

# “A slap does not hurt that much.”

Case studies based on reflections from CARE International’s work in promoting Gender Equity and Diversity in the district’s of Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa (Sri Lanka)



June 2009

**“A slap does not hurt that much”** : case studies based on reflections from CARE International’s work in promoting Gender Equity and Diversity in the district’s of Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa (Sri Lanka).

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# **“A slap does not hurt that much”**

Case studies based on reflections from CARE International's work in promoting gender equity and diversity in the district's of Polonnaruwa and Batticaloa  
(Sri Lanka)

A publication of the Program Quality and Learning Unit (PQL) of CARE International Sri Lanka

**June 2009**

## **Forward**

Our Strategic Plan identifies gender inequity as a key underlying cause of poverty in Sri Lanka. Our plan highlights gender inequities as a particularly acute form of social exclusion in the country, which significantly impedes development and social justice leading to systemic discrimination at the household, community, and national level.

For many years now, CARE's programming in Sri Lanka has paid greater attention to the way in which poverty affects women. This continues to shape our work today, and will continue to do so in the future. This is also reflective of CARE's global focus on marginalized women and girls.

It is unfortunate that we often find ourselves living in situations where women have become acutely marginalized. We see many examples where women lack voice and participation, have limited access to employment and livelihood opportunities, face increased insecurity, and have all too often become the victims of gender based violence – violence that has become accepted and invariably goes unnoticed.

In response to this, CARE's work in Sri Lanka continues to seek ways to address the many complex issues and underlying problems facing women today. It is important to note that this does not mean that our work is carried out in isolation of men, but rather men continue to be very much engaged in our work to address the many forms of gender inequities. For example, in recent years, our work in the east has focused on women headed households where we have supported communities through the formation and strengthening of representative networks and service providers that seek to address and prevent gender based violence. This has also included being clear about how we define a women headed household - beyond the traditional 'widowed' definition to one that is inclusive of a range of additional categories. In doing so this draws attention to the multi faceted issues and needs of such households and responses that are appropriate and comprehensive.

A lot of CARE's work today is undertaken with the support and participation of many different government and non-government partners. Work that seeks to inform debate and change at a variety of levels – be it at the community, district or national level. Collectively we seek to achieve positive change in the lives and livelihoods of women through addressing the ever growing dimensions that lead to gender based inequities.

Whilst this publication highlights many of the issues and problems facing women in Sri Lanka today, our hope is that it stimulates thought and ideas about the positive opportunities and solutions that can lead to the creation of an environment where women are seen as equal partners in development – be it at the household, community, district or national level.

Nick Osborne,  
Country Director,  
Care International  
Sri Lanka.

## **Introduction**

Since 1990 CARE Sri Lanka has actively sought to mainstream gender equity and diversity in its programming and within the organization. From an organizational point of view, this involved the development and institutionalization of a gender policy and relevant codes of conduct. Programmatically having recognized the lack of gender equity and diversity as a cause for poverty and social injustice, CARE undertook to better understand its manifestations and deal with these issues amongst those communities it works with. This consequently resulted in significant changes in its programming and within the organization. Throughout this challenging process CARE continued to reinstate its commitment towards institutionalizing programme quality, knowledge sharing and learning in gender equity and diversity.

In addition to integrating GED within its development projects that focused on vulnerable and poor communities in the tea and rubber plantations, dry zone and conflict affected areas in Sri Lanka, CARE also continued to build on the work it initiated in 2003 that focuses on preventing gender based violence. More recently CARE reinstated the work it began in 2002 with regards to sensitizing duty bearers responsibilities to women headed households and nurturing these households decision making power.

Over the years having understood the opportunities as well as the challenges in mainstreaming GED, ensuring increased levels of impact, accountability and learning it has become necessary to better understand the key lessons learned in institutionalizing these processes as well as to help us define the way forward. Therefore this booklet is an attempt by CARE to bring together its learning and experiences and provide specific recommendations to move forward. Observations generated from focus group discussions with staff, beneficiaries and partners as well as evaluations of specific initiatives were used to inform the writing of this booklet that is available in Sinhala, Tamil and English. It is our hope that the stories in this booklet in addition to enhancing learning will also prompt greater reflection by readers of the issues highlighted. We hope that the questions raised will help provoke reflection and stimulate discussions and possibly provide insights with regards to the issues highlighted. Space has been provided for readers to document their thoughts. Please feel free to contact us.

V. Weerasingham

Program Advisor – Gender

Program Quality and Learning Unit

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### **About the Author**

**Kusala Wettasinghe** is a development researcher with special interest in – psychosocial work, gender, children’s consultations and development communication. Ms. Wettasinghe is a trainer and resource person for project assessments, evaluations, research and development of creative communication. Over the years she has designed a number of research and training initiative on gender issues, child development and psychosocial activities. She has considerable experience in interacting with communities dealing with with various social issues. Based this Ms. Wettasinghe has written several articles and papers focusing on children, rural development, women issues, science, foreign affairs and gender issues. Children’s books authored by Ms. Wettasinghe include *Boru Kakul* and *Stilt Walter*. Those co-authored include *Balancing the Load - on Gender and Transport issues* (2002, Zed Books, London & New York).

### **About CARE International In Sri Lanka**

CARE International in Sri Lanka was established in 1950. Initially the organization focused on food-related programmes and addressing maternal and child health issues. However, in the 1980’s programming was diversified in order to respond to the changing needs of the country and the organization’s wider objective of poverty alleviation. This led to emphasis placed on agriculture, the management of natural resources, small economic activity development, and relief and rehabilitation activities.

In the 1990’s CARE continued to decentralize its service delivery structures and began implementing programmes through a network of field offices around the country. During this time its project portfolio continued to reflect a commitment to poverty alleviation. In recent years CARE’s programmes have sought to move beyond addressing the traditional causes of household and community vulnerability, and to address the underlying issues of marginalization and exclusion. CARE programs and projects continue to focus on three main target groups in specific geographic areas: poor rural communities in the dry zone, conflict-affected populations in the northeast and residents of Sri Lanka’s tea and rubber estates. Following the Indian Ocean tsunami in December 2004, CARE International Sri Lanka expanded its work to support tsunami survivors in seven of the worst-affected districts. Currently CARE works in 8 districts in Sri Lanka these include Hambanthota, Monaragala, Ampara, Batticaloa, Polonnaruwa, Vavuniya, Jaffna, and Nuwara Eliya.





**Case study 1**

**“A slap does not hurt that much.”**

*Batticaloa.*

**Case study 2**

**A time to rejoice and re-direct.**

*The Village Level Action Group of  
Polonnaruwa*

**Case study 3**

**Understanding slander and silence.**

*Polonnaruwa*

“A slap does not hurt that much”

This scenario is created, based on the observations of a Men’s Action Group formed by CARE Sri Lanka in the village of Malligai\* in Batticaloa. The story aims to bring out the views and sentiments expressed by the members of the Action Group. Names and other descriptions that lead to the identification of people or specific situations have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

*\* The village name fictional*



**M**anidaran is angry. He sits on the doorstep of his home, fuming with anger. The door behind him is closed. It is locked and Manidaran cannot enter his home. “How dare she!” he mutters to himself. “How dare she leave home when she knows that I have to go to this training programme tomorrow morning?” Manidaran’s wife, Kamala leaves home and goes to her own mothers’ house at least once every few months.

After a bitter quarrel that often ends in Manidaran beating her, Kamala’s late night weeping and leaving home with their toddler son and infant daughter once her older sons have left for school and Manidaran has left for work is not an unusual happening in their home. In such a situation, Manidaran knows well that Kamala has left the house keys with their next door neighbour. The two older sons will not return home until dark because they know that their mother is away. They will eat at one of their relatives who lives close by or at a friend’s house. No one is overly concerned about these ‘family fights’. It happens in most homes.

