competitions. Given their musicality, they sat the G.C.E A/L examination, in 2018 in humanities subjects. Dewmini, the older sister, will enter the

university, while her sister is preparing to face the examination again. Sewmini is determined to realise her dream of higher education and join her sister at university.

Apart from their talent in dance, Dewmini and Sewmini have held several leadership positions in school, including as prefects. In addition, both were active members of the Student Parliament. They emphasized the fact that participating in extra-curricular activities helped to improve their leadership skills, team spirit, and mutual understanding.

Seeing the young women's talent, the nursery-school teacher of the village invited their assistance in choreographing dance numbers for her students. Not only have the twins willingly accepted, they help out free of charge. Thus, they have used their art to reach and become role models for another generation of young people. They also teach at the Sunday School on a volunteer basis. Their social

commitment has earned them much respect in the community. Their mother is the twins' guiding light. Their father supports from distance as he is working abroad. She is confident that her girls are obedient, honest, and trustworthy and strongly supports the extra-curricular and welfare activities in the village. The twins say their parents are their strength. Their trust and encouragement to move forward, which means that the young women will not let down their parents. Whenever the school authorities demanded that their mother should accompany the girls for an external competition etc, she would comply. Their father has always trusted his wife's ability to make independent decisions regarding their children, something that is very necessary in parenting to mentor children towards discovering their best goals in life.

Many mothers in the community acknowledged that the sisters are inspirational role models for other young women in their community, an important factor in triggering the imagination and ambitions of those who may limit their aspirations. Dewmini and Sewmini are dreamers, and they insisted that their horizons are not confined to future domesticity.



VASANA SEWWANDI

PERSONAL AGENCY, SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Vasana Sewwandi (23) is a vivacious young woman from Akpitiya, Walasmulla. She had her secondary education at Walasmulla National School, obtaining very good results at the public school examinations. She is a talented vocalist and dancer, as well as a passionate sportswoman. She played netball, volleyball, and elle (a local softball game), often leading her team to victory in inter-school competitions at the district level. She was an all-round achiever, taking part in debates, and music and dance competitions. She was an active member of the school Environment Society and a traffic warden.

She has many talents and interests. A highly creative individual, Vasana paints, and does crafts and embroidery. She is an avid home gardener; in fact, environmental conservation is an issue very close to her heart.

Vasana has thrown herself into community work. She is leader of the Dilena Tharu Sports Society and the FISD Youth Society. She holds office as secretary of the Muthu Ahura Children's Society, the Muthuhara Youth Society, the Provincial Children's Society, and the village's Divi Neguma initiative. Then, she serves as assistant secretary of the District Children's Council. And, she is a member of the National Children's Council (Cultural Sub-Committee), the Southern Province Children's Provincial Council, and the Youth Parliament. Vasana considers this a wealth of experience and training preparing her to lead her community and country in the future.

Vasana has been involved in projects to address domestic violence, arranged distribution of school supplies to children from low-income families, and conducted awareness programmes on the value of school education for children and parents. Furthermore, she has helped to organise the Sinhala and Tamil New Year celebrations and religious festivals in the village, as well as



tree planting programmes and shramadana (where the community labors free of charge on village projects) activities. This livewire has held concerts for senior citizens and youth; coordinated with the Medical Officer of Health office on campaigns; and organised meditation programmes. She even makes time to train pre-school children in music and dance.

Impressed by her social conscience and passion, many local government officials (such as the Walasmulla Divisional Secretary, the Child Rights Promotion Officer, the Counselling Officer, the Youth Service Council Officer, etc, have mentored her and recommended her training opportunities. Vasana took part in a training programme on active citizenship (organised by FISD and British Council, Sri Lanka) on youth leadership to address violence against young girls. She learned about

gender equality and the importance of a gender perspective in development plans and programmes for rural communities. In addition, this young leader has a wide network of peers and worked at the local and national levels with youth clubs all over the country.

Vasana says her family's support and guidance are crucial to her activism. "I just don't waste a single second of my time, and I don't care what people think of a young woman who leads such a social life," Vasana says. She explained that she has been the target of gossip on occasion for traveling round the country, meeting and engaging with people, but she doesn't care. She is also determined to find a partner who will not expect her to be conventional or try to control her life. "I will never allow that," she smiles.





YAMUNA NISHANTHI GIVING BACK TO SOCIETY THROUGH MUSIC

Yamuna Nishanthi (33) made friends of her new neighbors in Aluthwewa, in Nachchaduwa, Anuradhapura, through music. Originally from Eppawela, she moved to Aluthwewa, her husband's hometown, four years ago. A busy mother of two children (aged 8 and 5), she doesn't believe domesticity should limit a woman's social and economic options. Her husband works in the Sri Lanka Navi and is home only on vacations.

While a student at Eppawela Sri Siddhartha Maha Vidyalaya, Yamuna discovered her love for music. After her G.C.E. A/L examination, she joined the Youth Corps of the Ministry of Youth Affairs, undergoing training in leadership and skills development. Although she left the Youth Corps when her parents started looking around for her future partner, Yamuna's interest in music and community work remained. She was appointed the secretary of the Aluthwewa Women's Society and the treasurer of the Village Development Society. She was recognised as a person who had the capacity to organise and mobilise people. "If I ask the women in the village to participate in a community," says Yamuna, "they would tell me, We will be there because Akka (older sister) requested us to do so. We can never say no to your invitation."

Everything began with Yamuna's increasing popularity as music instructor to the village kids. Before she began her classes, the children of Aluthwewa, a rural community of sparse resources, had no opportunity to learn music. Yamuna always wanted to give back to society; so starting the free music classes were a win-win for all concerned. Yamuna is happiest when she is teaching. She organises the annual concert of the village pre-school and trains children to sing bhakthi gee (devotional music) for the Vesak and Poson Buddhist festivals. These events were a first in the village. "I have no words to express the satisfaction and joy I get from this work. This village embraced and accepted me as one of their own. I don't feel that I am a newcomer," she says happily. Yamuna is also welcomed at Aluthwewa Kumara Vidyalaya where set up a western music orchestra and introduced the melodica to budding musicians. Her volunteerism is exceptional.

One might ask how Yamuna supports her own family. After being trained in tailoring, she obtained a sewing machine with assistance from the Village Development Society. She tailors clothes for sale in village fares through women vendors. She earns a decent income sewing uniforms too. Furthermore,

she cultivates mushrooms as a secondary source of income (following a training programme by Vidatha, a state livelihood training initiative). She is adamant about not depending solely on her husband's salary. "A woman has to be independent," she says.

Yamuna is not a woman who thinks only of her family and herself. She gathered together many women in dire economic straits and encourages them to start their own business. She teaches them how to manage a mushroom business and how to find a market for their wares. Moreover, she involves these women in her dressmaking business, allow them to sell the finished clothes from their own homes, understanding that most women find it difficult to go out of their homes to earn a living. "Even though my husband is mostly away from home, I never feel lonely", Yamuna says. "My house is always filled with women, and I know how happy they are to have my company and support in managing their lives."





ANUSHA THUSHARI

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Anusha Thushari (30) is a young community leader and successful entrepreneur who astutely converted her passion into an income generator for herself and others in the village of Moragoda, Anuradhapura.

Born to a middle-income family, Anusha studied at Kumara Vidyalaya, Anuradhapura, up to Grade 11. Anusha was very active in school, enthusiastically taking part in the annual sports meet and serving as a junior prefect. As a child, she and her two siblings used to sit next to their dressmaker mother watching her sew clothes. Influenced by her mother, she started showing a keen interest in embroidery and beauty culture. She loved learning Home Science at school and felt that she had been gifted with magical hands each time she picked up a needle and thread. When a majority of parents would like their children to become doctors, engineers, and teachers, Anusha's parents were intelligent enough to see young Anusha's growing talent. Therefore, with her parents' encouragement, Anusha followed courses on sewing at the Vocational Training Centre in Anuradhapura although she was qualified to follow the Advanced Level classes at school.

"When I started sewing and making dresses at home for the village womenfolk, I began to cherish a dream of opening my own tailoring shop," Anusha says. Indeed, Anusha worked very hard to transform her dream into reality. "My father is a pillar of strength to me. He had every confidence in me as he knew that I am strong enough and willing to face every challenge." Her father assisted her to open a small shop in 2009 where she made dresses, including school uniforms, for young children, supplying an order which came to her through the Early Childhood Development Authority in the area.

But her path was strewn with bitter experiences; barely five days after she'd opened her shop, it was burgled. The incident was a major shock but her family consoled her and supported her to reopen the shop. "As a result of that incident, I became stronger than ever. I was determined to rise up again and work towards my goal," Anusha says. She now sees the burglary as typical of the challenges that many young women may have to confront in moving towards agency and empowerment.

This courageous young woman who began her journey with one sewing machine is now the proud

proprietor of Winway Apparel, Moragoda, which opened for business in 2017. Deeply sensitive to the problem of unemployment affecting the youth in the area, Anusha has created jobs for 18 young women in her business. Going a step further, Anusha and her fellow workers offer training to young people, in the hope that such skills may strengthen their chances in the job market. Anusha's social consciousness has earned her the respect and gratitude of her community. "I am very lucky to have found a very understanding and supportive husband," says Anusha.

Despite her busy life as an entrepreneur and mother of a two-year old son, Anusha makes time to contribute to the welfare of her village. A senior member of the Tharunu Mithuru ("young friends") youth club, in 2015 she led a campaign to completely renovate the village community hall which had been near collapse. The new hall was used as a polling centre for the first time during the 2018 local government elections. In 2016, she made a profound contribution to the village by galvanising people to help renovate the maternal and child clinic centre. "We just could

not sit around and wait until government officials renovated the clinic. When we completed the renovation, we were so happy; above all, everyone appreciated that it was I who made this issue an urgent priority for our village." Indeed, youth in Moragoda, believe that Anusha is a good leader. Given her record of service and commitment, the villagers are quick to rally around Anusha when she initiates welfare activities.

Anusha reiterates the power of having big dreams and being determined to make them a reality. "If I had not had such dreams, I would not be a woman boss today. Dreaming alone is not sufficient. Hard work and determination matter the most. Being responsible for 18 employees is very challenging because they depend on me for their livelihoods. Women and youth in remote areas like ours have many family problems and economic difficulties. I know that although my workers may come to work every day, they are fighting their own personal battles. I do not want to add to the pressures on them. I have sometimes offered them flexible working hours. As a woman, I know that for them holding on to this job is of the utmost importance. I have a genuine interest in seeing them succeed in their lives. Above all, I want to hear them also say that they feel empowered and strong."





NIMMI GUNASEKERA

AN EXTRAORDINARY LEADER

Nimmi Gunasekera (50) was born in Nugegoda and completed her secondary education in Colombo. Her training as a leader began in school where she was on the netball and badminton teams, became the school Games Captain, and was on the committee of both the Science Society and School Literary Association.

Just after finishing her education, at barely 20, Nimmi's parents arranged her marriage. "Unlike today, in those days, parents were not interested in higher education or employment for their daughters. Giving away their daughters in marriage as early as possible was the highest goal." Similarly, young women like Nimmi were brought up to neither question nor disagree with this notion of their path in life. Her husband worked with the Sri Lanka Petroleum Cooperation and, in 1999, they moved to Anuradhapura when he was transferred there. They made their home in Madyama Nuwara

Gam Palatha, Karabewa, bringing up two sons (30 and 19) and two daughters (27 and 15).

Coming from the city to a remote little village was a tough adjustment, but Nimmi believes that she was up to the challenge. Given her strong educational background, she is passionate that her children get as much education as they can, up to the highest level they are capable of reaching.

