WE ARE WITH HER

FOR A VIOLENCE FREE SRI LANKA
Violence can impact women physically, psychologically and economically, and has serious implications on their health, their families, and communities. Responding to this violence requires a range of interlinked actions.

The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) together with the Government of Canada in partnership with the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-schools and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Service is working towards improving services and support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

Every individual featured in this publication passionately contributed to improving services for SGBV survivors in Sri Lanka, both at National and Sub-National levels in the Mannar and Hambantota districts through the project titled ‘We Are With Her’. This is a two and a half year project aimed at positioning public sector officials as advocates working to address violence against women and girls.

In Sri Lanka, 1 in 5 ever partnered women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime.
EVEN ONE WOMAN OR GIRL SUFFERING FROM VIOLENCE IS ONE TOO MANY, AND TOGETHER WITH OUR PARTNERS, UNFPA CONTINUES TO WORK TOWARDS A VIOLENCE-FREE SRI LANKA.

Ritsu Nacken
UNFPA Representative, Sri Lanka
“It’s high time we talk about rape,” says Ritsu Nacken, UNFPA Representative, Sri Lanka, and Country Director, Maldives. Whether it is intimate partner rape, or assaults on minority groups, including sexual minorities, at the heart of it all is the issue of individual agency and bodily autonomy.

THIS IS ABOUT RESPECTING A PERSON’S AGENCY, AND THEIR RIGHT TO SAY NO, WHATEVER THE CIRCUMSTANCES.

It takes courage to come forward, and those in authority need to know how to respond and coordinate with each other to ensure SGBV survivors don’t fall between the gaps or are re-victimised. For the state, a critical step will be to allocate more funds in the national budget to provide vital services including the enhancement of shelters for victims/survivors of violence.

Each instance of SGBV is an instance of someone’s rights and dignity being violated. Each case is preventing someone from realising their full potential,” says Ritsu.
WHAT WORKS IN CANADA, MAY NOT WORK IN SRI LANKA. YOU CAN’T JUST TRANSFER SOLUTIONS FROM ONE PLACE TO ANOTHER, UNLESS YOU’VE ADJUSTED THEM TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT.

H.E David McKinnon
High Commissioner of Canada to Sri Lanka and the Maldives
“Gender has been at the heart of Canada’s development work for decades with renewed focus in recent years under our Feminist International Assistance Policy,” says H.E. David McKinnon, High Commissioner of Canada to Sri Lanka and the Maldives. While emphasizing the important role of women and girls as agents of change, he notes the critical importance of engaging men and boys in addressing SGBV.

MEN AND BOYS ARE PART OF THE PROBLEM, BUT ALSO PART OF THE SOLUTION.

To help Sri Lanka respond more effectively to SGBV, the Government of Canada is supporting UNFPA and the Department of Census and Statistics to gather evidence on cases of violence. “It’s very important to give policymakers such tools to make the right decisions so that they can identify local solutions to address local challenges.”
PRECISE DECISIONS, ESTABLISHED LAWS & ORDERS, AND WELL-FORMULATED MECHANISMS WILL HELP WOMEN MOVE FORWARD IN A BETTER AND SAFER SRI LANKA DEVOID OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE.

K. M. S. D. Jayasekara
State Secretary of State Ministry of Women and Child Development, Pre-schools and Primary Education, School Infrastructure and Education Service
In this pandemic situation, I strongly believe in the need for raising awareness on the importance of FAMILY, SURVIVOR-CENTERED COORDINATED APPROACHES THROUGH MULTI-STAKEHOLDER SERVICE PROVIDERS, AND SAFE SHELTERS FOR VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE.

Continuous follow up mechanisms on victimized and non-victimized women in society will help ensure the protection of women and girls from all forms of violence.
WE SHOULD GO BEYOND THE USUAL AND TRADITIONAL WAYS OF RAISING-AWARENESS, AND USE MORE EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES SUCH AS SOCIAL MEDIA, AND THE INTERNET. WE SHOULD GO TO THE COMMUNITIES WITH MORE VISUAL METHODS SUCH AS TELEDRAMAS, FILMS, AND STREET DRAMAS, RATHER THAN JUST TALKING.

