

**MAPPING STUDY OF WOMEN'S (SELF-  
HELP) GROUPS IN ANURADHAPURA,  
KILINOCHCHI AND KURUNEGALA,  
SRI LANKA**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This mapping exercise aims to understand women's experiences with self-help groups in three districts of Sri Lanka, to ultimately identify potential areas of engagement in the future. It recognises the strong presence of women's rights activism in the country. The key findings of the mapping exercise reveal an in-depth understanding of issues faced by women heads of households. It provides elaborative personal narratives of women that substantiate the claim that gender-based discriminations significantly hinder every aspect of women's lives. The women from Anuradhapura highlights issues faced by women widowed by their military husbands. The women from Kilinochchi speaks of socio-cultural and economic challenges of women heads of households who have either lost their husbands in the war or enforced disappearances. The women from Kurunegala share that the widows of military husbands continue to be mistreated by society. Most women speak of sexual exploitations. The women emphasise that the women are not outside of any community. The lack of development and underdevelopment of women certainly takes a toll on the overall wellbeing of the community. The experiences of women validate that there is a need for regularising intervention programmes that aim to support women heads of households from a women's rights-based perspective. Simultaneously, the women heads of households are willing to be part of reshaping the future of women's organising in small groups. Based on such illuminating voices of women, the exercise makes several recommendations that can positively influence the formation, functions, and values of self-help groups.

**Keywords:** Post-war Sri Lanka, Women's Groups, Self-help Groups, Intervention Programmes, and Women Heads of Households.

MAP OF SRI LANKA



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## INTRODUCTION

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (the CEDAW Convention, 1979<sup>1</sup>) has guidelines to explore ways in which the convention's framework can be used in assessing the real situation of women who experience intersectional discrimination on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, age, and religion. Sri Lanka ratified CEDAW in 1981.

Gender-based discriminations against women in Sri Lanka is multifaceted and closely connected to the violent history of the three decades long war that ended in May 2009. However, the conflict between the ethnic groups that triggered the war still exists. The precariousness of everyday lives, even in the context of post-war, plays a significant role in the lives of people across the country. For instance, violence within and between communities, especially violence against women and girls, lack of access to infrastructural benefits, limited and/or no access to land that one owns or has cared for an extended period of time (mostly during the time of war), lack of job opportunities, and the consequences of accumulated trauma and unaddressed psychosocial problems. In reality, the majority of people, who had been directly affected by the war in terms of loss of loved ones, loss of property, livelihoods and everyday lives, are distressed by the assumed 'state of peace' (Maatram Foundation, 2015). Since 2009, Sri Lanka has also been affected by communal tensions triggered by religious extremists. Mostly, mosques and churches were attacks. While this mapping exercise was being carried out, a series of brutal blasts killed hundreds of lives in different parts of the country<sup>2</sup>.

Gender-based discriminations often intersect with the dynamics of such ongoing violence based on ethnicity and religion. Hence, the history of women's rights activism has also remained dynamic to be able to address emerging issues that discriminate women in various contexts. For instance, women's involvement in labour movements, land resolution, against ethnic divisions,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://groundviews.org/2019/04/22/easter-sunday-attacks-key-updates/>

<https://groundviews.org/2019/05/08/security-freedom-and-co-existence-after-the-easter-sunday-attacks-in-sri-lanka/>

<https://himalmag.com/easter-sunday-blasts-sri-lanka-april-2019-tisarancee-gunasekara/>

<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/28/opinions/sri-lanka-attack-threatens-fragile-peace-ananda-jegathesan>

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/apr/23/sri-lanka-violence-minorities-christians-muslims>

<http://ices.lk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/The-Chronic-and-the-Entrenched-Mr.-Gihan-Book-FINAL-WEB-PDF.pdf>

[https://www.academia.edu/37434371/The\\_Constitutional\\_Practice\\_of\\_Ethno-Religious\\_Violence\\_in\\_Sri\\_Lanka](https://www.academia.edu/37434371/The_Constitutional_Practice_of_Ethno-Religious_Violence_in_Sri_Lanka)

<https://www.cpalanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Dynamics-of-Sinhala-Buddhist-Ethno-Nationalism-in-Post-War-Sri-Lanka.pdf>

<http://www.ft.lk/article/617872/Religious-violence-in-Sri-Lanka-A-new-perspective-on-an-old-problem>

<http://thepicturepress.org/intolerance-and-islamaphobia-in-post-war-sri-lanka/>

anti-militarisation efforts, peacebuilding movements, and against violence against women (Abeysekera, 1999; de Alwis, 1997; de Mel, 2007; Kodikara, 2012; Jayawardena, 1986).

In this context, women mobilising in groups to show their resilience and strength has been an essential element in the history of women's rights work in Sri Lanka (de Alwis, 1997; Maunaguru, 2007; Samuel, 2006). It is a strategy started by women's movements and later was expanded by governmental and non-governmental organisations. For example, saving groups and Women's Rural Development Societies.

The current mapping exercise validates that gathering in small or large groups are not a new concept to women. This exercise is a significant departure of a long-term multifaceted intervention project with single women heads of households, including women deserted and widowed by their military husbands and women who lost their husbands in the war or with missing husbands due to political and socio-cultural turmoil of the war-country. The intervention proposes to engage with women in groups that can be identified as self-help groups (SHGs). The findings of the mapping exercise provide insights on the relevance of women's groups (as the term self-help group is not in the everyday vocabulary), issues that single women like to highlight, and the future of women's organising in groups with enhanced focus and efficiency to be better advocates for themselves as well as women from their communities.

A few recurring concerns shared by the women from the North and Northcentral parts of Sri Lanka include lack of access to livelihood activities, protection issues, the social stigmatisation of single womanhood and widowhood, and the need for women's organising in small groups to work towards their wellbeing. It was noted that the primary reason that motivates most women to come together in small groups was to find a livelihood opportunity. Initially, they shared that their hope is to get some kind of a livelihood assistance from this particular interaction as well. However, when probed to reflect on their everyday experiences about enhancing the overall wellbeing of themselves and their families, the women elaborated their realities beyond financial struggles.

The mapping exercise suggests that some of the questions that need to be continually addressed and approached with a gender-sensitive analytical lens include; what are gendered aspects of social and economic spheres that influence the everyday lives of single women heads of households, how do they manage the gendered relations of social hierarchies that have embedded controls over all aspects of women's lives, and what are the methodological challenges and strategies to be unfolded in order to ensure that a critical analytical perspective emerges beyond the simplified interpretations of complexities of everyday lives.

## METHODOLOGY

*“Today, the development of women is seriously hampered by lack of awareness and recognition, on all levels, of their actual and potential economic contribution”*

Els Postel and Joke Schrijvers write the above quote in their edited book titled ‘A Woman’s Mind is Longer than a Kitchen Spoon’ in 1980.

Driven by the critical awareness denoted by the above quote, the mapping exercise aims to identify women’s self-help groups and collectives in Anuradhapura, Kilinochchi and Kurunegala districts of Sri Lanka. While exploring the existing women’s self-help groups and collectives, the mapping exercise identifies gaps – both in terms of issues and locations – where the identification of new self-help groups also takes place with the hope of future collaborations.

Based on insights from the literature review and a few initial discussions with partner organisations staff from the three districts, the method of data collection primarily applied qualitative methods such as individual interviews and focused group discussions (FGDs). The guiding questions mainly focused on the formation, functions, and issues addressed by self-help groups and collectives. They also attempted to understand the nature of women’s involvement in such groups and collectives and their purposes along with strategies, if any, identified by women.

