



"I was worried when I heard that I had lost my job, but I was surprised to see my wife happily managing her own business by herself and supporting our family."

WOMENS DEVELOPMENT CENTRE

2020

NEWSLETTER



A YEAR OF RESILIENCE

The WDC marked the beginning of 2020, as always, with much anticipation and hope for a year that will continue the ripples of positive impact that have been flowing for nearly 40 years. With a committed team of individuals who brought with them their own experiences and a deep-felt responsibility to reach out to those in need, we were not quite ready to back down when things took an unexpected turn very early this year.

As the first effects of the Covid-19 outbreak reached the communities, the Women's Development Centre was quick to identify the areas that most affected the people; the little struggles that are perhaps normal to some, but carried colossal weight in the lives of some others – these did not go unnoticed to the hearts and minds of the WDC.

[continue reading on page 2](#)

REACHING OUT TO EMPOWER

Renuka Malkanthi is a 47-year-old widow, and mother of a 16-year-old boy child. Eight months ago, she was identified as a cancer patient.

"I earned Rs. 1,500 as a daily wage worker, due to my illness I was not able to continue working, I had to depend on my neighbors and a few relatives. During the Covid-19 lockdown I was desperate with my son.

Those who supported me before also could not help me during the curfew as they were also in a difficult situation. The grant received from Women's

Development Center was a great help and a blessing for me and my son to have a hope in our lives."

[continue reading on page 5](#)



A YEAR OF RESILIENCE

2020 was certainly not the year we expected it to be, all our plans had to change

continued from page 1

Weeks passed by, and the initial shock of the global pandemic eased into a daily struggle. The aftermath of the situation saw an increase in unemployment, violence and abuse against women, trauma and all things negative; but we were keen to be vessels that were ready to aid the increase of hope and positivity within the community.

Through commitment and teamwork, we were able to reach right into the depths of society to ensure that required assistance reached the right people. We were

able to assist women to start their own home businesses, find alternative methods of income that were less susceptible to be affected by disasters and even provide respite from abuse in their own homes.

The islandwide lockdown and travel restrictions left a serious dent in our outreach, especially when it came to the rehabilitation programs and the children's education. But the human spirit, they say, is stronger than anything that can happen to it, and so we adapted, we moulded into this difficult season and

we will continue to shape ourselves as required. We may change our way of working, but we will never back down from reaching out to those who need a helping hand.

2020 was certainly not the year we expected it to be – all our plans had to change – but it was undoubtedly the year that showed us that our resilience does not have to lie within our individual units, and that once we connect and remain focused on our goals, there is perhaps nothing that can stop us. We will continue to change, continue to impact and continue to create new waves that will only cause greater ripples of positivity.

This year's newsletter presents a snapshot of how we continued to work in perhaps one of the toughest years the organization has faced, and how our work helped different segments of the community.

We hope this edition will encourage you as you read it, to reach out and make a positive change wherever you may be.

A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR



First and foremost, I am very grateful to everyone who has been with us during the most challenging and trying time of our lives. When I look back at this year, it amazes me as to how we have come through a year filled with so many obstacles as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges we have faced in working with people, especially women who have gone through so much physical and psychological trauma during this period. Despite the loss and hopelessness, I am so inspired at the resilience shown by the women we work with. While hardships were faced there were also some positives that came along with the pandemic including the strengthening of family structures, innovative income generation efforts, such as home gardening, minimum spending and overall appreciation and value given to a woman's role within a family.

As we come to an end of another strategic period and initiate a new strategic direction it has become evident that we have shown increased progress despite the country's situation through overcoming improbable challenges and making a difference in peoples' lives. The pandemic situation is the biggest challenge we have faced since the 2004 Tsunami, affecting us personally and at an organizational level. Incidents of violence against women and children drastically increased particularly during the past 10 months, and the loss of jobs and livelihoods, collapse of businesses and especially collapse of the tourism industry and export industry were some of the major effects experienced during this period.

