

MITIGATING THE EFFECTS OF THE PANDEMIC AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS: EXPERIENCES OF THE WOMEN'S VOICE AND LEADERSHIP- SRI LANKA PROJECT



Image Caption: Handing over of COVID-19 sanitization equipment to staff of the Islamic Women's Association for Research and Empowerment (Batticaloa district)

Years 2020 through 2022 proved to be particularly turbulent for Sri Lanka with the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbating an impending political and economic crisis, the worst since its independence in 1948. All this culminated into a humanitarian crisis. The diverse range of issues arising from the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis were severe, sometimes difficult to predict, and cut across social, political, and economic dimensions. Sri Lanka faced multiple COVID-19 waves and variants, went into several lockdowns, only to be devastated by an economic crisis triggering fuel shortages, 13-hour long power outages, skyrocketing food inflation, import restrictions, medicine shortage, and a looming food crisis.

Despite drawbacks faced while operating within these contexts, Women's Rights Organizations (WROs) around Sri Lanka, both Women's Voice and

Leadership (WVL-SL) project partners and others, persevered in their work, responding to issues faced by women and girls as a result of the pandemic and economic crisis as and when they arose, while also continuing the work they started before the pandemic.

Characterized by a flexible, adaptive, and responsive management style, WVL-SL played a crucial role in guiding and assisting WRO partners with project implementation and management during the pandemic and economic crisis. The case-by-case approach WVL-SL took to respond to WROs allowed WVL-SL to tailor assistance to suit individual WRO partner needs which proved to be very effective, especially when addressing the nuanced effects that the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis had on WROs. For instance, geographic location of WROs based on if it was located in high COVID-19 risk or low COVID-19 risk zones; switching to online methods of project implementation was difficult for certain WROs who did not have electronic devices; accessing beneficiaries were difficult for some WROs during lockdowns especially if beneficiaries did not have access to electronic devices, were a few of the diverse issues faced by WROs.

Keeping in line with the feminist principles embodied in the project, WVL-SL ensured that the concerns, challenges and risks faced by WROs through project implementation were fully understood and addressed, while also responding to and supporting ideas and requests made by WROs to improve project implementation aimed at addressing pandemic and economic crisis related issues faced by their beneficiaries (such as through the Rapid Response Fund or adapting Multi Year Funding activities to suit emerging issues) and issues faced by the WROs themselves (such as capacity building needs). Overall, while it was a challenging experience for WVL-SL to navigate WROs through the evolving contexts, it also allowed WVL-SL and WROs to explore new ways and innovative approaches to implementing their work.

STRENGTHENING ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITIES OF WROS TO OPERATE WITHIN CHANGING CONTEXTS

STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF WROS TO OPERATE DURING COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic context created circumstances that demanded immediate capacity strengthening interventions for all WROs who wanted to continue their ground level work on women's issues, empowerment, and women's rights.

In terms of strengthening organizational capacities through the provision of equipment, WWL-SL provided sanitation equipment and supplies worth CAD 9,000 to all Multi-Year Funding (MYF) partners. As WROs work at the grassroots level, many act as first responders and as a result, are required to maintain close contact with community members to carry out project activities. Owing to this, the provision of sanitation equipment and supplies proved to be very useful for the continued engagement with the communities they served, particularly for WROs operating in “high risk” COVID-19 zones, while also following safety guidelines. WWL-SL also made sure that the items supplied were disability friendly.

Additionally, WWL-SL provided each WRO partner with one laptop and one dongle (total of 26) with the additional benefit of onsite technical service on warranty for three years. This investment was proving to be increasingly necessary as even with the relaxation of COVID-19 related lockdowns and travel restrictions, WROs continued to hold events online where possible. It also allowed WROs to incorporate technology into their work. Many WROs reported an increase in productivity as a result of the laptops and internet connections. For some, this was the first laptop the organization owned.

The transition from physical to virtual methods of project implementation proved to be difficult for some WROs. In response to this, WWL-SL conducted a capacity building session on the usage (and etiquettes) of online platforms, predominantly Microsoft Teams and Zoom. This capacity building enabled WROs to conduct meetings, information sharing and networking events, and in some cases, training sessions online as well.