In 2003, Nimmi began working in the community through the village temple and was inspired to join the Karabewa Cooperative Women's Society as its treasurer. The collective aims to enhance the lives of vulnerable women and offer support for a livelihood, mostly related to agriculture. Furthermore, it offers grants to women to develop their houses and improve sanitary facilities. Nimmi said that although women are eager to obtain the grants but lack the expertise to run their farms

successfully. So most tend to fail and the grant is wasted. Nimmi intervened to change this state of affairs, and in 2007, Nimmi sought training by a private agriculture company. "I thought I needed to know more in order to support people. I wanted to help them to take full advantage of the grants we provided." On her own she assumed responsibility for advising women on setting up agricultural livelihoods, including through many follow-up visits. Also, Nimmi registered the Women's Society with the Divisional Women's Federation to channel further support.

In 2008, Nimmi networked with local government authorities and politicians to coordinate many resources for her village. Through this initiative, she created nearly 50-60 jobs for the village women and built at least 50 houses for those in need. Nimmi strongly believes that a leader should work to uplift the lives of those around them rather than merely take office to enjoy the perks of the position. "Women look to leaders like me to help solve their problems," she says, "and we just have to find ways to do so."

In 2013, she established a Senior Citizens Society in Karabewa and worked to set up connections with service providers. In coordination with the Ministry of Social Services, Nimmi has helped to set up Senior Citizens Societies in 30 of the 40 villages in the Divisional Secretariat area.

Moreover, she works closely with the Divisional Secretariat office to serve differently-abled people in the area. Her social commitment and service was recognised by the Department of Social Services which presented her in 2016 with a Senior Citizen Honorary Award.

In 2014 Nimmi turned her attention to the village Dhamma school which hadn't functioned for the last 20 years. She not only revived the school but, as its current principal, has strongly advocated with the authorities for a building in which to hold classes. She worked hard to ensure grant money of LKR 8 million from local government authorities to build a road to the neighbourhood's Viharapalugama temple.

Women leaders like Nimmi are visionaries in their communities. She is not content to rest on her laurels or slow down because she has done enough. She is currently striving to secure medical and other facilities for those suffering from kidney disease in her village (there is a markedly high prevalence of kidney disease in the region due to chemical pollution of its water sources). Despite her busy schedule and deep involvement in the community, she does not want to give up working for any of the causes she is passionate about. She says women must be courageous and determined and should make a contribution to society, especially if they are capable of doing so.



A.M.MADHURAWATHI

COUNSELING A COMMUNITY

Madurawathi (53) has been a widow for the last 27 years. A mother of two children, a daughter (30) and a son (27), she takes care of her grandchildren but devotes the lion's share of her time to social work. She married at 22 in 1989 and moved from her home in Divulwewa to Aluthwewa, both communities in Nachchaduwa, Anuradhapura. Unfortunately, her husband, who worked in the Sri Lankan Navy died just after their second child was born.

As with many women who become widows early in life, Madhurawathi had to contend with numerous social and economic obstacles due to social prejudices against widows. The young mother needed to gather all her courage and strength to move forward. She worked as an agricultural laborer, in addition to numerous other tasks—making yoghurt, tailoring, and buying and selling children's clothes—to earn an income. She worked tirelessly, day and night, determined to not depend on anyone to raise and educate her children. Today, both children are government workers, with more stable lives than their mother had, and gratefully support Madurawathi so that the long, harsh years are behind her.

What is more unique in Madurawathi is her social conscience despite tremendous personal challenges. She started a Young Farmers Society in her village of Divulwewa back in 1981. She started the village development society, Gemunu Grama Sanwardana Samithiya, in Aluthwewa in 1995 and led the collective for years. She earned the community's respect through her efforts in the Village Development Society. But it is her work with the Women's Society that is most valued by her peers.

Similar to other villages in Nachchaduwa, Aluthwewa suffered from lack of services for women faced with domestic violence or struggling with economic hardships. Sensitive to this silent suffering, Madurawathi coordinated work with local government authorities and NGOs to secure mental health services for the community.

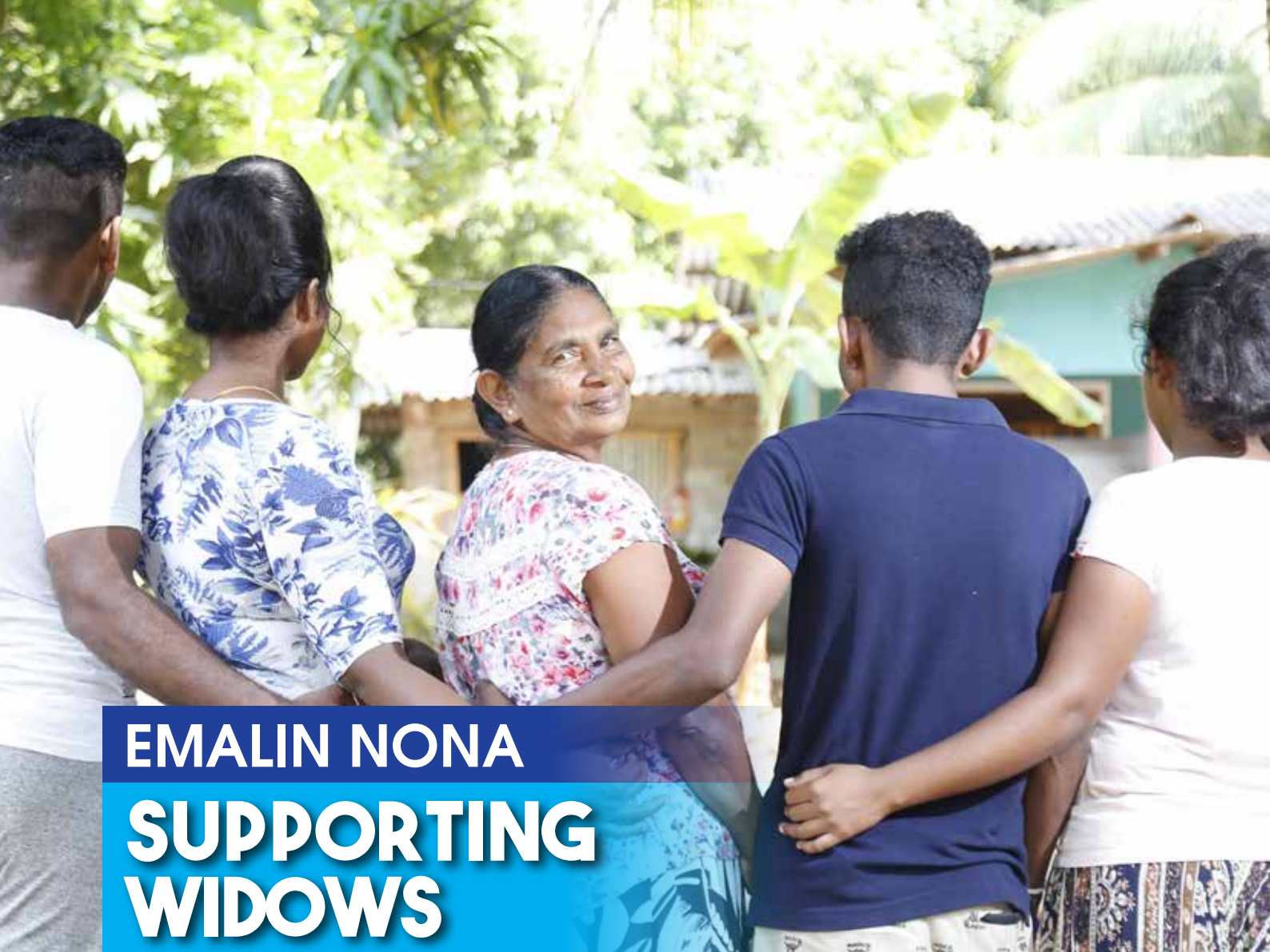
Mental health was considered a private matter that was never discussed openly. Similarly, it was unheard of for women to receive treatment and support for stress, depression, and other mental health issues. "I couldn't stand the suffering of women. I found that some women approached



me wanting to share what they were going through and ask for support. But I was no expert on counseling and could do little other than just listen and offer temporary comfort,” Madhurawathi stated. She thought to reach out to service providers outside village and, by speaking to many social development organisations working in the area, was put in touch with the counseling officer. Guided by local government officials and NGOs, she coordinated training for women leaders in her village on responding to mental health issues, including referrals to service providers.

“This had to be done very carefully since, if we were not careful about training suitable women, we could have done more harm than support,” she explained, adding that potential candidates were screened with the support of officials. She is very happy that a system has been established in the village linking women in need of mental health support to service providers.

Today, as a senior woman leader in her village, she has trained many young women activists. “I have done as much as I can and now it’s the younger women’s turn to do their part. I will mentor them as long as I can. That is my role now,” she said.



EMALIN NONA SUPPORTING WIDOWS

Emalin Nona (63) has walked a long, arduous road in earning the respect and acceptance of her community of Thuruwila, in Nachchaduwa in the district of Anuradhapura. One of nine siblings, she has worked hard to provide for her family. Emalin Nona recalls that even as a child, in comparison with her sisters, she was outgoing and social from a very young age.

Hers was not a smooth life. She got married at 20, in 1977, through a proposal arranged between the two families. The early years of marriage were quite happy until her husband lost his job at the Ceylon Railways upon a false accusation of misconduct. For two years, he was without work, falling into depression and alcoholism. He became violent towards Emalin Nona, always blaming his violence on alcohol. They had seven children, five sons and two daughters. Emalin Nona's husband committed suicide in 1991, when the youngest was just one year old. She gave up an opportunity to go abroad for work in order to be present in her children's lives. All of them went on to complete the G.C.E. O/L examination and are working. Six are married.

After the death of her husband, with seven children to raise by herself, Emalin Nona couldn't give up. It was a hard struggle being a widow, single mother, and sole provider, and Emalin Nona recalls tremendous social prejudice and disapproval. "People would always try to find fault with me whatever I did. Where did I go, what did I do, with whom did I associate? Everything became a question and a reason for people to insult me and cast aspersions on my character," Emalin Nona says unhappily. "People said that it was my fault and bad luck that my husband passed away. I was abandoned by my family and my husband's family as they all thought I had caused his death. It was intolerable."

Emalin Nona struggled to earn a living by selling home-made food, then collecting and selling agricultural products at the village fair. Her income was barely enough to feed and educate the children. She resorted to setting up a small grocery although the village community continued to ostracize her. It took her years of effort to convince people to accept her.



She mobilised a group of widows in 1996, learning through her own experience that such women need a support system. Most of the women in her group had lost their husbands in the war and also faced social prejudice. Once all her children were married, she decided to dedicate her time to her cause. She formally established a community-based Widows Society in 2003 to support her peers to face life with courage and create a more positive social attitude towards widows. "Even if people do not want to help widows, they should at least just leave us alone to carry on with our lives. We deserve happiness and freedom no less than anyone else," says Emalin Nona. Via her organisation, Emalin Nona has helped many widows access formal support from by the Divisional Secretariat for housing, self-employment, and for their children's education.

She continues to work in her grocery shop together with her youngest son. She supports the members of her widows' group by buying their products for sale in her shop. Emalin Nona is an inspiration to other marginalized women, especially widows. She teaches the lesson that women should not give up, however harshly society treats them. She teaches the lesson of empathy and courage

SHALIKA HESHANI

A ROLE MODEL TO HER CHILDREN

Shalika Heshani (37) drives her three-wheeler around Udaganawa, Buttala, Moneragala to attend to her daily work. She doesn't care for her neighbours' contemptuous opinion that she is acting like a man. "I have always done whatever I believed I could do. I not only drive my three-wheeler but climb trees and farm. If anyone thinks that this is men's work, I would argue that there's no such thing as men's or women's work; there is only biological difference related to reproduction," she remarks strongly.

