

# A Community Empowerment Journey

Addressing Violence  
Against Women and Girls

# A Community Empowerment Journey

Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls

British Council has worked in partnership with:



# GENERATION  
சரஜர்  
தலைமுறை



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# List of abbreviations

<b>ADD</b>	Alcohol, Drugs and Development
<b>CRPP</b>	Child Rights Protection and Promotion
<b>DEVAW</b>	Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women
<b>FISD</b>	Foundation for Innovative Social Development
<b>GAD</b>	Gender and Development
<b>JSAC</b>	Jaffna Social Action Center
<b>LGBTQIA+</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual +
<b>NPA</b>	National Plan of Action
<b>SAP</b>	Social Action Project
<b>SGBV</b>	Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
<b>VAWG</b>	Violence Against Women and Girls
<b>WDO</b>	Women Development Officer
<b>WRDS</b>	Women Rural Development Society

# Welcome



**Gill Caldicott**  
Country Director  
British Council Sri Lanka  
(August 2017 – August 2020)

It is with great pleasure that I write this foreword for the booklet 'A Community Empowerment Journey – Addressing Violence Against Women and Girls' (VAWG) - a compilation of stories, lessons learnt and recommendations from this impactful project that has been running over the past 2.5 years. The project has been unique in that it has engaged women and young people in rural communities, using an Active Citizen's methodology that empowers them to bring about change in their own communities. There are many wonderful examples in this booklet.

As we are all aware, violence against women and girls (VAWG) is a global epidemic not endemic to just Sri Lanka or Asia. It stems from deeply ingrained attitudes and social norms, a way of thinking about women and their role in society that is outdated, prejudicial, and fundamentally undermines their human rights. Addressing

this is no easy task. While this change will not come quickly or easily, I feel so pleased that the British Council has contributed to this journey. The British Council has, over the past few years, increasingly engaged in gender related work. Globally we see this as an area of both importance and priority, going forward. Women cannot begin to take their rightful place in society until and unless they are free from the fear of violence and abuse – both physical and psychological.

I would like to thank our partners, especially Foundation for Innovative Social Development, who have played the lead role in our collaboration as well as the Jaffna Social Action Centre, Janathakshan and Hashtag Generation.

The work we have done together is a step in the right direction and I hope we will find more opportunities to further the rights of women in society.



# Programme at a glance



## 2018 to 2020

For two years, local communities in Sri Lanka have been empowered to address the global issue of VAWG in Sri Lanka—specifically Sexual and Gender-Based Violence—by strengthening their resilience and ability to take collective action.

**4**  
Districts

**6**  
Villages  
in 6 divisions



**13**  
Facilitators

**20**  
Communities



**150**  
Women

**450**  
Active Citizens

**300**  
Youth

**150**

Men directly engaged through men's awareness sessions



**1800**  
Community  
beneficiaries

**40**

Community interventions/  
social action projects

**200**  
Service providers  
engaged through:



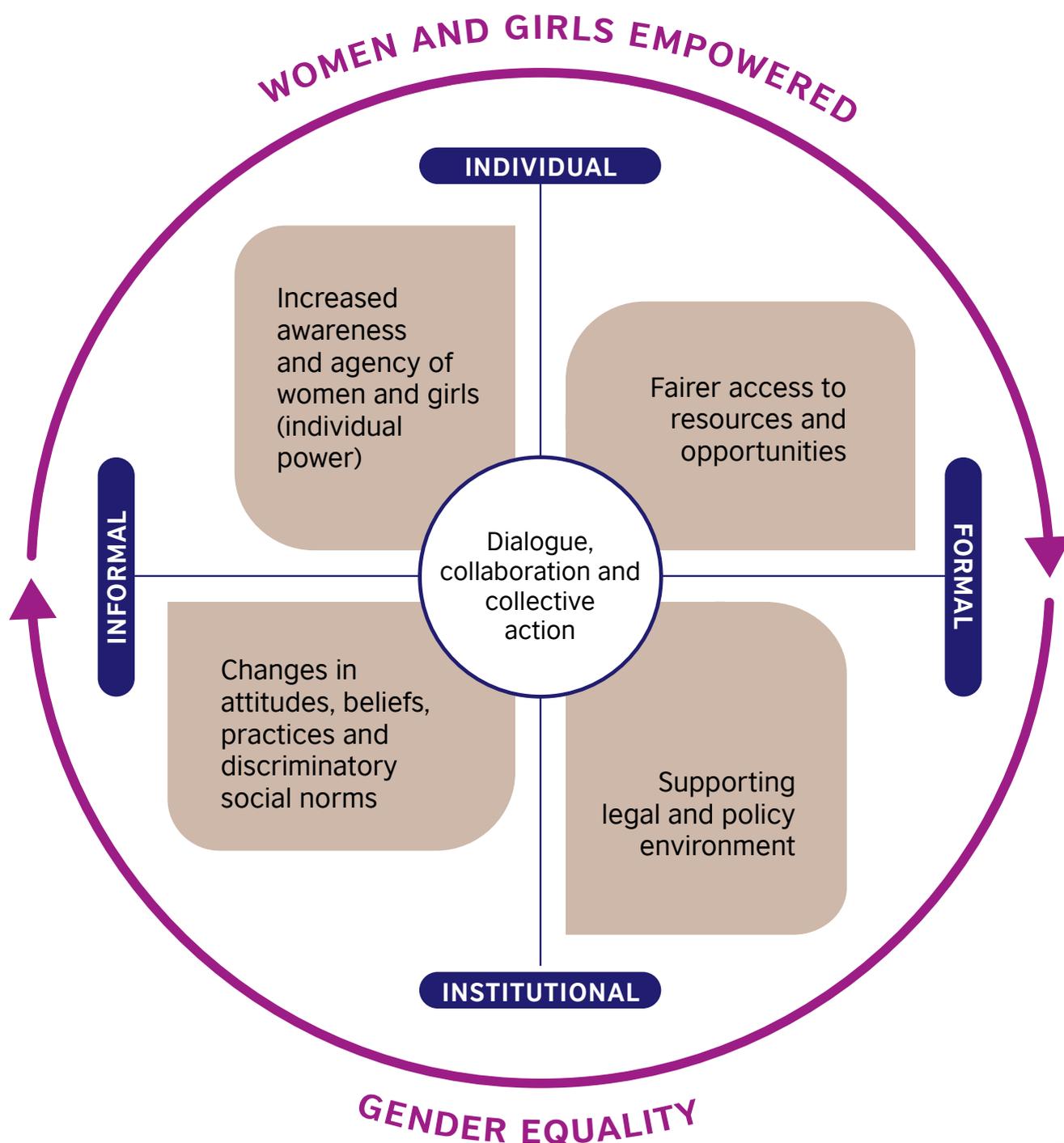
**1**  
National social  
media campaign

**3**  
District  
symposiums

**1**  
National  
symposium

# British Council's approach to empowering women and girls

The theory of change pertaining to women and girls' empowerment tackles gender inequalities from several perspectives and involves a range of different stakeholders. It defines the following five outcomes that are interlinked and operate at the level of the individual, civil society, the private sector, and the state.



# Introduction

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women 1993 (DEVAW) defined violence against women as: “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.”