Yet, Manidaran does not go to collect the keys. He is angry not because he misses his cup of tea that Kamala always has ready for him when he returns from work. Whether they have had a bitter quarrel the night before or not; whether he has beaten her and she has kept up crying all night or not, she always gets him a hot cup of tea early next morning. If she is home, she will make his tea in the evening too. “Ah, she is alright now, she does not feel bad about the fight now’ Manidaran thinks with relief. He does not want to drag on a quarrel. “Women easily forget a beating, even though the bruises remain for some days”, Manidaran thinks. “Physical beating is quite different from bitter words that stay on for a long time in one’s mind,

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how she nags him! He wishes he could forget her nagging. She deserves to be beaten when she nags so” Manidarana thinks. He is not sorry that he had beaten her the night before.

“Women need to be silenced and kept in their place. They sometimes forget their place in the house. It is all these organizations that come and spoil the women, telling them that they should be treated equally...Aah....” Manidarana stops half way in his own thoughts. What about his plight?

He too is a member of a village action group that CARE has formed in their village. How can he face the officials of the organization tomorrow? How can he participate in the discussions about violence and the pain of being beaten? Can he keep a straight face and give suggestions as to how men should behave sensitively and caringly in the homes when he has beaten up his wife the day before?

Manidarana remembers that he was extremely proud when the officials of CARE came and asked the men in their village to come for a meeting to form a Men’s Action Group. This was the first time that anyone in the community had

heard of a Men’s Action Group. The officials had told them that it is the first time that men would work collectively as a group to help reduce violence against women and children.

Manidarana and his friends knew that the organization had earlier formed a Women’s Action Group in his village. Sethu’s wife and Jayapala’s widowed sister were members of it.

They and other women went for meetings and met regularly to discuss cases of violence that had been reported to them. It was said that this women’s group had made contacts with several useful government offices in the area: The police was foremost among these. At first the men were surprised about a Women’s Action Group being formed to help women and children who face violence in their homes and in the community. Then, their surprise turned into anger, and anger into ridicule.



Manidarana and his friends in the neighbourhood had often laughed about it. “Look at the crazy times we live in... We men are at home while the women have been trained to run to the police station when some violent incident takes place in the home or when women are harmed.” They joked, feeling

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somewhat peevisish about being identified as 'those who create violence in the homes.... the ones who dominate the women. Manidaran felt that the Women's Action Group seemed to challenge the leadership of the men.

"Did they forget that it is we men who ride bikes? We can reach a police station much faster than they do. Besides, some of those women have not even stepped out of their houses before.... Some are so scared of their husbands.... How can they talk to the police about their men hitting them?", Manidaran and his friends had commented. Yet, months later, the women were seen going to the police or directing women who faced violence to report their cases to the Women's and Children's Desk at the local police station.

Sometimes, when a woman had to take for treatment to hospital after a violent incident, this Women's Action Group was reported to have asked them to go the "GBV<sup>1</sup> desk' at the Batticaloa hospital. The men were not too clear what exactly the 'GBV desk" was but some of them were aware that it helped women who faced violence and advised the men to stop their aggressive behaviour against the women and children in the family.

When CARE, after successfully forming the Women's Action Group in their village approached the men and asked them also to work as an action group, the men were excited. They felt that they were being recognized for their capacity to deal with violent situations.

"Finally, they (*the organisaiton and its officials*) are realizing that we men are the leaders. We will soon be doing what the Women's Action Group is doing. We too will be introduced to the police so that we too can report on violence. After all, it is a man's job to intervene in matters of violence." Manidaran's work mate and neighbour Suranjan said, holding up his arm and jokingly flexing his muscles in a show of his physical strength.

However, introducing the Men's Action Group to the police in the area had not happened as the members had eagerly expected.

*"What elseis there to teach a man to become a leader? Men are any way born leaders, aren't they?" That is Manidaran's view.*

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All that had happened so far was a series of meetings and a few training programmes. “What is there to teach men so much about leadership? What is there to teach men so much about power in the family?” the men asked somewhat frustrated with the delay. They were eager to see their action group as active and as recognized as the women’s action group. Every time the group met for a training programme or for their monthly meeting, the members asked the officials about introducing them formally to the police in the area. “All in good time. All in good time. First we must understand why we are working as a collective of men”, the official had replied. In the training programmes that were held for them, much of the talk was on violence against women and children and how the men must be more considerate towards the women. Mandiaran longed to say that men hit women because of women’s faults: either the women would nag their men until they could not bear it any longer or they would neglect their house work and be just lazy. Some women would spend time gossiping while some others would spend the hard earned money on unnecessary things like trinkets. Men would work hard all day long and when they come home, they had no peace. Was that fair? Is it tolerable? Manidaran wanted to ask. He and most of the other members in the Men’s Action Group felt that women often deserved the beating they got.

“Besides, what is a slap or two? The bruise goes away in a few days and then the women forget everything. A slap is easy to forget. It is us men who really suffer because of their harsh words,



annoying hints and nagging. How much we men have to tolerate?” Jayapala would later say. The others would nod in agreement. “Can we easily forget their harsh words and insulting comments?” Manidaran would

question his fellow members earnestly, his voice full of self pity. “Words really hurt. The anger stays on in our hearts and it just comes out in a burst. We cannot help that, can we?” the others would agree in unison.



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Although these sentiments were discussed among them after the training programmes or quietly during the tea or lunch breaks, they dared not openly say these to the officials and the trainers who worked with them. They did not want to be identified as people who are not suitable to be in a Men's Action Group that was working to prevent violence in the homes and the neighbourhood. They knew what standards or codes of behaviour were expected of them as much as they knew the patterns of their own lives.

“Not that the organisation can afford to ask us any of us members to stay away because we talk or behave aggressively” Manidaran thought with a wry smile.

One year after the formation of the inception of the Men's Action Group, much of the initial enthusiasm seemed to have waned. Over sixty men had come to the first meeting that was called to form the Men's Action Group: The men had come with many expectations. In about two months during which only meetings were held, the numbers had reduced to about fifty and in another two months or so, it dwindled to thirty.

“How much difficult it is to forget the scolding of women?” asks Manidaran in a voice full of self pity. “(Their) words like daggers stab the heart. The pent up anger in the heart suddenly erupts. Can we stop that anger?”

Although there are about twenty members in the action group currently, it is about ten to twelve members who come more or less regularly to the monthly meetings and to the occasionally held training programmes. The organization has been quite sensitive to the life styles of the men, and their responsibilities of having to earn for their families. Therefore, the meetings were usually held on a weekend or in an evening. Despite this and the opportunity to go to training programmes, only a few members continued to be part of the action group.

Manidaran remembered that they have not had a meeting for about two months. What is the problem with the organization? Are they losing interest? Is there a lack of money to support the Men's Action Group? Has the organization changed their plans? Manidaran did not care very much because it was good enough for him to be part of this Action Group, which to him denoted power.

Manidaran and his friends continued to come to be part of the Men's Action Group because they felt that it would give them some power to deal with the tension and the violence of the area – being a suburban town in Batticaloa, had been



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strife with armed conflict and a scene of sporadic fighting until recently, the men felt that it would be extremely good if they could develop closer links with the police through the Men's Action Group. Gang fights, sudden security raids, arrests, abductions had been a part of their lives for a long time. A link with the law enforcement mechanism gives people a sense of security.

Still seated on the doorstep, Manidaran looks at the sky. The sun is going down. He has been thinking of their Action Group for a long time. He gets up from the door step and wanders down the road.

"The wife will come home in a day or two. It is not a cause for worry". But he has to get his clothes, soap and stuff ready and keep some money for the daily expenses for the two days that he would be away. He cannot arrange all this without the help of his wife. It is she who usually gets his clothes ready and looks after the home, managing what ever money he gives until he returns. "She is a good woman," Manidaran feels. He cannot understand why she has to nag him so for taking



If we join the Men's Action Group we get the chance of knowing the officers in the police. It will give us confidence during these troubled times. Men should take the leadership in these kinds of work...

a swig of moonshine after a hard day's work. Yes, sometimes he gets a little drunk, sometimes more than a little drunk, but he does provide for his family, doesn't he. Why does she have to nag him for this? Manidaran wonders irritably.