Shalika would also take on hires in her three-wheeler without fear or reluctance. She says that her women passengers were very confident and happy as they knew she was safer and more competent than any male driver. There had been some talk by the men in the village discouraging potential customers, saying that they would be taking their lives in their hands in travelling with her. Shalika was undaunted by the talk and even galvanised by it. Today, no one in the community dares criticize her since she has proven her integrity and strength.

Shalika wants to be a role model to her two daughters (in grades 7 and 8, respectively) and show them that women are capable of anything if they set their mind to it. She is lucky to have a very supportive husband, a mechanic by profession. The marriage was a proposal brought by their parents, and Shalika was very upfront about herself from the beginning. She told her partner-to-be that she was not willing to change the strong, outgoing personality an active school career had given her.

"Most women suffer in marriage because they do not present their authentic selves and negotiate with the other party from the start," Shalika says, looking at her husband seated beside her.

Shalika values her economic independence as well. She makes a living by taking hires in her three-wheeler and through mushroom cultivation. "I have never asked my husband to pay for my needs, and this makes me feel very proud and blessed."



Shalika is an inspiration to other women and young girls in her activism of vulnerable women and families in the community. She coordinated with local government authorities to provide the families of differently-abled persons income-earning toolkits (grinders, sewing machines, and the like). Moreover, she was instrumental in seeing that families in need received sanitation facilities. "It gives me so much pleasure and satisfaction to see women come out of their shells and take a hand in social and economic activities to support their families and lead more fulfilling lives," Shalika stated.

GAYANI EDIRIWEERA

CHALLENGING THE MYTHS OF ALCOHOL DEPENDENCY

Gayani Eiriweera (35), from Bogahahena, Weeraketiya, in the Hambantota district, is a mother of two children who does not allow the struggle to make ends meet cripple her vision of a better society. She got married at a very young age after studying up to grade 10. Her husband is a fisherman. Gayani is a courageous and industrious woman; she prepares sweets and other food items at home to sell at village fairs. Additionally, she supplements the family income from the sale of coconuts from her home garden.

Gayani prioritises her children's education and, whenever she has time, helps them with their studies. She wants her children to be good citizens and actively contributes towards their wellbeing. She is used to managing the household on her own as her husband is mostly at sea.

"For me, it's not all about my own difficulties but how harmful society has become for children and young people. If we do not change things for the better, they will not have a good future," Gayani explains her fears. "If you want things to change, then you have to lead that change." This is what motivated Gayani to play an active role in many of her village's community organisations. Although her husband is frequently absent and unable to support her with the household, Gayani made time amidst her responsibilities to carve out a role as an activist.

She is the chairperson of the Community Development Society, the village's Gami Diriya project and the Samurdhi society, the Mothers Society, and the Athugedara School Development Society. Also, she is the liaison for the community for NGOs operating in the village and community leader for a project distributing water to households.

Gayani admits that she has encountered many challenges. It was difficult to secure people's active participation in the community organisations, but she trudged from door to door raising awareness about the benefits the entire village stood to gain. Gayani explains this general reluctance to get involved: "People do not address problems urgently unless they are personally affected."



She learned how to take impartial decisions for the benefit of the whole village and how to work with diverse individuals. Therefore, many in the community appreciate her leadership.

Gayani has been at the forefront of the fight against drugs in her area. Remarkably, she tries to help families with a loved one dependent on drugs free themselves of addiction. She has been trained by NGOs working in the field on how to prevent alcohol and drug dependency and conducts awareness sessions for children and adults. Says Gayani, "Young people are the most vulnerable as they often do not have positive role models. They see their peers or the adults around them finding excuses to start a drug or alcohol habit. And both the youth and their families think that once you start using, there's no turning back."

Gayani believes otherwise. She asserts that if you deconstruct the myths which make alcohol and drug dependency attractive, then it's easy to kick the habit. This is exactly what Gayani does. She has received tremendous community support as many families have been affected by the problem. Consequently, Gayani is a courageous rural leader who empowers old and young people to confront their problems.



P.V.G.SISILIYANA

A VETERAN LEADER

Sisiliyana (70), of Weeraketiya, Maduwawatta, is an exceptionally talented artist who recites traditional Sinhala poems, writes and directs stage productions, plays traditional drums, and is an exponent of traditional dance forms. This remarkable woman, a mother of four children, is also an agriculturalist with the kind of energy and capacity for work which would put a much younger woman to shame.

Sisiliyana came from a farming family and grew up helping her parents to grow banana, corn, and peanuts, in addition to rearing livestock. Today, she combines the ancestral knowledge of cultivation gained from her parents with new technology. In 2013, Sisiliyana and two other women farmers planted 100 new varieties of banana produced using tissue culture, with an intercrop of chillies. This farm generated a good income, and the trio made a contribution to the village's food security.

Sisiliyana has a high organisational capacity and is skilled in bringing together diverse individuals for a common cause. Sisiliyana's long years of community work mean that she is a leader capable of impartial and fearless decision-

making. Moreover, she is often called on to be the community liaison for state and NGO programmes in the community. She is an active member in many social groups; she received training in micro-finance management in a programme for community-based organisations in Embilipitiya. She plays a major role in the School Development Society, is the chairperson of the Samurdhi Society and the Samurdhi bank, as well as assistant chairperson of the Women's Organisation. In memory of her soldier-son who died during the war, she also volunteers with a veterans' welfare organisation.

She has numerous awards and commendations for her services to the community. In 2006, she received an award for the best social worker in the Julampitiya zone by the Walassmulla Divisional Secretariat. In 2017, the Walassmulla Divisional Secretariat recognised her achievements with the Diriya Kaantha (woman of courage) award at an International Women's Day Programme. Also, in 2017, the Women in Management Organisation in collaboration with International Finance Corporation recognised her as an emerging woman entrepreneur.



She even built her own house with support from her family and community. "The people in my community call me a superwoman," she says, "as many other women my age are content to just stay at home and rest."

Sisiliyana is an emotionally strong and resilient woman, particularly in the face of criticism and prejudice from those in the community who are taken aback by her determination. She is very modern in her thinking, eager to seize the opportunity to improve the numerous skills required for a rural woman like her to empower herself and lead her community's social development.

SHASHINI NIMESHA

FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Shashini (22) from Pandurawa, Walasmulla, works towards creating a community free of violence, alcohol, and drugs. She completed the G.C.E. A/L examination at the Walasmulla National School, where she excelled at netball, volleyball, as well as other track and field events. She was a talented dancer and a school prefect. She won the respect and admiration of her peers and teachers and is the pride of her parents too. She doesn't like to leave Pandurawa and is quite hopeful that she will find good employment which will allow her to serve her community.

Currently, she is the Cultural Affairs Officer for the Galahitiya East Youth Club. Also, she is an activist with the village Alcohol and Drugs Prevention Youth Committee and the FISD Happy Families programme in Galahitiya. She is a prominent youth leader in the community with a track record of mobilising people to take part in various educational and recreational activities. Furthermore, she volunteers with the Women's Society and other community-based organisations.

"The happiest moment in my community engagement was the Happy Families camp organised for married couples to build a healthy relationship between them. In one exercise, we asked the couples to hold hands and recollect happy moments and memories in their lives. I saw many women crying tears of joy," said Shashini.

She adds that many families experience conflict on a daily basis because of the men's use of alcohol and drugs. Women have accepted that men are aggressive and "do not know what they are doing" when they are drunk. With her training on alcohol and drug prevention, Shashini sees through, and strongly rejects, the excuse that a man is not responsible for his violent conduct because he was under the influence of drugs or alcohol. She believes that men use alcohol as an excuse to control women, and it's a pity that women accept this and submit to physical and emotional violence, ultimately blaming themselves for the man's actions.

"I refuse to accept that women suffer because of their fate or karma or that they are born to be vulnerable. My parents taught me to be strong and my training in youth empowerment and leadership has taught me that women have the right to a dignified life," Shashini asserts. She will fight for social justice, for her own sake and for all other women in her community.





IRESHA DILRUKSHI

A YOUNG ROLE MODEL

Iresha Dilrukshi (23) from Nagahamada, Madulla, in Moneragala, was very popular in her school, Nagahamada Vidyalaya, due to her exceptional leadership of many school clubs and societies. She was a member of the debate team which won many awards at inter-school competitions. She also distinguished herself as a school prefect and in extra-curricular activities at Alpitiya Vidyalaya, where she transferred to prepare for the A/L examination.

Iresha points to her engagement in many community youth interventions as formative experiences. At 13, she was the secretary of the Children's Club of Nagahamada and contributed to many social action projects. At 19, she was trained by FISD as a peer-educator on alcohol and drugs prevention. Iresha is passionate about this cause, saying, "I have seen young and old alike have become addicts to either alcohol, tobacco or drugs. And I have witnessed how women and children suffer as many men use alcohol as an excuse for violence against their family members."

She became president of the Youth Club and mobilised the youth against alcohol and drug use in the village. They motivated the owners of small shops to stop selling cigarettes and monitored liquor shops to prevent the sale of liquor to underage customers. Iresha also took part in activities initiated by the National Youth Services Council in Sri Lanka. Her activism earned her much praise in the community, many of parents feeling that Iresha was a good role model for their

daughters and sons. This made Iresha's parents really proud.

Today, she is an undergraduate studying agriculture at the University of Batangala. She has a clear aim in life: to serve the people in her community. She believes the encouragement of her parents, elders, teachers, and peers were critical to her achievements thus far and her worldview. "My parents' trust me and give me all the freedom to become involved in community activities. That helped me to become who I am today." Consequently, Iresha believes that girls should not be confined to the house and trained to just take care of domestic responsibilities; a girl's or young woman's potential can only be realised if she enjoys the same opportunities as her male peers. She says that even though she was somewhat shy as a child, taking part in the children's club activities and pushing herself to assume responsibility in the youth societies brought her out of her shell and opened her eyes to her own talents and capacities.

"Not everyone is a natural leader but our innate skills and talents can be developed with active engagement. One should just take up a challenge and seize the opportunity that comes your way, regardless of whether you're a girl or a boy," Iresha asserts, referring to young people in her community, girls and boys alike, who are reluctant to get involved. She insists that it's also the responsibility of adult leaders to clear the way for youth to emerge as social activists and trailblazers.

J.M.DHARMALATHA

GENDER EQUALITY BEGINS IN THE HOME

Dharma (43)—as she is known to her neighbours in Uva Palwatta, in the Buttala area of the Moneragala district—is a woman who has been at the receiving end of traditional gender norms. Now she is determined to challenge society's shackles on women and create an environment for women and girls to realise their full potential.

In school, Dharma showed tremendous promise in track and field events and participated in training programmes by the Ministry of Sports. She says, "It was a rare chance for a girl like me. And I was really happy that my brother who sometimes controls me allowed me to participate in this. When I wanted to join the army on leaving school, however, my overprotective brother put his foot down. I had to give up on that dream." In a conservative society where men usually take decisions about a woman's life, Dharma could not resist. Her brother was the family's breadwinner and had the last say. Like most men, he too believed that girls should not stray from their domestic destinies. So when Dharma later wanted to work in a garment factory, her brother again vetoed her choice on the grounds that women should not work outside the home.