A report by CARE International exposed that 36% of men reported physical sexual violence against a ‘woman partner’, 6% against a ‘non-partnered woman’ and 17% sexual violence ‘inclusive of rape against women’. A Sri Lanka Police report recorded 2,150 cases of rape and 2,175 cases of incest in the years 2012 and 2013. While sexual abuse and sexual assault do happen within the home, these are rarely reported because usually the perpetrator is a member of the household.



‘Empowering Communities to address Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG)’ intended to tackle the culture of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka. The British Council partnered with the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) as the lead strategic and delivery partner; who formed a consortium of delivery partners - Jaffna Social

Action Center (JSAC), Janathakshana and Hashtag Generation as bridges into local communities. Together, they modelled the delivery of the project on the British Council’s ‘Active Citizens Model’: a social leadership programme which promoted leadership skills, trust and understanding but focused on the theme of VAWG in the selected communities to address the issue of VAWG.



The project provided education, skills, personal development and interpersonal relationships so that participants could contribute economically, socially and politically to their local communities. The project incorporated the ‘Prevention’ and ‘Intervention’ recommendations from the National Plan of Action to address SGBV in Sri Lanka (NPA-SGBV 2016-2020).

Stakeholders from the community, government (such as the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs, Women and Children's Desk and Provincial Education Authorities) and non-governmental organisations (such as civil society organisations, consultants and trainers) participated in the project.

From start to finish, the project moved through three primary phases: capacity building, active engagement in communities and the construction of connection for future development and intervention.

The project operated in four key provinces: Uva Province (Monaragala), Southern Province (Hambantota), Northern Province (Jaffna) and Eastern Province (Batticaloa). Within these provinces, 20 local communities and villages in 6 divisions were singled out for the prevalence of VAWG. While, Monaragala and Hambantota had high levels of poverty, limited resources and inaccessible social services; Jaffna and Batticaloa had an increase in VAWG since the conclusion of Sri Lanka's 30 year long civil war.

On the ground the project focused on the transformation of perception, interpersonal interactions and practices of people and communities. Women and youth attended capacity building and training sessions to learn about gender equality and gender discrimination; built their leadership skills; and kickstarted Social Action Projects (SAPs). Men participated in awareness sessions to become allies and 'agents of change'.



NPA SGBV 2016-2020's chapter on 'Prevention and Empowerment' advocated for the reinforcement of communities and the initiation of assistance groups composed of community leaders and divisional level service providers. Taking this into account, Director of Fisd, Samitha Sugathimala noted that the project conducted training sessions for stakeholders at district level (such as Women Development Officers) and divisional level (such as Villager Officers) to help victims access service providers:



**“Strengthening women and girls at the community level to better understand and identify SGBV against them and make connections with the divisional service providers in responding to the cases were the main focus of this project. Building capacity among divisional level service providers to better co-ordinate the responses contributed to the National Action Plan.”**

**Samitha Sugathimala**  
Director Programmes, Fisd

Similarly, at the National Symposium in Colombo in 2019, Dharshana Senanayake, Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and Dry Zone Development applauded the project's creation of multisectoral connections:



“I see that all these components have been taken into consideration in this project. I hope the learnings from this project will contribute further in the implementation of the National Action Plan and motivate others who would like to take a similar approach in empowering communities to address violence against women and girls.”

Stakeholders and participants attended district symposiums in Monaragala, Hambantota and Jaffna. With the Easter Sunday terrorist attacks on 21 April 2019, the District Symposium in Batticaloa was cancelled. The local symposiums spotlighted a series of testimonies, best practices and recommendations. Moreover, it acted as a platform for dialogue, knowledge sharing and exchange of experiences for all the participants from all the communities.

**Dharshana Senanayake**  
Secretary, Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and Dry Zone Development  
at National Symposium - October 2019, Colombo

All the stakeholders and participants then attended the National Symposium on 2 October 2019 - an event that culminated in a series of recommendations for the implementation of the NPA SGBV 2016-2020.

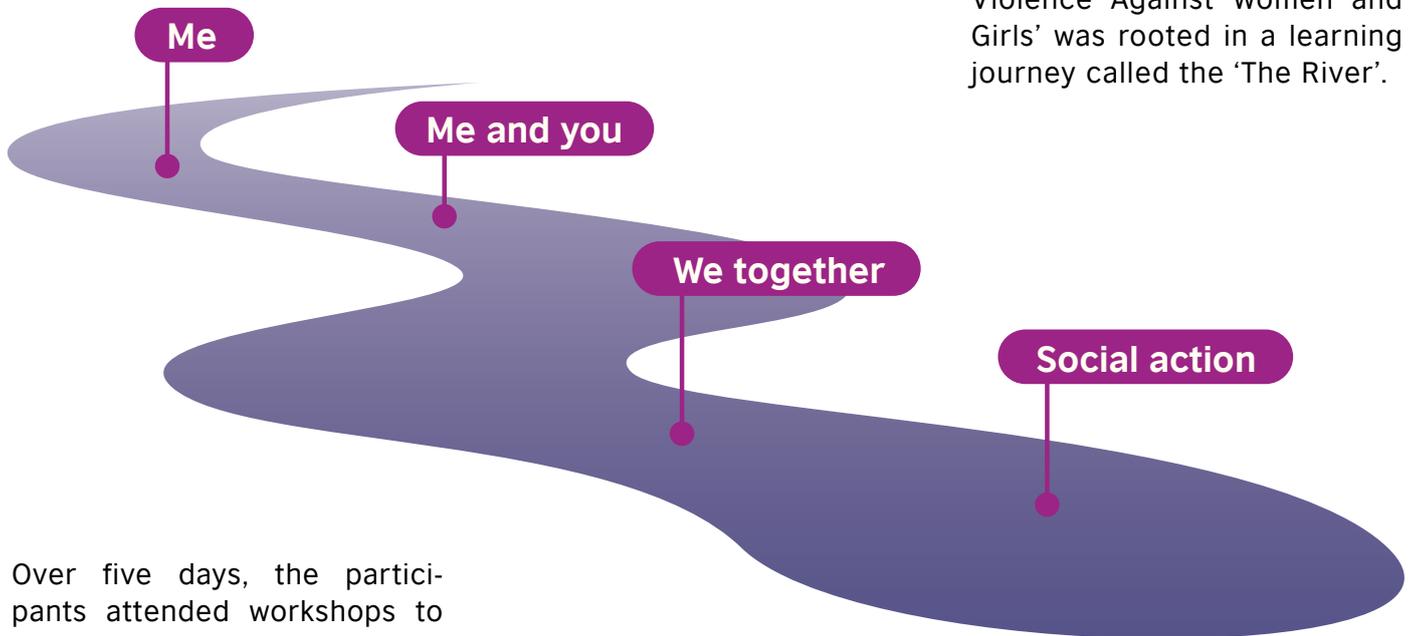
A national social media campaign has been developed and run throughout the period to present the highlights from the programme through creative modes such as testimonials, case studies and livestreams.



# Methodology

## The learning journey: the river

The project 'Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls' was rooted in a learning journey called the 'The River'.



