

Psychosocial Program



The Asia Foundation

Improving Lives, Expanding Opportunities

SEEKING WELL-BEING AND PROFESSIONALIZING CARE IN SRI LANKA

Presidential elections in January 2015 and parliamentary elections the following August promised sweeping changes to Sri Lanka's political landscape and brought new hopes for reconciliation, restoration, and healing after the 26-year civil war, which ended in 2009. The new government, with its stated commitment to postconflict reconciliation, has helped to destigmatize victim support services, and opened a window of opportunity to provide much-needed psychosocial support to vulnerable and trauma-affected communities during the reconciliation process.



PROVIDING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT THROUGH NGO PARTNERSHIPS

The Asia Foundation has more than a decade of in-depth experience working in the psychosocial sector in Sri Lanka. Asia Foundation programs to provide psychosocial support services to survivors of war, conflict, trauma, and torture have included Reducing the Effects and Incidences of Trauma (RESIST, 2005–2011), Trauma Treatment and Advocacy (2009–2011) and the Victims of Trauma Treatment Program (VTTP, ending May 2020). These programs help traumatized survivors with services such as counseling, medical support, and physiotherapy; yoga and relaxation techniques; raising awareness of the psychosocial effects of conflict-related violence; assisted referrals to government and NGO services; and even simple but effective interventions such as befriending. Since 2005, the Foundation has partnered with two national NGOs to support these initiatives—the Family Rehabilitation Centre (FRC) and Shanthiham (The Association for Health and Counseling).

During the six years of RESIST, over 8,000 survivors received psychosocial support to help them resume their lives with their families and communities. Between 2011 and 2017, VTTP provided clinical and psychosocial support to 706 war widows, 254 people with disabilities, 413 ex-combatants, 1,067 torture survivors, and 783 immediate family members of torture survivors.

FOSTERING STATE PARTNERSHIPS FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

NGOs alone cannot meet the enormous postwar needs of Sri Lanka's people. The year 2014 marked a significant shift for The Asia Foundation, from working primarily with non-government partners to working with partners in government. Several ministries offered counseling services, provided by counselors from various academic and cultural backgrounds, with different levels of training, and representing various schools of thought. Each



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ministry had its own emphasis and procedures, and the quality of counseling services had been variable.

Faced with these countrywide inconsistencies, the Foundation commissioned mapping studies through the Ministry of Social Empowerment and Welfare (MSEW) and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs (MWCA) to better understand the roles and practices of the government's mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) counselors. The study revealed the need for a standardized approach to MHPSS throughout Sri Lanka. The results were also presented to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Colombo, and lessons-learned were incorporated into a postgraduate course, Masters in Counseling and Psychosocial Support (MCP). Guided by the mapping studies, the Foundation has worked to formalize counseling practices, standardize assessment tools for psychosocial interventions, and promote continuing professional development (CPD) programs throughout the country.

CLINICAL ASSESSMENT TOOLS AND PEER SUPPORT

In a first for Sri Lanka, The Asia Foundation developed a professional guide to help service providers develop a formal client assessment tool, and helped establish a peer support-group model for industry-wide, professional oversight and support. The professional guide led to the creation of a standardized client intake form that unlocks new data on client needs. The peer support-group model was adopted institutionally by the Ministries of Social Empowerment and Welfare and Woman and Child Affairs. It provides a platform for service providers to present difficult cases to their peers and receive constructive feedback, share best practices, and learn from the experiences of their fellow professionals.

The peer support-group model is an effective way to address a spectrum of issues confronting service providers. For a counseling assistant in North Central Province, the peer-group meetings eased feelings of isolation in the field and helped develop a new view of the client. Another provider, a clinical psychologist, emphasized that multiple perspectives on challenging cases helped one to see beyond ones own values and experiences. A counseling assistant in Uva Province said that regular

meetings were invaluable for building a stronger referral network for individuals in need.



CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Asia Foundation supports CPD programs for the personal and professional growth of MHPSS practitioners and to help them stay up to date with international developments in the field. Through the National Training Program on Mental Health Nursing, a partnership with the Ministry of Health and the National Institute of Mental Health, the Foundation trained five groups of nurses attached to acute psychiatry units throughout the country to provide quality MHPSS support to clients. The ten-day program included lectures, small group discussions, problem-based learning, and role play. A partnership with the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists offered CPD programs for practicing psychiatrists that focused on topics including post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), childhood depression, ADHD in children, autism, aging and psychiatric disorders, treatment for depression, schizophrenia, and gender issues, and skills-based topics including leadership, mindfulness and psychotherapy techniques, and scientific writing.

Through partnerships with Sri Lankan institutions and the promotion of sustainable service infrastructure, the Foundation works to support uniform practices and high professional standards among mental health and psychosocial support providers, while improving access for Sri Lankans island-wide.

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The Asia Foundation is a nonprofit international development organization committed to improving lives across a dynamic and developing Asia. Headquartered in San Francisco, The Asia Foundation works through a network of offices in 18 Asian countries and in Washington, DC. Working with public and private partners, the Foundation receives funding from a diverse group of bilateral and multilateral development agencies, foundations, corporations, and individuals.

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