However, Dharma took her time getting married believing that a young woman should reach a degree of maturity first. She finally accepted a proposal brought to her when she was 28. Marriage was a turning point in Dharma's life, because her husband was very understanding and supportive of her desire for a role outside the home. He encouraged Dharma to get involved in social work.

Learning about gender equality and healthy relationships via numerous programmes, Dharma set about creating change in her own home. "I taught my two sons how to manage all the housework. I have never let them learn that chores are just women's work. My husband could not simply watch while my two boys tackled the work at home; so he also lends a hand." Dharma says that housework has never been her burden, since she has so much support. Particularly, she is very happy that her two sons are more liberal in their thinking than her brother.



Dharma asserts that a woman can change the circumstances of her life through negotiation and strategic interventions: she must take control of her own life. She says that in the absence of such skills, women risk conflict. Dharma believes that, "Many women do not want to engage. They just suffer in isolation thinking it's their fate." Wanting to challenge how women are treated in her society too, Dharma found her avenue in the village Women's Society.

Today Dharma is a highly-valued community leader in activities to empower girls and women organised by the Buttala Divisional Secretariat. "All the government officers look to me to organise community-based and divisional programmes for women. I can rally other women through just a phone call," Dharma says proudly, explaining that the community trusts her vision. For Dharma, social change is possible only if women believe in themselves and are positive about life. "We women should never give in to fate. It's negative social attitudes and patriarchy, not fate, which do not allow women to live equal lives with men. We should challenge these ideas."

DILANI ANURUDDHIKA

MENTORING OTHER WOMEN

Dilani (35) lives with her husband and child in Manumgawa, Weeraketiya. A hardworking woman, Dilani sews clothes at home which her husband sells at the Weeraketiya market. Dilani saved up to buy a Juki machine so that she could turn out products of a better quality and, as a result, there is a high demand for their items during festival seasons.

At such times, Dilani hires additional workers from the village and has trained eight women in dressmaking. Dilani is, thus, a unique businesswoman in mentoring her workers up to the level that they could set up their own businesses. She says that six of her eight trainees have already done so, and only two remain in her employment. Thus Dilani has empowered other while trying to survive herself. "It was not an easy task," she explains. "Most women in the village can sew. But bringing them up to a sufficient standard to sell their products in a highly competitive field was very challenging."

A home-based entrepreneur who started very small, developing to a scale where her products are featured in many shops across the district is a real achievement. She has many dreams, including to own a house one day. Dilani's work is the family's only source of income, and she and her husband struggle a lot to make ends meet. She is pregnant at the moment, and her husband helps with the sewing activities.

It is with all these cares that Dilani is also involved in community activities. She is the treasurer of the Kantha Bala Mandalaya and

a member of the Mothers Society. Given her experience handling her own business, she is recognised as a good financial manager. Further, she has taken advantage of opportunities to receive training in management and audits that have come her way via the Women's Society (such as one programme by the Department of Labour on self-employment).

Dilani is an example for many women who wish to engage in self-employment. "Many women want to start a business because they are desperate to earn an income. But these efforts fail quickly as the women do not have the business skills," Dilani says. Consequently, she is a ready source of advice to other women on running a business. Compared to many women who confine themselves to household work and depend on their husband's income, Dilani's drive and independence have challenged stereotypes. "My husband always says that I am his strength," she says, with a big smile on her face.

Her leadership qualities as an entrepreneur and her involvement in social welfare activities are much valued in her community.





MADHURIKA PIYUMALI

GIVING YOUNG WOMEN A VOICE

Madhurika (26) is a youthful visionary in the Obbegoda community, in the Dambagalle area of Moneragala. Her social engagement began with the village Children's Club, graduating to the Youth Club initiated by the National Youth Services Council. She was a student of Madulla Maha Vidyalaya until the G.C.E. O/L examination, and joined Alpitiya Vidyalaya for the Advanced Level classes.

The Youth Club was stagnant and had only a few members when Madhurika joined. She worked tirelessly to engage more young people to plan and carry out activities like youth camps, as well as religious, cultural, and environmental programmes. "Many youth today just don't get the whole point of volunteerism, and it was a challenge convincing them why they should get involved. But my own commitment and example have motivated my peers to be more active. I made sure that their efforts were appreciated as I noticed self-value is very important for youth," says Madhurika, reflectively.

After the A/L examination, Madhurika followed the Kelaniya University's external programme for a Bachelor of Arts degree and earned a higher diploma in information technology at the Sri Lanka Youth Center in Madulla. She was recruited as an

instructor at the Center. "This opportunity gave me access to many young people, and I was able to educate them in IT, a rare skill in areas like Madulla. At the same time, it was a good opportunity to mobilise youth for social causes," Madhurika explained.

She became the Assistant-Secretary of the Madulla Provincial Youth Club. This was a tremendous achievement for a young woman from her poverty-stricken rural district. Consequently, Madhurika became a role model for other young women with a great interest in seeing their communities develop. Even for Madhurika, with her track record of leadership, rising to office at the provincial level created the space for her to come into her own as an outspoken and visionary leader. She has since been busy organising camps and outbound training for youth.

She set up a community-based organisation, the Madulla Ekamuthu Youth Forum (youth standing strong together). She started the **Our Voice Matters** project to enhance young people's capacities to make decisions. Also, she was the national editor of a youth magazine begun via the project. The magazine has not only given girls and young women an opportunity to see their writing in print; it has transformed into a platform through which

to articulate their concerns and demand their rights. As a result of Madhurika's hard work with the youth Magazine, the Moneragala district has been recognised as one of the two districts with the highest women's representation in a youth magazine.

Now a registered CBO, Madhurika's organisation has carried out many activities for young people in Madulla. She still takes the lead in writing proposals and fundraising. "It has not been an easy journey for me, being a woman," she explains. "My mother was totally against my work as she feared that people would make up stories about me." She tells of how the neighbours would constantly question her mother about her whereabouts, since it went completely against traditional norms for an unmarried young woman to be out in public, so actively, without a chaperone. Family support is critical for a woman of Madhurika's background to resist such pressure and speculation. Madhurika's father was firmly in her corner. "My father is a teacher and keenly aware that girls should have the opportunity to grow and contribute to their society. He convinced my mother—and many of the questioning villagers—that work I was doing was important, for the benefit of the whole community," explains Madhurika.

She has shown that she is a talented, capable woman and an outstanding role model for young girls in her community. In 2017 the National Youth Services Council nominated her for a youth exchange programme in Bangalore, India. "It's irrelevant whether you are a girl or a boy. What matters is your commitment and skill. They will take you where you want to go in life. This is my belief," said Madhurika, smiling.





MANEL MALKANTHI

FARMER EXTRAORDINAIRE

Manel (32), originally from Kurunegala, gained her knowledge of farming by helping and working alongside her parents on the family farm. This was the life she was accustomed to from a very young age, and leaving school after grade ten, she began to take on greater responsibilities to assist her parents' paddy and vegetable cultivation. A skillful cyclist, Manel would pack and transport their produce to the market to be sold. Some in her conservative rural community would encourage; others would deride her as trying to act like a boy. Manel would always snap back that "It's a pity boys are not doing these things anymore, if it's boys' work."

She got married in 2004 at 17 and moved to her husband's hometown of Madyama Nuwara Gam Palatha in Anuradhapura. He works as a clerk in a UN branch office in Anuradhapura and is very supportive of his wife's independence. They are parents to a son (8) and twin daughters (12).

Eager to earn a living, Manel opened a store selling vegetable in front of her house. She would cycle through the village buying produce from farmers.

Manel eventually saved up enough to purchase a three-wheeler to make the trips to her suppliers and began selling watermelon near the Ruwanwelisaya temple, a popular destination for local and foreign visitors. With the proceeds, Manel was able to build a house and start cultivating her own lands. Manel's determined and tireless efforts, as well as her understanding and experience in marketing vegetable produce, brought much prosperity to her family, and she managed to invest further in her business. She bought and drives a lorry and double-cab across the district to transport vegetables and fruit. Although she was initially a stranger from a distant place, she soon became well known and appreciated in the area for her industry and courage.

She is a role model to many women in the village, always ready to lend a hand to any woman who wants follow her example and engage in an agribusiness. Manel supports women cultivators, in particular, by buying their products and encouraging them to strive to increase production. "Most women complain that they can't earn a living as they have kids and other household work. I always mentor

them as I know what it is to be a mother and a wife and what it took to become the businesswoman and community leader I am today,” Manel says proudly.

Typically, Manel looked for a way to offer livelihood support to women. She set up the Diriya Kantha Samiti women’s society in 2017, which now has 25 members, and aims to enhance the lives of women farmers with the necessary resources, knowledge, and support services. In 2018 Manel introduced organic gardening for women and created a market for their produce. She has now trained all the members in organic cultivation, drawing on the local Agricultural Officer. She is keenly aware of the family problems women farmers face, knowing that without solutions for these problems, it’s extremely difficult for women to commit to farming.

Say Manel, “Although women are very hardworking there are many challenges which limit their involvement, especially patriarchal attitudes.” She has been trained on women’s empowerment by leading NGOs working in the area. Manel is an outstanding community leader and a pillar of strength for women farmers, supporting them towards economic independence while contributing towards the improvement of agriculture in her village.





MONIKA KUMARI

DOMESTIC ISOLATION TO SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

Monica (32) and her younger brother grew up with their grandmother in Welimada, Nuwara Eliya, as their parents moved to Mahiyangana to cultivate a plot of land they'd received from the government. She studied up to the G.C.E. A/L examination at Welimada Vijaya Vidyalaya, where she was head prefect and active in many school clubs and societies. After she left school, Monica continued her social work through youth societies and sports clubs. Her grandmother was a traditional woman but allowed Monica to engage in youth activities since Monica was able to convince her grandmother about her desire to contribute to society.

Monica got married when she was just 19 years to a soldier. He was conventionally protective of his wife and forbade her from carrying out social work or having any connections to society. This was the hardest period of her life as she was compelled to live in isolation. This was not the life Monica wanted but adapted to it out of love for her husband. "I understood my husband's concern for my protection as I was very young and immature," Monica says. So she was thrilled when the president of the local Women's Society, who was also related to her husband, invited Monica to become a member. "I was able to persuade my husband through this woman's mediation that I should participate in the activities of the Women's Society. With time, my husband came around and began to support my social work," says Monica.

Monica and her husband moved to Buttala, in the Moneragala district, in 2012. By then, they had a daughter and a son and had another son after settling down in Buttala. It was not long before Monica joined the community organisations in the region and eagerly took part in training programmes led by non-government organisations. She discovered a special

talent for coordinating with local government authorities and channeling services to the village. Whenever government or NGO officers wanted to organise village events or rally other women in the community, they turned to Monica.

"There was a time that I regretted not going on to higher education. But I don't feel that anymore as I have gathered so much knowledge through my social engagement. I also have the opportunity to educate others in my community. I feel proud that my community accepts my ability to educate them," says Monica happily.

Community leaders like her contribute tremendously towards bringing women together. Monica visits the homes of women who live a solitary, isolated existence within the confines of the home. She is eager to help them realise their leadership skills, believing that "Every woman has hidden talents. The problem is they are either unaware of or are not allowed to use those talents."

Reflecting on her own journey, Monica knows that every woman must find her own path. She stands ready to offer support and courage.

P.M.NANDAWATHI

A PIONEERING LEADER

P. M. Nandawathie had to overcome many challenges in realising her passion for community work. Nandawathie studied up to the G.C.E. O/L examination at Alpitiya Central College in Dambagalla. No longer a young woman at 55, she proudly says that the people in her village of Ihawela Uva Gangodagama, in Moneragala, recognise her energy and hard work towards developing their community. Nandawathie wears many hats: she is the president of the Govi Kantha society, an association of women farmers in the area; and secretary of the Farmers' Organisation, Cooperative Society, and Vihara (temple) Development Society.