Over five days, the participants attended workshops to enhance their education and personal development. Co-ordinators and facilitators created conducive and collaborative spaces which motivated critical thinking about perspectives, practices and norms related to SGBV in local communities and social circles.

Based on the 'Active Citizens Toolkit', facilitators used the exercises such as the fishbowl technique to unpack and explore discourse; and community mapping tools to identify the positive and negative areas in communities.

This learning journey culminated in the set-up of a SAP as an intervention into VAWG. Here, participants incorporated the community empowerment model because they had to enlist stakeholders from their local communities, organisations and institutions.





**Charo Lanao**  
Active Citizen Master  
Facilitator (UK) and  
Social Leadership Trainer

“Eighteen months ago I got a request to deliver an Active Citizen’s training in Sri Lanka. It was a very specific request because it was about how to use the methodology of Active Citizens, which is a social leadership program, to address violence against girls and women. It was very challenging because the purpose was to deliver the training in four districts. In July 2018, I was part of the team who delivered the training for thirty facilitators.

Eighteen months later, at the National Symposium, the participants from the four districts brought forward the project. These projects were connected by how we can all be the change. In this meeting, we reflected on the journey, the facilitation and methodology. There are several possibilities for the future.

I encourage the British Council and their partners to share this with other parts of the world, particularly how they worked together on a very specific theme. The program reminded us that this is not about just girls and women; this is also about the whole of society.”



# The main players

## Partners:

The initiative ‘Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls’ brought together a coalition of local partners as a bridge to local communities. The partners included civil society organisations, education bodies and youth organisations who were all committed to sustainable outcomes in the fight against VAWG.

### Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD)

FISD provides inventive solutions to stakeholders for sustainable social development through the creation of applicable methodologies that create a fair and equal civil society. FISD is notable for: the Child Rights Protection and Promotion Programme (CRPP), Gender and Development Programme (GAD) and the Alcohol, Drugs and Development Programme (ADD).



“The success of the programme was built around its core foundation: giving ownership of the project to the women, men and youth at the community level, resulting in many community-initiated and community-led

projects on SGBV. The partnership with British Council supported FISD to formulate new partnerships with other government officers and community stakeholders to further strengthen the existing partnerships in the project locations.”

### Samitha Sugathimala

Director Programmes, FISD

### Janathakshan

Janathakshan is a not-for-profit organisation that provides sustainable and green solutions in development to Sri Lanka. Janathakshan encouraged educational exchanges and supported the transmission of expert information to future practitioners, development agencies, researchers, students, academics and decision makers.

“Twenty-four female leaders such as women development officers, village officers and economic development officers participated in the training over five days. Here, they learned about the gravity of the problem; and their roles

and responsibilities to take action against VAWG. At the end of the training programme, the social action projects encouraged local stakeholders and community members to run community development actions.”



### Janaka Hemathilaka

Deputy Director, Janathakshan

## Jaffna Social Action Center (JSAC)

Jaffna Social Action Center is a Sri Lankan non-governmental organisation providing services throughout the Jaffna Peninsula, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu and Trincomalee districts. JSAC implements projects that mitigate disaster and trauma and promote sustainable development. In particular JSAC works on the protection of children and women.



“JSAC has several success stories on the implementation of the Active Citizen’s methodology. It has been useful in empowering the community, especially youth and women, to address gender-based violence. We sustained the community through continuous support such as developing their capacity and providing them with networks and platforms.

During the later stage of the project, we had a symposium where we collaborated with Jaffna University. It was successful because various practitioners were brought onto one platform to share their experiences with the community. University students also participated, shared their thoughts, and expressed their interest in future activities.”

**Nadarajah Sukirtharaj**  
Co-ordinator, JSAC

## Hashtag Generation

Hashtag Generation is a not-for-profit run by young, socially active Sri Lankans interested in the civic and political participation of youth, particularly those marginalised because of their gender, race and sexuality. Founded in 2015, the organisation uses technology and social media to run projects such as ‘#WeGovernSL’ to encourage women’s participation in the political sphere and ‘Cyber Security and Advocacy Training’ for LGBTQIA+ youth in Sri Lanka.

“Hashtag Generation’s role in this project was twofold. We rolled-out the communications campaign for the entire project. Usually, we hear only expert opinions of sexual and gender-based violence. Our campaign featured voices of women, men and youth from the different districts. For some of them, the problem was a lived reality. We also rolled-out the training for youth in Batticaloa. Over the project cycle, we could see their attitudes about these issues gradually change, particularly during the implementation of their social action projects. Our learnings from this project have shaped the way we design campaigns and mobilise young people.”

*(Left to right)*

**Mahishaa Balraj**  
**Senel Wanniarachchi**  
Co-Founders and Directors;

**Sahani Dikkumbura**  
Volunteer Project Co-ordinator,  
Hashtag Generation



## Co-ordinators/facilitators

The programme's partners selected and trained community co-ordinators and facilitators. Their connection to the subject, their knowledge of the community, interpersonal and communication skills strengthened the programme delivery. They conveyed the project's objectives to the participants through facilitation of workshops, dialogues and mentoring support provided for social action projects.



## State and community stakeholders

Within the Divisional Level is the Women and Children's Unit, consisting of village officers who provide services such as protection, emotional support and counselling to problems related to VAWG. They are also connected to state bodies such as the Mithuru Piyasa and community service organisations.

“While many countries in the region are focusing on the need to improve education access for girls, Sri Lanka is facing a reverse situation where girls are performing better than boys. While Sri Lanka can be rightly satisfied with



what it has achieved in terms of educating girls, it is important to address the factors which are making boys drop out of the education system.”

**Udhayani Navaratnam**

Women Development Officer (Jaffna)



**N. Damayanthi**

Women's Development  
Foundation  
(Katuwana - Hambantota)

“Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) happens in small communities because of substance abuse. During the sessions, I took notes about all the duties and responsibilities to attend to once I return to the community. I gained extra information to carry out a project successfully. I also learned that I am an empowered and capable woman. Through this programme, I have progressed and look to the future to achieve more.”

## Resource people

The Programme chose resource people to provide specialised sessions on areas such as gender, legal support and mental health. As a result, participants receive expert-led support to combat VAWG in their local communities.

“I observed a very positive attitude among the participants about the importance and usefulness of learning the legal context behind sexual and gender-based violence. Most of the participants said that the topics benefited their personal life and their community activities.

Participants also appreciated the detailed information given on institutional and procedural mechanisms to deal with issues related to VAWG.

They also responded to information on legal aid and other services.”

**Sajeewani Abeykoon**

Legal Officer, Legal Aid Commission of Sri Lanka



## Participants

‘Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls’ places the spotlight on the women and youth experiences of SGBV. While the women chosen were already leaders in their community, the youth had ‘potential’ that they exercised in their education or extracurricular activities.

The training focused on their attitudinal and behavioural change so that they could become leaders for their local community and role models for the next generation. Participants travelled along a learning journey which culminated in a Social Action Project (SAP). Here, they made an impact on their local community, built connections and joined the national movement against VAWG.