The WDC has been working towards addressing these issues through a gender sensitive lens as evident through this narrative with many targets achieved through the work of WDC and its partners. We are yet to overcome many challenging tasks ahead of us in addressing the underlying effects resulting from the pandemic. However, with our committed and driven workforce we will continue to be a strong movement for change, striving towards reaching our ultimate vision of creating an inclusive society that respects gender equality.

I wish you all good health, hope and peace during this season and in the upcoming New Year.

Sashi Stephen



VOCATIONAL TRAINING TRANSFORMED

Ussaka Eshan Manohara was just one and a half years old when he was brought to the Women's Development Center for physical exercises. Later in 2002, when he was enrolled at our Kurunduwatta Center, we were able to notice various multiple disorders. These included speech problems, hearing loss, behavioral problems, difficulties in learning and daily work. Having assessed his situation, we gradually carried out rehabilitation work for Ussaka.

Continued reading on page 8



A woman collects a dry ration pack, distributed to low income households

GROWTH AMIDST A PANDEMIC



"I was worried when I lost my job, but I was surprised to see my wife happily managing her own business by herself"

Sagarika is a 29-year-old mother of two. Her family's only source of income was through her husband who was employed at a garment factory in Colombo. Due to long working hours and travel distance Sagarika's husband would occasionally visit home on his vacation. With her husband away, Sagarika had to bear full responsibility in taking care of her household including taking care of her ailing mother-in-law.

Being increasingly dependent on her husband's income, Sagarika found it difficult to manage the household. She was also facing difficulties with her mother-in-law, which

had impacted her marriage negatively.

Looking for support, Sagarika approached the field staff on the Rajarata Praja Kendraya (RPK) and joined the community group.

At first it was not an easy feat for her as both her husband and mother-in-law disapproved of her going out and involving herself outside her household. However, she took on the challenge and began attending group meetings and actively involving herself. She was able to participate at trainings conducted through the project and prepared a business plan for a curd-making venture.

She started small scale preparing only 25 - 30 curd pots per day and selling it to villagers. With her acquired confidence, Sagarika soon began to supply 50 - 75 pots per day to a regular buyer.

In April 2020, her husband

returned home after losing his job due to the COVID - 19 pandemic.

"I was so happy when he returned home, because I couldn't handle my business by myself. I even had orders during the lockdown. Orders for my product keep increasing and now I supply 150 curd pots per day. However I faced issues in finding quality dairy and access to transport, which affected the running of my business. But with the support of my husband I can now reach my targets" - Sagarika

"I was worried when I lost my job, but I was surprised to see my wife happily managing her own business by herself and supporting our family. Now I'm very much involved in her business and support her whenever she needs me. I have also started to prepare our surrounding area at home to cultivate vegetables. We have also made plans to invest in a van with my gratuity fund in order to support our business. I am proud of my wife's achievements in saving our family" - Sagarika's Husband

This is only one success story resulting through the project. The learnings from this process will support WDC and RPK future endeavours to serve many women like Sagarika.



REACHING OUT TO EMPOWER

[continued from page 1](#)

It was a difficult task for Malkanthi to come to the WDC office in order to collect the grant, so the WDC sent one of our staff members to hand over the grant.

"I needed to buy some medicine from a pharmacy as they are not available at the hospital clinic, so I spent some money to buy medicines and rations for our food and other essential needs. This grant is just like a drop of water we found when we were in a desert."

The WDC works in Sri Lanka to promote women's empowerment and support people through a rights-based approach. Although our staff have many years of experience between them, both about the work and the areas we work in, nothing quite prepared us for the Covid-19 repercussions.

The WDC has been working in 13 districts helping

provide emergency support to those in need. We have been helping families with disabled members, as well as those who cannot work now.

Carers have also been helped as they have been left particularly vulnerable due to the virus as they have to endure double the burden, having to look after people but also deal with mounting medical costs and little or no way to pay them.

Supporting women-headed households is also part of our emergency support agenda as women are having to take on a multitude of extra burdens during this time. Daily wage earners are also susceptible to Covid-19 impacts as they have no savings to fall back on.

Another often overlooked group is commercial sex workers who are not being supported and have fallen

through many aid gaps, WDC is doing what they can to support them also.