Data Collected at a Glance		
District (villages covered)	Number of Interviews Conducted	Number of Focused Group Discussions Conducted
Anuradhapura (Kekirawa, Vilachchiya, Kepittikolawa, and Anuradhapura Town)	9	5
Kilinochchi (Mullaipoonga, Ithavil, Thambagamum, Vannaankerni, Iyakachchi, Ramanathapuram, Kanakapuram, Mawadiyamman, Pallikudha, Mudkomban, Poonakary)	6	9
Kurunegala (Ibbagamuwa, Mawathagama, Polgahawela, Redeegama, Maho, and Wariyapola)	8	3
Total	23	17

The number of participants in a focused group discussion varied between 10 and 15 with a few exceptions. The partner organisation in each district selected the number of Grama Niladhari division to be included. All participants were female heads of households from different socio-economic backgrounds. The youngest were in their early twenties and the oldest were in their late sixties. A majority of them were married women with children, except a few. Some have support

from their extended families. Most do not. The category of female heads of households include separated from their husbands, missing husbands, deserted by their husbands, divorced, widows, and women living with husbands who are unable to generate an income due to their disability. ***In the context of this report, the term single women represent all these variations.*** One or two members of the partner staff were present at almost all interviews and focused group discussions. It helped to create a rapport with the participants and hopefully, will be helpful for future interventions that emerge from this mapping exercise.

The mapping exercise was conducted in Sinhala and Tamil. There was an interpreter involved to facilitate the fieldwork in Anuradhapura and Kurunegala as the researcher's knowledge of Sinhala language was limited. A brief explanation of the purpose of this exercise was given at the beginning of each interview and FGD by the partner staff member in each location. The venue and time of each discussion were decided by the partner organisations in consultation with the researcher. Building a rapport with most participants was not a challenge as most of them had known the partner staff for a while. The participants were not treated as passive objects of this exercise. At no point, the fact that they are autonomous subjects with preferences to share their viewpoints or not, was compromised. The word choice of the researcher was carefully selected not to imply any prejudices in terms of social, cultural, economic, sexual, and political backgrounds. No judgements of what was shared expressed. Confidentiality was assured to all participants. Their real names have been changed.

The researcher ensured that the research space was open to all kinds of voices to be heard. There was no space for hierarchies of any form to dominate one voice over the other. The voices of the participants were also not limited by existing theoretical frameworks on women's self-groups. Shaping women's voices according to theoretical frameworks can be a limitation. For that reason, this report does not manipulate what was shared by the participants. The translations in English attempts to keep the depth of meanings and feelings as expressed in Sinhala and Tamil. Hence, the translations might not be grammatically adequate in English.

## FINDINGS

The mapping exercise reveals that the term self-help group is not widely applied in the context of Northern and North Central Sri Lanka. Finding the equivalent in Sinhala and Tamil during translations showed that it was not a common term used in the everyday language of the people. The participants came up with different articulations of what the equivalent term for SHG could mean. When the word self-help gets translated in the local languages, it becomes self-explanatory. Interestingly, a few development organisations use the term. However, the aspects of self-help did not sound very relatable to most women as they are still in the process of identifying their potentials and becoming self-help groups. Consequently, the mapping exercise finds out that there is no SHG where the women hold memberships. However, there are different kinds of groups that the women are part of and a few are exclusively for women. The following table provides an overview of these groups and their purposes;

### *An Overview of Groups in the Districts*

Associated Group at a glance (add a table with description)

**Commented [CD1]:** This section will be completed with data from partner organisations!

According to a study conducted to measure the effectiveness of SHGs in empowering rural women in Batticaloa district of Sri Lanka, a self-help group “is a small group of rural poor, who have voluntarily come forward to form a group for the improvement of the social and economic status of the members” (Sureshkumar & Jeyarajah, 2018: 756). With the support of similar studies from the South Asian region and the primary collected from a sample questionnaire survey, the study argues that the SHG approach plays a vital role in promoting the socio-economic empowerment of rural women. The study provides an operational definition of SHGs. It offers a particular understanding of SHGs in the context of Sri Lanka that opens up the analytical fields for further exploration.

The current mapping exercise is in agreement with the above study. It validates that the Sri Lankan experience offers a particular understanding of SHGs. It was noted that the term self-help groups is not popular among the participants of this mapping exercise. However, almost all of them are part of a women’s group or a local society in their village or town. The most popular groups include Ranaviru Sewa, Samurdhi group, Women’s Rural Development Society, Amara Women’s Group, and the funeral society. Some women’s groups started by organisations and were

not followed up. Eventually, the women lost the trust and interest. Hence, the mapping exercise draws on the experiences of single women representing female heads of households who are part of various groups, including women's groups, to substantiate its' claims and recommendations elaborated in this report.

A study on women SHG in Kenya offers an understanding of SHGs where the researcher articulates SHGs as women organising themselves into groups to address all forms of inequalities against them in a patriarchal society (Nyataya, 2003). According to her;

“By organising themselves into groups, women have attempted to re-examine their present status in society, question and challenge those social values and structure which cause their marginalisation and formulate their strategies to improve their overall status” (Nyataya, 2003; 18)

Then she opens up the category of SHGs as any form of organising that women do, such as cooperatives, women's clubs, and women's associations. Nyataya argues that women organising through SHG has been a vital contributor and a driving force of the women's movement in Kenya (Nyataya, 2003).

The findings of the current mapping exercise closely resonates with the experiences from Kenya. For instance, most women think that women's groups can empower them to challenge oppressive norms and structures that continue to violate the lives of women. They also shared a strong desire for women's organising. They believe that when articulated as collective voices, women's issues and problems can be heard better. Hence, the likelihood of finding appropriate solutions from relevant authorities is also high.

Hence, the analysis of women's experiences shared remains within the scopes of this mapping exercise to identify the potentials of SHGs (women's groups in this instance), both existing and the future ones. The first half of this section focuses on issues that single women face as female heads of households. The latter half focuses on the potentials of women's organising as SHGs and/or women's groups. Women's narratives gathered during the fieldwork conducted for the purpose of this exercise substantiate the emerging insights elaborated below. Some insights from existing studies, where applicable, provide further support and substantiation.

## THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF SINGLE WOMANHOOD

The literature on gendered realities of Sri Lanka claims that women, especially single women from the population that has been directly exposed to adversities of the war, continue to experience multiple levels of marginalisation. Research reports illustrate that socio-cultural tabooing of issues related to violence against women still significantly silence many women in the post-war context of Sri Lanka (Saroor, 2014). Women activists along with the support of women from the affected communities have been fighting the battle of getting oppressed while battling against the dominant formulations of nationalism and resulted violence (De Mel, 2001). Increasing incidents of threats to women's security and the challenges faced by women's groups have jeopardised their functions (De Mel, 2007; Kumudini, 2006). The complexities of domestic violence across the country show that the extent of abuse that women are subjected to significantly hinder their wellbeing, let alone development or growth (Kodikara, 2012).

The mapping exercise validates their claims. It reveals that the gendered social constructions of single womanhood, including widowhood, socio-culturally, sexually, financially, and legally marginalise single women. Although the political aspects of marginalisation have not been directly mentioned, it remains an important aspect of marginalisation.

