

EXPLORING FEMINIST APPROACHES TO GENDER EQUALITY: EXPERIENCES FROM THE WOMEN'S VOICE AND LEADERSHIP PROJECT IN SRI LANKA



A group of five women stand in a row, smiling for the camera.

Image Caption: Dedicated staff and second tier leadership of the Women Center in Galle District.

The Women's Voice and Leadership Project in Sri Lanka (WVL-SL) worked with over 60 women's rights organizations, representing women in all their diversity, over a period of four years spanning 2019 to 2023. The fundamental approach of the project was to strengthen feminist approaches to women's empowerment and gender equality. Woven around the ultimate aim of women's empowerment for change, WVL-SL took a gender equality approach in identifying, recognizing and understanding women's disempowerment in their gendered roles, responsibilities, access, and control over resources, in decision making and ultimately in the lives of women in Sri Lanka.

Firmly guided by Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, a novel and groundbreaking presentation of a foreign policy document, WVL-SL adopted the exploration of how a feminist approach to development and to programming on women's rights has worked in Sri Lanka. The initial exploration of the ideology on empowerment, followed explicitly and often implicitly by women's rights organizations, provided valuable insights. Women's rights organizations were initially reluctant to call themselves 'feminist organizations' based on misconceptions about feminism. But

exploring 'how' women's rights organizations work showed that they are, in fact, feminist organizations, 'doing' feminist work following feminist approaches.

ENABLING FEMINIST APPROACHES

WVL-SL worked on the firm premise of fully understanding that feminist approaches to working on women's rights was not new in Sri Lanka. While the concept of directly identifying feminist approaches to women's empowerment was new in its theoretical conceptualization, women's rights organizations and the women's movement in Sri Lanka has been led by feminists had taken feminist approaches dating back more than eight decades, and continue to do so. The question that we always raised was "how else could anyone work on promoting women's rights?".

The history of women forming themselves into groups to work towards a collective goal of women's empowerment in Sri Lanka dates decades back with women's fight for suffrage and in the fight for independence. Forming women's groups and becoming a part of the development discourse has varied throughout history with changes in strategies and focus and varying degrees of participation and status. Over the years, the women's movement has grown strong with feminist activists and organizations advocating and lobbying for, and winning a range of rights for women. Much of the feminist discourse was concentrated in national level organizations with a trickling down to a small proportion of local women's organizations. Many women's organizations worked on women's rights but declined to identify themselves as feminist organizations taking feminist approaches. It was in this background that WVL-SL started working with more community level women's organizations.

In the initial capacity assessment of organizations partnering WVL-SL, women's rights organizations themselves identified the areas in which they needed capacity building. Findings indicated that while many partners used a rights-based framework in their programming and placed the advancement of gender equality at the core of their work, there was still uncertainty in understanding the various concepts and approaches to women's rights, gender and most importantly feminism. The assessment identified a need for conceptual clarity, deeper understanding of developments to conceptual frameworks, and a need for theoretical knowledge on approaches and principles regarding gender and gender-related issues. The assessment recommended that women's rights organizations be provided capacity and technical knowledge on feminist approaches to working with women.



Image Caption: Embracing fundamental feminist principles, the WWL-SL project and its partners strived to advance equality, expand women's choices, eliminate gender gaps, end gender-based violence, and foster a balanced distribution of power between women and men. Pictured here are the dynamic staff members from the Social Welfare Madram, Nuwara Eliya.

Based on this, WWL-SL developed a three-part training on an introduction to Feminist concepts and approaches. The training programs, in the country's local languages (Sinhala and Tamil), were designed by the WWL-SL team with the primary aims of increasing understanding, knowledge, and clarity on feminist approaches to development work and, enhancing skills to apply the feminist approaches in project and program cycles.

Throughout WWL-SL, The Asia Foundation, supported by feminist activists and theorists from Sri Lanka, provided capacity strengthening to finetune the understanding among women's rights organizations that they are in fact 'doing' feminist work.

One of the primary approaches in capacity building was providing an understanding of the difference between gender sensitive programming and feminist programming. Women's rights organizations were pushing to think critically on the approaches to women's empowerment they were taking and articulated that "gender sensitive programming is to do our work while understanding and giving consideration to socio-cultural norms and discriminations in order to acknowledge the different rights, roles and responsibilities of women and men in the community and the relationships between them".

Women's rights organizations explained that "feminist programming is to do gender sensitive programming but taking one more step forward to address all the gaps we find out while doing gender sensitive programming with the ultimate aim of promoting equality for women and gender transformative change".