If women are not empowered it affects the whole family. When women are empowered we have seen that it helps to protect the family and communities. In communities where WDC works in, women have voluntarily been involved in preventing the spread of Covid-19 as well as providing assistance in tackling domestic violence.

Again, all of this crucial work is being done at a social distance whenever possible.





Mother of two, Udeni, begins her day with the usual cup of tea for her family and proceeds as she tends to her family and her home garden consisting of pepper and passion fruit. Her husband and children join in to help her. She is empowered, valued, respected and enjoys a healthy family life now. Udeni's story would have been different had she not taken the small step of joining one of WDC's Self Help Groups (SHGs).

A resident of Delthota, Udeni was identified by one of the SHG facilitators during a field visit to form Self Help Groups. Initially, she was reluctant to join a group due to family pressure and restrictions. Udeni was also being abused, both physically and psychologically by her husband who was a heavy smoker and drinker. The Facilitator however was

determined and continued to pursue Udeni to join the village groups. Finally, Udeni agreed to join the group, attending the meetings when her husband was away. It served as a respite for her, amidst the family troubles. Udeni was even humiliated by her husband when she was appointed as the group leader, as per the practice of rotational leadership within the group. This 10-women group grew in skills as they all learned to manage family finances, reduce waste and increase savings. Udeni's husband soon saw the benefits of the meetings and endorsed her to attend them. Things were not all rosy however, as Udeni still had to endure abuse at home.

Having established five groups within the division of Kirawanaketiya, the next stage was to form Cluster Level

Organisations (CLAs). Two members from each group were selected for a special volunteer training in order to finally establish a women's federation in Delthota. Udeni was amongst those selected for the five-day training. At the training she received knowledge and awareness on a variety of topics, with one of them being home management.

Having learned a little bit about successfully managing a household, Udeni began to practice what she learned within her home. When her husband came home under the influence of alcohol and began shouting at her, she remained calm. The next morning, she would talk to him about the previous night and try to make him understand. She sent him off to work with pleasant gestures in a traditional way every morning. Initially her husband took little notice of it, but after a couple of weeks he began to respond and show affection towards Udeni, slowly realising that alcohol was the cause of his aggressiveness. He promised to gradually stop his drinking habits and not

VISION OF A SELF-SUSTAINED VILLAGE

cause any more trouble to her and the children.

Udeni's story is just a small one in our vision to create change and empower women. These small groups truly do bring together women, educate them and strengthen them to make their voices heard. The process of supporting women to rise slowly is through engaging women

cultivation and consumption. They even have livestock and a good supply of milk. Most often, the entire family has a part to play in the cultivation and farming, which includes paddy, potatoes, maize, kurahan and other vegetables. There are, however, some misconceptions and practices that have pushed back the people's progress and wellbeing in this area.



and educating them to be an advocate to others and their peer groups.

Watapanduragama is a beautiful place in Deltota, abounding with natural resources. The land is fertile and there is no shortage of water for

Despite a sufficient supply of fresh milk by farmers in the village, almost all families purchase milk powder from the local store for their consumption. They have been led to believe that fresh milk increases illness and causes leprosy. Furthermore, instead

of supporting each other within the village, they actually sell the best part of their crop at a low price and purchase vegetables from the market for their consumption. There is also a shortage of variety in crops, which could easily be changed to include a bigger range. The farmers also spend a great deal on fertilizers when in fact, they have all they need to make fertilizer for organic farming.

As part of the solution to the issues the village of Kolabissa, in Watapandurugama, is facing, they have been advised to hold a fair every week that would allow the women to buy vegetables and fruits for the week. The village also has a farmer pool which is available for cultivation advice. This group however, is made up of men only. But after the training provided through SHGs, women have been encouraged and enabled to apply for representation in the Farmer's Association in 2021. Our hope is that their inclusion will bring forth a difference in the way the village works, and undoubtedly a better one.

We see the Kolabissa village as one that could easily be self-sufficient, a network that can easily supply and use resources available within the village. Our goal is to educate and encourage women to rise up and create change, to make a positive impact in the community they live in.