Image Caption: Laptop distribution among all 26 Multi Year Funded Women's Rights Organization partners of the Women's Voice and Leadership Sri Lanka Project

Apart from the capacity building session on using online platforms which was applicable for all WROs, WWL-SL recognized that individual WROs required specific skills and capacity building to innovate, adapt project interventions, and implement activities within the changed context. WWL-SL put forward the idea of integrating specific organizational capacity strengthening components into the new MYF project phases. For instance, Women's Center in Galle integrated capacity building on Mobile Journalism for advocacy. Association of Women with Disabilities (AKASA) in Anuradhapura weaved in a training for staff on social media advocacy to initiate its social media presence. Rural Women's Front (RWF) in Galle incorporated a training session on strengthening its staff and volunteers' capacities on social media and marketing as well as a component to explore alternative income sources as a sustainability measure. This approach is a departure from traditional donor funding experienced by WROs where support was provided to implement projects without focus on staff development. This continued to Phase 3 of the MYF Grant cycle to address organizational capacity building needs surfacing as a result of the economic crisis.

However, WWL-SL continued to provide individual support where needed, especially in terms of project planning and designing as most partners requested assistance to adapt to the context. To do this, WWL-SL conducted one-on-one sessions with each WRO (averaging eight hours worth of discussions for each). The capacity building helped partners critically review their work and design new approaches to navigate the COVID-19 context but also reflected their strong commitment to women's rights and empowerment.

STRENGTHENING CAPACITIES OF WROS DURING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

A knowledge sharing session was conducted with WROs on feminist perspectives of the economic crisis with external resource people from Feminist Collective for Economic Justice. To cut through and demystify the abundance of (and often jargon heavy) information available on the economic crisis, a basic explanation of the context and the factors that caused the economic crisis was given. The resource people went on to speak of the specific issues vulnerable populations/communities faced as a result of the economic crisis. Issues faced by women were discussed at length, touching on issues such as access to basic needs, increasing Gender-Based Violence (GBV) incidents, issues faced by female-headed households (FHH), women in the informal sector, divorced women and issues related to maintenance, and additional unpaid care work. Food security was also a major topic of discussion with many WROs corroborating this with stories from the communities. Issues related to children, access to education, and transport were also discussed. Overall, feedback on the

knowledge sharing session was positive. Many found the session useful in understanding the economic crisis. But most importantly, WROs were able to incorporate activities targeted at addressing issues related to the economic crisis in their project proposals for Phase 3 of the MYF Grant cycle.

SUPPORTING WROS TO ADAPT PROJECT INTERVENTIONS AND STRATEGIES TO SUIT CHANGING CONTEXTS

ADAPTING PROJECT INTERVENTIONS AND CHANGING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

The capacity building on the use of online platforms became useful for WROs wanting to shift to online spaces to conduct their activities. Women's Center in Galle and Textile Garment and Clothing Workers Union (TGCWU) in Gampaha identified that their target beneficiaries were tech-savvy and had access to social media and therefore, adapted their advocacy and awareness programs to virtual social media platforms and WhatsApp networks which included their direct beneficiaries who are workers in Export Processing Zones (EPZ).

However, switching to online methods of implementing project activities was not possible for all organizations. Society for Welfare Educational and Awareness Training (SWEAT) and Social Welfare Mandram (SWM), both located in the Nuwara Eliya District, planned to implement GBV advocacy and awareness programs for communities within the plantation sector. These communities are known to be some of the most economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged communities, with little access to technology. As such, both SWEAT and SWM recognized that switching to online spaces would not be suitable and instead, with the assistance of WWL-SL, adapted the activities to work with smaller groups in-person where possible, or work closely with stakeholders who had better access to these communities during COVID-19 travel restrictions. Women in Need (WIN) in Badulla also faced a similar issue and planned to work with officers involved in the estate management (Plantation Human Development Trust), welfare officers, midwives and child protection officers attached to the estate sector in promoting stakeholder involvement in addressing GBV in the estate sector.

The lockdowns and COVID-19 related travel restrictions were disruptive for WROs who had to work in close contact with their beneficiaries. WWL-SL stepped in to assist WROs to re-strategize. For instance, Stand Up Movement Lanka (SUML) in Gampaha works on advocacy for commercial sex workers rights and usually works in close contact with sex workers.