On the way he meets Selva and Jayendra. Both men are returning after work. Both are members of the Men's Action Group. Selva, well into his middle age, works as a daily

labourer while Jayendra, much younger, works as a clerk in a government office. Manidaran and his neighbourhood friends are happy to have someone as educated as Jayendra in their Action Group.

Selva and Jayendra stop to speak with Manidaran. Soon they notice his dejected look and inquire the reasons for it. Manidaran complains that his wife has 'run home' to her mother after a fight last night and that he is annoyed because he has to prepare his clothes

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to take for an overnight stay at the training programme: He also has to attend to household matters all by himself, before he leaves tomorrow. The co-members of the Men's Action Group are quite sympathetic.

“Remember, at the last meeting our sir (*official of CARE Sri Lanka*) said that we have to think of the pain of being hit.... He said that we, men, would feel the pain and the shame of being hit.....” Selva begins to say something. The discussion that had happened in one of the training sessions, about the dignity of human beings and the shame and the pain of being hit is clearly etched in Selva's mind. He had often thought about it, and has at times felt bad about his own aggressive behaviour at home. He seems to be the only member of their Action Group who believes that a husband's slap hurts much more or as much as a wife's harsh words and that the men should try not to hit their wives.

Jayendra quickly interrupts Selva, “Yes, I too thought that it was a good way to start the discussion. I too felt, at that time, that it was wrong to hit one's wife or daughter. But do you know, when I went home after work a few days later, our house was a mess! My wife had not cleaned the

house: Said she was busy because she had to visit a friend in the hospital. That may be true. But keeping the house clean is a wife's responsibility. Looking after the children too is a wife's duty. When I went home, I found the daughter had gone out to play and my wife did not know where she was. The house was not cleaned. I really lost my temper when she tried to argue with me too, after all this neglect. I forgot all what we discussed at the training and I hit her hard. I do not think I was wrong.”

Selva opens his mouth to say something but looking at the angry faces of Manidaran and Jayendra, he stops.



“In our training programmes they tell us we must not hit women. They say that we must support the women to be more confident and powerful and that we should respect them. They do not tell us how we, the men,

can remain as the heads of our homes unless we use our power to silence our wives when they try to tell us what to do or when they do not do their duties at home.” Manidaran mutters. “You are quite right Mani” Jayendra says. “If we don't behave

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powerfully as men are expected to behave, the society would laugh at us.”

Selva nods thoughtfully. “Yes, that is true. It will be easier for us men if we understand why we want to hit our wives and children or our younger sisters when we are angry” Selva says slowly.

Actually, why does a man take out his anger on his wife and family? Why do men feel that they know best about everything other than cooking, washing and looking after the children? Why do men feel low when they don't know as much as their women folk do about an economic or political matter or when the women take decisions that are wiser than the men's decisions? Why do men feel bad when other men who are more powerful than them insult them? Do our wives too feel insulted



and inferior when we men hit them and shout at them? Selva wonders. He is torn between the power he wants to keep as the head of his household and a dominant male and being a sensitive and an understanding man. He wishes that the discussions and

trainings they have had through their action group had given more attention to such dilemmas that men face. However, he does not voice these thoughts. He too does not want to be ridiculed by other men for being 'too soft' or 'being afraid of his wife'. Society expects men to be rough, strong and brave, doesn't it? Selva asks himself silently. “Who am I to challenge the ways of the society?”

“How will you prepare your stuff for the trip tomorrow? Remember, we will be away for two days” Selva asks Manidaran. “I will bring some breakfast for you. Don't worry about that.” He offers.

“Training, training, training and meetings..... That is all that seems to happen in our action group..... When will the organization introduce us to the police and start us off as a

How do men retain their prominent position in the family without resorting to action that exhibit their power or manliness

Do men think that they know everything apart from cooking, washing clothes and looking after children ?

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proper action group?..... “ Munidaran mutters irritably. Then he says, “I will ask my older sons to go ask my wife to come home. She had better come today. If not, she will have to face the consequences when I return!”

“No need to get so angry, Mani, Ask your boys to speak to their grandma. She will send her daughter home quickly. After all, being slapped by your man is no big deal. I am sure the mother has had her share of beating in her own married life. She will ask her daughter to return home when her husband sends for her. The older generation of women still lives by the age old traditional ways. It is only now that there is all this talk about not hitting a woman and that it is a violation of a woman’s right and all that....” Jayendra says. He stops at the bus halt to catch a bus to the town.



“True.... True..... strange though that with all our criticizing, we too have somehow become part of this change. Wish we understood better what we are doing through our Men’s Action Group.” Selva says with a disappointed smile and walks on.

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“Yeah. Yeah.....” Manidaran nods in agreement and adds. “Stopping violence is one thing: Getting a woman to be obedient to her man so that there is peace at home is another thing. Yeah....Yeah... Yeah.” He turns to go back, to look for his sons.



**A time to rejoice and re-direct**  
*The Village Level Action Group*

This is a village not too far from the town of Polonnaruwa. Let us identify it by the name of Mullai\* This is the story of a group of courageous women and men who joined together, with the support of an organization to deal with the high degree of violence faced by the women and children of their village.

*\* village name fictional*



CS © - Intro.

**T**he mid day sun is hot as it usually is in the dry season in Polonnaruwa. Yet Mala<sup>1</sup>, a slim woman nearing middle age, is tending to some plants in her home garden. As she weeds a patch of vegetables in the scorching sun she frequently steals glances at the backyard almost as if she is expecting a visitor to emerge from the scrub forest bordering her home. A while later she sees a woman and a young girl step out from the forest cover and hurry towards her house. The visitors do not surprise her. Signaling them to come in from the back door Mala too goes in. The three of them speak in hushed tones. The soft

crying of the young girl can be heard but what they discuss is not heard outside. A little while later Mala makes tea for the visitors and soon they leave stealthily as they came. Mala sits on her doorstep sipping her cup of tea. She has a troubled expression on her face.

She sees Karuna walking towards her house. Karuna stands near the stile and shouts, “Akke (elder sister) we have a meeting of the VLAG next week don’t we? Have you informed all the other members?”

Mala does not shout back. She goes up to Karuna and speaks softly. “Yes. We do have a meeting next Monday. I have informed the other eight members too.” They chat for a while about the VLAG but Mala does not tell her friend, neighbour and co-member of the society of which both are members, about the issue that is troubling her

The VLAG is the Village Level Action Group formed to help deal with the violence against women and children that is prevalent in the village of Mullai. The action group initiated through the interest of CARE has ten members: Eight women including Karuna and Mala and two men. Mala is the president.



### A time to rejoice and re-direct

Later in the afternoon Mala goes to the town to do her marketing. On her way she quietly stops at a phone booth and calls CARE. She asks for the relevant officer and informs him about the attempted rape incident that was brought to her notice earlier in the day.



**Your group discussed about that problem didn't you? that crook was taken away by the police**

She does not reveal the name of the girl or her mother who visited her to tell this. She mentions the names of the alleged culprits and request that the police are informed. She has already asked the survivor of this violence to go to the Women and Children's Desk of the police station. Will the CARE office look into this matter and refer them to appropriate places for the necessary support, she requests. A few days later when a man is arrested for alleged rape no one in the village knows who informed the police.

"It must be that Action Group that informed the police" some villagers guess. Some gossip about it, some even ask the VLAG members

whether they had discussed such a case but truthfully they have not. None in the VLAG except the informant knows who brought the case to the VLAG's notice or who passed on the information to the relevant law enforcement and service agencies for necessary action. Steps that need to be taken are taken in extreme secrecy.