Women's rights organizations were supported to refine the use of gender-based analysis in their work to examine impacts of policies, programs and initiatives on diverse groups of women understanding the roles that women play in the household, community, workplace, political processes,

and economy, their access to and control over resources and identifying power imbalances between women and men to strive to minimise power imbalances.



Image Caption: While proficient in implementing gender-sensitive initiatives with a focus on gender mainstreaming and inclusion, partner organizations, under the WWL-SL project, were guided to transition from gender-sensitive to feminist programming. As a result of an enhanced understanding of feminist programming, partner organizations recognized the imperative to challenge power relations, question assumptions about gender roles, and adhere to a rights-based approach. They acknowledged the importance of trust-building, fostering understanding, promoting self-awareness, changing attitudes, and measuring complex transformative change for programs to align with a feminist approach. Captured in this photograph are the dedicated staff members of Yougasakthi Women Federation in Mullaitivu District.

WWL-SL frequently strived to provide strategic capacity building interventions to remind partners to critically assess gender equality and women's empowerment concepts, the crucial need to address power imbalances that fuel gender inequality leading to women's oppression, the link between feminism and gender equality as well as reminders of principles, concepts and commitments that were visible in the working environment.

Over the four years of working with women's rights organizations, WWL-SL saw the organizations accepting, proudly, that they were indeed taking a feminist approach to working on women's empowerment. In their feminist approach, women's rights organizations strived to empower women by eradicating gender-based differences and discriminations to ensure equality for women at the same level as men. They focused on gender, gender differences in understanding the oppression of women and those who identify as women, bringing in diverse intersectionalities of ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, age, class, income levels, place of residence among other diversities.

WHAT IS FEMINIST ABOUT THE WORK DONE BY PARTNER WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS SUPPORTED BY WVL-SL?

While working at community level on diverse women's issues, women's rights organizations were frequently encouraged to critically review their work looking at why they conduct programs with the hope of them leading to women's empowerment, the types of programs conducted, how they are conducted and who they are targeted at and who benefits from the positive, and transformative changes the work brings about.

Exploring results was done at various points of the project. This enabled critical review by women's rights organisations of their own work and space for revisions and change. WVL-SL stimulated this critical self analysis with questions.

Initial responses by women's rights organizations as to why brought in reasons such as "to provide knowledge" "to create change" and "to create awareness regarding "rights" but discussion and exploration finally resulted women's rights organizations agreeing that they work "to uphold women's rights."

Nevertheless, women's rights organizations remained hesitant to articulate that they were 'doing' feminist work, struggling to connect the work they do expressly to achieve 'gender equality' as being feminist. Some raised the issue 'society accepts that we do 'gender equality' work but they cannot accept when we call it feminism' and sought answers from WVL-SL. WVL-SL stimulated thinking that it could largely be due to a lack of awareness regarding what 'feminism' actually was, or because feminist approaches may have had their roots in violent protests during the early part of the 20th century and women's rights organizations were in the current working environment reluctant to associate themselves with violence to achieve rights. Accepting that the fight for women's rights has many different modes of operation that are not all violent, women's rights organizations that it may stem from a misconception that feminism is a western ideology unsuitable for countries like Sri Lanka. This led to discussions and understanding that dismantling patriarchy is essential to achieve women's equality is universal, and that the western-eastern difference is only on the influence of norms and cultures on patriarchal structures that feminism seeks to dismantle and not on ideology. There was then a gradual acceptance that "feminism is a movement that advocates for gender equality" and that "the goal of feminism is for all people to be treated equally."

Partners spoke of time tested methods of promoting women's equality (through education and knowledge sharing, awareness raising, mobilization and forming collectives and groups, strengthening women's economic status, addressing violence against women, accessing justice for issues of

discrimination and violence faced by women) and recognized the need to strengthen these methods by being informed about women's rights and women's oppression and discrimination from a feminist perspective and including feminist principles into programming by promoting women to recognize and challenge perpetuating social norms and structures that marginalize and discriminate women, thus enabling women to advocate and lobby for equality. Women's organizations were firm that feminist principles will enable their organizations to critically examine their own positions that promote (or at times hinder) enabling environments for increased empowerment, inclusion, and equal partnerships. They also recognized their power to ensure continuous momentum of the feminist discourse on women's rights.



