

Women's Leadership Development Project, Ampara District

by Transition Recovery Programme, UNDP Sri Lanka.

UNDP Sri Lanka with support from the Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery has been supporting a pilot Women's Leadership Development Project since 2009 in the Ampara District on the eastern Coast of Sri Lanka. A multi-ethnic district, Ampara was affected by both the Indian Ocean tsunami and conflict and has the lowest level of female political participation in the country, and a relative scarcity of women's NGOs and gender advocates. Reaching out to 30 potential women leaders from different segments of society, the project has provided support for the women to strengthen their skills in advocacy, project management, resource mobilization and communications in addition to seed-funding for initiating community-level activities. With the project drawing to a close, a knowledge sharing and networking session was organized on the 6th of April 2011 in Colombo where several of the women leaders shared their experiences, ranging from standing for local elections, to overcoming cultural barriers and bridging ethnic divides, which was followed by discussions around how the UN, Government and civil society can better help to promote and support women leaders moving forward.

The following was documented from the networking and sharing session.

1. How have the women benefitted from the training program?

- Representing 3 different ethnic groups, the activities in the training programme has helped in terms of the women seeing each other as not different from one another.
- They have learnt to appreciate similarities while respecting differences such as language; which they have overcome through reading 'body language'.



The networking and sharing event was part of activities of the N-PEACE Network (Engage for peace, equality, access, community and empowerment), a multi-country network across Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Timor-Leste with the aim of working towards strengthening the role of women in building and restoring peace. The event was supported by UNDP Regional Crisis Prevention and Recovery Team in partnership with the Country Office in Sri Lanka.

- Learnt about responsibility that comes with leadership and the role of a leader.
- The women expressed their increased confidence to overcoming various challenges and barriers. This was mainly attributed to them being part of a stronger and close-knit group, motivating and supporting each other to face difficulties.
- They have learnt about things beyond their homes, about rights and entitlements, how to develop project proposals, mobilize funds and implement projects, manage budgets and finances, how to develop and manage organizations etc.
- The very fact that the training programme was not a one-off activity with typically little or no follow-up, made a remarkable difference; the women have been engaged as a group for more than one and a half years and meet monthly to update each other on the progress made in their respective CBOs.
- The women attributed the bonds established with the experiences being a major help to the much needed healing process that was required at local levels after the conflict.

N-PEACE Network

Engage for Peace, Equality, Access, Community and Empowerment

- The women leaders have also learnt that when involving family members and religious leaders in some of their activities, it was easier to find solutions to break through age old cultural and social barriers and practices.

2. How have they put to use the skills they acquired?

As per a requirement of the leadership training programme, each of the women leaders are expected to identify a pressing issue in their community and develop a series of activities to address it or its root causes.

Upon hearing of the high number of under-age marriages, one of the women leaders had chosen to create greater awareness among her CBO members (men and women) and therefore the wider village community, to give space for young girls to acquire skills, knowledge about their entitlements etc., before they enter in to marriage. While in a different village, a muslim leader together with her fellow women committee members organized an awareness march within the village for international women's day, where the women proudly displayed and shared messages and leaflets in both Sinhalese and Tamil around the village – a first event of its kind event in her village.

In one muslim village, the women leaders found that the youth group in the village had only male members. The women together were able to lobby that a balanced participation was only possible if young girls in the village were also able to join them. At present, there are 15 young women in the village youth group.

Yet another young leader spoke of her candidature to the youth parliament and having missed selection by a small margin, prior to her selection as a participant in the Women's Leadership Development Project. She now believes she is better skilled and has the confidence and support from the other women leaders and hopes to win at the next youth parliament elections. She

is focusing her attention on female headed households in her community and wants to work towards addressing their specific issues.

3. What challenges have they faced in trying to assume leadership roles in their communities?

- Personal threats during elections processes by political opponents.
- Patriarchal social attitudes, where men question and at times oppose the mere gathering of women.
- Cultural barriers towards women to visit houses in the village beyond their immediate neighbourhood and to engage in such visits without male family members.
- Lack of response when one women seeks assistance/advice/support from local authorities as opposed to a group of women seeking the same assistance collectively.

4. What type support beyond training do they require ?

- Linkages with services available at the District level, especially services and funds in support of livelihood initiatives.
- Support in promoting and ensuring women taking leadership positions not only in the community but also in the Government, NGO and other agencies.
- Support the creation of such women leaders in other districts and link all leader networks in creating a better position for women in the country.
- Continuous sharing of good practices and receiving guidance

Next steps for Women's Leadership Development in Sri Lanka

For the Ampara women in particular, the District Secretary is keen to activate a woman's network, linking these and other leaders and the District Women's Development Officers, that can serve as a platform for addressing women's issues and elevating the larger issues to the Colombo based National Committee on Women.

With a view to replicating the Ampara model in other areas of the country, UNDP held a specialized session with donor partners to advocate for collective increased attention to the challenge of women's leadership. The session highlighted the obstacles women leaders face, while also showcasing the experiences of several beneficiaries to demonstrate that positive results are possible.

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