"Confidentiality" seems to be the key word in this 'secret pass' of the VLAG in the village of .Mullai . Anyone undergoing harassment or physical or mental violence due to imbalanced gender power relations or anyone who knows of such a happening can approach a member of the VLAG with their 'secret'.

**No, we never talk this issue with our team**



It could be a case of a young girl student being molested in a school under the guise of a special computer class or it could be the frustration of many village wives

### A time to rejoice and re-direct

because their husbands visit a sex worker who is supported by a few powerful individuals in the area or it could be a case of attempted rape. When such an incident or a threat of such a situation is told in confidence to a member of the VLAG, intervention to address the issue could pose many risks for the informant as well as the VLAG members.

Therefore the VLAG member who comes to know of such a situation acts cautiously, without even sharing it with the rest of the members of the VLAG:

This high level of caution and confidentiality is essential because bringing domestic or other forms of gender based violence to the notice of authorities or service providers may anger the perpetrators of violence. In the village of Mullai, passing on information of such 'secrets' could even pose threats to their lives. The gravity of the dangers involved in this 'secret pass' is best understood if one is familiar with the context of the village of Mullai.



Bordering a famed religious site with ancient ruins in Polonnaruwa, the village of Mullai consists of a large extent of land. The villagers believe the land area to be not less than 400 sq km. Much of the village is under scrub forest cover. Thus, the village, although not too far from the town, is sparsely populated and has stretches of lonely forest areas.



Over the years this village has served as an ideal ground for crimes such as rape and as a hide out for men evading arrests by the police.

Some of the community members are natives of the area while there are several families who have fled to these parts after disputes with their own communities or allegedly after committing crimes. The varying life styles, the unfamiliarity with each others' traditions and value systems and the need of some families to live in secrecy has not provided favorable ground for deep bonding among the families in the community.

**A time to rejoice and re-direct**

This was the nature of the village of Mullai when CARE began working in the village about 3 years ago. The district level policy makers and law enforcement authorities had recommended that CARE work in this village if they wished to demonstrate the effectiveness of a mechanism that helps reduce gender power related violence.

The village of Mullai had been officially reported as having a high rate of gender based violence, some of which were categorized as hard crimes. A rape and murder incident, which received much publicity, had already marred the name of the village.

A gang-protected female sex worker was operating in the area and brewing moonshin, while heavy consumption of illicit alcohol was a notable feature of the village.



How does one step into such a location and initiate a dialogue on gender power relations and the violence stemming from it? On the one hand physical and gang power based violence was prevalent. On the other, traditional value systems

of the area in which gender discourse at community level had not hitherto happened was not conducive for a discussion on gender power relations: Stereotypical gender roles were held in high regard.

CARE had to cautiously select its approach. After much discussion at the sub office in Polonnaruwa, CARE decided to take a non-aggressive approach based on positive aspects of the family unit.

They also decided to work directly with the community. The normal procedure was to work through a local partner organization. Working directly would give them more space to try out effective options.

In the initial discussions, CARE talked of the value of the family unit and the support of both husband and wife that helps safeguard family unity. They used locally used expressions and

Some men indulge in violence against children and women by hiding behind rowdiness and traditional values. What do you think? opinion?

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**A time to rejoice and re-direct**

phrases, carefully avoiding any technical or popular terminology that is typically used in gender discourses. Thus, phrases such as 'gender based violence' or 'violence against women' were hardly used in the community discussions.

CARE representatives talked about how loving and peaceful a family unit could be and the community responded with a more realistic and familiar perception of how frequently '*sandu*' (quarrels) and '*gori*' (fighting) occur in many of their families, especially if the men have had liquor. They also talked about how vulnerable women could be within and outside their homes.

The immediate objective of the intervention was to form a committee that would help ensure the unity of the family and help protect women and children from violence. The initial discussions were followed by the formation of the Village Level Action Group (VLAG) and raising awareness of possible situations where women and children are subjected to violence.

For this, CARE chose an approach that would attract the attention of both women and men and the young and the old. They showed street dramas based on five selected themes.

The themes included challenges faced by widows; those faced by girls who work in garment factories; harassments faced by women when traveling in the bus; alcohol dependency and resulting in family quarrels and the negative impact of alcohol dependency on children's education.

The staging of street dramas were followed, wherever possible, with discussions on how the audience felt about the issues raised in the dramas.

Mala recounts the early stage of the intervention when we meet a few of the VLAG members in 2008. We are interested to study how a mechanism such as a VLAG can function in a village to make a significant change with regards to gender based violence in a village.

Mala remembers, "even before CARE came to talk about this, we knew that many incidents of violence and crime were happening in our village or in the nearby areas. We also knew that some people living in our village were responsible or were associated with such happenings. There were even murders and rapes. Each time we heard of such a case we were afraid for the safety of us womenfolk and our children, especially our daughters. We lived with this tension. We felt we

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had to do something about this but could not even think of what we could do.”

“We saw, we observed, and waited with fear for the situation to improve. We dared not act on our own or inform the police or any other authority..... It was at this stage that CARE came into the village.”

“What they said and how they were going to deal with the issue seemed to match what we had been feeling. That is why I decided to join with them.”  
What specific features in the approach attracted them to be part of it? We ask. Karuna is eager to explain and Mala adds on the details. “In the beginning we did not have a clear idea of what they were going to do or whether we would even be active partners of this.”

“We came for the discussions because it was not problematic for us to attend..... It was not threatening to us because they were only talking about the unity of the family.... later when we came to know of their way of working we felt that CARE accepts the fact that we were afraid to directly challenge the wrong-doers. In the way we work now, no one in the village needs to know who informed the VLAG or which member of the VLAG informed the police or any other authority.”

“That is why we don’t even tell one another in the VLAG about the cases we refer. When we are not able to help a person who comes to us we can discuss the case in the VLAG but without giving out the details.”

Was it easy to learn to work with such secrecy and confidentiality? Did they not want to blurt out the burdensome secrets to a fellow VLAG member? The three women members with whom we are talking to exchange smiles indicating that



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it was a practice they had to cultivate through trial and error. “It was not easy. In the beginning there were a few lapses, but fortunately these were not serious incidents and we learnt that we have to respect the confidence of the families or individuals who come to us. If we do not do this there will be quarrels among us members and we will put ourselves in danger” they explain.



Secrecy and confidentiality may bring a certain degree of individual protection but is it sufficient to protect them as a group? Don't the perpetrators of violence threaten or target the VLAG members as a group when they can't singly identify the informant? We are curious to know.

“Yes. Especially when there were court cases or when we tried to stop a sex worker operating from nearby our villages we did face many threats”, Mala says and looks at Karuna who eagerly explains further, “there was one case where we were particularly afraid because the families of those who were arrested threatened us. We kept vigil in each other's houses. On our own also we took precautions.”

“During that time, I used to sleep with an axe and a bottle of chillie powder by my side..... we were afraid but we did not give up..... sometimes our husbands or other family members would shout at us and say that we are placing everyone in danger. But later they realized that we are doing a service..... that definitely was not an easy time for us.”

Sujeewa, another VLAG member and a young mother speaks while she paces up and down the hall to stop her baby from crying. “CARE has given us the telephone numbers of the police and other useful people whom we can contact in an emergency. They have even given us their personal phone numbers so that we do not feel we are in this alone.”

Mala explains, “Now that many people in the village know what we are doing and also that we have the support of the police, things are easier for us. It was at the beginning that we faced many threats. However, we continue to be cautious when we refer cases.”

Bandara, a youth who introduces himself as a member of the street drama group that helped raise awareness on gender based violence, recalls an incident that was a turning point in the

### **A time to rejoice and re-direct**

development of the VLAG. It was not only an incident that reduced the hitherto frequent quarrels in some families but one which also opened the community's eyes as to how women could be exploited. A female sex worker had been operating close to the village. Allegedly, a gang of powerful men in the community were using her as a source of income for them. The VLAG had talked with the woman several times and had asked her to stop this practice as it created many problems for some families in their community. Her position was that she had to support a family without the assistance of a male and therefore had no other option.