“After the Active Citizen’s training on VAWG, we had a small consultation with other young people in the area. We decided that we wanted to educate people on substance abuse and child marriage in our village. We learnt about forum theatre in the programme. I have a passion for drama and suggested a forum theatre production to tackle this problem. Being a young woman and



leading such a project in our community turned out to be challenging; but, the programme gave me the tools and the confidence to believe that I can make my life and the lives of other girls in the community better.”

**Thadshayini**

Active Citizen and  
SAP Team Leader  
(Batticaloa)

# Women's voices

"I faced SGBV, particularly during the early days of my married life," said K. M. Rathnawathi, a pre-school teacher and president of a Waguruwela women's organisation in the Buttala Divisional Secretariat.

She has also seen instances of VAWG in her local community. She believes that the violence, she and other women in her community experienced is rooted in the inaccessibility of information and limited education opportunities for women in the area.

"We nurtured a generation who can speak up and voice their thoughts," K. M. Rathnawathi said. She believes that her project helped change perceptions about gender in her local community:



Her participation in the programme provided skills to tackle violence in the various spheres of her life. With the help of the lessons, she kick-started a SAP called 'Towards a Happier Society' to help her community access information and resources.

During her first event, participants learnt about money management (such as the creation of a household budget, personal budget and savings) and also learnt about running small businesses. Soon after the event, five participants set up self-employed businesses.

Then, she hosted a mental health session for children aged 12-18 years. With the help of a local psychologist, she educated them about SGBV, mental health and challenged their misconceptions about gender.

For her third event, she hosted a leadership program for youth. Here, girls learnt about VAWG and the right they had to their lives.



**K. M. Rathnawathi**  
Active Citizen  
(Buttala - Monaragala)

**"Women and men are not unequal—they are, in fact, equal. The community has understood this and people who attended our events communicated these ideas to other people in their social circle. Through this, there has been a greater push for equality."**

“As a community leader, I see unhappy women in my community. When I meet them in the street; they cry, tell me their story and point their bruises out to me. Women are isolated from their families and lead sad lives. They do not know who to complain to or how to resolve their situation.”

**Priyanka Priyadarshini**

Active Citizen (Walasmulla - Hambantota)



Child marriage is common in Wallasmulla. Several teenagers start abusing substances such as, alcohol or drugs, and then prematurely start families. They do not have a good education or a stable job to support themselves or their families. Then, the violence starts. Women in these situations are unable to resolve these tensions or reach service providers.

Through the ‘Empowering Communities to Address VAWG’ project; Priyanka, a mother and President of Athpitiya Women’s Development Society in Walasmulla, received tools to improve both her life and the lives of her community.

Priyanka’s husband is a smoker. Through the project, she learnt about the importance of communication. So, she helped her husband open up and reduce his daily intake of cigarettes.

Encouraged by the productive discussions at home, she decided to tackle the prevalence of domestic violence in her local community. She enlisted the help of community members, educators and divisional officers to run the event.

Then, she invited several families who experienced domestic violence to learn about healthy relationships. With these tools, she helped her husband open up and reduce his daily intake of cigarettes.

Director of Voices of Human and Gender Consultant, Kapila Rasnayake hosted community awareness sessions.

In these sessions, Priyanka also distributed leaflets to connect victims of VAWG to service providers so that they could reach the right correct social services and authorities:

“We helped several families resolve their problems and re-unite through this programme. These families are still very happy. Now, they know who to talk to or which organisation to consult. With this information, certain participants reached out and contacted authorities in response to VAWG.”



In Thangavel Sathya's village, Kokkadicholai in Batticaloa, women have limited access to education and job opportunities. Even if they have a job, job security is rare.

When VAWG occurred, the community blamed the victim and victimised them even more. As a result, violence slipped under the radar and victims continued to be stuck in a cycle of abuse.



**“Women who are subjected to violence are ignored by society. So they cannot stand strong in their communities.”**

### **T. Sathya**

Active Citizen  
(Kokkadicholai – Batticaloa)

During the ‘Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls’ project, her group closely examined problems in their communities and used methodologies such as the ‘Tree of Expectation’ and the ‘Problem Tree’ to troubleshoot solutions.



The experience helped her enhance her interpersonal relationships because she learnt to initiate conversations, consider a variety of opinions and bring tensions to a peaceful resolution. She decided to apply these skills for the betterment of her community.

Thangavel set up an SAP to link women living under the poverty line to vocational training and employment as seamstresses. This skill had the promise of a steady income and could improve livelihoods. She recruited the assistance of several stakeholders such as the Samurdhi Institute, Women's Society and Rural Development Society.

Once the training ended, 20 participants applied for jobs at garment factories. Here, they earned Rs. 16,000 as a basic salary and have the opportunity

to earn up to Rs. 20,000-25,000 in the future. Some even had the chance to find employment overseas. Twenty kickstarted small businesses which they run from home.

Thangavel is proud of the transformation she brought to the lives of the participants and their community. The participants stand as strong role models for the next generation.

The participants responded positively to the SAP. Both genders realised the importance of financial independence and equal contribution to the household income. Consequently, Sathya has decided to expand her project to connect the diverse talents in her community to the palm industry.



Thanabalasingam Rasamani, President of the Maviddapuram Women Rural Development Society participated in the 'Active Citizens' training. The land in Rasamani's village, Maviddapuram had the perfect conditions for small-scale gardening. However, no one had thought of putting the constant sunlight, humidity and fertile soil to use.

In Maviddapuram, several men who were injured in Sri Lanka's Civil War had returned home disabled. Despite being the primary 'breadwinners' in their household, they could not provide for their families. Women, as a result, had to fill the role that men usually occupied but their lack of education, limited skills and social stigma acted as obstacles.

**“During the input sessions, I learnt about the importance of financial independence. Women could contribute to the household if they had a steady income and also relieve financial and interpersonal tensions.”**

**T. Rasamani**  
Active Citizen  
(Maviddapuram - Jaffna)

**“Despite the legislation about domestic violence in 2005, domestic violence has not decreased. Clearly, domestic violence cannot be eradicated by legal measures alone. Instead, several spheres such as legal, the government, the general public and standalone individuals have to take collective responsibility to stop VAWG. We are under the misconception that violence impacts only the victim and her mental health. This is not true because the VAWG has an impact on her, her family, her community and even her country. When we think about VAWG collectively, we can focus on stopping it and create strong families in the country.”**



For her SAP, she decided to set up a home gardening initiative. With this project, she connected the untapped potential of the land for the underestimated mothers in her local community.

From a nearby local farm, she sourced plants, natural pesticides and natural fertilisers. With the help of external resource persons, the mothers learnt about cultivation techniques and organic agricultural practices. Then the team cultivated beans, eggplant, tomato, okra and pumpkin.

The project became a turning point for the participants because they succeeded as the 'breadwinners' of their families.

They earned money, saved profits for the future and nurtured the livelihoods of their families. Moreover, the project transformed into a space for leisure as the mothers used it to connect, converse and build community.

Over time, the project recruited more women as stakeholders, reinforced 'Women's Groups' and produced role models for the next generation.

Rasamani plans to expand the SAP through the recruitment of other stakeholders such as youth and the cultivation of more crops such as mango trees.