Leadership is not something that happens overnight but developed through years of engagement and activism. Working in community development in the Ihawa area has not always been an easy task for Nandawathie. Society often expects women to be confined to the domestic sphere and not take on a public role: pushing back against these expectations, Nandawathie tried to make a change in her community and experimented with development solutions that could improve the lives of those around her. So, 20 years ago, she took the initiative of establishing a village Women's Society. Back then, women could only become leaders of women's collectives, while men rose to leadership in all other community or district groups. Society believed in less at the time in women's capacity to be decision makers. Instead, women were considered solely as the passive recipients of community development initiatives.

Women's involvement in the narrow sphere of Women's Societies were allowed since it was believed that women would bring something back to the family. There was no conception of women gaining something for themselves, financially or in terms of greater self-respect and self-esteem.

Nandawathie's leadership and personal choices shattered traditional gender expectations. "I didn't even consider marriage as I was too passionate and committed to social work. My family and relatives would often scold me about my lack of interest in marriage, but I somehow always managed to slide away from those discussions. I don't have any regrets," she laughed.

Nandawathie got involved in many community groups and negotiated her way into leadership positions through her active and powerful personality. Similarly, she encouraged and paved the way for other women to take on leadership and responsibility too. Nandawathie's efforts have challenged the traditional male-dominated culture of the village. It is interesting to note that she has accomplished all this without creating conflict with men. "Unlike in the past, the men in our village are not very active about taking up public responsibilities; and they don't make fuss about women becoming leaders except in the case of their wives. It is true that patriarchal attitudes remain, but I am happy to say the situation is changing for the better," Nandawathie explains hopefully.

Today, she is a much-respected community leader in the whole district. She has become the link between the village and local authorities. She has created opportunities for women and girls at the divisional and district levels. Nandawathie says she will contribute to develop young leaders, especially girls and young women, until her final breath.





NISHANTHI UDAYAKUMARI

A TIRELESS ADVOCATE FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

Nishanthi (45), of Madyama Nuwara Gampalatha, Galkadawala, is a human rights activist and the person members of the community turn to for help when their rights have been violated. A member of the village society representing the Human Rights Commission, she actively fights for people's rights, especially women's rights.

Leaving school after grade 11, Nishanthi found work in a garments factory; she eventually worked abroad for two years in a similar job, managing to save up and build her own house. She considers this her first triumph. A go-getter, determined to acquire more income-earning skills, Nishanthi earned a diploma in sewing and beauty culture, deciding that the latter was her field of work. She joined a few salons and beauty studios, again working abroad in Singapore and Maldives for few years. This experience would come in handy later when wanted to start her own beauty salon. Nishanthi is famous among her friends as a woman of numerous skills. "I managed to find opportunities and educate myself all by myself, I didn't have anyone to support me or mentor. I believed from childhood that girls should have the freedom to grow during life without giving in to fate, and I did," Nishanthi proudly states.

She got married in 2007, settling down in Galkadawala with her husband with a lot of hope for a happy life together. Although it was a love marriage, Nishanthi's husband turned on her after the birth of her second son who is autistic. Therefore, she made up her mind again to direct her own life and take care of the children herself.

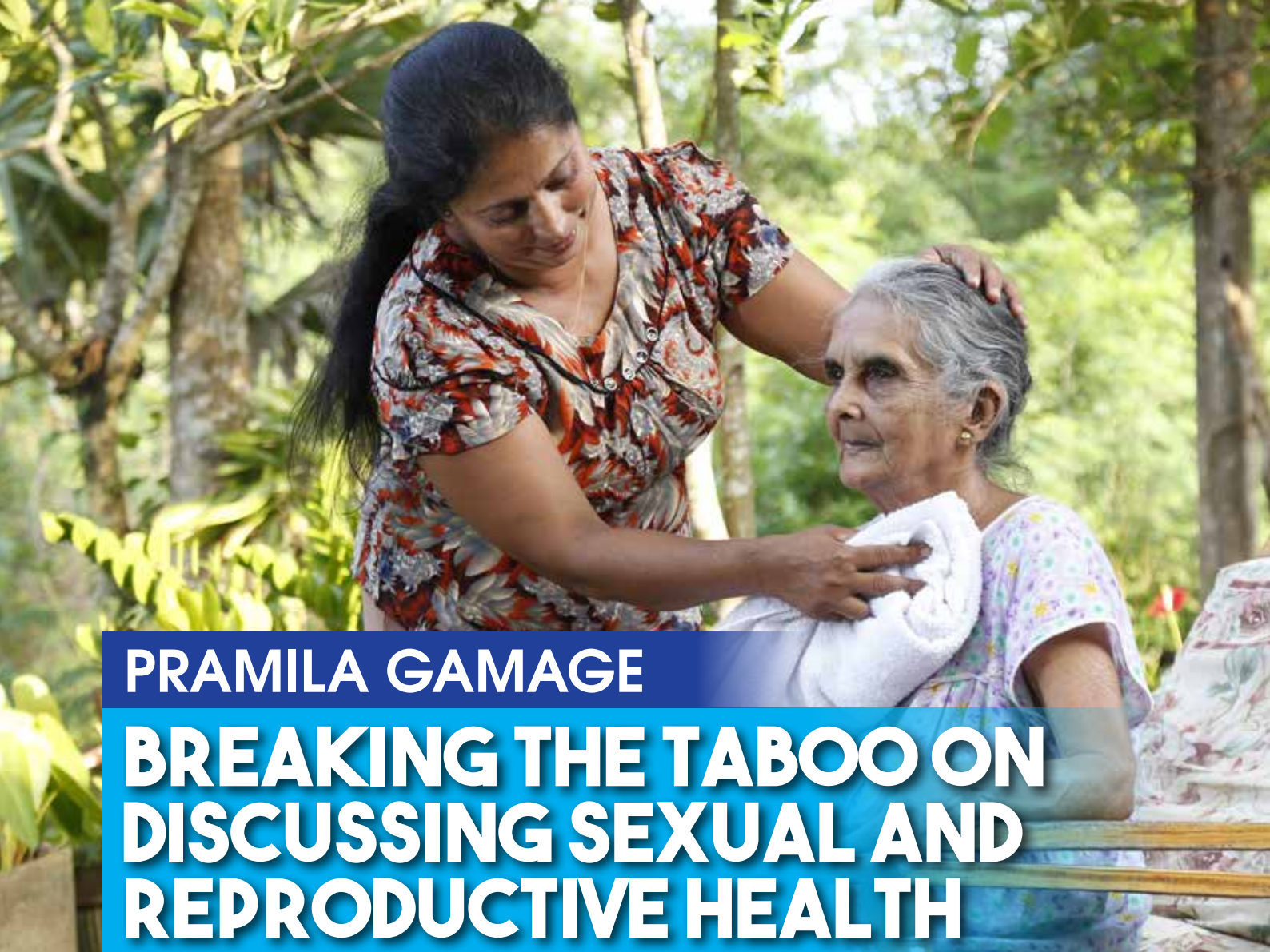
A mother and businesswoman, Nishanthi is a community leader too. She started the Women's Society in Galkadawaka in 2010 along with the Children's Club. Nishanthi is deeply concerned about the low self-esteem of women in her area and their conservative notions about their identities and lives as women: she is troubled that such attitudes limit women's capacity and create dependency in them. In turn, Nishanthi explains, women transfer these attitudes to their daughters and sons. Nishanthi says that parents are afraid of too much, adhere to social stereotypes, and do not educate their daughters on how to face life's challenges; they inhibit the girls' growth and do not allow them to choose their careers. Faced by these pressures, as well as deprived of social knowledge, many young girls between 15-20 make a bid for freedom in unsafe relationships. This leads to many underage

marriages and girls dropping out from school. Hence, Nishanthi is really passionate about the Children's Club as it allows her to reach out to young girls.

As the leader of the Galkadawaka Women's Society, Nishanthi works closely with girls and boys, setting up various trainings and skills development programmes to engage them in productive activities. She also involves their parents in discussion and brings experts to the village to educate them on challenging gender stereotypes. Further, she assists women in economic difficulty through training for self-employment and to start their small businesses. She is thus passionate about human rights and coordinates with local authorities and NGOs to help those who have had their rights violated find redress and justice.

Nishanthi draws on her family's support to take care of her children, especially her autistic younger son. Despite all the hardship in her life, she gained the National Vocational Qualification in beauty culture offered by the Vocational Training Authority in Anuradhapura.

"It's true that I sometimes feel tired and overburdened. But social work gives me so much pleasure. I would be no one if I stayed away from this work," she says, wiping away the sweat from her face and taking a deep breath before smiling. Women like Nishanthi deserve more recognition and reward for the commitment and determination they bring to each day of their lives.



PRAMILA GAMAGE

BREAKING THE TABOO ON DISCUSSING SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Premila Gamage (43), of Palugaswewa, Manupa, Anuradhapura, was passionate about helping people while still a schoolgirl at Walisinghe Harichchandra Maha Vidyalaya where she led many student clubs and societies. These days, she assists the region's Public Health Midwife (PHM) in her work. She follows the midwife on her home-visits, helping to maintain records of pregnant mothers and mothers with very young children, supporting check-ups, and monitoring of the nutritional and other requirements of these mothers and children. She has become the PHM's right hand.

A prominent member of the Palugaswewa Liyawaruna Women's Society, Premila is a good listener and finds many women confiding their most difficult or secretive problems in her. She knows that sexual and reproductive health (SRH) related issues are a taboo topic in many rural areas; consequently, women are too embarrassed or feel that they would be judged negatively if they discuss such matters openly. The practice is for women to suffer in silence instead. Premila shared this mindset until she underwent many SRH trainings through her association with the PHM and the

PHI (Public Health Inspector). "I know that many young girls are completely unaware of how a child is conceived until they themselves give birth after marriage, and sometimes even after then," Premila says.

She recalls how she got married at 18 in a state of ignorance, with many unanswered questions, not daring to speak to anyone, not even her husband. As a result of her training and voluntary work with the PHM, she was amazed to find out that women are missing a lot in their sexual lives and hiding many complications. "I wanted to make a change in women's sexual life," stated Premila, "knowing that other women leaders are more in to enhancing women's social and the economic lives."

Thus Pramila started to talk to women and raise awareness about SRH issues. She reached women through the pregnant women and mother's clinics in Palugaswewa. The Medical Officer of Health in the Manupa area sees her as an invaluable resource to raise awareness among mothers, and even young girls. She supports in mobilising mothers and assists in the clinics with childcare too.

She works through the Women Farmers Society, Welfare Society, Mothers Committee, and the Provincial Women's Federation to reach out to women on SRH issues. Premila has also organised many health camps in her village. "it is really important to build trust through knowledge. Women do not share their stories unless they are assured that they will receive an answer. Maintaining confidentiality is also very important," she says, explaining further that over the years she has gathered the knowledge and expertise to win their trust.

Premila talks about having to fight through her own shyness to become a powerful speaker on SRH issues to inspire confidence among other women to break the taboo. Premila has even been asked to intervene and give advice in many disputes between spouses related to sexual relationships. Premila shows maturity beyond her years in handling these issues: "I always make sure that families are able to lead happier lives," she said.