Image Caption: A reflection on the work carried out by women's rights organizations highlights a focus on women's welfare and security to address their practical gender needs, stemming from existing gender roles and power dynamics. Simultaneously, giving equal importance, women's rights organizations also strove to implement activities targeting strategic gender interests, aiming to strengthen women's rights and promote gender equality for lasting and transformative change. Consequently, they now view their work through a feminist lens.

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO STRENGTHENING MANAGEMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY OF LOCAL WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS IN SRI LANKA

During the project, WWL-SL's support to women's rights organizations to implement WWL-SL funded projects acted as a transfer of hands-on knowledge on management and operational capacities constantly guided by the three key principles of feminist development - participation, inclusion and empowerment.

WWL-SL was always mindful that this engagement between WWL-SL and community level women's rights organizations had space for asymmetrical power dynamics. Therefore, WWL-SL continuously and explicitly sought the interest and willingness of partners to receive support from WWL-SL on program management and operational practices, thus respecting their decisions and individuality. Changes in practices involved discussions with partners in a spirit of equal partnership. The majority of partners were receptive to such support. Some changes are evident through this engagement where new or different management and operation

tools were adopted and systems were enhanced by many partner organizations. New approaches to management include, but are not limited to, ensuring feminist organizational vision, mission and objectives, having developed monitoring and evaluation frameworks, strategic plans and comprehensive financial systems and fund-raising plans, and from an operational perspective, comprehensive annual workplans, and well-defined job descriptions and performance evaluation systems for staff.

The initial selection of partner women's organizations was dependent on the percentage of women in the staff and in the boards of management of each organization. WWL-SL tracked these numbers throughout the project ensuring that women were the majority stakeholders in every organization's decision making, management, and operational processes. The experience of WWL-SL was that the high percentage of women was not tokenism. It was clear that the voice and power of women remained active in all partner organizations throughout the project.

Feminist approaches were also ensured in organizational management with partners supported to have in place a well-defined and feminist organizational vision, mission and objectives, an organizational strategic plan or constitution, well-defined thematic areas, geographic coverage, beneficiaries and stakeholders as well as overall annual workplans for the organization. Partners were further supported to develop organizational gender policies and sexual harassment policies.

WWL-SL also provided guidance and support in incorporating feminist approaches into program implementation. Learning to use a feminist lens when designing assessments, and developing research designs and data collection tools, as well as learning to use inclusion and empowerment lenses when selecting beneficiaries for trainings provided partners more meaningful ways of doing the same work they have been doing. This further enabled partners to make their work have a stronger focus on feminist and rights-based approaches to women's empowerment.

WWL-SL's support to enhance management and operational capacity of women's rights organizations was mainly through the provision of direct support to women's rights organizations in formulating plans, strategies and procedures identified by partners themselves through multiyear funding support and on the job mentoring support as well as building the capacity of organizations to do so themselves through training. Feminist and consultative approaches were used by WWL-SL to ensure that partners directly contribute to and take ownership of the plans and strategies that were developed, thereby, also ensuring that these plans and strategies will be practically applied within the organizations' governance and management in the future. During partner discussions, many women's rights organizations claimed that WWL-SL's assessment of their plans and strategies also convinced them of the importance of having such processes in place. It was a learning for WWL-SL that these results were achieved during a contextually challenging period for partner women's rights organizations and the overall development sector in Sri Lanka. The duration of the WWL-

SL project was an exceptionally challenging time to implement projects to promote women's rights when the focus was on urgent needs created by the COVID-19 pandemic and humanitarian crisis followed by an economic crisis in the country. A period where women's rights organizations were struggling with implementing existing projects, keeping staff, maximising resources and serving beneficiaries while maintaining health and safety standards. It was a period where women's rights organizations were learning to adapt their longstanding ways of work to modern and online based work with limited resources and knowledge to do so. A period where restrictions to mobility negatively affected community consultation processes that are used prior to formulating proposals. And a period where there were changes in donor funding priority from rights and empowerment focused work to pandemic response – an area which was new and unfamiliar to most women's rights organizations. Despite these external challenges, women's rights organizations kept firm to their final objective of ensuring women's empowerment and safeguarding women's rights and the learnings and understanding of the realities and challenges faced by them brought about many lessons in the resilience of not only partner women's rights organizations, but the women's movement as a whole.

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ENHANCED DELIVERY OF QUALITY SERVICES AND ADVOCACY BY LOCAL WOMEN RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS TO ADVANCE GENDER EQUALITY IN SRI LANKA

WVL-SL worked towards enhanced delivery of quality services and advocacy by local women rights organizations to advance gender equality in Sri Lanka through strengthening capacities of women's rights organizations to provide quality services and effective advocacy campaigns, and thereby enhance outreach by women's rights organizations to advocate for transformative change.