### *Symbolisations, Isolations and Social Policing*

The social and cultural aspects of marginalisation of single women often overlap. The widows are expected to carry symbolisations that are both gendered and discriminatory. These symbolisations are often used as tools for social tabooing and shaming. For instance, the widows cannot wear colourful clothes or dress well, cannot speak to men, cannot show that they have a life after the deaths of their husbands, they are not expected or welcomed at functions and occasions, they must not have a social life, men cannot visit their homes, they cannot be seen having a regular life as others, and finally, if they do any of the above, there will be name calling and they are considered as bad women or inappropriate women. More often, they are called by derogatory terms that imply that sexually objectified widows.

Often, the widows spoke about how difficult it was at the beginning. The same challenges are there even now. However, over the years they become better at facing them. The society has not changed much. Most people often try to take advantage of these women who do not have a man in the house. The following quote captures their bitter reality that forces them to live in isolation:

**Commented [CD2]:** More references from CEJ studies to be added!

“We cannot wear nice clothes. A man cannot visit their homes. Everyone’s eyes are on us. We simply cannot live our lives. We cannot show that we have moved on. We live for our children. We tolerate all these ill treatments from society just for our children. Some men come to offer to remarry us. Most of us do not trust them. Some women do marry them. But then they get deserted. Those men are just after the money that the government gives when someone remarries. But after that, we will not get the salary of our military husbands. The women who remarry are often left in a bad state. Their condition is very poor. They are unable to have three meals a day. Most of them also live in shadows. They do not come back to the Ranaviru group. They feel ashamed for having remarried someone inappropriate” – FGD, Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura

Quite disturbingly, the widows often bare the blame for having killed their husbands with their bad luck:

“The wives are often blamed for the deaths of their husbands saying that it is due to their bad luck. The women are taken as bad luck when their husbands die. There are also land issues as the wives of deceased soldiers lose everything and come back to their parents’ houses” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

The same group of women from Kekirawa, Anuradhapura also shared that with time, they learn to cope with such social isolation and social tabooing all by themselves. Similar concerns were echoed by almost all women who took part in this exercise.

“We used to be shattered, initially. Now, we are immune to those ill words. Initially, we used to cry a lot and did not come out of the house. We do not think there is any use in engaging with these people who speak ill of us. No point in trying to change them. They will never change. We hear from one ear and let it out from the other. This is the reality even now. Sometimes, it is still hurtful and we cry” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

They pointed out a memory lapse where the significance of the recent past has been forgotten:

“During the wartime, we had the respect. Now, people have forgotten that there was a war. People do not realise that the war was ended because of the soldiers, especially those who gave their lives to get freedom. If the war is back, people will be reminded again” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

However, even the present soldiers do not respect them, which raises the question, is it the memory of the war that was forgotten or the women as victims of war who are easily forgotten:

“It is a shame that the present soldiers do not think of their lost soldiers as their brothers. There is no brotherhood. As a result, they do not respect us either. We are no one to them” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

The following experience of Kamla also shed some light on the essence of a supportive social structure as single women are more likely to seek justice from social leaders instead of law enforcement officers;

“As widows, women face a lot of problems related to their safety and security. People think that these women do not have anywhere to go and no one would speak up for them. So, they take the women for granted. They approach us with proposals to marry them. But they do not really mean that. They just want to take advantage of us and later leave us. We, the single women, have to be very strong to be able to stay away from such men who try to harm us. We do not go to the police. We go to the monk at Pansela (Buddhist temple)”  
– Kamlā, Gonamariyawa, Anuradhapura

In addition, the women shared another important aspect that shows the gender hierarchies within and between the genders significantly jeopardises the lives of single women.

“We are humiliated by wives of living soldiers. They have money. They have full freedom as their husbands are still with the military. Even some soldiers themselves speak ill of the military widows” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

The group of women from Ibbagamuwa, Maho & Wariyapola in Kurunegala shared that it is difficult to find jobs for their children. A few of them have sons who are in their early twenties. They are unable to find a sustainable job. The sons are grown to be irresponsible. They do not feel responsible to earn an income and look after the family. They are not actively looking for a job either. The women struggle a lot to fulfil their needs. One has taken loans to send her son abroad to study as he wanted that. He is a 21-year-old. She tried to educate him abroad by putting herself in debt for the rest of her life. She does not think he is going well there either. She continues to suffer from the burden of motherhood. This raises the question; does it ever end for women to care for their children in every sense of the word? They added: “Even coming to this hotel is a problem. People are always after what is going on in our lives. If someone known to us sees us here, they will go to town with their imagination. We used to be scared. It is a while to get out of the house. Some of us still are struggling to face such social problems”.

The social policing of single women’s lives also pressurise them to bring up their children well. They are often blamed for any ill-behaviours of their children. The burden of motherhood is very significant as they are single parents. Whether the children turn out to be helpful or not, the mothers carry a huge responsibility with the hope that one day the children will be supportive of them.

Finally, the socio-cultural construction of single womanhood has been noted by the lack of interest to involve women with disabilities and overall psychosocial wellbeing of single women. A group of women from Kanagapuram, Kilinochchi pointed out these two categories are essentially, however, often ignored by service providers as many single women who have some kind of a special need and/or psychological problems hardly come out of the house. They are unable to participate in meetings. Hence, they are left out. This is an important finding, which

could not be substantiated by the information gathered in this mapping exercise. However, it is an important finding to be included in the future endeavours of similar studies and/or intervention programmes.

Here is the change that women seek in society:

“The society has to change the way it looks at us. The society must stop making assumptions about our lives and behave as if our lives are open for everyone to talk about” – FGD, Mawathagama, Kurunegala

### *Intersection of Social Values and Financial Burdens of Single Women*

The impacts of social policing costs the livelihood opportunities for single women. The following experience of a single mother with children illustrates how difficult it is for her to generate an income according to her skills and feasibilities:

“I am suffering a lot to engage in an income generating activity as the community would not allow it. My job is cleaning fishing nets. So, fishermen come to my house to leave their nets. I clean them. They come in the evening to get the nets back. The community speak ill of me. They spread rumours that I have relationships with all the men who come to my house. Both women and men spread this rumour. Gossiping is entertainment to them. But it has cost me a lot. For a period, I had to stop my work. We are poor. My family is dependent on this income. After a while, I gathered courage and restarted my job. I cannot let my children to starve just become of these rumours” – FGD, Poonakary, Kilinochchi

The above experience shows the intersectional aspects of socio-cultural marginalisation that takes a toll on the financial wellbeing of single women heads of households.

Single women heads of household suffer from lack of access to skill development, limited mobility, and increased demands of family responsibilities and caregiving. Most single women live with their immediate families that are their children. In some cases, both parents or one parent also live with them. In other words, the single women may have dependents at home to take care, yet, are the sole breadwinners too. Often times, they are overburdened by the need to be caregivers as well as breadwinners among many other roles that they play on a daily basis. This becomes critical when it comes to livelihood prospects available to them. The participants of this exercise do not think that this critical element of their lives is taken into account when planning intervention programmes for them.

It was noted that income generation is a significant limitation for single women heads of households. Often, they find it difficult to move forward without a steady income. The mapping exercise shows that they do not have access to resources. It also shows that quite often, the survival itself is in question;

“The main struggle is the economic problem. Most properties are given to men in our society. We marry and move to the in-law’s house. When the husband dies, we move back with our parents. Only after that most of us had to find land and build a house for ourselves and for our children. If we have land, the government built the house for us. Indeed, it is not much. We have to put the extra money to build a decent house. Most of us have taken bank loans for this purpose. Even getting a loan is not easy. If there is a man, they give it quickly. We had to wait for a long time to get the loan” – FGD, Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura

The main cry of the group of women from Iyakachchi in Kilinochchi was about poverty, which echoes in almost all discussions carried out for the purpose of this mapping exercise.