VOCATIONAL TRAINING TRANSFORMED



As a result of the rehabilitation, in 2011 we were able to enable him admission to Year 2 at the Giriulla Maha Vidyalyaya. With our constant supervision and intervention throughout the years, we were able to provide Ussaka the necessary facilities to sit for the GCE (O / L) examination in 2017. He achieved a simple pass in history, enabling him to win his right to education through this.

Meanwhile, Ussaka was also trained in basic activities including making paper bags, rug making and envelope production. As a result, he was transferred to the Kurunduwatta Vocational



Training Center in 2018 and received about a year and a half of training in carpentry. However, it was clear that he was more interested in doing mechanical work. Therefore, from 2020 up to now, he has been happily training in a three-wheeler garage in the Sinhapitiya area in Gampola. His only hope in the future is to work in a garage.

In addition, he was able to obtain a driver's license in 2020, winning further rights. Having being allowed to be accompanied by someone else for the practical test due to his hearing impairment and not having to sit for the theory exam due to excelling in the practicals were notable situations.

In addition to the rehabilitation of this child, the parents were referred for counseling through our head office. Ussaka is

currently carrying out his daily activities independently and is enjoys spending time with family members.

Much like the story of Ussaka the CBR programmes has witnessed many success stories throughout its 25 years of experience.



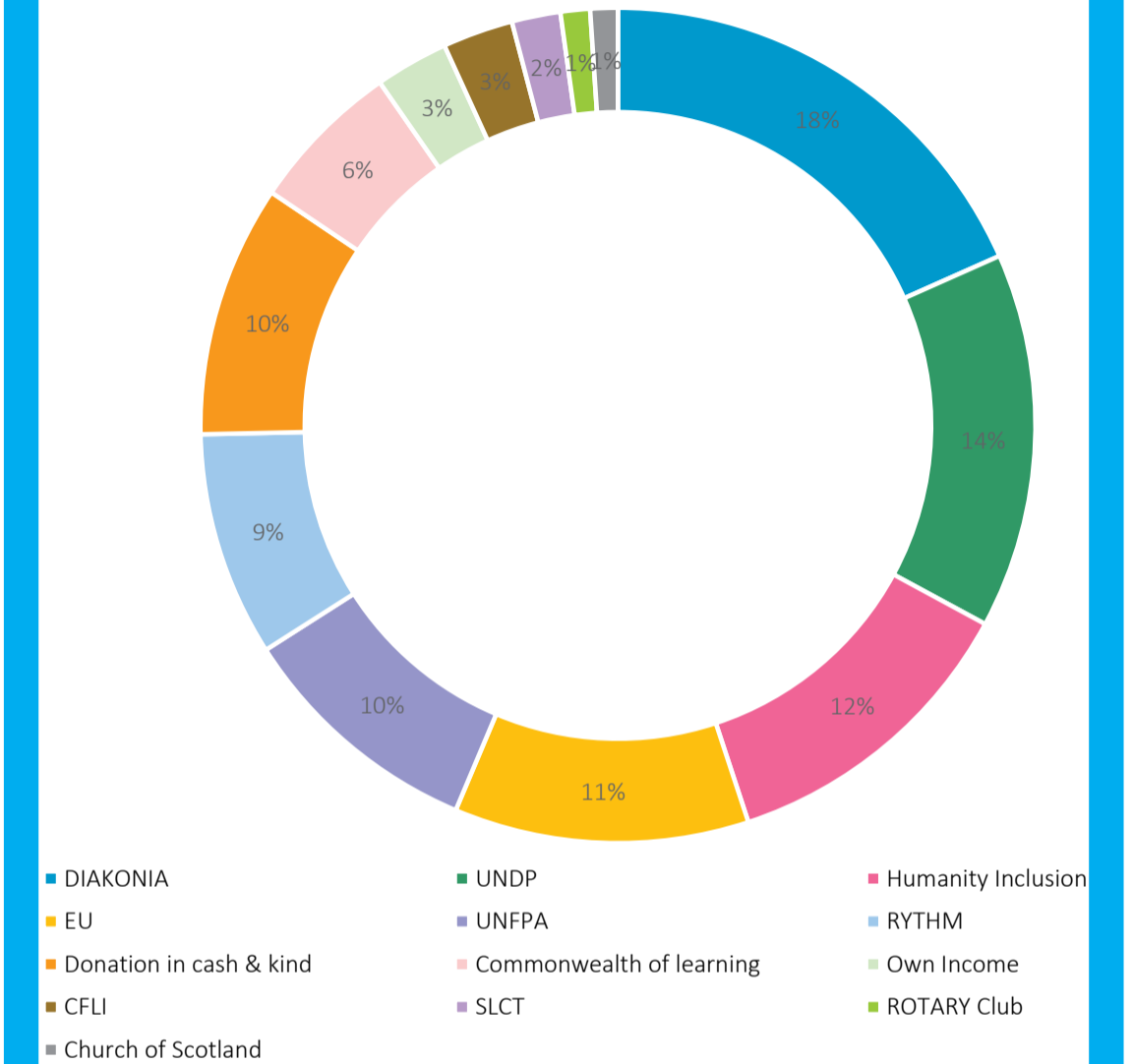
The Sahana Vocational Training Centre (VTC) and hostel in Ampitiya has continued to capacitate and support youth with disabilities in exercising their right to employment, however with the emergence of COVID-19 all activities were interrupted.