In this journey, inclusion was a key area. Women's rights organizations firmly believe that working on women's empowerment and promotion of rights is more effective when initiatives look at women as a diverse category instead of as a homogeneous group. Understanding dimensions marginalization within the homogeneous category of women impacted by issues such as disability, class, caste, locations of residence, ethnicity and religion, language, age, social status, and the impact of culture, and customary laws are among the many intersectional issues that create marginali

WVL-SL learnt through the work of their partner women's rights organizations that mobilization looks at the process of strengthening, mentoring and guiding women, throughout a period of time, to organize themselves as a group to become champions, whistle blowers or leaders

Learning about inclusion and the methodologies and approaches that bring about inclusion into programming on empowerment links directly to WVLSL's ultimate goal of increasing enjoyment of human rights by women and girls especially those that are marginalized and vulnerable.



Image Caption: Learning about inclusion and the methodologies and approaches that bring about inclusion into programming on empowerment links directly to WVLSL's ultimate goal of increasing enjoyment of human rights by women and girls, especially those that are marginalized and vulnerable.

Pictured here is the dedicated staff of Association of Women with Disabilities (Anuradhapura District)

of a community to create a voice against issues that discriminate women and girls and affect the enjoyment of women's rights and empowerment in the community. Mobilized to join or form civil society organizations as individual members, independent entities or as sub groups or units of a larger mobilized entity, women's collective strengths are geared towards uplifting women's economic and social empowerment.

WVLSL also learnt that creating awareness is the foundation of advocacy. If more and more women and girls are aware of their rights, laws, entitlements and the services available for them, there is a greater tendency that they will demand rights, take action when the rights are violated, and seek justice. Awareness is central in effectively addressing and changing discriminatory norms, practices and structures that marginalize and discriminate against women. Awareness works as a powerful tool for women to break barriers of social, cultural and religious misogyny. Increased awareness in the work of women's rights organizations is coupled with collectivism, as women lead civil society organizations, create synergies and amplify women's voices against discrimination. This enabled women's rights organizations to advocate for social, legal and policy level change that brings about equality and justice for women. Women's rights organizations are not only strengthening recipients of their services to stand up for their rights, they are also creating linkages for women, and raising knowledge and awareness of duty bearers who can contribute towards enabling transformative change.

The support to women's rights organizations for enhanced service delivery and advocacy provided by WVLSL was constantly embedded in

feminist approaches to gender equality. Myriad services were provided by and gender equality through WVL-SL supported projects. WVL-SL saw women's rights organizations evolving to look at service provision more strategically, as more than mere tools for disseminating information and began seeing service provision not a stand-alone activity that happens in a vacuum but something that contributes to a larger feminist agenda. Women's rights organizations thus integrated different services to achieve their overall aims of women's empowerment moving from protectionism to rights; some mixed thematic areas such as integrating sexual and gender based violence responses with economic empowerment through micro credit service provision and provided services for alternate livelihoods augmenting incomes levels to relieve economic stresses faced in volatile occupations like those of commercial sex workers, perceived low skill level work like that done by garment factory workers. Women's rights organizations became more aware of emerging service needs of women and responded to such weaving in Do No Harm principles to ensure that no woman was left behind, bringing in men into the service provision activities as providers as well as recipients and that no damage was created through exclusion.

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY

Results of projects implemented with WVL-SL support, both technical and financial, have been articulated by women's rights organizations largely from a gender equality perspective. However, gaining conceptual clarity on feminism and moving away from the initial reluctance to call themselves feminists from feminist organizations using feminist approaches enabled partners to understand and accept that their approaches were indeed feminist.

At community level, partners say they were able to increase awareness and sensitivity of communities and local service providers on gender dynamics and women's rights issues through targeted programs. It is their assessment that the work done by them has been instrumental in the increase in women's participation at community level, supporting their ambitions to become politically active, lead community-based organizations, and advocate for their rights with government stakeholders. Women's organizations have also observed an increase in shared responsibilities within the households and elevating the status of women and girls in the home.