### *Sexual Exploitations*

According to a study conducted by FOKUS Women titled “Living in Shadow: The Status of Military Widows in Sri Lanka,” in 2016 argues that the women of female-headed households are subjected to sexual violation due to their widowhood. The study states;

“Female Headed Households in post-conflict Sri Lanka have been increasingly subjected to sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and sexual bribery. The study interviewed 292 military widows, found that nearly half experienced some form of sexual harassment, including sexual bribery” FOKUS Women, 2016

The current mapping exercise validates the above finding. It sheds more light on the extend of the problem of sexual exploitations including sexual bribery. The women confirmed that they are often sexually objectified. That is, they are often seen as easy targets by men. The women also confirmed that men in power ask for sexual bribery. They said that it is not shared widely or spoken in public. As a result, it still happens in secret. It is a huge problem. But it does not get addressed.

“When we were young widows, everyone took us for granted. They expected us to give sexual favours. We were considered as easily accessible women. Many men had approached us with the wrong intentions. When we go somewhere to get some work done, they immediately take us for granted and expect us to say yes to their proposals, which are often sexual. We had to be strong and resist such ill treatments. Now that we are older than what we were those days, they do not approach us like that. They do not ask directly. Indirectly they indicate. We can feel in their body language and the tone. Indeed, not everyone is like that. But most men try to take advantage of us, especially when we were young. When a husband dies a woman’s world collapses. It is hugely problematic. But we do not know how to change that. We survive. However, our lives could be better if we have more income to meet the needs of our children. The progress is very slow. Often, we get stuck due to many social obstacles” – FGD, Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura

“We have heard that sexual bribery is taking place. Not necessarily by govt officers. Mostly by Tamil men who live abroad. They give money to women and later ask for sexual favours. Or even sexually abuse them. Single women – those living by themselves are targeted more by men. They continue to harass them” – Palai, Kilinochchi

A group of single women from Polgahawela and Mawathagama in Kurunegala shared, “we feel like killing those men. But we are unable to do anything about them. We just avoid going back to them. There is no justice. We try to get our job done through women officers”. One of them added, “an army officer has asked for sexual bribery. I complained to the higher officer. That officer was transferred”. The women also pointed out that is not the solution as he goes to a different location and does the same.

“We must stop sexual bribery. The young children are going to be affected by it even more than we did. We must address the main problem, which is financial instability. If women have access to a regular income, they do not have to go to these officers. Also, create safe spaces for women. Women’s leadership must be promoted and strengthened too. There must be more women officers who are approachable. Only then we can begin to deal with the problem of sexual bribery” – FGD, Mawathagama, Kurunegala

A group of women from Kanagapuram, Kilinochchi, was furious over the kind of sexual abuse they face as single women. A mother who is still looking for her son: was mistreated by a military officer from the Criminal Investigation Department in Vavuniya when she had gone in search of her son. First, he had asked for her telephone number. Later, before she left the office premises the officer had called and asked her to come alone to his office. She understood that the way he spoke was very different and that he intended for sexual favours. “I was terrified. I ran out of the office. Later, I changed my telephone number too. I never returned to that office or any other military office. I only go to the human rights office to find out about my son”.

The following tale of a woman who has been deserted by her military husband for over a decade shares her experience with sexual bribery;

“I did not want the salary even. I just wanted him to get well and be able to walk again. He was bedridden. I only cared about his wellbeing. But his family did not like that. They were after his salary. I was 28-year-old then. Now I am 51. For the past 15 years, he had deserted me. He lives with his mother. He also constantly tries to spread ill words of her. I have two sons. Both of them are supportive of me. They do not like their father. Actually, he was never around to take care of them. He did nothing for them. The older son is married now. My sons treat me like a god. They know how much I suffered to bring them up. I went abroad as domestic help. I was there for a few years. I have been back for a few years. I did a saloon course in Kandy. Now, I am trying to establish a business here. Sadly, the society and my relatives believe him as he is a disabled soldier. No one believes me, except my sons. We are not divorced. He is just playing with my life. Recently, he started to come to our house. I live with my sons. They do not speak to him. He just comes to see me. Once, I had given my telephone number to an army officer when my husband was getting the treatment from Ragama hospital. He called me late in the night and spoke inappropriately. He asked whether I would go with him. He spoke in a sexual tone. I was certain that he was expecting me to get sexual with him. I told him that women like me look up to officers like him. Therefore, not to speak like this ever with any woman. I hung up. Later, I changed the number. Women often do not speak about these experiences. This is the first time I have shared about this experience. Thanks for listening to me. It is a big

problem in our society, especially to single women. Our safety is often at stake. If a fellow army officer asks for sexual favours, who else will protect us. This has to be changed” – Samudra, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

Another woman shared that she started to get unwanted messages from a government officer in Jaffna after she had gone there to obtain some documentation. Single women are often sexualised. Men often expect that we need to do them sexual favours to get a service done. They feel as if it is their entitlement.

A group of women from Mullaipoonga in Kilinochchi said that they get a lot of nuisance calls and harassment on the road. They said that the men do not let ourselves be and it is a torture to be harassed like that. They also realise that they got to be stronger than ever to be able to face such men in their societies.

Often times, women do not know what to do or how to react when government officers and other service providers demand sexual favours from them. Almost all women who participated in the mapping exercise ominously shared that it is their financial vulnerability that makes them go to government officers and service providers in search for some assistance. They think that if they have access to a regular income within their scopes of engagements, they do not have to face such men in their lives. Because, they do not know what to do when it happens as they are in need for some help, which make them vulnerable. In other words, the agency of single womanhood is significantly compromised in the hands of corrupt officers, especially those who ask for a sexual bribery.

“But we have also experienced where some have got their phone numbers and later give them nuisance calls or ask them to do some kind of favours in the wrong way. It happens at the police station. It also happens at DS offices. We often do not get the service that we deserve when something like this happens. We are not powerful to challenge them. When there is a male officer who asks for sexual favours to get the work done, most women do not give in. They go back home and forget about the need. It never gets fulfilled. Some women do give in. They undergo a lot of trouble afterwards. They stop coming to the Ranaviru society. We hardly get to know about what happens to them. It is highly tabooed and they feel shy to share their experiences with us. If they have children, it gets even worse. The children of such women who give in go through more problems. For instance, they get married at young age and their lives get changed completely. If we resist and tell them that we will tell others, they might stop asking such favours. They might get shamed of their behaviours and stop doing it. They are government officers. They cannot ask like that - FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura”

One woman among them said:

“My divorce case was delayed by a year and a half due to an officer at the court did not pass my file as I did not entertain his request for my phone number. He kept asking. I refused for a long time saying that I do not have a phone. Later I had given a number of

one of my old male relative. He must have got angry about that. They delayed my case so much. I used to cry everyday” - FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

A similar experience was shared by Vaani;

“The Divisional Secretariat in Pooneryn, a few years ago, behaved in a way that indicated that he expected certain favours from us, the single women. He used to give me nuisance calls and speak inappropriately. I scolded him. I changed the number. He created problems to many women. Eventually, he was transferred. But the problem has not gone away. He will continue ask for sexual bribery somewhere else. There was no disciplinary action taken. We do not know what is the punishment for such behaviours by government officers. Some women are vulnerable. I escaped from his trap. Men like him use this vulnerability. Some women say yes. Because they do not have anywhere else to go”

She continued to point out that the sexual bribery can never be tolerated and that she fears that eventually sexual bribery will be normalised;