R.M. PREMATHIE

A LIFETIME WORKING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

Life challenged **R. M. Premawathie** (60), of Dambagalla, in the Moneragala district, to become a leader in her community. "There cannot be any woman who has faced as much injustice as I have since childhood. Instead of dwelling on what happened to me, I learned many lessons for life becoming stronger than ever," reflects Premawathie.

She was the eldest of 11 children. Her parents were poor farmers, struggling day and night to take care of the family. There were nights the entire family stayed awake weaving reed mats got the market. Despite their dire poverty, Premawathie continued her studies up to the G.C.E. A/L examination at Piyaarachana Vidyalaya, Moneragala. She was not only a brilliant student but a talented sportswoman. She played netball, volleyball, and track and field events, winning medals and trophies at national tournaments.

Missing the cut-off mark for university by a few marks was a major setback, as she could not justify taking the examination again with all the difficulties in the family. She was keenly conscious of her responsibilities as the eldest child. She applied two times to teaching appointments in government

schools, but despite being sufficiently qualified, lost the opportunity both times due to lack of political backing. This shattered her hopes once again. Premila felt the only option left was getting married to a man who could maintain her as well as help her support her large family.

Therefore in 1985, at 24, she married a farmer. Later, she gave birth to three sons and a daughter. She was determined that her children's prospects would not be blighted by injustice, understanding that she needed to carve out a place for herself in society. In 1990, she joined the local Women's Society and was appointed its secretary. That was the start of a long journey and, so far, she has held office in more than 30 community organisations and village committees: in the District Women's Federation, the Village Development Society, the Farmers Society, District Farmers Forum in Moneragala, and many others.

Premawathie enjoyed working in these organisations and committed herself to serve the women and their families in Dambagalle. She is a very hardworking woman who works beside her husband in all the farming activities. She doesn't

expect any monetary compensation from her community work but serves on a voluntary basis. “We don’t even get the bus fare to travel for all this community work. But we tried hard to coordinate with the relevant authorities and organisations to transfer the benefits to our members who are mostly women,” she states.

Premawathie has helped many households obtain electricity and water connections and coordinated aid for construction of more than 50 houses. Through her efforts, 127 houses received sanitary facilities and most of the access roads to the village were paved with concrete. Most importantly, she has helped many women secure grants and loan facilities to improve their businesses.

“I can talk about hundreds of things that I have done for my community in my three decades of community service. I know that women and their families respect me for all support I have given. Even my children and my husband feel proud of me,” Premawathie said with tears in her eyes, thinking back to the hard times she faced.

Today she is a proud mother as all three of her children are doing government jobs and happily married. She has also overcome political barriers to forge close connections with local politicians. She says she used to expect their support but suffered many disappointments and injustice too. Now, a prominent community leader, she says the politicians looking to her for support which she will only negotiate based on the service they actually provide for her community.

“It was a hard journey, but worthwhile,” Premawathie, a Justice of Peace for the whole country, says with pride.





R.M.N.GNANAVATHI

AN UNWAVERING CHANGE MAKER

R. M. N. Gnanawathie (57) has always been passionate about changing her community for the better, no matter how challenging or arduous the process. She was a young radical and was suspended from school, Nikapotha Vidyalaya, at 13 for engaging in political activities. Today she laughs about skipping school to attend local political events but regrets that she couldn't continue her education since her parents had no idea of how to deal with the authorities to get her back into school.

"I loved politics as a child because I thought it helped to fight injustice. I hate injustice. It's a pity how corrupt politics have become. And I am not sure anymore if it fights injustice or creates injustice," Gnanawathie says thoughtfully.

Originally from Haputale, in Nuwara Eliya district, Gnanawathie's family moved to Wellawaya in Moneragala where her father, a plumber at the Irrigation Department, was transferred. Now a resident of Buttala, Gnanawathie has a keen interest in working with others, as well as excellent leadership and public speaking skills. "I was always fond of working with people. I think I've always played the role of a leader in my own way," she says.

She initiated the Wellassa Diriya Kantha ("courageous women") women's society in her village, Dodanwatta, in 2014, has been its secretary for the last 4 years and is the current president. The society is now part of the Divisional Women's Federation of Buttala, Moneragala. Gnanawathi says that women's societies are very important in communities like hers as a way for women to empower each other and collectively work towards development goals. Gnanawathie has supported many women to become self-employed in businesses related to sewing, gardening, and cooking.

Gnanawathie has always done what she feels is the right thing to do and never lacked for courage. She sought a divorce after 11 difficult years of marriage. "If there is no understanding between the partners, it's useless staying together. It only leads to conflict," she says. Gnanawathie married a second time believing in the stability of her new relationship. She knows that divorce and remarriage, especially for women, are heavily frowned upon in her community. Women will even suffer violence rather than opt for separation and divorce. Gnanawathie will never tolerate injustice,



and her message to her other women is, "Do not suffer in silence." She has supported many women through their personal and economic problems. With her skills to empower women through encouragement and motivation, she has changed the lives of many. She is happy that her present husband is very supportive of her work and understands her passion for radical social change.

She is an activist working on human rights, as well as alcohol and drugs prevention. She has mobilised women and youth in her community to advocate against sale of drugs near schools. She has convinced people to send letters to the Ministry of Education demanding action. She has also helped nudge youth towards sports activities as a strategy of keeping them away from drugs. Gnanawathie also set up a community volleyball team for girls in 2019.

"Parents know that my intentions are good, so they send their children willingly to participate in these activities. Young people are also very close to me and they choose to work with me," Gnanawathi says.

She believes that if an individual wants to create a better society, their age is not a consideration. Gnanawathie says it's important to reach out to all age groups since they contribute towards negative attitudes, especially concerning women and girls in public life. "I fought back because I was brave enough to shatter stereotypes, but not all women and girls are willing to do. So it's my responsibility to support them to overcome their fears," Gnanawathi explains. She is a passionate advocate of collective action towards women's emancipation.



THARANGA SANDAMALI

AN UNCONVENTIONAL SIGHT AT THE GAS STATION

Taranga Sandamali (33) lives in Dabarella, Weeraketiya, in the Hambantota district. Her family of three sisters and two brothers lost their father before Taranga was born. Her mother looked after her children with no outside support, by labouring in paddy fields or on construction sites. Taranga's family knew what it was to live with grinding poverty. Despite all this hardship, she went to Ratmalwewa School where she studied up to grade 11. At school, young Taranga's talent for singing was revealed. She took part in competitions and was even offered an opportunity to sing on radio but, due to the family's economic difficulties, she was compelled to pass up the opportunity. On leaving school she decided to support her mother by getting a job.

Taranga got married at 17 due to poverty. Taranga says that her husband's disability (he is mute) has never been a problem as they love each other. They have three children. The income Taranga's husband earned working as a mason on construction sites was insufficient to support the family, so in 2010 Taranga went to the Persian Gulf region to work as a domestic aide. Her son and daughter, 7 and 5 at the time, were in the care of her mother-in-law.

Although missing their mother, the children received plenty of love and affection from their grandparents.

Taranga returned to Sri Lanka because of the difficult working conditions set by her employer. Then her husband fell ill, and she was forced to borrow money for his treatment. To pay off their debt, Taranga left to Kuwait to work as a domestic aide. This employer was worse than the previous one, even withholding her salary. Before travelling to Kuwait, Taranga had learned that she was pregnant; therefore, she quit her job and returned to Sri Lanka. In 2015, after giving birth to her third child, she joined a garment manufacturing factory in Weeraketiya as a labourer but quit working after a time as she felt that her children needed her at home. Without a steady income, the family faced many difficulties; Taranga managed to subsist by growing their own food, by selling coconuts from their garden, and with occasional help from her in-laws.

Three years later, Taranga was looking for a job, and one of her friends told her that the new gas station in Middeniya was hiring workers: both Taranga and her husband were taken on. It is extremely unusual

for a woman to do a non-traditional job like this, especially in rural Hambantota. "I applied for this job without even knowing what was involved or how to do it. But I didn't care. I was confident that I could manage anything after everything I have gone through in life," Tharanga said with determination.

A dedicated, hardworking woman, Taranga quickly learned to operate the gas pump. She recalls how she made mistakes and miscalculations at the beginning, appreciates that the owner of the gas station understood her circumstances and gave her time to learn. She works at the gas station until 8pm and goes home to be with her family with a lot of hope for the future.

Taranga dismisses the notion that women should not work night shifts or travel at night. "I feel independent and confident and have increased my social connections," she says proudly, remarking also that other women admire her for holding down such an unconventional job, despite initial doubts about whether she would be able to manage.

Taranga is also a good community leader. She was the secretary of the Samurdhi Society and chairperson of the Gami Diriya programme. "It is important that you give back to your community. If the community we live in has good values, it creates a safe space for our children to grow," Tharanga explains. She regrets that she is unable to do more social work given her tight job schedule.

Taranga is a woman of resilience and strength who refused to give up even at the lowest points of her life. She is living proof that there is no distinction between men's work and women's work, and equal work opportunities benefit women economically and socially. "A woman can do the same job as a man," asserts Taranga. "All that matters is whether a woman has the skills required." Each day that she goes to work at the gas station, Taranga blazes a new trail for women. We salute her bravery and strength.





A.M.PREMALATHA

AT THE PICKET LINE

She is among a handful of women in Udagama, Buttala, who have found their voice and gained the confidence needed to stand up and speak about the things that are important not just for them but for the entire community. **A. M. Premalatha** (64) is a strong believer that education, an active school life, plays a significant role in shaping one's future. She recalls being a talented public speaker, throwing herself into sports, and holding office in school clubs and associations while a student at Dutugamunu Vidyalaya, Moneragala. "I was the only girl in my family, and the most outstanding, forward, and social child. I was a much stronger student and more active in extracurricular activities than my three brothers," Premalatha laughs.

Despite her good results at the G.C.E. O/L examination, Premalatha decided to leave school, opting to take up a job she'd been offered at the Buttala Cooperative Association. After two years of on the job training from the Polgolla Training Institute, Premalatha became the manager of the Cooperative Association at a very tender age of 23. Her managerial skills were excellent, earning frequent praise from her supervisors. In the meantime, she met and married her life-

partner, a colleague who was also a manager at the Association. She worked for 15 years until her husband met with an accident in 1992. She was compelled to leave her job to take care of her convalescing husband. "It was not easy to handle our three children and my husband at the same time. But that experience made me realise how strong a woman can be," Premalatha explains.

Due to financial difficulties, Premalatha started work at a garment factory in 1993, once her husband was able to manage on his own. Typically for her, Premalatha shone in this new field of work. Within a very short period, she was promoted to Operator, then to Supervisor, due to her talent in managing people. She completed a decade at the factory, where nearly 800 employees toiled day and night, keenly observing instances of injustice.

"It began gradually," says Premalatha. "Many of the workers were young women. They labored for months without pay or for half the stipulated wage. They were afraid and lacked the confidence to bring their grievances to the authorities. I felt that I should stand up for them because it was not just the workers who suffered but their families who

depended on their meagre salary.” Thus, Premalatha formed a trade union, with the support of the fellow workers, to demand justice. She was the Secretary and later chosen as the union’s President. Premalatha was tireless in fighting for their cause. “I was confident that we could win this struggle,” she says. “My fellow-workers trusted me. We launched a strike in Colombo to find a solution for this matter and prevailed at the end!”

Now, Premalatha is a senior member in her community. She continues to raise her voice against injustice, particularly through the Yashodara Women’s Society which was her brainchild. Premalatha is very approachable, and other women look up to Latha akka (older sister) as a highly resourceful and knowledgeable woman. Her husband, whom she still praises for his extraordinary support in her personal and public lives, died in 2017. Now she has started home-business growing flowers with her younger daughter. She is ever willing to share her knowledge about running a business with other women who seek her out.