Going beyond the community, women's organizations say that they have achieved significant milestones. They have successfully established women-led trade unions, which played a pivotal role in advocating for the rights of women workers, and in holding private sector companies and the government accountable. Their ongoing efforts to champion the rights of women in tea plantation communities have resulted in the incorporation of women workers' rights into laws and policy reforms, particularly in areas related to health rights through collective agreements, thereby improving

working conditions. There has been a noticeable increase in women's interest in political participation, with many expressing a strong desire to run in upcoming local government elections. Women are actively engaged in regional committee meetings and are members of appeals committees related to welfare benefits, and in forums responding to women and child related issues, showcasing their growing influence and impact.

At the district and provincial levels, there has been an increase in the availability of services for women. Networks like Women's Forums and Forums working against gender-based violence have improved women's resource sharing, case management, and coordination among service providers. Advocacy efforts have resulted in institutional changes, such as the publication of a circular that mandates adherence to accessibility standards focusing on people living with disabilities within government institutions at the provincial level, ensuring better access for women with disabilities and the establishment of a dedicated bureau to look into women worker issues in tea plantations as well as in other locations. Engagement with government officials has led to their increased participation in training and awareness-raising programs, creating crucial connections for women at the district and provincial levels.

At the national level, women's rights organizations have actively contributed towards policy and legal reform efforts. Under the WWL-SL project, women's rights organizations submitted their recommendations to the National Action Plan for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. Women's rights organizations also compiled a national brief on land reforms and launched research study on the feminization of the aging population in Sri Lanka and developed a policy brief for policy makers and State officials with recommendations on the same. Many women's rights organizations contributed to advocacy initiatives for the ratification of the International Labour Organization's Violence and Harassment Convention 190 of 2019, for reforms to the gender discriminatory Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act, and pushed for the establishment of a national council for women with disabilities under the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs, and Social Empowerment. Reviewing their work over 4 years, women's rights organizations realized that despite the contextual and social challenges, the women's rights movement in Sri Lanka has made significant contributions towards women's rights and gender equality.

PROMOTING WOMEN'S VOICE, AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT

WVL-SL identified Voice, Agency and Empowerment as the key feminist principles that underpinned the work of women's rights organizations undertaken through the WVL-SL projects.

Exploring the role of Community Mobilization in Increasing Women's Voice, Agency and Empowerment, women's organizations explain that women experience marginalization and discrimination, limited awareness, and mobility constraints, frequently struggle to be active within their communities and articulate their needs. To amplify their voices, women's organizations mobilized women's groups within communities in the form of Self-Help Groups, Women's Societies, Village Committees, even formalizing some into Community-Based Organizations. This established platforms for women to connect, share concerns, express their needs, and cultivate a sense of solidarity. These groups enabled women to network with other community stakeholders, further expanding the space for them to amplify their voices.

The strategy of forming community groups is widely regarded as a successful channel through which women can assert their agency. Recognizing that the limited representation of diverse groups of women in these community groups impedes the agency of those experiencing marginalization, women's rights organizations adopted 'gender equality and social inclusion' approach to mainstream women who have experienced marginalization into these community groups, thereby enhancing their opportunities to exercise agency, similar to their peers.

For WVL-SL partners agency provides them with the autonomy to make decisions but also to question the status quo and therefore supports them in building their own identity despite cultural and religious restrictions.

Community groups have played a crucial role in empowering women by providing access to and control over financial resources, fostering financial independence and decision-making power over savings, investments, and business development. These groups also offer women continuous opportunities for training and skills development. Women are thus able to engage in grassroots-level advocacy and take collective action against issues within their community. Community groups serve as a vital link, connecting women members, as well as other community members, to government services and assistance. The impact of community groups on women's self-empowerment is considerable, with many reporting increased self-esteem and confidence to strive to achieve their desires and outcomes.

Working to increase voice, agency and empowerment of victim survivors of gender-based violence, women's rights organizations explain that women and girls often hesitate to voice their experiences of sexual and gender-based violence due to various factors, including a lack of sensitivity, fear of social backlash, and self-blame and women's rights organizations employed several strategies to address these challenges. This included offering services through women's rights organizations themselves, which provide a safe avenue through which women could discuss the violence they have faced, as many are reluctant to approach other service providers or law enforcement. The establishment of community groups also played a pivotal role in encouraging individuals to come forward and share their experiences. These groups reassured victims that they were not alone in facing these issues and fostered confidence to address them. Additionally, women's rights organizations used various other platforms, such as formal forums led by the government, and social media, to empower women to raise awareness about sexual and gender-based violence with stakeholders and the general public.