“A government officer can never ask for sexual bribery. They take us for granted. Instead of protecting us, they misuse us. They are not children. We cannot teach them that. They must know it. The more they ask for sexual bribery, the more it will become a regular thing” – Vaani, Mudkomban, Kilinochchi

Devi’s husband was never around since the birth of their daughter. She is 26-year-old and her daughter is 5-year-old. They live by themselves. Devi goes to work at a seafood processing company. A couple of times, Devi has experienced harassment from government officials. This is her experience;

“*The Officer* at the Divisional Secretariat office got her telephone when she had applied for a water well. He harassed her over the phone. He uses different numbers and she cannot identify his name to avoid any contact with him. Even this morning, she had gone to the DS office for some other work and he immediately came out when he saw her and teased her. She says that he would do anything to me if she agrees for his desires. “He says that he paid special attention and took care of my request for a water well. He went out of the way to help me. He implied that I am not returning his favour. Of course, he expects sexual favours. I live all by myself with my little daughter. He thinks that he could do anything to me just because he is in power. This has happened in the past too. There is a GS who keeps harassing women. There was a livelihood officer who asked sexual favours from single women. This was in 2014. Later, he was transferred to Mannar. I have also got nuisance calls from the police. Because of my husband’s ill-behaviours, I had to go to the police station a few times. They take your number. Then they misuse it” – Devi, Pallikudha, Kilinochchi

Devi’s experience of sexual harassment from that particular officer from the Divisional Secretariat was reconfirmed by a few other women. Unfortunately, no legal action has been taken against those officials who are likely to ask for sexual bribery from single women with children.

The women also shared that their freedom has been compromised:

“We live with a huge weight in our hearts due to this widowhood. Yes, the country is in peace. There is freedom to go any part of the country. However, we do not feel that we have freedom. Women are still bounded by many limitations from the society” - FGD, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

According to Premavathi and Sriyani from Anuradhapura town,

“Some men genuinely come forward to help us. But most men are not like that. They try to take advantages of us. We cannot go to government offices without accompanied by a male relative. If we do not have male relatives, we take one of our children with us. Our Grama Niladhari is good. But all officers are not like that. They look at us differently. We could tell from their gazes that their intentions are not good. Also, that they expect some kind of sexual favour from us. We end up not going back to those men again. Our work also does not get done. If possible, we go to a woman officer. But that is not always possible. Legal actions need to be taken. But we cannot file the complaint. We are poor and helpless. We could be targeted and they could do anything to us”

The women firmly believe that legal action is the solution to punish men who ask for sexual bribery. They also hope that it will stop to reduce this crime. However, they feel vulnerable to act towards it.

The social constructions of single womanhood clearly depict different kinds of marginalisations faced by women as they try to rebuild their lives as single women. Often times, women worry about their children and dedicate their lives to their children. When asked what they do for fun, most women did not have an answer. The idea of fun or doing something for themselves does not exist for them. Some said they like to laugh like this in the middle of our conversations when we tried to break the ice or to cheer them up. A few had gone on trips, which is a rare occurrence.

The social constructions of single womanhood also leave us with a firm call for a multidimensional understanding of women’s empowerment that ought to be promoted in all kinds of intervention with women in these societies. According to Naila Kabeer, women’s empowerment is everything about the processes in which women acquire the ability to make strategic life choices. She argues for three interrelated aspects, namely resource, agency and achievements, that must be recognised in any process of women’s empowerment. Kabeer also expands the understanding of choice by exploring its content and consequences in different contexts (Kabeer, 2002). The findings of this mapping exercise validate that Kabeer’s articulation of women’s empowerment must be transformed into intervention programmes in Sri Lanka if they were to make any meaningful difference in the lives of single women in the context of post-war rebuilding. This insight leads to the next theme emerging from this exercise, which is on the existing women’s (self-groups) groups.

### INSIGHTS ON EXISTING WOMEN'S (SELF-HELP) GROUPS

The literature on Self-help Groups (SHGs) suggests that the livelihood and microcredit programmes mainly operate on the assumption that SHGs are an effective mechanism to promote the economic empowerment of women. Some studies challenge this assumption based on the everyday realities of women in several parts of the world where development programmes are multiplying on this hypothesis (Kumar, 2014). They show that the mere access to an income generating activity is not economic empowerment women, let alone equality on other aspects such as socio-cultural and political (Batliwala, 1995). The economic empowerment does not mean the empowerment of women in all other aspects of their lives (Hashemi et al. 1996). Such concerns have generated a plethora of discussion on this subject. Hence, the effectiveness of SHGs has been repeatedly assessed almost in all parts of the world (Atteraya, Gnawali & Palley, 2016; Self Help Group Approach Manual published by KNH). The current mapping exercise also supports the argument that economic empowerment alone is not sufficient to uplift the lives of single women and their families.

#### *Experiences with Existing Groups*

The women stated that the purposes of existing groups mostly focus on social concerns to financial benefits. The social concerns include supporting a family that loses a member, cleaning of public places, helping a family to organise an almsgiving, and leisure activities. The financial benefits include savings, livelihood support, and loan facilities. The groups that are exclusively for women mostly focus on savings and income generation. In Kilinochchi, the newly formed women's group hope to voice their needs. They are committed and encourage one another in shaping the future of the group.

“As part of the Amara Women's Group, we meet once in three months. We also meet when a need arises, like today. Many needs of women are not fulfilled by any organisation as yet. We are happy to be part of this group. Something might work out, eventually. We recognise that we must participate with commitment” – FGD in Ramanathapuram, Kilinochchi

Ranaviru Sewa is a mixed group of all genders and different ages. The families of deceased soldiers and disabled soldiers are part of this group. It is governed by the military services authority.

“The society is not only for women or the widowed wives of the deceased soldiers. There are the parents, siblings and other family members of the deceased soldiers. There are also disabled soldiers. There are different kinds of people and different category of memberships as well. As a result, not everyone is happy with the way society functions. There are a lot of disappointments and frustrations due to lack of services obtained” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

“Those days the Ranaviru Identity Card that we have had some significance. We did not have a stand in the queue. We could get things done without having to go through a lot of troubles. Like, at the bank or at the hospital. Since the end of the war, it has changed. No one respects us or our identity cards. Military men are celebrated more than us. But these days, even the soldiers are not respected as they used to during the wartime” - FGD, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

The women from Kurunegala stated that their experiences with Women’s Research Centre have been rewarding;

“Joining the WRC group was very empowering. We have had a series of meetings. It will be good to form like a women’s group to support one another through that group. For example, getting a livelihood support” – Ashila and Renuka, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

The women shared that they find strength in one another when they come together as a group. They also validated that it brings them hope and a firm sense of unity. According to a group of women from Kurunegala;

“We cannot be alone in life. We are taking care of our families by ourselves. However, we must be part of societies like Ranaviru Sewa, Funeral Society, Women’s Society, and Buddha Society, to have a sense of community. When we come together, we feel good and important. There are other women who care about us. If we are just by ourselves, self-pity ruins us. When we come together as a group, there is a sense of belonging. Hence, we are motivated to function in groups. Just because we have a lot of challenges to get through each day of our lives, we cannot be sad all the time. We must have a place to feel good and laugh. This group is that place. When we come together that place is created by us to feel good. We gain knowledge by attending meetings like this. We learn about other women’s problems. We learn about financial management and group management when we function as a group and manage the group savings. When we come together as a women’s group, there is a sense of unity. We are united as widows. As single women. Unity gives us strength and hope. We can face any challenge as a group” – FGD, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

Another group of women shares that gathering as women’s groups bring them happiness;

“We were very sad when we were widowed. The beginning of widowhood was tough. We almost had no one to support us. But slowly we gained the courage to survive without our husbands. We had to look after our children. Slowly we learned to face our problems. When we came in touch with groups and societies, we learned from other women’s experiences. Coming together gave us the courage to face our problems and move forward. Unity is our strength. We are about 15 widowed women who are part of the Ranaviru group from this GN division. There are about 60 members in total, including the parents of deceased soldiers and disabled soldiers” – FGD, Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura

Simultaneously, the women also pointed out the challenges in coming together as women’s groups. According to a group of women from Iyakachchi, Kilinochchi, a women’s groups that existed before are not functional anymore. It was difficult to mobilise women given their responsibilities. As single women, they hardly have enough time to manage everything by

ourselves. Making time for extra meetings is very difficult. However, they regularly attend WRDS meetings, which happens once a month. Other than that, they do not make time for anything else.