Recounts Bandara, "One day an ugly brawl broke out in the community over this issue. Some people in the village became very angry and wanted to chase this woman away.

We intervened and began to talk with her. She explained her situation and then we too realized how helpless she is because she has no means of supporting herself or her family. Later, a man from a nearby village who watched this scene

expressed willingness to marry her. Now she is married and is living elsewhere. I feel that the fact that anyone came forward to marry this woman who was earlier shunned by the society indicates how her situation was understood and how she won the respect as a woman struggling to survive and support a family."

Listening to him we feel that being part of the initiative to reduce gender based violence has broadened Bandara's perspectives. If young men such as Bandara are influenced to move from their stereotypical gender biased views and be more sensitive and humane, that in

itself is an achievement of the VLAG.

The number of youth who are positively influenced by this may be few, but a process has been initiated. We share their smiles of success and move on to explore the scope the VLAG.

Does the community see the VLAG members as a powerful group? Does the existence of a VLAG or their contacts with the police prevent the alcohol fond husbands from beating their wives and children?

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Karuna replies with an angry ‘Huh!’ and a toss of her head. Bandara looks away and Sujeewa is busy with the baby. Mala thinks for a moment and says quietly, “We do not interfere in family matters. It is not appropriate for us to get involved in personal matters.... If someone tells us and if the violence is severe, we help them to go to the Women’s and Children’s desk at the police station. But we cannot undertake the role to talk to the men..... because these are personal matters.”

We hold back our questions and our puzzled expressions: surely discussions on gender power related violence does relate to domestic violence too, doesn’t it? Instead we ask whether this is a conscious decision that the VLAG has collectively taken.

The group looks at one another. “No.... not exactly that.... It is just that we don’t ... talk much about it....We only deal with situations where there is violence such as rape or grave incidents of that nature.

Again Mala answers and suddenly Karuna blurts out with suppressed anger, “Once I tried to stop a group of young men in the village from

making fun of a young girl who walked pass them and they became angry and shouted at me. Who are you to tell us what to do, they asked me.”

“I felt embarrassed when these boys much younger than me shouted at me on the road. After that I don’t try to stop such harassments. I feel it is wrong..... but we don’t want to be laughed at by the other villagers.”

An uneasy silence hangs around us. Obviously they are not happy with the level of domestic and other gender based harassments which are probably considered ‘minor matters’ by many people in the community.

However, they do not feel sufficiently confident to deal with it. In a locality such as theirs, perhaps it is prudent to

It is not appropriate for the outsiders to intervene in family matters. Is this right? Or wrong?

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Is an incidence of a group of boys making fun of a girl walking on the road a violent activity or not?  
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be conscious of the limitations of the intervention.

We, who are strangers in their village, cannot fully understand the risks and apprehensions they have to deal with, if they try to openly combat all forms and degrees of gender based violence in their community.

We give them time to think and move on to ask them about the significant factors they have contributed to their success in reducing the 'hardcore' violence against women and children.

If the perpetrators of violence are physically powerful and have the support of their gangs, how has the VLAG been able to win the confidence of the community to come to the VLAG when they face grave forms of violence?

How have they managed to maintain a balance between being easily accessible to the community while ensuring that informants'

identification details are not revealed? How have they managed to build trust in the community?

In response to our questions Karuna, Bandara and Sujeewa relate much anecdotal evidence which illustrates the effectiveness of their work.



A mixture of emotions ranging from fear and sympathy for those who faced violence to anger against the perpetrators and their supporters and a sense of victory in the cases where the matters were successfully brought to the courts is expressed as they speak.



We listen to them with interest, however, it is Mala's recapturing of the key factors that really holds our keen attention.

She speaks with clarity and confidence and we feel that in her quiet and capable manner she contributes immensely to maintain the delicate

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balance the VLAG must keep between being strong but not aggressive.

Mala identifies 8 points which she says specifically contributed to the success of the VLAG. These, as expressed by her, are:

1. Trust is primary. We have to trust one another in the VLAG.

2. Clarity when understanding an issue is important. This comes from an interest to be knowledgeable about our own environment.

Trust among the members

3. We need to maintain confidentiality. We should be friendly with everyone in the village so that it will be easier for people to talk to us without attracting anyone's attention unduly. After listening to a case we should never repeat it to another person unnecessarily or talk about it in a way that the

In order to clearly understand a problem/issue, one has to know the whole background of it.

informant can be identified.

4. Flexibility is also very important. We need to be able to understand that an issue can be complex and that our initial understanding of the problem may not be correct. We should be willing to look into and understand a case even as many as ten times.

5. Patience – We should not get all excited and worked up when we hear of a case. We should clarify and understand the issue well and act with caution and confidentiality. We have to have patience for this.

6. We, the VLAG members, need to have a good understanding of the places and contact persons that can assist people in different types of cases.

7. The villagers recognize our service but they will want to maintain good relationships with everyone in the village, including those who are involved in acts of violence. We have to understand and accept this. We cannot treat people who are close with those who promote violence as our opponents.

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8. People in the village will not work collectively to stop the violence. When they report a case to us secretly they want us to do something to bring the wrong-doers to justice. Yet, they will not come forward to openly support this. We have to understand this.

If we want to preserve confidentiality

Listening to them we recognize both the advantages and disadvantages of this balance.

We need to know whom to go for assistance.

The advantages are that they are able to reach out to the community to help address the grave forms of gender based violence and thereby contribute to somewhat lessening the crime rate in the area. They have been able to create a niche for themselves in the societies, although it is not signposted by a banner: They are able to work as an intermediary link between the survivors or violence and the service and law enforcement authorities.

We should not think that those who work closely with violent people work against us.

Mala's words indicate to us that she has well understood the limitations within which the VLAG must work. Rather than take an openly activist stand against the violence the VLAG of Mullai has opted to operate from where the community is, understanding their apprehensions, doubts, challenges as well as their trust, The support of the community is not openly expressed, but it is felt by the VLAG members and they are content to operate from a low profile that does not overtly upset the traditional value systems.

It is important to be compliant. We should accept that we can do mistakes

Patience.  
We should not be emotional and act in haste.

The disadvantages are that they are not able to use their position as the VLAG to the highest potential to raise greater

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awareness of the many forms of gender based violence: they cannot reach out to the women and children facing verbal abuse or minor forms of violence. They are not able to reach out to the men in the village to help them understand that they too can share the household work, just as much as the women in their families often share the burden of income generation with the men. The discussion on more equitable gender power relations has stopped midway.

Not all will be prepared to cooperate with us openly. We should work keeping this in mind.

We are curious to find out whether their personalities and ways of behaviour have any bearing on the achievements of the VLAG.

Is the mild and calmer demeanor of Mala more acceptable to the community than a more aggressive and challenging conduct of Karuna? Is this partly a reason for the success? We wonder but keep this question for the CARE staff, whom we ask later on.

According to the project coordinator of this site, both these have immensely contribute to the

success of the project. "There is a time to campaign and raise your profile, and there is a time to be calm and quiet and take a low profile. During the stage of awareness raising, it was Karuna's role that was more prominent. She spoke up when issues came up or in the discussions after the street dramas".

"She spoke with her heart and it made many people in the community look at the intervention more favourably. However, when we began to establish and strengthen the VLAG we realized that intervention at community level on cases of violence and making referrals as well as winning the trust of the community required different type of skills."

"The leader in this stage had to be calm and quiet and had to have a good balance between the head and the heart when responding to the people. Mala's qualities were ideal for this."

CARE, being sensitive to the varying qualities of leadership required at different stages of a project has been able to avoid a mistake that most project staff would have plunged into.

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Often organizations/projects work with the opinion leaders who join them first and out of obligation or without giving due consideration to the issue, they are made leaders of the community level mechanism.

Often this results in gaps in the service delivery because different types of skills are required for leading an established mechanism.