Women's rights organizations noted that victim survivors of sexual and gender-based violence within the community show more agency in decision making about how they want to handle their situations. They seek assistance from women community leaders, women's rights organizations, and government and non-governmental service providers, which reflects an increase in agency. Women's rights organizations observed a rise in empowerment among victim survivors, especially in terms of increased financial independence resulting from the various initiatives conducted by women's rights organizations to enhance women's skills. This empowerment is further enhanced by increased community support through community groups. Consequently, women's rights organizations note many instances where women have gained confidence to reduce their dependence on perpetrators and take control of their lives by creating a violence free environment for themselves and their children.

Enhancing Women's voice, agency, and empowerment to improve women's political participation and leadership, women's organizations observe that women's voices are underrepresented in politics resulting in a lack of awareness of the myriad challenges they face. Women's rights organizations conducted training, awareness raising and sensitization programs for aspiring women politicians, community leaders, and government officials, with the aim of encouraging them to mainstream gender into their political agendas, to ensure true representation of their female constituents. Women's rights organizations actively engaged in raising awareness and mobilizing women to enhance their participation in political actions, such as protests, signifying the growing influence of women's voices.

Women's rights organizations conducted targeted programs to enhance women's understanding of local government processes, responsibilities, and available government services. They have also provided training in

building leadership skills and other essential competencies required for effective political leadership, including community needs identification, proposal writing, fundraising, and budgeting, to women who aspire to increase their political participation. As a result, there is a noticeable increase in the agency of women increasing their involvement such as through joining political parties.

Many women have assumed decision-making roles, even within traditionally male-dominated structures, while some have created space to assert women's leadership. For example, there is a growing interest among women to participate in politics, with many aspiring to become candidates in upcoming elections. In the context of women's labor rights, women's rights organizations have established women-led trade unions and are working towards forming a federation of women-led trade unions to enhance the bargaining power of women workers. Additionally, some women have taken up positions within various networks and alliances. These developments indicate an increase in women's political empowerment, leadership and influence within these traditionally male-dominated spaces.

As a strategic approach, women's rights organizations have built networks and connections between community groups and government officials. Women in these community groups leverage these linkages to engage with government officials, drawing attention to and advocating for the resolution of community issues, signifying increased agency and empowerment. Their empowerment has become more apparent to government officials, leading to a shift in their attitudes and perceptions of women.

Another factor contributing to the positive outlook and perceptions government officials' have towards women is the dual approach taken by women's rights organizations. They have conducted awareness-raising and sensitization programs for government officials while also actively involving them as resource persons in the awareness-raising and training sessions women's rights organizations conducted for women on a range of topics. As a result, government officials have begun to include women in meetings and actively seek their support in addressing community issues. Women's rights organizations observed that women's leadership and political empowerment have played a pivotal role in extending the reach and engagement of government officials with the community.

Recognizing the challenges that women encounter when making decisions related to their preferred methods of income generation, women's rights organizations took steps to enhance women's economic agency through skills development, ensuring access to financial services and other resources, and establishing linkages with government officials and access to markets. The efforts of women's rights organizations have led to higher incomes, greater decision-making power regarding savings and investments, and increased autonomy in making choices related to expanding business activities. The structure of certain Self-Help Groups

has also improved women's control over financial resources. Savings and credit schemes offered to women at the Self-Help Group level have given them a degree of control over financial resources, providing them with more opportunities to allocate these resources in ways that align with the growth of their businesses and personal needs- a reflection of enhanced agency and economic empowerment.

Women's rights organizations contributed to the increased economic agency and empowerment of women workers by providing them with knowledge about their rights and legal procedures. They also offered legal assistance and facilitated connections with government officials from the labor department. These efforts to enhance their ability to assert their economic rights by claiming compensation and benefits reflect a level of empowerment as women are directly challenging rights violations that had previously limited their economic opportunities, outcomes, security, and resilience. This was particularly crucial in the context of the economic crisis, where many privately owned factories were closing down, often not in accordance with the law.

WVL-SL SAW RESULTS OF WOMEN'S INCREASED VOICE, AGENCY AND EMPOWERMENT WITHIN THE HOME AS A RESULT OF SUPPORTING THE WORK OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS.

Women's rights organizations have used strategic interventions to involve men and boys in their work on women's rights. Recognizing that efforts to enhance women's voice, agency, and empowerment should be in tandem with engaging men and boys, women's rights organizations conducted awareness-raising and sensitization programs, as well as distributed informational material to men and boys within the community, covering topics such as gender equality, women's rights, empowerment, and the role of men and boys as allies.