**Nalini Ratnarajah**  
Gender and Human Rights  
Consultant  
Session Moderator  
District Symposium (Jaffna)

# Men's voices

The project has a strong focus on enlisting men and boys to create a violence-free community. Through the men's awareness session on SGBV, they were encouraged to reconsider the misconceptions of VAWG and perceive SGBV as a violation of human rights. They were encouraged to be responsible citizens and become allies and advocates for gender equality in their local communities.

In Hambantota and Monaragala, the project focused on healthy relationships through the 'Happy Families' and 'Loving Father' Programmes. Resource person Kapila Rasnayake believed that unpacking SGBV in the context of families was more impactful than through the participation of individual members.

His session 'Fun Kitchen' challenged gender stereotypes and participants challenged their preconceptions about household roles.

A participant of Kapila's session, Prasad Saman Kumara from Galahitiya East, Walasmulla enjoyed this particular session. The men collaborated to cook a mushroom curry and he recalled it as a memorable experience. When he returned home, he shared the lessons he gathered from the session:

“We engaged families because families can establish norms to prevent SGBV. Through the awareness session, we helped change the mindset of many men through this programme; encouraging fathers to stand against SGBV, let go of outdated views, embrace new perspectives and actively seek solutions to address this community issue.”



**Kapila Rasnayake**  
Gender Consultant and  
Founder, Voices of Humans



“This was the first time I participated in a programme of this nature. It was relaxing; there was a volleyball match, a cooking competition and a musical programme. We spoke about the common issue of SGBV, what steps we need to take to identify it and then respond to it. Since I returned to my community, I have been more observant, mindful and responsive. I have also spoken to my family and friends about what I have learnt.”

**Prasad Saman Kumara**  
(Galahitiya East - Walasmulla)

“I have seen both women and men face injustice and violence in society,” said D. M. Upul Shantha Dissanayake, a store keeper and participant.

Through the ‘Men’s Awareness Session’, in Waguruwela, he learned that to counter VAWG, he had to provide his continued support and advocacy. “I have also learnt the methods to help change society. If VAWG occurs, I have the confidence and the education to tackle it,” he said about the session.



**W. M. Udana Madumal**  
(Buttala – Monaragala)

“Since people have returned from rehabilitation, there have been several challenges in our community of fisherman,” said Muthuraja Inparasa, president of his village Nallinakapuram, Tellipalai in Jaffna.

Inparasa believes that men in his community need to change their perception and treatment of the opposite sex. Women, of all ages, face gender-based violence from sexual harassment on the streets, violence induced by substance abuse and cyber violence.

Influenced by the Active Citizen’s learning journey, ‘The River’, Upul Shantha believes that social change has to be initiated through him, his thoughts and his actions first. Next, he hopes to communicate his beliefs and experiences to his family, parents and extended family. Then, he intends to deliver these lessons to other people in his life such as his friends, acquaintances, elders and community members. He believes the exposure of VAWG to his community can help them build a better Sri Lanka.

“When I tell a man not to resort to violence, he does not really understand it but if he is taught about it in a group, he learns more from that experience. I am particularly grateful for the collective conversations initiated by this programme.”

The ‘Men’s Awareness Session’ he attended in Nallinakapura encouraged families to lead healthy relationships.

“The programme helped me address SGBV, starting from the family unit and gradually spreading the message to the entire village. Now, families of the local community understand the importance of healthy relationships; and have the tools to handle tensions and violence in their families.”

**M. Inparasa**  
(Nallinakapuram - Tellipalai, Jaffna)



“We can then solve the problems of violence and social obstacles to remove them from the lives and minds of people. I believe that the best place to start is with me.”

**D. M. Upul Shantha Dissanayake**  
(Monaragala)



# Youth voices

Lakshika Piyumali observed a rise in suicides linked to cyber violence in her village, Dickyaya in Monaragala. Several young members in her community used social media and the internet.

Through 'Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls', she learnt that VAWG included cyber violence. She decided to educate the young and old members in her local community through her Social Action Project 'Combating Online (Social Media) Violence Against Women and Girls'. She recruited the support of several stakeholders such as service providers and launched a poster campaign. These actions produced positive results and helped the community learn that though violence happens online, it has tangible implications on daily life.



At the National Symposium in Colombo, Lakshika presented the lessons she learnt and the experiences she had. Here, she learnt that collective local actions helped progress a national cause.



“As a girl from a rural area I felt proud to speak in front of a large audience representing my community at the National Symposium in Colombo. We are mobilising youth in Dikayaya to replicate community action and broaden awareness for our social media initiative: ‘Combating Online Violence Against

Women and Girls’. I realised the importance of the steps taken at a community level to achieve gender equality and a violence-free society.”

**Lakshika Piyumali**

Active Citizen (Dikayaya)

at National Symposium - October 2019, Colombo



“Coming from a women-headed family, I was under the misconception that I was alone in the challenges I faced. This changed when I met many girls and single mothers at a youth forum at the District Symposium in Jaffna. I heard heart-breaking stories about women and their daily struggles to survive. I am determined to be the voice for women who don't have their own and I am now empowering them through 'Manitham', a charity organisation initiated by me and my friends based at the University of Jaffna.”

**Nivetha Sivarajah**

Active Citizen (University of Jaffna)

Panellist, Youth Forum - Jaffna Symposium 2019

Despite Pradeep Prasanna's observation of family problems, divorce and substance abuse in his village, Keselwatta in Monaragala; he had a limited understanding of their connection to VAWG. VAWG is not a topic of conversation in his village. When he joined the 'Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls' project as a participant, he understood their interconnection. Over the course of 4 days, he learnt about the various factors that lead to SGBV and the various forms of it.

Pradeep chose to tackle this problem through the education and contribution of families in his local community through the set-up of the 'Happy Families' project.

Next, his team hosted a 'Happy Families' camp for 70 participants. A variety of stakeholders such as youth, elders and government officers provided their assistance. Together, they facilitated conversations about SGBV in their local community. Pradeep believes that these conversations should be at the center, rather than the margins of conversation in his local community.

For the third and final event, the project recruited 30 people in the local community to create an 'Alert group' to intervene in VAWG, particularly domestic violence.

Pradeep is happy about the sustainable impact his project had for families in his local community.



“I had absolutely no understanding about sexual and gender-based violence before this programme. Women do not only face sexual harassment; they also face economic violence, physical violence and psychological abuse.”

**Pradeep Prasanna**  
Active Citizen  
(Keselwatta - Monaragala)

“I have worked in Rehabilitation Centers where there are several war widows. While they are trained in a variety of skills such as beauty, they are still excluded from family functions and special occasions because there is a misconception that

they could bring 'bad luck'. This is a form of discrimination and marginalisation; and I hope to recruit more open-minded youth to tackle these issues.”

**Kobiny Antony Rex**  
Active Citizen  
(University of Jaffna)



# Community facilitators' voices

“The Active Citizen’s programme is about understanding problems in the community. It is about distributing information from an individual through to the community. It is a process of understanding.”

**Remo Shihan**

Active Citizen Facilitator



Remo’s focus on understanding is present in his personal actions. When Remo and his co-facilitator, Sinthuka Vivekananthan initiated conversations about SGBV and sensitive revelations came up, he left the room to provide the participants privacy to confide in each other. While his presence is important in the sessions, his absence helped the session evolve even further.