During our discussion with the VLAG, the issue of support for the VLAG members come up many times. Who or what are your support mechanisms?

We ask the Mala, Karuna and others. Unanimously they say "CARE. The officers who come to the village are very supportive. They will stand by us in any matter. They are our



biggest support" .After some probing, they name a few other service agencies such as the Women and Children's desk at the police station and the hospital.

What about support from higher levels of state decision making bodies in the district? We ask, thinking of the Task Force that CARE has helped establish and the Core Group which consists of the GA, DS and CARE representative.

Both these bodies are said to meet periodically to discuss cases that are referred to them when resolving them at community level have failed. Establishing a support linkage stretching from the community to the district's highest state officials is one of the main positive features of the project. However, despite our

When doing this kind work, there are times when we should aggressively put across our ideas without hesitation or fear. At the same time there are times when we should take our time to contemplate before doing work.

When selecting a leader for a association in the village, we should offer the leadership to the appropriate person according to the specific time.

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Our biggest strength is the CARE organization and the inability of the village association to make contacts with the administration and the decision makers existing beyond that organization.

Is it Good?

Or bad?

repeated probing, we find that the VLAG members who talked with us are unaware of such a mechanism.

As far as they are concerned, this is a service provision mechanism that links the village level society and CARE and the police, which has been positively influenced to a certain extent by CARE.

On our way back, we discuss this issue. Is it good or bad that the VLAG does not consciously draw support of the Core Group at the helm of the district. On the one hand, it could be seen as a positive outcome. Even without such a high profile linkage, these women and men have braved the opposition of power groups in their community to

collectively work together to help those facing gender based violence and bring perpetrators to justice.

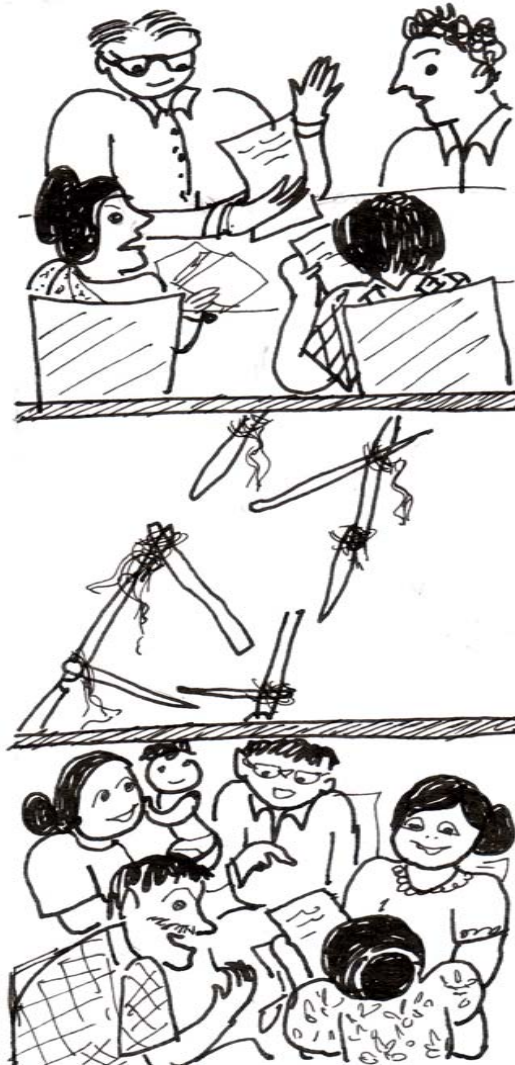
On the other hand, could the awareness and support of the Core Group help further the gender discourse within the village so that it moves on from the hitherto achieved success and reach out to the many families who would benefit from more equitable gender power relations among husbands and wives, mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters?

The success of the VLAG of Mullai has progressed and has come to a juncture where CARE now needs to consider which should its next direction be? Should it operate on the same lines at the same pace which runs the risk of the VLAG losing its momentum because they currently handle only grave forms of violence against women and children.

The environment in the village is slowly changing with other organizations and village societies too working towards the improvement

A time to rejoice and re-direct of the village which will in time reduce the level of hardcore crimes in the area.

According to one organization that we spoke with, during this visit, they are active in stopping the brewing of moonshine in the village. When the level of serious forms of violence reduces, will the VLAG become dysfunctional because there is no longer a demand for their services? Could /should the VLAG be helped to sensitively approach the issues of domestic violence, teasing of girls on the road and other forms of verbal or mental harassments that stem from inequitable gender power relations in the



families and the community? These are issues for CARE to consider when they justly rejoice in their success in the village of Mullai.

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**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Names and descriptive features that enables identification of persons or specific situations have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

**A time to rejoice and re-direct**





### **Understanding the slander and silence.**

This story discusses an incident which indicates the disadvantageous position caused by acting hastily, even though the intention is good. The method that was used to solve the problem has been tested as successful before, while avoiding the basic steps mentioned in approaching a village community. In this context it is not only the project that faces a drawback, but the essential contemporary discourse that could have been brought forth through the project.



**T**he village is intertwined with gravel paths now turned muddy due to the recent showers of rain. Amali<sup>1</sup> a young mother of two toddlers, walks down a path. Her head is bent with frustration, but tears of fury and helplessness are overflowing in her eyes.

She hurries down the path, keen not to meet anyone before she reaches her destination. Jayani walks another path but towards the same destination.

Her head held high with determination she brusquely walks past the puddles of water, paying little heed to the muddy water that gets caught in her slippers splash around, some spoiling her saree as well. Ranga, a mother of a school going son, too is headed for the same destination; she skips over the puddles paying scant regard to the mud that gets splashed all over. She boldly looks around, her eyes challenging those who may be furtively watching her.

On the way she meets Leela, a demure woman who smiles pleasantly and allows Ranga to take the lead on the path. Leela, however, does not skip over the puddles of muddy water but carefully avoids them by walking over the grass overgrowth lining the paths.

A little way off at their destination Frieda, a middle aged woman clad in her long and brightly coloured long gown, is arranging the chairs in the open verandha of her home. Every now and then she looks at the front yard to see whether her visitors would arrive on time.

She is keen that all the members of the Village Level Action Group (VLAG) of which she is the president come on time to start the meeting



without delay. Usually, they start late as the women have to tend to their families needs before they come to the meeting. They are keen that all their domestic responsibilities are duly met. If not they may have

to face criticisms from their husbands and the older family members. These are women walking different paths but aiming to reach a common destination – a destination, which is a living environment that is harmonious and safe and is sensitive to the needs of women and children.

Seven of the eight women who form the VLAG of Nelum are from the village while Jayani, the one who travels from outside. She is their adviser and guide who has been supporting them to set up a Village Level Action Group in the



village of Nelum to address the issues domestic violence and other forms of issues stemming from gender power relations in the village.

The village has an officially reported high rate of domestic and gender based violence. It is with this disreputable introduction that the local state administrative authorities of Polonnaruwa and the local police recommended CARE to work with the community of Nelum.



CARE , was and still is the only international non-governmental organisation working in the district of Polonnaruwa. It began working in Polonnaruwa in 2003, keen to replicate the success of its project on the Prevention of Gender Based Violence (PGBV) that the organisation had implemented in Batticaloa.

A sub office set up in Polonnaruwa initially worked with the state policy and decision making agencies of the district to raise their

Understanding the slander and silence

awareness on issues of gender based violence and the need to initiate programmes to address issues of gender power relations (GPR).

After months of awareness raising programmes, discussions and debate a mechanism that draws on the strengths of the official authority of the state administration and the diversity of experience of the state and non state service providers was set up. The mechanism was headed by a multidisciplinary task force (TF) and a core group (CG) consisting of the GA, DS and the representative of CARE.

Referrals on cases of GPR violence is reported to them through the District Level Action Group (DLAG) which liases with the Village level Action Groups (VLAGs) or directly through the CARE Sub Office in Polonnaruwa. Initially CARE worked through partner organisations active in selected villages of Polonnaruwa.