With the closure of all schools the VTC too was closed and children were sent back home provided with homework in order to continue their

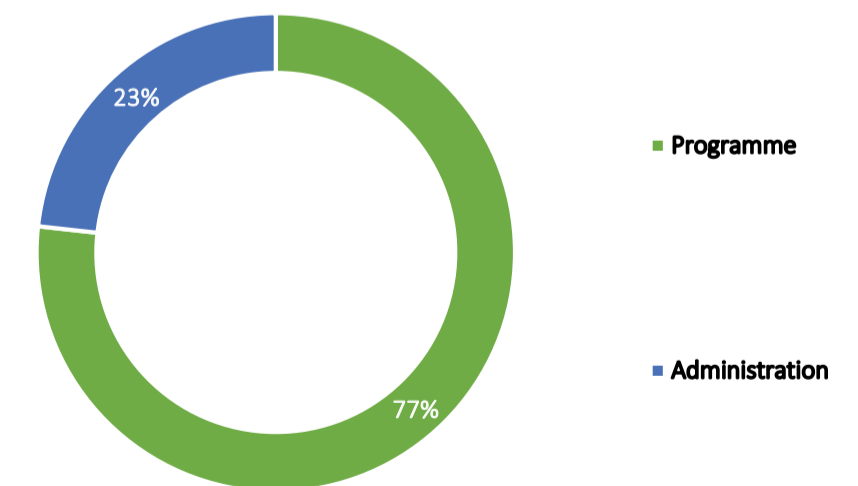
rehabilitation process. It was decided that the centre be transformed into a temporary shelter due to the increased SGBV referrals made to the WDC during the pandemic. In order to ensure the protection of residents at the shelter all referrals made through the probation, police and courts were sent to the VTC where they were quarantined for 14 days before being sent to the shelter.

We were able to provide food, accommodation, vocational training and healthcare to all those who were quarantined. It should also be noted that all babies born at the Centre during this period were healthy and devoid of any complications. We initially received some opposition regarding the capacity of the VTC in providing refuge and facilities for ordinary girls. However this was successfully dissipated when we started to show positive results in providing services. This proved to be a valuable learning experience for VTC staff who gained confidence in handling such situations.

2020 FUND ALLOCATION



Expenditure Proportion



THE TEAM'S VERSATILITY

As we battled through the lockdowns and travel restrictions to continue our work, the committed and dedicated staff of the Women's Development Centre were no exception to the effects of the pandemic. Though that may sound



negative, there were in fact quite a lot of positives that shone through.

The knowledge we acquired as staff of the WDC, from gender equality, governance, environment justice to women political participation, trickling down to how we manage home, decision making in a crisis, waste management etc. came in good use and we were all able to use them practically, reducing any struggles of spending

extended time indoors. We were also able to focus more on the use of local resources, to grow vegetables and fruits and make use of the medicinal values of some plants that grew right in our gardens!