“It is the responsibility of a facilitator to be sensitive to the environment so that participants can feel comfortable,” Remo said.

He and Sinthuka used several exercises in the Active Citizen’s toolkits to enhance the participants’ understanding of gender. With the exercise, ‘Power Walk’, participants learned about the hierarchy of authority. Who is positioned at the top? Who is positioned at the bottom? The facilitators then asked questions and brought up example scenarios for the participants to understand authority even further.

“We asked questions to expose the challenges women face. We then developed a debrief to understand the reason a

person acts out. We used this to stimulate thoughts and put them in a practical scenario to explain their function in society,” Remo said.

In a session he ran in Jaffna, he noticed A. Kalaimagal’s response to the session he hosted. Her energy and enthusiasm stood out to him. Despite her age, she intended to counter the prevalence of emotional abuse and create a safer environment in her community, Nallinakapuram.

“She and her team had an energy which even the youth lacked. They were punctual, committed and active. They took their roles very seriously,” Remo observed.

For her SAP, she ran an interactive session for participants to open-up, therapy sessions to touch on emotional abuse, and hosted a children’s day for families and elders. The village officers and community leader noted a change in the community when they gathered together to host events and take a collective step to create a happy and peaceful community.

“I like running sessions to understand individuals. In turn, I have noticed that the sessions are thought-provoking and help participants understand themselves and their communities better,” Remo said.



“Witnessing women and youth, especially survivors of SGBV starting to work for women rights was strong evidence that we are on the right path. As a facilitator, it was fascinating to be a part of the training with gender mainstreaming.”

**Sinthuka Vivekananthan**

Active Citizen Facilitator

Ayanthi de Zoysa and Gayan Rajapaksha conducted community trainings for youth and women in Monaragala and Hambantota. They used creative and collaborative methods such as role play and conversation to run their sessions about VAWG.

As the participants opened up, they realised that the violence they experienced at home had to change first. Influenced by the Active Citizen's 'Learning Journey', the participants realised that change had to start from within themselves: 'Me'. Only, then could they use their

positive personal experiences to help other community members counter VAWG.

"One of the participants and her husband had jobs as masons. Since she had decided to attend the project, her husband had punished her for absence. When she returned home at six or seven that night, she had to stay up and complete her chores late into the night. The programme was an eye-opener for her and she realised that she needed to take action," Ayanthi said, about the lack of support the participant received from her husband.

For the initiation of the SAPs, Ayanthi encouraged the participants to brainstorm solutions, based on the context of their community. She helped them take ownership of their project and their community. While the participants did not speak up on the first day, they eventually shared their experiences and troubleshooted the problems in their personal lives as a collective. Over the next 2 days, they reinforced their position as community leaders through their SAPs.

"When we went into the community, we learned that these community leaders were survivors of gender-based violence at home but they were also listening to other women and helping them out too."

**Ayanthi de Zoysa**  
Active Citizen Facilitator



"I worked with many women and girls from rural communities. They have gone through various hardships throughout their lives but displayed more commitment and patience than male participants. These women were keen to be empowered, since they had their own dreams for themselves and for their families which they quietly nurtured inside themselves."

**Gayan Rajapaksha**  
Active Citizen Facilitator



# Government stakeholders' voices

“The participants’ thinking has changed. They are more confident and vocal about the problems they face.”

**Nanda Dissanayake**

Women Development Officer  
Buttala Divisional Secretariat

Like other Women Development Officers, Nanda operates at the ground level. When she started the year-long ‘Empowering Communities to Address VAWG’ in 2018, she hoped to extract ideas from the project and use it to solve problems in her local community. Through the project, she learnt about the multiple factors that lead to VAWG and the various forms of SGBV.

“We learnt through several seminars about legal action and counseling; and also received exposure to the topic of SGBV,” she said. She has seen positive results since the programme reached out to community members in the Buttala Divisional Secretariat. As a VAWG prevention mechanism, the participants learnt about money management and running small businesses.



In Waguruwela, several participants started small businesses to overcome economic obstacles. In turn, they became role models for other members in the village. They encouraged their neighbours to join them and create a positive family environment for everyone.

Women rarely opened up about their problems before. As the programme educated participants about VAWG and linked them to service providers; they contacted women’s organisations to seek help for a variety of issues such as child marriage, substance abuse or domestic violence. Nanda has also seen a more considerate and sensitised response to the participants’ responses by officers in the field.

Nanda believes the programme has strengthened the relationship shared by service providers and participants; and is happy for the programme to be extended throughout Butala.

“We exchanged our experiences and thoughts and participants also mentioned the positive results they had seen today. I suggest that this programme is also hosted in other Divisional Secretariats.”



For the ‘Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls’ project, Uthyakumari, facilitated a session for women from Kopay, a small village along point Pedro Road in Jaffna. When she spoke to the participants, she realised that child marriage was a problem in the local community.

As parents did not have access to education, a stable job nor had much exposure to society, their children lacked important documents (such as birth certificates) and missed out on school. This meant that the child continued in the same cycle of poverty, marginalisation and social stigma as their parents.

In response to this, Uthayakumari facilitated a session on child marriage and adolescent pregnancy. She helped participants secure birth certification for their children. When two children started school soon after the session she held, she realised that her session had a positive outcome.

“There were many children in our communities who were born because of early marriages. Some did not even have birth certificates because their parents’ marriages were not legally registered. I believe that the work I do, actually has an impact in my community.”

**Uthyakumari**  
Active Citizen and Member of the Women Rural Development Society, Jaffna



# The National Symposium

The National Symposium acted as a foundation to share the best practices and recommendations from the project. The presence of national stakeholders pulled the conversation out of a local context (district level) and into a national one, to better achieve the outcomes of the National Action Plan on SGBV. The input and support of national stakeholders are essential if the project is to be replicated and expanded in the future.



# Recommendations

These are the recommendations the local district presented to national stakeholders:



In order to ensure the effective implementation of processes to end VAWG, involvement by women and youth leaders should be a priority. Special focus should be directed at actively engaging adolescent girls and boys.

It is important to address gender norms, socio-cultural practices and traditions within certain communities which specifically limit the mobility of women and girls.

Women should focus on addressing VAWG at household and community levels while youth should look at interventions focused at society level such as street harassment and cyber-violence.

The integration of gender and related concepts in school curricula is essential for generating awareness and understanding.

Women and youth who are committed to the development of their communities should revisit the positive results generated from social action projects. They should take the initiative to continuously empower their communities through follow-up action.

Facilitate relationships and strengthen links between service providers and communities to expand service provision networks, expand awareness and actively engage community leaders.

There should be an active engagement of decision makers and stakeholders in leadership positions, particularly men, who stand up against VAWG and advocate for women.

Structured, formal and periodical training sessions aimed at addressing VAWG are required.

It is crucial to have a comprehensive and accurate understanding of the community, its gender relations and the gender equality of its members.

Strengthening the systems which effectively implement and monitor interventions to prevent VAWG at all levels are needed.

The combination of these recommendations will contribute towards a violence-free community which respects the dignity of women and girls.