As the project progressed, the DLAG was set up to increase the communities' access to support

mechanisms and help them look at gender based violence from a broader perspective. This broader view understood gender based violence as being triggered or aggravated by socio-economic issues and poor accessibility to essential services.

The tensions, frustrations, helplessness to influence systems that are not sufficiently responsive to the acute needs of families could find an outlet as gender based violence: GBV could also take the form of criminal acts.

Whatever form it took, GBV was essentially a result of how gender power relations (GPR) were operational in the communities and within families.

The DLAG, TF and CG understood cases of domestic violence from this dimension and helped address the issues by finding options for economic problems and improving access to services such as schools, legal assistance and appropriate medical care.



Understanding the slander and silence

Although the project approach was sensitive to discuss the issues of GPR within the priorities of the traditional value systems and was keen to promote it as a means of enriching family unity rather than pose undue threats to the family unit, the implementation of the project was an uphill task.

Gender discourse was new to Polonnaruwa, an area dotted with ancient ruins, which are a physical reminder of the inherited value systems that defines the culture and life styles of the native communities of the area. The traditional value systems have clearly defined roles and responsibilities for women and men and place men at the helm of decision making hierarchy within families and in the society.

While acceptance and submission to the male hierarchy is expected of women, social expectations of the men as being capable of meeting their leadership role and fulfilling their families' economic and social needs are also equally high.

Addressing gender power related violence required discussion and dialogue on these sensitive traditional value systems and recognition of the changing social roles of men and women.

In addition, the current socio-political dialogue of the more recent times has found INGOs a convenient peg on which blame for many social issues could be hung.

Discussing a topic as sensitive as gender power related violence with rural communities in an area such as Polonnaruwa was a challenge that CARE Sri Lanka had to learn to deal with caution and subtlety.

The sensitive and broader perspective with which CARE approached the issue enabled the local state authorities to align with the project and become actively involved in it through the CG and TF.

It is in this backdrop that the CG requested CARE to work in the village of Nelum to improve the quality of life of the community through the

In an area where the discourse on gender is unfamiliar, what you do first in decreasing the rate of violence against women?

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Think before you turn to next page. What are the short comings of the CARE organization?

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reduction of gender power related violence.

Implementation of the project at ground level was carried out by the DLAG: Two members of the DLAG were appointed as the coordinators at community level. It was with much enthusiasm that the DLAG representatives entered the village.

According to Jayani, DLAG representative and its current president, "We were totally unprepared for the hostility and resistance shown by of some of the community members, mostly men." Initially they put it down to narrow male chauvinism.

Such male resistance to gender discourse was not uncommon and the DLAG and CARE expected this to gradually reduce as is the usual case. However as work progressed and Jayani

together with a few enthusiastic women opinion leaders of the community worked towards forming a VLAG, they realised that the resistance was not solely on a gender bias, but that it had a socio-political dimension to it.



CARE was accused of spreading 'western views harmful to traditional values systems of the country and thereby working to fulfil western and neo-colonial agendas. An implied and sometimes openly mentioned accusation was also that CARE was an organisation that worked to promote terrorism in the country.

Slinging such accusations and insinuations at INGOs is not an uncommon happening in the current socio political dialogue and the project implementers chose to ignore it. However, in the village of Nelum where a political group keen on gaining political mileage took an adamant stand against the project and labelled it as 'an INGO initiated western agenda that

aimed at destroying the family unit of Sri Lankan communities’.

“No matter what – we will continue with the project” is the determination arrived at by provincial CARE action group without properly considering their basic mistakes. They identified the hostility of by a group of villagers only as a hindrance to their work.

Two years later, in retrospect,

Jayani says “We made the first mistake. When we first went to the village, we identified the project as an initiative taken by CARE Sri Lanka. We should have used our own identity.” DLAG members are drawn from local NGOs in the district and have been working with communities of other villages implementing livelihood support and similar projects. Later, the DLAG and the VLAG of Nelum tried hard to rectify the error by highlighting theirs and the community’s control over the project but it was not easy to retrace the wrong move. It was more so difficult because identifying the project as a concern of CARE was not the first mistake.

It was the second.

The first mistake CARE made was to initiate work in the village of Nelum without adequate baseline



study, which would have highlighted the complex power dimensions in the village, including those of politically aspiring groups. In its enthusiasm to promote the project approach the CG requested not only for CARE to work in the village of Nelum but also to develop it as a model village of harmonious gender power relationships.

Part of the funding given to the CG was diverted for this purpose. The strong support of the GA and the DS of Polonnaruwa, which are the highest state decision makers of the district, seems to have influenced CARE to by-pass the essential step of carrying out a baseline study and situational analysis of a village prior to initiating a project.

CARE and the DLAG were not aware of the political elements active in the village and the power dynamics that they could influence. In addition, sufficient time does not seem to have been spent on awareness raising and giving the



Understanding the slander and silence

community the time and space to familiarise themselves with the theme. The project had not proactively created space for discussion and debate on the issues of gender power relations: When the debate did happen, it came in the form of accusations and criticism.

Oblivious to these initial

mistakes CARE

and the DLAG

seems to have

noticed only the

reaction of the

resistant groups

in the

community,

resulting in

identifying them as a hindrance to the

progress of the project. "We will somehow

carryout the project" was the determined spirit

of the DLAG and CARE.



The determination is commendable but the lack of understanding of the complexity of issues, regrettable.

Two years after the project started working in Nelum, a VLAG has been formed, its members (all women) are aware of the resistance, hostility and the reticence with which their group is regarded in the village. The VLAG seems to be in open competition with the groups that oppose their work in the village. The

construction of a community hall, initiated by the VLAG to rally support and recognition for the VLAG and its purported services, stands half completed for the lack of funds: the VLAG has not been successful in raising funds from the community to complete the hall.

A new year festival organised by the VLAG with the support of CARE was conducted in April 2008 to build bridges with the opposing group and their supporters but has ended with a trail of criticisms, accusations and slander which is



often  
communcated  
through  
whispers  
or in  
informal  
chats  
and  
occasionally  
spoken  
outright

in disputes among families or community members. Early signs of community disharmony created/aggravated by the process of forming the VLAG to deal with gender based violence in Nelum are visible by 2008.

Understanding the slander and silence

When the VLAG members, Frieda, Ranga, Amali, Leela and others meet Jayani, their guide and adviser at Frieda's house for the regular VLAG meeting they often end up talking about the adverse comments a community member had made against one of them

individually or at their group:



Sometimes it is a comment to discourage the VLAG women leaders from gaining leadership in another society of the village which traditionally has had a senior male leadership.

"We have gained recognition in the village. We can stand up to them and challenge their leadership;" Ranga says proudly. "We have to try and get leadership for women in the other village societies too. Then they cannot put us women down;"

The others nod their heads in agreement. Leela is puzzled. When she joined the group she had no idea that this would take the form of a power tussle between the males and females of the village. She does not feel that there is a

competition for power between the men and women of the village. Therefore Ranga's comment puzzles her. 'Are we in competition with the men? Can we do this? The males are part of our families? Is there a better way to make women more powerful?' Leela silently wonders. She dares not speak out.

She fears an outburst by Ranga or an admonishing by Jayani who often reminds the group that women are as strong as men and they should not allow any impediment stand in their way of family harmony. Leela feels that what Jayani says and what Ranga and Frieda strongly support are often paradoxical:

They profess to enhance the harmony of the families and the community by reducing gender power related

What is the/ your reason for working for the prevention of violence against women? Is it to compete with men or due to the anger towards men?

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Understanding the slander and silence

violence. Yet they say and do things that could create disharmony in the families and increase disputes in the village. Leela, however, does not question them. She does not feel she is competent to challenge their views.