“We do not know how to get together as women that does not involve a saving. We have never come together as women’s groups anything other than saving groups – like Samurdhi. We are unable to imagine it. If you tell us, what else we could do by coming together as women in groups, we could think about it. We also need support of all women. Everyone must understand that there will be some benefits to come together like this” – FGD, Iyakachchi, Kilinochchi

The women also pointed out existing fractures within the group members, like caste differences. In Ithavil, Kilinochchi, there seems to be a caste element that played a role in who could speak. Most women were not comfortable to speak up. They did not trust each other to speak out. They repeatedly mentioned that they are scared to speak up as they fear that it will not be treated as confidential with all participants.

At another discussion, the intersection of caste, vulnerability, and likelihood of giving bribes surfaced;

“Women hardly speak of their problems, especially when they are sexually abused or misused by men, they have trusted that would never harm them. There is definitely monetary bribery happening where govt officers take money to provide a service or when filling a govt post. Due to this corrupted system, the qualified ones do not get the jobs they deserve. I did not get the nurse job that I deserved. The government official said, if you pay us some money, you can get the government job quickly. Caste plays a major role in getting women together. We cannot mobilise without taking such issues into consideration” – FGD, Palai, Kilinochchi

There was also mentioning of trust issues among the members;

“It is difficult to speak about our problems. We do not have any space to speak about our problems. We hardly speak about our problems even with these groups. Trust is a big issue” – FGD, Palai, Kilinochchi

The trust issues with the formation of the group itself were also highlighted. For instance, when speaking of Ranaviru Sewa, one of the staff members of the partner organisation added;

“I have done a small study. In that study, the military widows shared their frustrations with the society saying that their needs are not taken care of. They are called for meetings and made to wait for a long time. They shared that they are very disappointed by them. Because the benefits that they get are very minimal or close to nothing for the time they spent on meetings and coming together” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

Another group of women shared about lack of motivation to form in groups:

“Women are asked to mobilise in groups so that organisations can give a loan and/or offer livelihood support. As long as we know, this is the only purpose for mobilising women in

groups. Our hope is that such efforts eventually bring us livelihood support. We come together like this to talk about our problems with the hope that our problems get visibility and organisations and the government offer us support based on such sharing” – FGD, Poonakary, Kilinochchi

In Kanugahawewa, Anuradhapura, there seems to be a generational gap between young and old women. The older women are not aware of the problems faced by young women. All are single women. Either widows or deserted by their husbands. Older women think that violence against women is not a problem in their village. But a young woman spoke of her experiences of living with a violent husband who eventually left her with two children. She is still fighting in the court to get maintenance from him. She said that older women know about her problems. She also said that there is no sense of justice in their village. Even the officials who must promote justice for all do not believe in justice.

“It is even more difficult for women to fight by themselves to establish something that is not there. When justice is not there, women tend to get it in the wrong way. We, women, have to be careful and be strong not to get diverted by such requests. However, it is very difficult. Everyday survival is difficult. Resisting an offer to give sexual favours for some money or services is also difficult. We must come together like this to speak about women’s problems. Only then we could move forward as a group and find solutions. We could also support one another in whatever way possible” – FGD, Kanugahawewa, Anuradhapura

When speaking of their experiences with groups, women also shared their disappointments in terms of lack of access to justice in any form. For instance, the story of a woman from Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura, who has been deserted by a disabled soldier/husband, shows the complexities of her life as a single woman with a child who has no social support. The husband was abusive. She took care of him for a long time. He was bedridden. Over the years he became addicted to drugs and started to ill-treat her. About 18 months ago, she left him as she could not tolerate it anymore. Her sister gave a piece of land. Little by little she built a house on it. She has a small son. Even now, the husband family speaks ill of her for having left him. She encourages the son to visit his father. Because she does not want the son to not to know his father. However, her husband and her mother-in-law are not appreciative of it. Now, they are trying to take the house she has built. Once he has even tried to set fire on the house. She filed a complaint at the police. They did not act upon it as he is an ex-soldier and disabled too. Her narrative shows that the women expect some kind of a reparation process to be facilitated by groups that they are associated with.

Despite their challenges and frustrations, the women expressed a strong sense of desire to involve in women’s organising for women.

“We must build trust and increase confidentiality when we come together to share our problems. Single women must be exclusive groups – all members of the group must know the purposes of gathering in groups – must know the history of an existing group – awareness is very important. We must believe that there is a use in gathering as a women’s group” – FGD, Mudkomban, Kilinochchi

Two more women from the same location shared their views on the need for women’s organising in groups;

“A collective voice is more powerful than a single voice. We managed to mobilise and close down the liquor brewing in our neighbourhood. Some men do not like it. They know that we were the ones behind the closing down. But we cannot remain in fear. We must also think of our children. Their security is also compromised by our social work like this. But it is also something that we will not stop doing. It is good for self-motivation and being courageous. Also, important to build confidence. It is healing too – talking to another woman who has gone through similar experiences helps to heal our wounds. It helps to improve our leadership skills. We become better advocates to voice our issues. The more social work we do the more responsible we become. Since our childhood, we have taken roles of adults. We had no support. We had to be adults when we were children. We started to do the household duties when we were very young. I started to cook for the family at the age of nine. We were mostly taking care of our lives by ourselves. We are used to it. It has made us strong women. We hardly lived with our husbands. They are no more. Our lives go on. We have no time to feel sad. We used to cry a lot. Crying out aloud helps to deal with pain. Even now, when we feel very low, we cry” – Vaani and Mala, Mudkomban, Kilinochchi

### *Desire for Women’s Organising*

The strong desire for women’s organising emerges from the notion that women’s rights are human rights too:

“Soldiers battle in the battlefield. We, their wives, battle with the society. We are also heroes. But we are not celebrated as heroes. Only soldiers get celebrated like that. But we are the ones who have been managing everything at home and in the society in their absence. We are the fathers and mothers too. We play multiple roles. The responsibilities are endless. We suffer quite a lot, physically and emotionally. “Women cannot lose their strength. Women are strong and that keeps them going. If men have to go through what we go through, they will not be able to handle it. They are not strong like women. Women have the inner strength. When needed they become more powerful and face any situation. Women gain the strength from within. It is there in them. They just have to bring it out” – FGD, Kekirawa, Anuradhapura

Similarly, a sense of women’s empowerment through power and self confidence was shared;

“Women must be empowered with power and self confidence that they could do. Coming together will motivate them to fight for their rights. Legal support must be made available to women too. Women have to show to the society that we are strong. We must not give up on us” - Premavathi and Sriyani, Anuradhapura town