However, the lockdowns meant locating sex workers was difficult as they were no longer accessing clients in public spaces, therefore, re-strategized their approach to advocacy and worked with lawyers to provide legal support for sex workers instead.

A finding from the Baseline and Capacity Assessment conducted by WWL-SL at the inception of the project was that most WROs lacked knowledge and experience on evidence-based programming. The COVID-19 context provided WWL-SL with the perfect opportunity to encourage WRO partners to do small scale research/assessments of the prevailing context and develop action based on the findings. For instance, Affected Women's Forum (AWF) in Ampara District conducted a study on the impacts of COVID-19 on women in the community. Rural Women's Front (RWF) in Galle District conducted an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 on informal women entrepreneurs in the tourism industry.

ADAPTING PROJECT INTERVENTIONS AND CHANGING STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

Most WROs developed Phase 3 of their MYF Grants as a continuation of the work done in Phase 1 and 2. However, with the assistance of WWL-SL, WROs also incorporated interventions directly related to issues emerging from the economic crisis. This provided WWL-SL with the opportunity to shift partner focus from addressing practical gender needs, to addressing strategic gender interests and needs in order to withstand the economic crisis (such as through income generation methods). For example, the Affected Women's Forum (AWF) in Ampara moved from an awareness raising strategy to improving livelihood skills and capacities of marginalized women in Ampara. Capitalizing on the local opportunities to sell dried fish- an industry which AWF recognized as easily accessible to women- AWF designed a training program for these marginalized women to gain technical skills in drying fish. With recommendations from WWL-SL, AWF brought in technical resource persons from key government institutions for training, thus improving access to knowledge and skills that help women improve their capacities and in turn, strengthen their economic status, agency, and confidence. WWL-SL encourages partners to select appropriate experts and resource people to support their projects to ensure quality and standards are maintained.

WWL -SL continued to support WROs to adopt evidence-based programming during the economic crisis. For Phase 3 of the MYF, Centre for Women and Development (CWD) plans to conduct research on the impact of the economic crisis on rural women from three districts in the Northern Province, train 90 women on economic skills for initiating SMEs. For quality assurance, WWL suggested that CWD work with economics and

gender academics from the University of Jaffna to draft an impact report with recommendations for stakeholders on responding to the challenges faced by rural women in the Northern Province due to the economic crisis. The recommendations will then be presented to government and non-government stakeholders in Jaffna. CWD also plans to conduct an assessment of the legal aid support given to GBV victims to better understand the quality of the support.



Image Caption: A skills building workshop on drying and packaging fish for alternative livelihoods for women beneficiaries conducted by Affected Women's Forum (Ampara district)

Many WROs also included interventions to support women headed households with food security. Some of this work was built on the "Economic Relief Package for Female Headed Households in Sri Lanka" rapid response project funded by the Lotus Circle Emergency Fund (elaborated below). Interventions included capacity building to increase knowledge on food security and nutrition, develop skills for home gardening, and upskill women to turn excess production into an alternative source of income. Some WROs included additional components (such as Social Welfare Mandiram), to skill women in organic fertilizer production. WROs also proposed to continue to work alongside government officials, such as officers from the Department of Agriculture, to support the training programs.

WVL was cautious of placing the responsibility of ensuring the families' food security on women within the household. To mitigate this, WVL suggested that WROs include a requirement where women should bring a male family member over the age of 18 years for the skills development training for home gardening. The age requirement was put in place to ensure the male family member was of an age where they could learn the skill and meaningfully contribute towards the welfare of the household.

RESPONDING TO WROS' REQUESTS FOR FUNDS TO ADDRESS EMERGING ISSUES

FUNDING INITIATIVES IN RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Through the Rapid Response Fund, WWL-SL supported WROs to implement initiatives that addressed issues surfacing as a result of COVID-19. For instance, Women's Development Federation (WDF) recognized that quarantine periods resulted in a loss of income and exacerbated domestic violence. They requested to support 40 women from low-income households and their families, who had lost their daily income as a result of being subjected to mandatory quarantine, with essential goods and information leaflets on COVID-19 and contact details of government and non-governmental support systems (including contacts of GBV related services). WWL-SL supported this intervention as it would inevitably empower 40 women to support their families, reduce their burdens, protect them from malnutrition, and provide them with access to knowledge to seek support when needed. Dabindu Collective requested for funds for partial support for an International Women's Day celebration event organized by the Collective under the theme 'Feminist Leadership in Times of Crisis.'