# Co-ordinators

“Our journey with the project has been a life changing experience for all of us. As project co-ordinators, we can now witness how the seeds that we sowed have begun to sprout gradually. The capacities and the potential of the young girls and boys together with the courageous women who joined and stayed with the programme are tremendous. The combination of these recommendations will contribute towards a violence-free community which respects the dignity of women and girls.”



**Dileesha Liyanage**  
Programme Assistant and  
Project co-ordinator, FISD  
(October 2018 - March 2020)

**Sivanjalli Sivashanmugapillai**  
JSAC, Jaffna



**S. Baskaran**  
Janathakshan, Batticaloa



**Priyantha De Silva**  
FISD, Monaragala

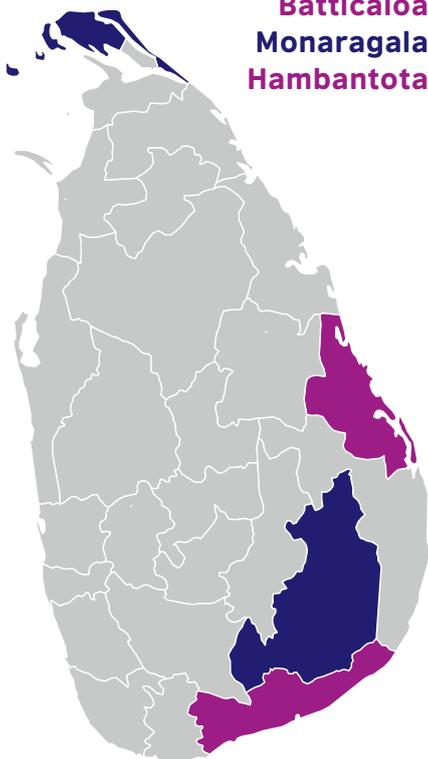


**Rasika Swarnamali**  
FISD, Hambantota

# Reach

‘Empowering Communities to Address Violence Against Women and Girls’ measured the impact by looking closely at the outcomes from the sessions and the initiation of SAPs to counter VAWG in the local community.

**Jaffna**  
**Batticaloa**  
**Monaragala**  
**Hambantota**



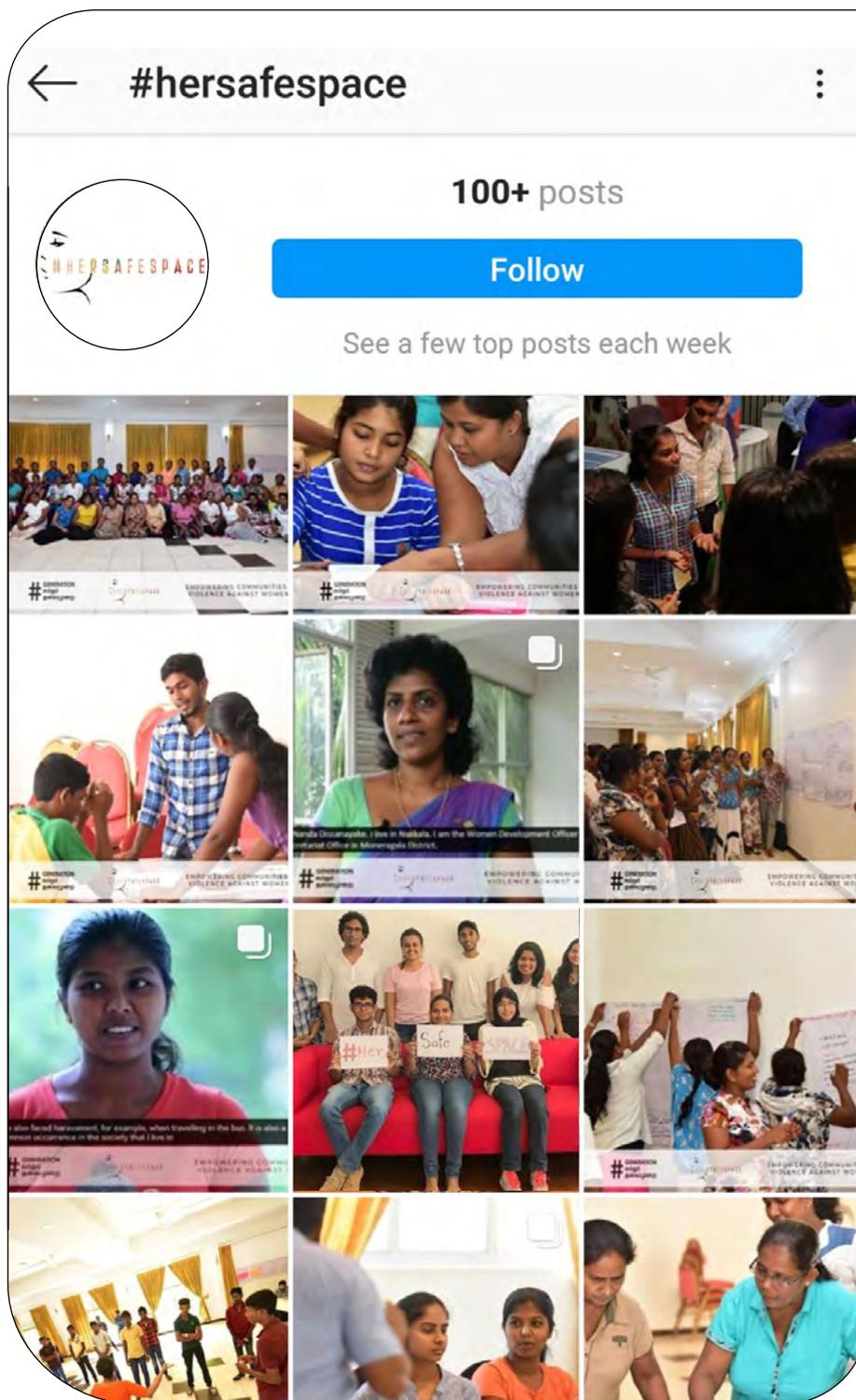
The project’s various sessions such as workshops, dialogues, ‘Men’s Awareness Sessions’ and SAPs have resulted in the direct engagement of 150 men, 150 women, 300 youth and 200 local service providers over the four provinces (Jaffna, Batticaloa, Monaragala, Hambantota). Two hundred local community leaders have been nurtured to run interventions and brainstorm solutions to tackle VAWG in their local communities. The project also kick-started 40 SAPs to continue to educate the community and advocate against VAWG.

**88,955**  
people reached

## Social media campaign

The #HerSafeSpace social media campaign featured voices of women, men and youth from the different communities who shared stories of violence and injustice but also stories of coming together, empower-

ing each other and leading change in their communities. The social media campaign was able to amplify the voices of these community leaders who shared their stories with a wider audience.



# Active Citizens' voices



“After attending the Active Citizen training on VAWG, I started a SAP about sexual harassment in public spaces. I hosted events like a youth camp and distributed pamphlets throughout the community. The standout event was a drama I scripted and directed. The chief monk of the temple even encouraged people to attend our play in his sermons! The play turned out to be a great success and we performed it at the National Symposium. I believe my drama catalysed an important conversation in our community. As a result, a lot of young girls and boys have chosen to improve their lives further through a continued focus on self-development and education.”