The women envision the shared space for women’s organising as empowering:

“We do not have a place to meet like that. If that can be arranged, we would like to come together once a month at the least. It will help us to forget about our problems for a little while. Also, we can learn from one another and become stronger. We used to cry a lot at the beginning. We did not know how to go on with our lives without the support of our husbands. But slowly we learned and we are still learning. We face problems on a daily basis. Coming together as a group like this will be very helpful to us” – FGD, Ibbagamuwa, Kurunegala

“Women coming together to solve a problem is always empowering. We try to help each other and move forward together as much as we could. It is very difficult. We live in poverty” – FGD, Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura

“A collective voice is more powerful than an individual voice. We could get to know about other women’s problems. We will not tell our problems to strange women. This can be a space for us to come together as women and speak about our problems. We could support each other. When we ask men for help, there is a change for them to misuse or abuse us. Whereas asking women for help is much safer” – FGD, Mullaiipoonga, Kilinochchi

The women want it to be consistent too, especially given that access to financial resource can further complicate the lives of single women. Mallika’s thoughts clearly captures these aspects;

“Women in our village function in groups and carry out livelihood activities. When we do work collectively, it is better for us to manage with our other responsibilities. As single women, there are lot of responsibilities to be fulfilled. We also conduct weekly public market to sell the products we produce. We have a good market. Women suffer from financial loans they get from small financial institutions. They just give loans. No one think about their repaying capacity. As a result, after a little while, women are unable to repay the loan. Some organisations approach us to work with women headed households. Later, they stop coming here. We are unable to contact them over the phone too” – Mallika, Iyakachchi, Kilinochchi

A group of young widows from Vilachchiya, Anuradhapura with small children said that they wish to be part of women’s groups. Their desire is to seek support and be helpful to one another. They are finding it difficult to adjust to the recent change in their lives. They get no support from their families. At present they are not part of any groups as such. But they wish to. According to them, the main purpose is to come together to support one another and find economic ventures.

The participants of this mapping exercise seem to have a clear image of how they wish to come together in groups:

“To support women, first we need to organise them in groups. Also, have initial discussions with the GS to get their support. Without their support, we cannot function. We need to have good relationship with government officials. If they are unaware of any activity, some of them create problems. They do not like to keep them in the dark. It is also important to have groups at the village level. Having a common group for the entire DS division will not be practical for single women and women with special needs. It is also important to register these small groups. So that we can engage in activities to generate income, like the Ammachchi shop. We can also obtain revolving loan and function as an enterprise” – FGD, Kanagapuram, Kilinochchi

Similarly, a group of women from Poonakary, Kilinochchi shared;

“Groups must be formed in each village. Combing villages in one group must be avoided. Because, there are many single women who need support in each and every village. Also, mobility of single is highly restricted. Therefore, gathering near where we live will increase the sustainability of these groups. People often look for benefits. If no material benefits, there will be less chances of sustaining any initiative”

In many cultures, women often come together in groups for a range of reasons. However, categorically they fit into two divisions. First is the formation of groups to obtain material benefits. An example is the *'chit group'*, which is an informal savings group where women participate in regular savings throughout the year. Every year, they share the savings with one woman who is unanimously selected by them (Karmakar, Mehta, Ghosh, and Selvaraj, 2011). Second is the formation of groups as women's organising – both formal and informal – to address social, cultural, economic, and political injustices against them. For instance, the Cloth Line Project, WECAN Campaign, One Billion Rising, and the Sri Lanka Campaign for Peace and Justice.

In a study on women's activism in the post-tsunami (December 2004) context in Sri Lanka, Perera points out the importance of coalition work amongst women's organisations that prioritised the task of increasing women's participation in decision making bodies of the reconstruction process and to respond to the calls of violence against women – even inside makeshift camps and temporary shelters. She mentions women's peace activism that should ideally bring women's rights activists from different ethnic backgrounds; however, does not go into details of it (Perera, 2007).

Similarly, Maunaguru points out, “traditionally women are viewed as helpless victims in the context of disasters. But what we witnessed generally in Sri Lanka as elsewhere was contrary to this popular view; women acted upon the consequences of disasters with great resilience and strength” (Maunaguru, 2007; 71). She supports her claim by showing that women's organisations not only focused on immediate relief assistance but also prioritised policy-related work where their activism had resulted in bringing changes in the national policies on land reformation and violence against women. She also emphasises on women's coalition work that had provided the space for collective activism. The experiences shared in this exercise validates these claims. Despite the challenges, including threats to lives, women have not only resisted an authoritarian state but also protested against dominations and celebrated their achievements too. They also substantiate the notion of women's empowerment argued by Kaber mentioned earlier.

For instance, the following story on the formation of a women's group, illustrates the success of a single woman who mobilised women in her village that eventually gave birth to the

women's group in Gonamariyawa, Anuradhapura in 2012. The mobiliser woman was 28 when she influenced seven other women and started a women's group, which is still functional. She is the president of this group. Here is their story shared by three women who were among the initial eight women to start this women's group;

“Our interest in women's rights brought us together. The women in our village suffer from different problems. For instance, financial struggles, unequal treatments, and violence in the household. We did not know what to do and who to reach out to. Coming together as a group of eight women at the beginning, made us to believe that there are others and we could do something about our problems. Eventually, we formed the society. We learned how to function as a group, where to go, and who to talk to in order to find solutions to our problems. We spoke about our problems with one another. Many women think that it is not appropriate to talk about their problem, especially when it comes to violence against women. We slowly changed that. The society is a space where women can come together to speak about their problems. When we reach out to the Grama Niladhari or any other officers as a group of women, they take us seriously. Fewer chances to ill-treat us or misbehave with us. Women like us who live in poverty do not have access to a steady income. Therefore, when we go to the officers to get some service done, they ask for sexual bribery. We do not have money to bribe them. So, they intend to get sexual favours from us. At the beginning, we used to come together to share our problems and frustrations. Eventually, we started to talk about how to find solutions to our problems. We began to develop our knowledge on women's rights and services that are available for women, especially single and widowed women. We started to engage in our own income generating activities. We went for different kinds of training, mostly on income generating activities. Gradually, we became trainers ourselves. It has been an empowering journey together with women like us”

One of them, who was widowed by her military husband had to wait for 8 years to get her husband's pension. A few times she had gone to the Saliyapura army camp with one of her older brothers. They asked her to come repeatedly. One time she had taken her daughter. After a few visits, the major of that camp asked her to come alone. He had said, 'come alone. I will help you'. She stopped going there after that. She knew that he was expecting something else from her. She said, "I had never been to anywhere by myself. How could I have gone to the camp alone? I did not like the way he asked me to come alone".

She was 28-year-old when this incident had happened. Now she is 50. Due to the inappropriate conduct of that army officer, she did not get the pension for eight years. She could not send her older son to school. That had affected her a lot. She gave up on the pension until one of her relatives joined the army from her village. He helped her to get the pension without having to face the major who wanted to meet her alone. She had not shared this incident even with her mother. She was ashamed to share that something of this sort has happened to her. Eventually, she joined this group of women. She was one of the first eight women who came together to start

the group. She felt comfortable to share this incident with the women. Apparently, the pension was not back dated to those eight years that she did not have access.

It appeared that women do not have information on what is the difference between a salary and a pension. All they know is that the pension is significantly less than the salary. There seems no transparency of the transition from getting a salary to getting a pension. After they had formed the group, through RPK, this group has access to different kinds of training offered by various organisations such as FOKUS, CIDA, and Task Force (they are regular participants of the task force).