To foster a deeper appreciation of the work women undertake both within and outside the home, women's rights organizations actively involved families in events celebrating women and their accomplishments to foster solidarity and inspire families to play a supportive role. Further, to challenge traditional gender roles and promote shared responsibilities, women's rights organizations included men and boys in specific training and skills-building programs. For instance, in programs aimed at enhancing food security, such as training in home gardening and organic fertilizer production, women's rights organizations included men and boys from the same households to ensure that the responsibility for a family's food security was not solely placed on women.

As a result of these interventions, women beneficiaries express having experienced a notable increase in the visibility, recognition, and respect for their contributions within the home, with increased negotiation and

decision-making power within their households. They now wield greater decision-making power over household finances and expenses, exercise more control over their sexual and reproductive health choices, and enjoy increased freedom of mobility. In some cases, instances of domestic violence have decreased, leading to improved family life. Women are observed to be more empowered as they share household responsibilities and engage in income-generating activities.

Women's rights organizations speak about various ways of ensuring women's voice leading to strengthening women's agency and contributing to their empowerment. These include forming women's groups for a collective voice to negotiate with, lobby and advocate for the rights of women in the community with local authorities, state officials, employers, service providers and even policy makers; encouraging more women to come forward regarding situations of violence and empowered them to regain their place in society by holding awareness trainings, connecting affected women and children to protection services and even by obtaining birth certificates for children born out of wedlock/born of widowed mothers; holding trainings regarding political participation of women and increasing the number of women participating in Provincial Council activities; enabling women to fight for the rights of women employed in semi formal sectors, working in the informal sector, in prohibited occupations such as sex work; giving a voice to families of missing persons and those affected by war and communal violence; addressing and redress violence against women and girls; effectively meeting food security related vulnerabilities and access and control over income; and fighting for equality for sexual minority women and even advocating against extrajudicial arrests made by law enforcement in their communities.

The notion of a collective voice emerged as a key element in amplifying women's voices. Many women's rights organizations emphasized the formation of groups and forums, not only to offer solidarity to women but also to underscore the power of collective voice. Networking was often used as a strategy to connect women to authorities and service-providers where the voices of women at grassroot levels would have a higher likelihood of being heard. The political participation of women was also perceived as being crucial to the amplification of women's voices as it would create the necessary representation and agency necessary to express their needs, wants and desires.

For WWL-SL partners empowerment is the power of a woman to control her own lives according to her own agenda while enhancing skills, developing her self-actualization and self-esteem, and ultimately her self-confidence. While external parties can support individuals or communities to empower themselves, an individual is also able to empower themselves alone.

Empowerment was described as being not merely a process, but an end result in all spheres of life including the home, workplace and society. Knowledge, skills, human and material resources, networks, policies and tools, as well as opportunities and experiences were identified as factors

that were crucial towards empowerment and it was discussed that a lack of these tools often led to a lack of 'power'. The target groups that are identified by the women's rights organizations often include women devoid of any of the above factors, therefore displaying a gap that their projects then try to bridge.

Partners state that they were empowered by WVLSL and that their beneficiaries of some of their projects have now become resource people themselves and are empowering a newer generation of people to deal with situations of violence and discrimination to get the help they need.

For women's rights organizations, identifying and recognizing marginalization and discrimination leads to identifying and recognizing feminist approaches to ensure empowerment and gender equality. Marginalization and discrimination of women is understood by WVLSL partners as a multi dimensional issue faced by women in different situations (due to ethnicity, religion, economic status, place of residence, sexual orientation, occupation and a multitude of other factors) differently. But partners say that although the experience is individual to women, the result is the same causing gender inequality in society in general and the exclusion of various groups and communities in particular.

In the work that women's rights organizations do, they see the marginalization of women experiencing domestic violence by not having access to services, of female headed households and of women living with disabilities not being prioritized in service provision by the State, of women living and working in tea plantations not being given a place in political parties and worker unions and being denied housing and land rights, women in grassroots communities not being included in political processes, girls in rural schools not being allowed to participate in sports, women addicted to drugs and alcohol marginalized from community activities, women displaced by war and natural disasters not having access to education and community activities, women in prohibited occupations like sex work not having social protections and a myriad other issues faced by pockets of women. This is recognized by women's organizations as an issue faced by all women as it contributes to the overall disempowerment of all women.

Women's organizations highlighted the need to understand this difference, between discrimination and marginalization when they create and implement interventions to work towards women's equality. This process is, in essence, feminist.