Premalatha’s exceptional leadership skills have taken her to the position of President of the Regional Bala Mandala (women federation) for 11 divisions in the Moneragala District. She engages in welfare activities through Sarvodaya, the Death Donation Society, and the Sports Club in the village. Local politicians have invited Premalatha to run for office, an offer she has vehemently rejected on the grounds that you don’t need to get involved in politics to serve the community. This is something Premalatha knows well, having been presented with a Diriya Kaantha (courageous woman) award in 2018 and 2019 for her immense service to the community.

Premalatha’s primary concern is to empower young women to seek a better life. She is a classic example that gender is no barrier in serving one’s community. She has shown that women’s voices are as powerful as those of men.



GAYANI MADHUSHIKA

CAPTAINING YOUTH

Living in the extremely remote village of Ruwalwela, in Moneragala, has not prevented Gayani Madushika from pursuing her life goals. The youngest child in her family and only girl, Gayani has made her parents very proud from a young age. She completed the G.C.E. A/L examination at Daliwa Central College, Moneragala in 2015. She developed an extraordinary passion for sports which helped her bring fame to school competing in provincial sports competitions. "I have taken part in a number of leadership training programmes, sports camps, and tournaments where I learned how to accept victory and defeat alike and also the importance of team spirit. I was rarely in the classroom: everyone knew they could find me on the school playground!" Gayani smiles. With her talents and leadership skills, Gayani served as a prefect and school games captain. "Under my captaincy during the inter-house sports meet, everyone knew we would definitely achieve the champions cup. Everyone was so certain of it as they trusted me," she says.

Now 23, Gayani continues to be involved in sports through the Ruwalwela Sports Club and the Uva Sports Academy where she is training to be a sports instructor and coach. Her family has been a true blessing as they have given her the freedom to do what she loves. She is a talented Judoka and wrestler, male dominated sports in Sri Lanka.

Gayani realised early that the aptitude for leadership skills she had honed on the playing field could be channeled to serve her community. Having heard that the Rantharu Youth Club in Ruwalwela was inactive, she promptly rolled up her sleeves and set about restructuring the Club, newly inaugurated as the Muthuhara Youth Club in 2013. Today, she takes pride in leading nearly 50 youth as the Club's President. Also, she has built an alliance with another youth club to carry out community projects and welfare work. For instance, they



lobbied for funds from the Youth Council, which were used to cover a much-used road in the village with concrete.

"Getting youth to participate in public forums is indeed challenging," Gayani says. "At times I find it extremely difficult to convince parents that giving their children the liberty to engage in social and welfare activities is not paving the way for mischief. Many parents are ignorant of the opportunities awaiting us. So I even visit homes to talk to parents. Now they trust me and willingly send their children whenever I organise a community event." More importantly, Gayani Youth Club's monthly meetings have become a forum for the village youth to talk about their issues and the needs of the community.

Gayani is a rising star in the Divisional Youth Council in Madulla, where she has served since 2015. "I believe that young women like me can do a lot to improve society if we have enough courage and determination. I will try my level best to encourage my sisters to pursue their dreams as they should know that the kitchen is not the only place where women can rule and make decisions."

S.G.L.PUSHPALATHA

NEVER AN IDLE DAY IN HER LIFE

Raised in Embilipitiya, Pushpalatha (55) moved east to Buddhiyagama in Weraketiya, Hambanthota, after marriage. For anyone visiting her home, the first thing that catches their eye is the beautiful garden blooming with varieties of flowers. The red Anthurium is Pushpalatha's favorite as they are easy to grow and constantly in demand. She grows vegetables and spices too. After trying her hand at many home businesses, Pushpalatha discovered her green thumb and, through her gardening, a source of income and the refuge she has sought all her life.

A child with 13 siblings, Pushpalatha had to care for the younger children while she was still growing up. The economic hardships at home and the time and labor involved in being responsible for her siblings meant that Pushpalatha had no space to focus on school. Much of her time was spent on the family's agricultural work.

She got married at 26 and became mother to a daughter and son. Without steady work, she and her husband had to rely on odd jobs to make a living, struggling to raise their children. Pushpalatha was the secretary of the village Samurdhi Society and took out a loan from Samurdhi Bank to start her own business. With the LKR 100,000 capital, she set up a workshop producing concrete products for construction activities. Concrete columns, indispensable in building houses, were in great demand. Pushpalatha was able to turn her husband's energies into a positive direction as well: "This decision to start the business helped me to free my husband from alcohol and tobacco, as his addiction was eating into every cent we earned through hard work."

Eight years of laboring day and night, and Pushpalatha fell ill. "We weren't making enough money to hire laborers. Perhaps we were not as capable as we'd hoped and didn't have the necessary skills to manage the business with staff. But we realised that we just couldn't do it anymore," Pushpalatha explains. Despite giving up the business, she is happy that they were able to educate their children and build a house they now live in during those eight years. Not long after, Pushpalatha



began her plant nursery and garden. "I have never spent a day without doing something productive to support my family unless I am very sick," she says. A local political leader who saw Pushpalatha's hard work donated 300 orchid plants to expand the nursery and increase her income. Thus, she is much admired and respected in the community for her efforts to stand on her own feet.

Pushpalatha is a women's leader, with the Ranahansi Women's Society of which she is an active member adjudged the best of its kind in the Weereketiya Divisional Secretariat in 2018. She is the assistant-secretary of the Provincial Women's Federation and vice-president of the Buddhiyagama Samurdhi Society. Her ability to mobilise people for social work is well known, simply because since she has won many people's hearts through her own commitment.

"A woman can lead others only if she stands as a role model herself," Pushpalatha says, explaining that many women look up to her because she persevered despite the setbacks in her life. "I tell other women, 'There is always a way out so don't give up. Don't suffer alone.'"

She says that community organisations create a space for women to voice their concerns and find the necessary strength to serve their communities and find alternative avenues for personal development.

ROHINI PRIYANTHI

A MULTI TALENTED LEADER

Rohini Priyanthi (50) was born in Galwadiya, Julampitiya, into a family of five siblings. As a child, she enjoyed sports more than books, taking part in track and field events, playing on the school volleyball and netball teams, and taking part in many sports competitions.

Her family didn't particularly encourage her to pursue her studies because, at the time, it was unconventional to educate girls beyond basic schooling. Rohini grew up hearing people say, "What's the use of educating girls? What would they do with all that education when they just get married to someone and leave home?" So after the first public schools examination, Rohini stayed at home and to help her parents with domestic chores.

As was commonplace, Rohini got married at 19, eventually giving birth to a daughter and son. Her passion for social work began nearly 24 years ago when her first child was barely one-and-a-half years. Rohini has served in leadership positions in the Civil Defence Committee, the Gami Diriya committee, and many other community organisations.

Farmers Associations play a critical role in rural Sri Lanka by mobilising resources, securing access to markets, and serving the general welfare of farmers. For last eight years, despite not engaging in much farming herself, Rohini has led the village Farmers Association. This is exceptional since the majority of farmers and leaders in the village are overwhelmingly men; the women and men farmers alike in Rohini's community were unanimous in insisting that she lead the association, however, knowing her ability to coordinate resources to help farmers face daily challenges.

"I never felt any fear about fulfilling my duties as president of the Association. I am well known in the District Secretariat and among service providers in the district. I am concerned about my people and passionate about ending their vulnerabilities," Rohini says.



Under her leadership, the Farmers Association rehabilitated the old Dammandiya minor irrigation scheme with a LKR 200,000 grant from the Walasmulla Divisional Secretariat. The members' collective efforts were more significant than the funding support. Rohini is so proud of the volunteerism shown by the members and their families: she reflects that "the free labor and touch of a good heart" was what really mattered. The entire village is highly appreciative of the Association's hard work since the newly renovated minor irrigation scheme has helped to increase agricultural production. "Rohini is an amazing leader. She would not give up under any circumstances," a member of the collective stated.

Rohini says she is very conscious of the need to manage your time well and imposes a fine of Rs. 10 on those who are late to community meetings. She says this strategy is very effective in getting people to learn time management in community projects.

Rohini supports her husband's carpentry work too, since she enjoys woodcarving. Their workshop employs three villagers. Rohini laughs that she handles the carving machines better than kitchen utensils. She believes strongly in women's independence, including the need to learn a skill towards earning their own income. That's the main reason she wanted her daughter to learn woodcarving: the young woman now works beside her father. As in farming, trades like woodcarving in Sri Lanka are dominated by men. "Learning new skills can enhance women's contribution to society and helps them adjust to new realities in life and face challenges," Rohini explains thoughtfully.

Rohini's talents are not limited to social work, leadership, and woodcarving, she sings and dances, performing in village festivals and other events.

Rohini is exceptional in defying gender stereotypes in her rural community and makes an active contribution to the development and welfare of her village.



A. RUBASINGHE

MENTORING YOUNG WOMEN LEADERS

Rubasinghe (64) lives in Muruthawela Gedara, Keppetiya North, in Weeraketiya. In between helping her husband to farm their small plot of land, Rubasinghe devotes her time to the village societies. She proudly counts over four decades of service to the community.

Back in the day, she joined the Samurdhi programme, going on to become the chairperson of the Samurdhi Society in her village. Rubasinghe was involved in improving the livelihood capacities of low-income families on the Samurdhi grants scheme. She was commended by the Samurdhi authorities for her outstanding contributions in enhancing the living standards of Samurdhi beneficiaries. During her tenure, Rubasinghe organised many training programmes to help set women on the path to economic empowerment. The Southern Province Ministry of Women's Affairs gave her an award as the most outstanding woman in the Weeraketiya Division during a ceremony marking International Women's Day in 2018. Furthermore, the Weeraketiya Divisional Secretariat and the Southern Province Ministry of Women's Affairs awarded her a medal for her contributions to the fight against rural poverty.

An excellent planner with a head for numbers, she serves as the treasurer of several village societies, including the Village Development Society and the Samurdhi Society. She is amazingly efficient and methodical at bookkeeping for the various societies, benefiting from being trained in organisational management by the Divisional Secretariat. "I don't waste the knowledge I received from such training programmes" she says. Many women in her village say that Rubasinghe is a remarkable woman whose work is more professional than anyone they know who works in the financial field. The villagers say that they cannot imagine anyone else as treasurer in their societies.





Rubasinghe feels otherwise. She knows that she is not getting any younger and is keenly conscious of the need to pass on her knowledge to the next generation. She says, "I am always on the look out for energetic young women whom I could get involved in my work so that they develop an interest in financial management. But most of them are afraid of making mistakes and taking up the responsibility."

She believes the women can benefit more if they are a part of decision making. "Leaders like us must empower women and educate women so that they are capable of analysing their own life conditions and deciding what is best for them." Rubasinghe's years of experience have given her a lot of mature insight into women's issues.

She mentors the women in her village on how to get the most out of their involvement in the village societies: "I know that many women have so much work at home. But they actively engage in social work; so it's the responsibility of women like me to guide and support them."

Her family strongly supports Pushpalatha's social work. She is a very humble woman and plans to continue her service to the community for as long as people want her to do so. "I suppose we don't feel old when we don't subscribe to the harmful social norms that limit our lives," she said.

SOMA MADDUMAGE

WOMAN IN CONSTRUCTION

Soma Maddumage (56) of Pahala-obada, Walasmulla, had a happy childhood. After finishing school, she got married very early when she was 20. She had two sons and a daughter. Her life took a major turn eight years later, when her husband was killed in the 1991 youth insurrection. A woman who had depended completely on her husband to taking care of her and their children, Soma did not know what to do. She was left with a field of banana and coconut trees and the house they lived in. But the income from the banana and coconut was insufficient to pay for her growing children's needs.