M.V.H. Dayaratna
Grama Niladhari, Lunugamwehera Divisional Secretariat
“People often think that rape is the victim’s fault: what was the woman doing? what was she wearing? was she walking alone? They don’t think of the woman’s rights due to this stereotypical mind-set,” says M.V. H. Dayarathna, a Grama Niladhari in the Lunugamwehera Divisional Secretariat.

Dayarathna thinks the solution is a strong victim-centric approach to providing justice in a timely and sensitive way. To achieve this, authorities across several sectors including health, law and order, and social services must coordinate their efforts. Dayarathna also notes that underreporting, including instances of marital rape, should be addressed. He hopes a different approach could change attitudes on the ground.
COMMUNITY POWER CAN BE USED AS THE MOST POWERFUL TOOL TO SUPPRESS THE TENDENCY TOWARDS COMMITTING VIOLENCE.
Dr. Rahal Rajapaksa worries about the adverse impact sexual violence can have on children. Rahal, who works with the Ministry of Health, explains that SGBV can take many different forms, including physical, verbal, sexual, and psychological. “Any such violence can have an impact on the future well-being, personality development, and mental development of a child,” he says.

Children who are affected by SGBV can carry around a profound fear, and experience physical and mental collapse. They might rebel against the society that failed to protect them. “Whatever the way they are harassed, their experience has an impact on their future family life,” says Rahal.

Many types of research have pointed out that the family background has an immense impact on the behaviour patterns of a child.

For him, the solution must include transforming societal attitudes by bringing communities together. From parents to counsellors to healthcare professionals and legal aid, everyone has a role to play.
IN THE PAST, THERE HAVE BEEN INSTANCES WHERE RAPE VICTIMS HAVE BEEN RAPED MULTIPLE TIMES BEFORE THEY REACHED COURT. WOMEN HAVE BEEN REPEATEDLY RE-VICTIMIZED BY AN UNCARING SYSTEM. TODAY, CHILDREN AND WOMEN ARE AWARE THAT THERE IS A DEDICATED POLICE UNIT AND THAT THEY CAN REPORT TO WOMEN POLICE OFFICERS.
Superintendent of Police, Lanka Rajani Amarasena is proud of what the Children’s and Women’s Bureau of Police has accomplished. Developed into a separate police division in 1998, the Department is designed to support women and children at their most vulnerable. “Today, we provide a very progressive service,” says Rajani. However, she also highlights the need for improved infrastructure in police stations to be more women and child-friendly.

Rajani and her team are also finding new threats emerging. “The Internet is a space with limitless freedom,” she says.

“SOMETIMES, THE PERPETRATORS ARE FAR AHEAD OF US IN TECHNOLOGICAL KNOW-HOW.”

In response, Rajani’s Department is raising awareness around cyber and computer-related SGBV and cybersecurity and is planning to launch an internet-based crime surveillance unit.

Rajani is hopeful that as more women join the police force and receive training, they will be able to provide greater support to SGBV survivors.
DURING THE WAR, LONG-STANDING SOCIAL NETWORKS DISINTEGRATED AS PEOPLE FLED THEIR HOMES, AND WHEN THE FIGHTING WAS OVER, WOMEN FOUND THEMSELVES SIMPLY STRUGGLING TO EARN A LIVING. MANY TODAY LIVE WITH HIGH LEVELS OF DEBT.
Kurushanthan Mahaluxmy believes that all women and girls deserve to be safe and free.

“MY SERVICE AS A WOMAN GOES BEYOND RELIGION, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURE.”

“People who have been displaced by the war have lost their lives, property, education, and culture,” she says.

Having once been displaced herself, she knows what challenges other displaced women face including women headed households.