She is only a member who joined the VLAG because she felt that they had a positive aim and yes, there were many gaps that a mechanism that is sensitive to the myriad of issues faced by wives, mothers, sisters and single mothers and women of the village could help resolve.

Leela looks at Amali, a member of the VLAG and a young mother who recently divorced from her husband due to his misconduct.

Yes, the VLAG had stood by her and helped her through the difficult times and gave her strength not only to face life again. Amali is still upset over the break up of her family and the many adverse comments she sometimes had to suffer due to the conduct of her husband. But the VLAG members have helped her re-gain confidence in herself that now she wants to resolutely work towards a better future for her children.

There are many women who silently bear the beating and harsh words of the men of their families. Some women dare to speak out against the heavy use of alcohol or gambling. Added to these are other burdens of economic difficulties, not finding the necessary support for their children's education or not being able to find appropriate jobs for their young sons and daughters, the legal issues over land and many other matters that trouble their minds.

They look to their husbands or fathers as heads of their households to resolve these issues: When the issues remain unresolved the mere mention of it could trigger off a quarrel. Amali feels that there should be a place for women and even men to come together and discuss these challenges to their families. When Jayani and the officials of CARE Sri Lanka came to the village, they spoke of other villages which had successfully set up village level groups that sensitively and subtly looks into these family-based disputes and help resolve issues which reduce disputes family quarrels and beatings. They said that secrecy would be maintained about who sought the assistance of the village level support group.

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On listening to them Leela had hoped that this service could be acquired while ensuring the dignity of the women who needed assistance to keep their family intact or muster courage to face the challenges that they had to face in their family life. Leela had several friends and relatives in the village who she wanted to help. At times she too would need such assistance, Leela had thought with relief.



Now, sitting as a member of the VLAG, Leela listens to the strong comments of Ranga, Frieda, Amali and others and wonders where that promised sensitivity and dignity is. The members of the VLAG face many adverse comments that the other women in the community do not want to identify themselves with the group, leave alone bring their personal worries and issues of domestic violence to be resolved with the assistance of the VLAG.

Within the past two years the only case they helped resolve was that of Amali's after which she joined the group to support the cause. True, several of the VLAG members have become strong leaders and have gained leadership in some of the other village societies as well. They are able to speak in front of a public audience and they have developed some contacts with the police and other service providers.

Some leaders have attended two or three training programmes and are able to discuss the context of gender power relations drawing from many arguments..... Yet, are they really sensitive to the environment that they live in? Are they sensitive enough to the fact that their open challenge to the existing power groups has created an

A person in this association working for the prevention of the violence against women tells you that much resistance exists due to the ignorance. What are your views on this?

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unnecessary competition with these groups?

Leela's train of thoughts is disturbed. Ranga is asking for her views on how to overcome the opposition to the VLAG from the "*the ignorant men and women who do not see the value of its service.*" Leela is disturbed by the use of the word 'ignorant' to describe those who resist the VLAG's work. "Perhaps we too have been wrong. Aren't we ignorant of ....." Leela begins hesitantly but is cut short by the enthusiastic protests of others. 'Haven't we given them enough time to understand what we are doing? They just don't want us to improve the position of women. No. More than that, it is that political group. They have a wrong idea of the INGO and are just being silly about the whole issue.... They said this that day... they said that...." Slanders made against the project and its implementers are repeated again and again.

Leela looks at Mayuri who has come to the meeting late. They share a silent nod of unspoken agreement. Leela slowly stands up and excuses herself. She has to run home to prepare the lunch before her husband finishes

his brick making for the day and comes in for his lunch. She does not give this as the reason for her early departure. She says that she has to fetch her youngest son from the school. Yes, she will go to the school and then she will hurry home to prepare the lunch.

If Leela or others sharing her views had a chance to speak and if they were supported in articulating what they wished to say, perhaps they would have shared some recommendations such as these:

- Ask direct assistance of CARE to complete the community hall that VLAG has failed to complete. The half built community hall should not continue to stand as a reminder of the VLAG's failure. If the community hall is somehow constructed, other village societies too will start using it and this could be a starting point for VLAG to build bridges with the other societies of the village.

If Leela and those who think like her had an opportunity to speak, what would they say?

The half built community hall epitomizes the failure of the association

- Retrace a few steps in the discussion about gender power related violence and allow the men and women of the community to express their views on how they feel about this issue and how they wish to be

helped. The men and women or even the older children could discuss and understand for themselves the positive aspects of their family and community relationships and what needs improvement. If there is openly expressed recognition for the family unit and the positive relationships that already exist, there would be greater willingness to discuss the gaps and issues that need to be resolved.

- Help everyone understand that this is a system that the community can implement with the assistance of the relevant local authorities and that CARE is only helping them to set up the process. Perhaps some men and women from other villages where the project has been successful in helping reduce gender power related

violence through sensitive intervention could come and talk with the men and women of Nelum. However, this should happen only after some initial dialogue has been started with those who are currently openly opposing the project.

We need to retreat a few steps in this discourse and first understand how the villagers think

- Above all, it is essential to talk with the opposing groups and actually find out the reasons for their resistance. They may have reasons that are not related to the project. Those who oppose may have personal or political agendas but it would be good to find out. It will be difficult to retrace the steps, swallow one's pride and initiate such discussion, but it could pave way for a healthy dialogue. If there is no open

We need to start a discourse with another village on this topic and learn from them

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competition with the existing and political power groups of the village the neutral majority would be more willing to interact with the VLAG.

- If CARE had better understanding of the many issues of the village it would help them to understand why some people in the opposing groups have power over many families in the village: why women who obviously need assistance of the VLAG are reluctant to develop contacts with them. Currently CARE and the project implementer as well as the VLAG are not fully aware of the power dynamics of the village.
- There must be a reason as to why the community of Nelum has a higher rate of violence than most other villages of Polonnaruwa. What are the social and economic and other location specific reasons that have contributed to this? Is it

It is very important to start a discussion with the opposing group

not essential to know this if the project aims to reduce the gender power related violence in the community?

CARE, the DLAG and the VLAG all need to understand and be sensitive to the particular issues that trigger off aggressive behaviours and violence of some/many community members because gendered or any other form of power dynamics would not act as a singular or an independent force: It would interact and often be interdependent on other forms of power bases.

- The VLAG is aware that the GA and the DS of Polonnaruwa are strong supporters of this project and that they

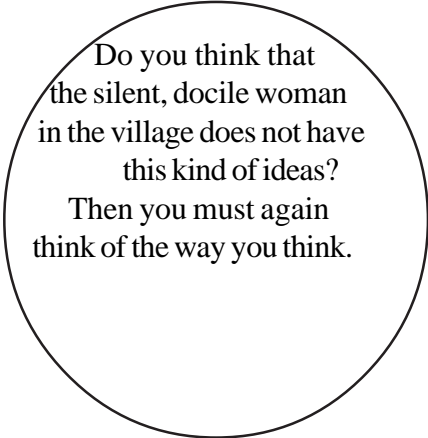
We need to incorporate the ideas of the ones who have opposing views.

What can we do without looking into the increase of violence in the village?

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are at the helm of the mechanism that is established to help reduce gender power related violence in the village. However, the VLAG does not have a direct link with this mechanism and do not feel the presence of this linkage in their work at community level. If there is such a high-powered link, should not this be visible in some form to the community so that they begin to recognise this as a local and state supported system rather than a foreign funded project?

If CARE feels that Leela or other women like her in the village cannot come up with such suggestions, please think again. The less vocal and the more silent members of a community will have valuable perceptions that they would not have the confidence to share with project staff. How such views are given voice is necessary a challenge to which a project must sensitively respond by building long term and trusting relationships with all groups in a community.



Do you think that the silent, docile woman in the village does not have this kind of ideas? Then you must again think of the way you think.

**(Footnotes)**

Please note that real names have not been used. Based on the observation of the VLAG of the village of Nelum during a field visit, a possible scene of a meeting is created to bring out the varying dynamics of the group and the project