Soma took part in a training programme in non-traditional vocations for women, held by the Weeraketiya Sarvodaya with Canadian funding. Soma trained for a year in masonry work. She recalls that she needed a lot of patience and commitment: "Many people tried to discourage me, claiming that I was just wasting my time being trained in work that was inappropriate for a woman. But I didn't care. I needed some skills to earn a living."

When she started working as a mason, her daily income of LKR 100, later increasing to LKR 750. She would cycle to work, an unusual sight in the village. Initially skeptical, her neighbors and the community slowly came around. She mostly worked alone, sometimes as the solitary woman on a team of men. People liked to hire Soma for her neat and well-finished work. "Once, I was injured while working at a building site and had to be rushed to hospital. Examining my injuries, the doctor wanted to know what I had been doing. I told him I was a mason and had been working on a house. He was surprised and impressed. All the hospital staff took care of me very well and appreciated my courage," Soma said with tears of happiness.

Her children have no complaints about her choice of work. "They know how hardworking I am," she says, "and they support me every way they can. When they were still growing up, every day when I went home after work, they had the meals ready. They can take care of themselves," Soma sighs with relief. She managed to school her children, and now



all three are married and given her grandchildren. The two sons are working, while her daughter earns a living by sewing at home.

Soma became interested in community work when her children were grown up. She was the vice-president of the Women's Society and President of the Farmers Society. She also held office in the Weeraketiya Women's Federation and the Samurddhi Society.

Soma picked up many skills through her involvement with community organisations. She can make bags, purses, and tailor clothes. She even learned bridal dressing. "I somehow found the time to attend these training programmes; I serve my community free of charge while earning enough to make a living. It makes me happy," she states. Also, she is highly creative and has won many prizes at divisional competitions for her singing, dancing, and acting abilities.

This is a woman who has never spent an idle day in her life: from the moment she lost her husband, she fought to become economically empowered and take care of her children. Since 2013, when Soma was diagnosed with arthritis and could no longer work as a mason, she took to a new livelihood, selling herbal porridge. Her indomitable spirit is a testament to the ordinary courage and strength of so many women.

A photograph of Wasanthi Karunathilake, a woman with dark hair, wearing a red and black patterned top. She is holding several gold-colored awards and a large bouquet of pink flowers. The background is a solid blue color.

WSANTHI KARUNATHILAKE

BEAUTICIAN TO HORTICULTURALIST

Wasanthi Karunathilake (54) from Herewela, in the Walasmulla area of Hambantota, is an innovator. She has consistently looked for new ways to express her creativity and provide for herself and her family. As a child, Wasanthi moved a lot as her father, a principal, was transferred from school to school. She studied up to the G.C.E. O/L, then began a course in sewing and beauty culture. In 1996, with her diploma in beauty culture in hand, she got married. Wasanthi says she always enjoys learning new skills, especially English.

Wasanthi worked in a beauty salon for almost two decades and raised her daughter. However, when she was learned of a new opportunity in 2014—a home-gardening competition—she decided to give it a try. She won first place in the division, second place in the division, and discovered another talent. This was the beginning of a new stage for Wasanthi, now the president of two farmers societies, Didula and Sandali, through which she coordinates support for many women farmers.

In the past few years, Wasanthi has started experimenting with food technology. What started as tinkering in her home kitchen soon became a business. “I always wanted to find ways I could turn rurally-grown fruits into marketable products,” she explained. She makes mixed-fruit jam, bakes cakes of corn and flour, and makes banana chips for sale. She also experiments with mushrooms as an alternative to meat. Wasanthi has six employees

in the garden and kitchen, as well as supporting suppliers of fruit and other produce. She says that it’s difficult to convince people, especially women, of using homegrown fruits and vegetables to earn an income: “So I became an example” Wasanthi says she is determined to see more women becoming home entrepreneurs and also expand her own business to employ more women. “If they are interested in starting their own garden, I will give them seeds free of charge if they are unable to afford the startup costs. I will also mentor them to become entrepreneurs.”

Moving forward, Wasanthi hopes to continue her work in the food business and also plans to open a beauty salon. She has been widely recognised for her exceptional business skills, receiving a Women in Management award in 2015 and an Entrepreneurship award from the Southern Provincial Ministry of Sports and Youth Affairs, Manpower and Employment in 2016. She also received the Ruhunu Laka award from the Southern Province Ministry of Women’s Affairs at the 2018 Women’s Day commemoration.

Wasanthi believes that women should be engaged socially and always strive to improve themselves; she tries to motivate others whenever she can. She believes that her success comes from her willingness to try new things, experiment, and inspire change in others around her.



SUMITHRA GUNAWARDENA

SHAKING UP PATRIARCHY

Sumithra Gunawardena (36) is from Buttala. Soon after marriage at 20, she moved to her husband's hometown of Galle. When the family was affected by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, they were compelled to return to Buttala. Life was a hard struggle for Sumithra and her husband. The income they earned making bricks and doing other odd jobs was insufficient, and Sumithra's husband, who had been a soldier, decided to re-enlist.

Sumithra had been a young activist while still in school and later joined the local Yowun Haula Youth Club where she led many community activities. No matter how difficult life had become with the constant worry of making ends meet, Sumithra yearned to once again be a part of social work. So she became an active member of many community-based organisations. "I am really fond of children and think I have a special skill to work with them," says Sumithra, reflecting on why she began the Children's Club in Yudaganawa.

She is an indefatigable social mobiliser and leader in Yudaganawa, Buttala, where many women are marginalized and confined to the home and a traditional life of domesticity. Sumithra saw that women were poor, lacking the knowledge or skills to initiate an income-generation activity on their own. Supported by the Janashakthi Bank in Buttala, Sumithra established a Welfare Society in specifically to help women. She didn't stop there and created the Ambakolawewa Women's Small Group. Beginning with five members, it has grown to 25: the group supports families in distress due to poverty.

Despite the name, there are men in group's membership ranks. Many social organisations in rural Sri Lanka used to be male dominant (with the exceptions being the societies for women, widows, or women heads of households). Usually the husbands attend meetings and decide on community welfare projects, while the wives are expected to remain home. Sumithra's self-help group

is highly unique character in requiring husband-and-wife duos to become the members, with each alternatively attending the monthly meetings. This demands that women and men alike be aware of the society's work, and both get equal opportunities to participate in decision making and develop their skills.

Say Sumitra, "We established this mechanism to empower women and engage men in the awareness programmes aimed at changing attitudes towards the need for shared domestic responsibilities, as well as the family's social responsibilities."

The founding chairperson, Sumitra trained the other villagers to take responsibility and serve their community. She is adamant that women and men can hold office in the committee. She encourages members to get trained in how to conduct social activities and learn the leadership skills necessary for their public and personal lives. Also, the group has programmes for men to talk frankly about the costs of traditional masculinity and the need to embrace a different code of masculinity to become happier men in healthier relationships.

Sumitra also pioneered the village's Youth Club: she encourages youth and children to develop their innate talents, as well as acquire new skills and knowledge, by taking part in community projects. Sumitra proudly points to a second generation of social leaders among the village's young who are enthusiastic about the many social and cultural events.

This is a confident, highly-motivated woman who steered her whole community towards enhancing its human values. Sumitra says her path in life was determined by her family which strongly supported Sumitra's participation in sports at school and other social activities. Although she does not have a higher education, she is constantly searching for new knowledge, reads widely, and takes part in a variety of training programmes. She encourages others to similarly realise their potential in life.

"It was challenging at the beginning when I started these village societies, as I had to shake up this male-dominated social setup," Sumitra admits. But later, when people came to respect her commitment, things became easier. Sumitra helps her community to see that gender and age are not barriers to personal development and social leadership.



SUDHARMA PADMINI

A CHAMPION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Sudharma Padmini (49), of Weeraketiya, Hambantota, is a role model to many women in her community. She was the eldest child and only daughter of her parents; her father, a school principal, and mother, a housewife, treated Sudharma the same as her brothers, without any discrimination. "My father always encouraged us to engage in extracurricular activities, Sudharma says proudly, "and, more importantly, he believed that girls can also be leaders." She excelled at Weeraketiya Rajapaksha Central College, completing the G.C.E. A/L examination in Science subjects. Failing to qualify for university by a few marks, Sudharma followed a course on typesetting at a Technical College instead. With this qualification in hand, she found employment at the Agricultural Department, Angunukolapelessa, subsequently moving to the Divisional Secretariat Office.

Sudharma got married at 24 and left for Colombo with her husband. Adapting to city life was a challenge, but she didn't give up. Although she did not work, following sewing and cookery classes in her spare time. Her first child, a daughter, was born in 1998, followed by twin sons in 2003. Recalling how her husband abandoned her to provide for the three children on her own, Sudharma says, "I believe 2005 is the turning point of my life. Life offered me a chance to discover my strength." She moved back in with her parents in Weeraketiya, but they were unable to provide the financial support the young family required: so Sudharma set to work.

She began sewing bags for sale in her brother's shop. Driven by the need to provide for her family, she would travel frequently to Colombo (arriving in Pettah at 4am) to find outlets to feature her wares. Sudharma says that this experience made her stronger, and now she is able to handle anything and anyone. When men made advances to her, "I was smart enough to avoid them tactfully," she says.

Sudharma developed her business, under the brand name DSG Bags, employing six women in her neighborhood, thus sharing her space and resources to empower others. Having given up her financial agency when she got married, Sudharma is keenly aware of the vulnerabilities women like her have to face. "A woman should never be totally

dependent on others, specially economically," she reflects, pointing out that when her husband abandoned her, she would've been in an even more precarious position had she not had the skills to earn a living on her own. In 2018, under a government scheme, she received a plot of land in Sathvirugama, Weeraketiya, where she is the proud owner of her own house. Since moving, she has begun a mushroom business as well which she also hopes to turn into an opportunity to train and empower others.

Drawing on her own experiences, Sudharma is a champion of women's rights. She is the currently the treasurer of the Grama Shakthi Village Development Association and President of the Sathvirugama Women's Society. Her family is highly supportive of her community endeavours, urging her to slow down and make time for herself. However, Sudharma finds a profound sense of satisfaction in helping and encouraging others.

Sudharma believes that some women may have withdrawn and given up had they been compelled to become the sole breadwinner of their family. But Sudharma even provides for her former mother-in-law, despite the fact that her husband never returned. Sudharma's example of courage and persistence inspires her children who are thriving. Her daughter is training to become a draughtsman, and the boys are in grade eleven. Sudharma confesses that sometimes she feels very overwhelmed and alone but draws strength from the conviction that she is actively working to help the community and her family.





Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD)

Established in 2011, Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) is a national nongovernmental organization in Sri Lanka working towards the upliftment of living standards of local communities. We enlist civil society participation and social mobilization in order to enhance the status of women, to build a healthy environment for children, and to create a society free from alcohol, tobacco, and drugs.

Within the key priority area of Gender and Development, FISD implements programs pertaining to gender justice and women rights and envisions to eliminate sexual and gender based violence (SGBV), build capacities of women and girls in order to achieve gender equality. Our initiatives seek to minimize impediments that limit participation and leadership of rural women and girls and to empower and capacitate them as change makers in their communities.

✉ info@fisd.lk

🌐 www.fisd.lk

📌 <https://www.facebook.com/FoundationForInnovativeSocialDevelopmentfisd/>



The British Council is the UK's international organization for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with - changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.