FUNDING INITIATIVES IN RESPONSE TO THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

WROs became concerned with addressing the immediate needs of vulnerable and marginalized communities emerging or worsening due to the economic crisis and looked to the Rapid Response Fund for humanitarian assistance. However, WWL-SL felt that WROs' requests for humanitarian assistance to address issues related to the economic crisis eclipsed the purpose of the Rapid Response Fund. Humanitarian assistance is only one component of the Rapid Response Fund and WWL-SL felt the components to fund strategic and/or innovative initiatives were not being prioritized by WROs during this time. The WWL-SL team, after discussions with the Project Advisory Committee, revised the format of the Rapid Response Fund to support testing, piloting, and implementing strategic and innovative initiatives that enabled gender equality, enjoyment of women's rights and women's empowerment. The "Innovative Grant" (as it was called post revision), could be utilized to address issues under various thematic areas including (but not limited to) the economic crisis, and a call for applications was shared among non-WWL-SL WROs. Vikalpani National Women's Federation (Vikalpani) in the Monaragala District (a recipient of the Innovative Grant) submitted a proposal to improve the economic situation of women through a traditional seed breeding and marketing scheme. Vikalpani identified a demand for traditional seeds given their nutritional value, climate resistance and diversity. Women's Development

Centre (WDC) in the Kandy District submitted a proposal to mobilize women within the plantation sector of the Pinawila Divisional Secretariat through “Self Help Groups”, provide dairy farming equipment, establish dairy product storage spaces, and train women farmers on improving vegetable cultivation and producing and marketing organic fertilizer.

However, WWL-SL also recognized the need to support requests made for humanitarian assistance, especially requests aiming to address the asymmetric, sometimes unseen impacts the economic crisis had on vulnerable groups of women and girls. To this end, the WWL-SL team supported Inside Justice project team (both teams operating under the umbrella of the Gender and Justice Program of The Asia Foundation) to raise funds through the Lotus Circle Emergency Fund (an internal fund source from The Asia Foundation) to create more opportunities for WROs to rapidly respond to the growing need for assistance within their communities during this economic crisis. A call for applications was circulated among WWL-SL WROs for the “Economic Relief Package for Female Headed Households in Sri Lanka” emergency assistance project. This assistance consisted of an economic relief cash allowance for selected FHHs along with a seed starter pack to promote home gardening and food security. With this, WROs also distributed leaflets developed by The Asia Foundation on mental health wellbeing and contact details of GBV and domestic violence service providers. This assistance was intended to reach selected households with temporary relief, to provide women with the opportunity to use their agency to spend the money as they see fit and to support their household expenses in the short-term and provide them with an opportunity to be self-sufficient in their household food requirements in the medium term, thereby reducing the ‘dependent/welfare reliant’ mentality, often created through welfare programs and humanitarian assistance.



Image Caption: Seed starter packs give to 1,100 female-headed households through 15 Women’s Rights Organization partners of the “Women’s Voice and Leadership” Project

For the implementation of the emergency assistance project, WWL-SL encouraged WROs to work with government stakeholders within their localities and maintain constant interaction to ensure collaboration throughout the implementation of the emergency assistance project. To strengthen collaboration and networks with government stakeholders, WROs set up selection committees comprising of relevant grassroots level

officers (e.g. Women Development Officers from District Secretariats, Grama Niladhari, Social Workers, Agricultural Officers) to select deserving/vulnerable FHHs based on criteria they developed, and also worked alongside Agricultural Officers to conduct training for the FHHs. WROs used the distribution event (where the cash grant, seed starter pack and information leaflets were shared among beneficiaries) to highlight diverse issues, consult with the beneficiaries and also encourage them to realize their own strength to overcome their economic hardships and provided them with practical skills to manage their finances, households and mental wellbeing while coping with the crisis.