For Mahaluxmy, such structural inequalities feed into SGBV. Determined to help survivors, Mahaluxmy today works as a District Coordinator at the Women’s Development Federation in Mannar, and also serves as an active board member of the Women’s Action Network and a patron of the Muslim Women’s Trust Organization. In her work, she helps survivors gain access to legal services, connects both survivors and perpetrators with mental health services, and says they remain committed to active monitoring and data collection.
RAISING AWARENESS AMONG NEWLY MARRIED COUPLES IS ALSO AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY BECAUSE EVEN WITHIN MARRIED LIFE, RAPE (MARITAL RAPE) AND SEXUAL HARASSMENT CAN TAKE PLACE.
“I HAVE COME TO REALIZE THAT THERE IS NO ECONOMIC, SOCIAL, OR GEOGRAPHICAL DISPARITY IN TERMS OF WOMEN BEING SUBJECTED TO VIOLENCE. I HAVE MET SURVIVORS FROM ALL BACKGROUNDS.”

says Thushari Mangalika, as she reflects on the lessons she has learned through her 14 years of experience at the Divisional and District Secretariat level as a Women’s Development Officer. Another lesson Thushari has embraced is that prevention is always better. In this context, she sees the social services sector as a vital player in preventing rape and sexual violence.

Thushari shares her belief that it is important that we start talking about SGBV early on. “We must also recognize that it can impact men and boys in the form of mental and emotional violence,” she says.
WE PRACTICE A KEY POLICY THAT EVERYBODY HAS A RIGHT TO ENJOY A DIGNIFIED LIFE.
After eight years of working as the Legal Aid Commission's Representative in Lunugamwehera, Nadeeka Gamage understands why people are very reluctant to report a rape. “There are many reasons for this,” she says, “there can be a lack of trust in the law, they may experience shame or be cautious of long term legal processes, they may be worried about their standing in society or fear re-victimization, or fear facing other issues in their personal life. Many also lack confidence in the police and other services.”

THE LEGAL AID COMMISSION PROVIDES FREE LEGAL ASSISTANCE AND SERVICES TO VICTIM-SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES while also raising awareness in the community around the legal aspects of the issue. She says that “such issues should be everyone’s concern. For a crime affects not only the victim, but disturbs the entire society.”
SOME MALE SURVIVORS OF SGBV HAVE LEFT SCHOOL JEOPARDIZING THEIR EDUCATION. ENTIRE FAMILIES HAVE ALSO BEEN IMPACTED DUE TO LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD STEMMING FROM THE SEXUAL VICTIMIZATION OF A HUSBAND, FATHER, OR SON.

S. Gunapalan
Former Additional District Secretary, Mannar
The risk of ignoring SGBV is crushing. Gunapalan and his team have seen the consequences of physical assault resulting in severe, and in some cases, lifelong injuries. Gunapalan also seeks to broaden public understanding of SGBV to include male survivors of violence. “Economically, survivors face numerous impediments to employment due to poor mental health, community marginalization, or compromised physical health,” he says.

In 2018, 54 cases of SGBV were reported in the Mannar District. In 2019, that number almost tripled, says S. Gunapalan, the Additional District Secretary of the Mannar District. He knows this increase in reporting is also an indicator of progress, as survivors increasingly reach out to authorities for support. However, he highlights the challenges:

“WE HAVE VERY FEW FEMALE CONSTABLES WORKING IN MANNAR AND VERY FEW TAMIL-SPEAKING POLICE IN AN AREA WHERE THE MAJORITY ARE TAMIL-SPEAKING.

THIS IS A BIG CHALLENGE FOR US.”
I'M VERY HAPPY TO WORK AS A WOMEN’S DEVELOPMENT OFFICER BECAUSE I KNOW THAT MY SMALL CONTRIBUTION CAN HELP CHANGE A PERSON’S LIFE.
“IN OUR SOCIETY, WE THINK THAT WOMEN ARE TO BE BLAMED FOR THEIR ACTIONS WHEN THEY EXPERIENCE VIOLENCE.”

says L. Thayananthy, a Women’s Development Officer in the Mannar District. “There are even officials who feel uncomfortable talking about sexual violence.”

Over the years, Thayananthy has come to see SGBV as an extreme form of discrimination and a serious human rights violation, which can threaten the right to life, liberty, and security of a person, as well as their right to freedom.

In this context, Divisional level women’s federations, such as the one that Thayananthy belongs to, can play a key role in raising awareness around the social, economic, and political empowerment of women, and in directing women to the services they most need.
This publication released in 2021, contains excerpts from a campaign conducted during the period of 16 days of Activism in 2019, reflecting the project ‘Addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence through Public Institutions’. As such designations and placements of certain officers have changed.