**Wasana Sewwandi**

Active Citizen (Walasmulla – Hambantota)

“After a training session in Kokkaddicholai, a participant returned home and spoke to her husband about his violent behaviour. He opened up to her about his situation: he had absolutely no guidance before their conversation. After her conversation, he sought help from a drug prevention unit and decided to reduce alcohol consumption and to test the turnout for a month. With her newfound confidence, the participant tackled the root of the problem. It took her husband three months to return to full sobriety.”

**Nuzrath Benazir Farook**

Counsellor and Active Citizen Facilitator



“The National Symposium helped me reflect on lessons to learn from the UK and Sri Lanka, particularly thinking about empowering women in communities. Many of the issues faced in Sri Lanka, particularly violence towards women and girls, are many of the things that are happening in the UK. There are so many projects to overcome similar challenges. This made me think about the power of being globally connected because people can share the projects that they are working on in order to overcome some of the barriers and challenges.”

**Ed Moss,**

Active Citizen Facilitator (UK)

at National Symposium - October 2019, Colombo



“I have seen several instances of SGBV at bus stands, buses, stations and even on the road. As boys, we do not disrespect girls, but there is a marked distinction how we treat them. I have learned that girls need to be respected because they are our equals. For our project, we engaged with youth clubs, non-government organisations, village councils and district councils to hold events and distribute leaflets to reduce SGBV.”

**W. M. P. I. Sandalanka**  
Active Citizen (Madulla – Monaragala)

“There are several recurring instances of SGBV in my community. As a responsible citizen, I intend to stand against SGBV in my village and lobby for the divisional secretariat assistance. Through the training I discovered that there are service provisions available that the community is unaware of. We must create the necessary links and ensure that we work together to reduce this issue and create a violence free society not only for us but also our children.”



**G. M. Dharmalatha**  
Active Citizen (Buttala – Monaragala)



“This programme has motivated me and improved my self-confidence. Though I am married, I am currently enrolled in University. I am facing a few difficulties and have thought of stopping my education and focusing on my relationship, but these thoughts changed after the programme. I have realised that I should continue my studies because I then have the expertise and skills to look after myself.”

**Sivajiny Krishnamoorthy**  
Active Citizen (University of Jaffna)

“I attended the ‘Men’s Awareness Session’ which was held in our neighbourhood. I found the programme to be relaxing; with a volleyball match, a cooking competition and a musical programme. We also discussed about common issues related to SGBV and what steps we need to take to identify and react to it responsibly.

Since I returned to my community, I have been more observant, mindful and reactionary. I have also spoken to my family and friends of what I have learnt.”



**Keshan Dheerasinghe**  
Active Citizen (Weeraketiya – Hambantota)

# Hotlines

Numbers to contact for more information about sexual and gender based violence:

State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-Schools & Primary Education, School Infrastructure & Education Services

Women's Help Line  
**1938**

ChildLine Sri Lanka  
**1929**

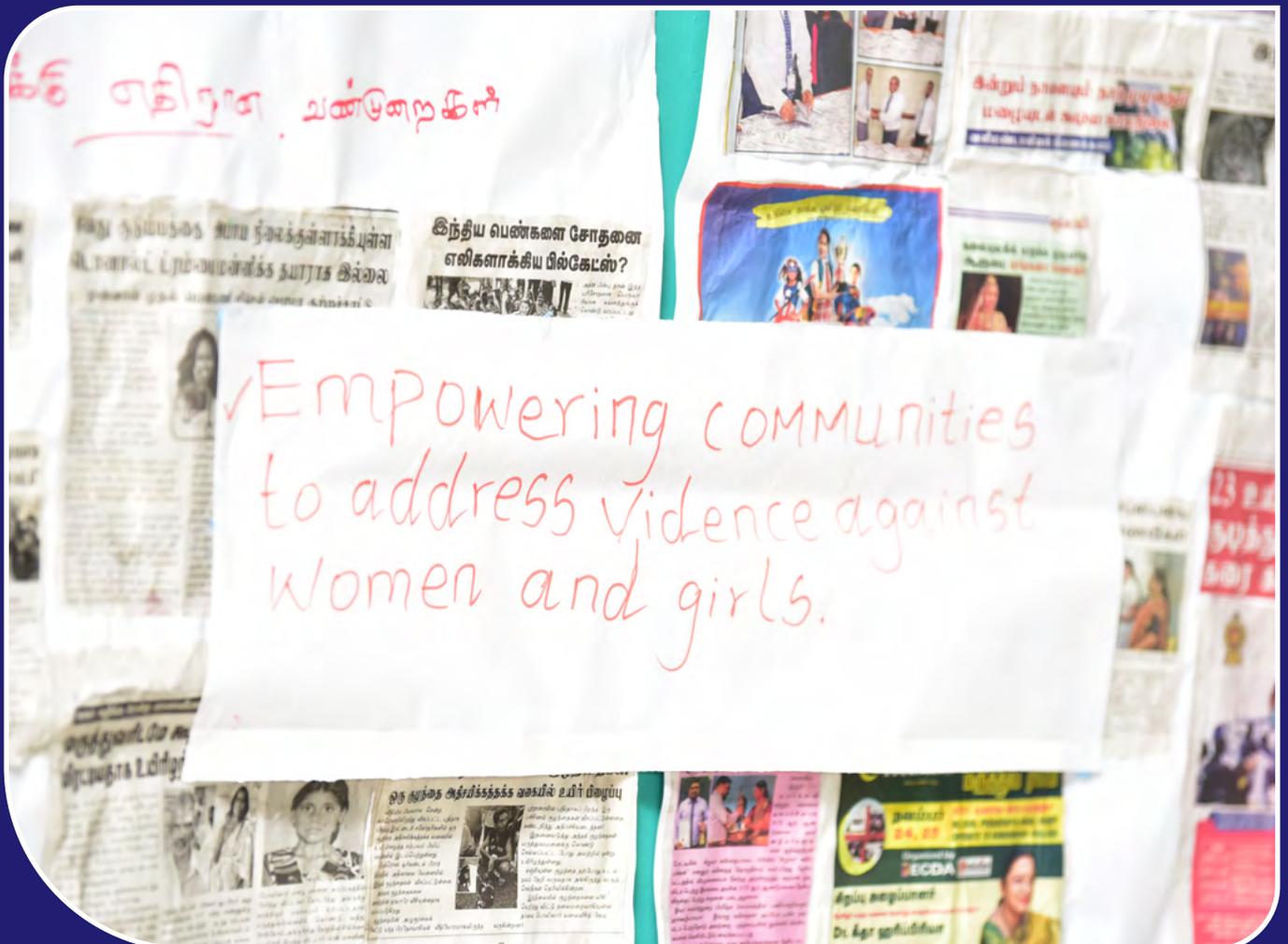
Women In Need  
**077 5676555**

Shanthi Maargam  
**0717639898**

Grassrooted Trust   
**+94763488622 (text)**

National Transport Commission - Public Complaints  
**1955**

National Centre for Cyber Security (CERT)  
**0112691692 / 0112679888**  
[report@cert.gov.lk](mailto:report@cert.gov.lk)



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