RESPONDING TO WROS' REQUESTS FOR FUNDS TO ADDRESS EMERGING ISSUES

DURING COVID-19

With the aim of ensuring WROs' ability to retain their staff and for the continuation of work, WWL-SL ensured that salaries and allowances to WRO project staff were paid continuously, even though most WRO partners had trouble implementing project activities, especially in the early days of the pandemic. These efforts by WWL-SL were greatly appreciated by the WROs as they did not have their own resources to retain their staff. However, WWL-SL encountered another issue with the financial capacities of WROs. While it is usual practice to enter into No Cost Extension (NCE) Agreements with project partners in cases where project implementation is incomplete, most WROs did not have the financial capacity to sustain an NCE to complete activities from Phase 1 of the MYF Grant cycle- a concern that was highlighted as a result of the pandemic. To remedy this, WWL-SL decided to close the projects and, in consultation with individual WROs, work pending activities into Phase 2 of the MYF cycle. The benefits to this approach were twofold: it enabled WROs a second chance at achieving expected results and also reduced the burden of finding other sources of funds in order to retain staff over a no-cost extension during a critical time. This issue reflected the dire need for setting minimum standards and best practices for financial sustainability for WROs. WWL-SL initiated this with one organization (Association of Women with Disabilities in Anuradhapura-AKASA) through a financial assessment of the organization which helped establish standards and formulated financial and operational procedures.

DURING THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

An immediate effect of the economic crisis was the drastic increase in costs as a result of inflation. There was a need to revise partner budgets according to the evolving context. WWL-SL took a case-by-case approach to this and worked with partners in amending the budgets (especially for travel) and grant agreements to reflect these changes.

UPDATING PARTNER MONITORING METHODS TO SUIT THE CONTEXT

Partner visits were planned to be the key mode of partner monitoring across the project. However, given the travel restrictions as a result of COVID-19, WWL-SL developed a system of “Individual Partner Discussions” which were done regularly. The Individual Partner Discussion tool allowed WWL-SL to understand partner experiences in promoting women’s rights within specific localities, challenges faced, and strategies adopted to address them; understand whether WWL-SL’s engagements has been beneficial; and discuss capacity needs and capacity priorities of the partner organization with respect to organizational management and operations, advocacy and service delivery, and networking.

UNEXPECTED RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF TARGET BENEFICIARIES

At a time where the expectation was that WROs may not reach as many beneficiaries, five WROs were able to reach an unplanned number of beneficiaries as a result of adapting their work to suit the COVID-19 context in Sri Lanka. Women’s Center in Galle District, who usually work with Sinhala speaking Export Processing Zone (EPZ) workers, also reached Tamil speaking beneficiaries in Katunayake EPZ and Vavuniya District through the dissemination of flyers with information on legal provisions on working overtime, after they used internal resources to translate the material. Rural Women’s Forum (RWF) in Vavuniya District collaborated with government officials in the Divisional Women’s Development Unit in the Vavuniya Divisional Secretariat to carry out awareness raising in the village (instead of in schools due to school closure) and reached a higher number of women and girls. Muslim Women Development Trust (MWDT) also recorded an increase in the number of beneficiaries seeking counseling and legal aid services especially due to the rise in SGBV cases during the pandemic.

The Economic Relief Package for Female Headed Households in Sri Lanka emergency assistance enabled 15 WROs across 11 districts to reach approximately 1,150 women from FHHs with information on SGBV, cash allowances and seed starter packs. Through this emergency assistance, WWL-SL and WROs were able to reach a new segment of direct beneficiaries (female headed households) and indirect beneficiaries (their dependents including children, elderly parents/relatives, and disabled/infirm husbands/partners) through collaboration with the Lotus Circle Emergency Fund.

IMPROVED CAPACITIES OF WROS AND THE PRIORITIZATION OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT BEYOND WWL

WWL-SL also recognizes WROs' involvement in the political crisis and their activism during the "Aragalaya" (citizen's movement as a response to the corruption and inefficiency of the Sri Lankan Government, started as a response against the leadership of President Gotabaya Rajapaska and his family). While WWL-SL did not get involved in political activism nor did WWL-SL directly support the work done by WROs during the political crisis through funds or technical expertise, WWL-SL acknowledges the efforts made by WROs to incorporate feminist principles within their activism, given the low participation of women in politics in Sri Lanka. The partners formed formal and informal networks with other organizations and activists, increased their visibility within the community, included more women in their activism, and pushed for the recognition of women's rights in their activism.



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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