As for challenges, it is the experiential knowledge that they gain from one another is keeps them strong to face any challenge in life. Someone else would have gone through it before them. According to them, sharing helps to learn from one another. It also helps to identify more ways to face a challenge or similar challenges.

“For instance, when one of us has a problem that needs to be shared with the Grama Niladhari, we first share among us and plan how we are going to address with the officer. Then we go as a group of three or four. We do not go alone”

When speaking of sexual bribery, the three women show that it is a challenge that they are ready to face while recognising that it is a highly sensitive subject to raise in public;

“Some women in our village do not understand that they are being targeted to get some sexual favours. The level of education is very low. They are unable to stand strong against such problems against them. We have to slowly increase the level of awareness among such women. We have to work on the issue of sexual bribery. Mostly, young women are being targeted. We must speak about it. Only then issues will come out and we will be able to deal with it. It is still a tabooed subject. But we have to slowly change it”

“...we can organise exchange visits to other CBOs in Anuradhapura and outside of Anuradhapura too. While building rapport with other CBOs, we must share our interest to work on sexual bribery and make it as one of the important mandates to be addressed by the network. It is a new topic. Not many people speak about it. Not many women feel comfortable sharing their experiences. It will take time. But slowly we must move towards our goals”

Another inspiring experience comes from a woman who has paid the price for being socially active, yet wishes to engage in women’s organising in the future. Shanthi is a 38-year-old woman with three children. She lives on an isolated plot of land Mullaipoonga, Kilinochchi. Her husband left her in 2010 soon after he got her pregnant with their third child. The older son goes for daily labourer job. She feels very unsafe. She rears chicken. The older son also rears some pigeons and sell them. They have a small home garden too. She goes to the mental health clinic every month at Kilinochchi hospital. She was the president of the women’s group started by Sirakugal. She is

the treasurer of WRDS women's group. She was very active and worked for the development of her village. However, a recent incident plotted against her by the people who brew illicit liquor close to her house has deeply caused her physical and psychological harm. When she was advocating to stop the illicit liquor brewing, those who benefit from this business have set fire to the Palmyra trees in the backyard. It had also damaged their one and only toilet. It happened a few months ago. The toilet is unusable. They go to the bush at the back of the house, which is not safe either. She feels very insecure. When the children go to school and work, she locks herself inside the house and does not come out until they return home.

Shanthi thinks that women are scared to do any work for the community. This has to change. Women must come together as this is always strengthening. She likes to re-join a women's group as her activities have been put on hold after the incident. She feels that there is a need for all single women headed households to be united with one another. They could do activities together. Indulge in income generating activities together and share the profit. Also, they could keep one another safe. They do not have to be left alone. The women can also voice their problems together. So that no single woman is targeted alone by the perpetrators.

Shanthi likes to re-establish the group that Sirakugal had started. They were called Malligai group. They used to meet regularly and engage in home gardening. They also acted in dramas and other cultural events, which helped them to laugh. They played games. These were women's social entertainment. She wants to re-organise them and do more activities that promote unity among them.

Similarly, Malar points out the financial inequality that women face in the society. She thinks that mobilising women in groups where the main purpose can be to enhance their financial wellbeing, however, not limited by it. Malar too proposes to remobilise an already existing group;

“Women get less wages for the same job done as men. They do not get enough financial recognition for all their hard work. So, it is important to have financial security for women, which will take care of many issues that they face. Already suffering women do not have time or the energy to participate in meetings without a substantial benefit, like some kind of an assistance to ease their financial burden. If we were to mobilise them, we need to offer them a few solutions to their problems, mainly, the financial struggles to make their lives a little better. They will come for training workshops. We can give them leadership skills. The existing groups can be strengthened. We are 25 women in our group. I am sure there are more single women headed households. We need to gather information from the GS and mobilise them too. New groups must be formed. But we must keep all our previous learning in mind when planning to mobilise new groups” – Malar, Mawadiyamman, Kilinochchi

In a study conducted by Linda Nabuya Okello (2011) to understand the characteristics and performances of self-help groups in Kenya, Okello defines SHGs as;

“Self-help groups are informal groups of people who come together usually for the purpose of saving together and borrowing from one another in a rotational manner, and also sharing news, ideas and also helping each other out in terms of need” (Okello, 2011; 1)

This mapping exercise validates that women are not passive receivers of discriminatory practices. They are also active agents of change that they wish to bring. They find different ways to address discriminatory practices. According to the women from Anuradhapura, Kilinochchi, and Kurunegala, women’s groups mobilise to voice their needs and concerns with the hope to find solutions. They wish to obtain trainings on leadership skill, coping strategies, stress management, various income generating activities, financial management, developing good business plans, accountability and transparency aspects of group functions, advocacy strategies, analytical skills, communication skills, empathetic listening skills, motivational skills, Tamil language skill, interpersonal relationship building skills, and effective mobilisation.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emerge from the experiences of single women headed households. Hopefully, they help to move forward with this particular intervention project that aims to bring positive changes in the lives of single women, their families and communities.

### *Values*

- ✓ A holistic approach to women's empowerment must govern all SHGs
- ✓ All activities must reassure that women's rights are human rights
- ✓ The scope of SHGs must always remain beyond financial or monetary values
- ✓ Every member of the SHGs must be treated as autonomous humans with dignity
- ✓ Mixed or homogenous SHGs must come up with their own guiding principles that ensures ownership
- ✓ Social mobilisation and advocacy must be part of the overall purpose of the SHGs
- ✓ Zero tolerance for corruption, violence, and hate speech of any kind

### *Functions*

- ✓ All activities ensure women's rights and the interests of women decided by the women themselves
- ✓ The purposes of SHGs must be developed by the women themselves, if possible, with the support of women's rights organisations
- ✓ A regular meeting pattern must be established
- ✓ A profile of SHGs must be created and regularly updated
- ✓ The SHGs must continue to add value to each member to maintain sustainability
- ✓ Skill development trainings must be available to all members with regular intervals to strengthen the SHGs
- ✓ Leisure activities must be promoted with the intention to expand the social spheres of women
- ✓ Discussions on general topics other than everyday issues of women must be regularly held
- ✓ The SHGs must be critical of themselves as well as their functions
- ✓ Overall wellbeing of each member of SHGs must be noted and prioritised
- ✓ Activities to motivate all members and sustain the SHG must be carefully strategised and implemented
- ✓ Sustain community participation by reassuring action-oriented thinking towards social justice

- ✓ The SHGs must identify other groups and networks with similar values and functions and expand their networks and scopes of actions
- ✓ Each SHGs must develop their own grievance mechanisms and ensure their effectiveness
- ✓ Economic interventions must promote local products and marketing strategies must be identified to develop community-based markets

#### *Approaches*

- ✓ The formation and functions of self-help groups must recognise the long history of women's rights activism in the country and must not limit the scopes of women's activism
- ✓ Women's rights centred psychosocial wellbeing must be promoted through intervention programmes instead of always prioritising the needs and wellbeing of children and other family members first before the women themselves
- ✓ A holistic understanding of factors that hinder women's empowerment and emancipation must be established and regularly updated
- ✓ Ongoing search for community development through women's empowerment and participation
- ✓ Differences of beliefs will always be respected by all members of SHGs
- ✓ No one will be discriminated against based on their identities
- ✓ The principles of do no harm will be prioritised at all times
- ✓ Each member of SHGs must be aware of its values, purposes, functions, and approaches

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