WHAT IS FEMINISM TO WOMEN'S RIGHTS ORGANIZATIONS?

Women's rights organizations critically analyze the concept of feminism within the Sri Lankan and in the South Asian context, exploring the purpose of the feminist movement in Sri Lanka and discussing the difference between pragmatic and strategic gender needs, the impact of



Image Caption: For certain organizations, empowerment revolved around fostering solidarity among women, enabling them to realize their ambitions and break generational stigmas. Others viewed empowerment as an achievement for women and as a process that strengthens all aspects of their lives. Some organizations perceived empowerment as a woman overcoming obstacles for self-actualization.

The photograph above is a collection of illustrations by women's rights organizations, depicting their visual interpretations of what empowerment means to them.

gender roles and power relations, and creating a strong voice for women, strengthening their agency, leading to the full realization of their rights, their empowerment and ultimately gender equality in Sri Lanka.

Women's organizations discuss some important thought processes in their work involving introspection regarding biases relevant to gender roles and responsibilities and power relations, the perpetuation of gender roles through external factors and forces such as family, religion, politicians, and community leaders, and women themselves and the role of feminism in dismantling power relation imbalances that uphold patriarchy. The conversation is strongly based on feminist tools and instruments available in Sri Lanka to be used as guiding principles, such as the constitutional equality and affirmative action clauses, experiences of past and present feminist movements, CEDAW, Beijing Declaration, 5th SDG and 1325 UNSC resolution and national policies led by the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

Women's organizations question their own work recognizing that their interventions do provide welfare support and protection. The WWL-SL supported interventions are about economic stability for women from livelihoods support, access to credit and income augmentation opportunities, access to vocational training and markets, knowledge on financial management; awareness of gender-based violence and access to services and justice mechanisms; and better access to welfare benefits and social security systems.

Women's organizations are firm that their interventions provide security and protection for women be it the protection of the justice system, services, food security, medical and psychosocial support, protection of employment, and the protection of women organizing themselves as groups.

Women's organizations question if welfare and protection interventions trap women into stereotyped positions of gender inequality, protectionism, and patriarchal patronage. In one voice, they recognize these approaches, albeit not feminist in themselves, are just stepping stones to empowerment, realization and strengthening of women's rights, and finally reducing gender inequality in Sri Lanka.

Women in the community are empowered because of their collective strength; better identifying issues that marginalize and exclude them leading to discrimination, better access to and control of solutions for their diverse problems; increased power to take leadership roles and challenge discriminations in institutions of authority (religious, State, non state and within the household), ability to sustain interventions through increased financial and human resource development, increasing the respect they receive from the community, their self-esteem, self-respect and self-confidence which brings them dignity and status in their communities.

Women's rights organizations who partnered WWL-SL over four years are confident that they have strengthened women's rights. They provide clear and visible examples of this - in the increased voice of women, participation in leadership roles outside their own organizations including in politics, establishing of forums and networks including men to promote women's rights and equality, increased decision-making power in patriarchal institutions, preventing violence against women by ensuring systems that recognize and respond to violence against women as a human rights violation. By this, partner women's rights organizations firmly believe that their work has reduced inequalities. This is evidenced by the division of labour in the home, cooperation and support of men in activities recognized only as women's work and women's place, reduced gender biases fuelled by negative social norms, increase in equal opportunities in many spheres of society, more gender sensitive services, and women becoming less dependent, economically, socially and emotionally on men.

Women's rights organizations conclude that what they do and how they do their work is indeed feminist. They speak of enabling the voice, agency and empowerment of women, recognition of women's equality and rights, and confidently inching towards dismantling patriarchy in many spheres.

WWL-SL partners proudly call themselves feminist organizations using feminist approaches to work towards women's equality in Sri Lanka.



About the Project: The Women’s Voice and Leadership Project, Sri Lanka is funded by Global Affairs Canada and implemented by The Asia Foundation Office in Sri Lanka. The project’s goal is to build the capacities and support the activities of local women-led women’s rights organizations and movements seeking to empower women and girls, advance the protection of the rights of women and girls, and achieve gender equality.

About this document: The “Approach Notes” series of factsheets, developed as part of the Women’s Voice and Leadership Sri Lanka project’s communications strategy, provides an overview of the approaches used by the project team in the implementation of various project objectives, delving into the results achieved, insights, and lessons learned throughout the project’s duration. The document serves as a reflective guide on the journey of implementing the project and underscores the significance of feminist approaches in shaping its achievements.

Women’s Voice and Leadership- Sri Lanka

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