The lockdown made many of us realize how busy our lives actually were and being confined to our homes for such a long period meant we were able to spend plenty of time with our family and our loved ones. Some of us realized that there were things that we overlooked, certain responsibilities that we had failed to fulfil and how much we enjoyed spending quality time with our family. Most of our workforce spent their free time talking to their family, sharing experiences and life stories. These



times and stories would no doubt be remembered long after, perhaps passed from generation to generation. Some were able to look into the needs of their elders more closely and ensure they had all they required. Few others were able to launch DIY projects and see them to completion – painting their house, building a piece of furniture or even landscaping their gardens.

Working together as a family also emphasized the role of gender equality and the immense contribution that women make. There was new-found appreciation for the differing roles played by the woman – cooking, cleaning, checking up on children's schoolwork and gardening amongst others. Being able to share



these tasks with the rest of the family enabled them to understand both the importance and the hard work and time that goes into these chores.

The most novel experience for most of our staff was working from home. The WDC has always been a very hands-on organization, with people constantly in the field. The travel restrictions and countrywide lockdown however meant that whatever we did while in office or out in the field, had to continue within the four walls of the house. Our traditional working methods were not sufficient to meet this demand and we were accelerated towards big changes to make things happen.

Our staff started getting familiar with technology, using the mobile phone for more than just taking a call. We started to connect

virtually through WhatsApp, and other online platforms that allowed us to convene virtually. We connected with those who were in need of assistance and used the online space to exchange information and disperse advice and aid. Even those who did not have internet connectivity did their best by connecting through calls.

Most of our staff were also able to use their experience and knowledge to intervene in issues that arose in their neighborhood. This also raised awareness on the value of the working woman and we realized that there was a newfound respect for her.

When we were finally able to return to our office, we met each other with great appreciation, anticipation and love and this time, instead of exchanging flower plants, we were exchanging vegetables,

seeds and fruits and plants that were of much use. As a team, we even redid our garden space at the office changing it from flowers to herbs, fruits and vegetable plants and started reusing disposed containers to grow plants.

It would be untrue to say all was good during this time – each of us faced our share of grief as we battled through the worries of the pandemic as well as loss of life and other hardships that ensued. Our strength and hope in a better future though, keeps us going each day.

We would all agree that the



lockdown due to Covid-19 did much good to our family life and our work life – as staff, we learned a lot by exchanging useful information and perhaps it is fair to say that not seeing each other for a long time did build our love and appreciation for one another!

TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE GROWTH



With the beginning of the new decade came new goals for Sthree. We had seen the true potential of the store with the introduction of the café and wanted to continue to keep improving so that growth could be achieved systematically throughout the next five years.

The first step towards this was conducting market research, followed by the development of a business plan for Sthree and then following through the plan with an effective marketing strategy. To achieve this we had marketing experts and volunteers conduct surveys and questionnaires for the general public to understand who Sthree would predominantly cater to. However, despite our best intentions, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to resort to other alternatives in order to sustain the Sthree store.

Sthree is built on entrepreneurs that are sustained through the store, and many of the women entrepreneurs depended on their income from the sales. The most affected groups in Sri Lanka were daily wage earners, women-headed households and micro scale entrepreneurs. It was clear to us that we needed to work more towards supporting entrepreneurs and providing the necessary resources to engage and develop their respective businesses. That is exactly what we did. We partnered with organizations

and likeminded enterprises such as Their Future Today, The Heartbeat Centre, UNDP and Simply Unique who supported our cause by bringing business to entrepreneurs who had lost their main source of income. Links were established through WDC volunteers who referred likeminded organizations and individuals towards investing in our cause. Masks, sanitary sets, saree bags and sanitizer pouches were some of the items that were most in demand. We also had a generous donation of portable loom machines which are used at the production center to help with the rehabilitation of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence at the WDC shelter.

Complementary to that, the SLCDF and Diakonia also helped us in setting up a production center for entrepreneurs. This centre provides entrepreneurs access



to tools and equipment that they could otherwise not afford, helping them continue their businesses at ease from the production standpoint. This work-friendly space provides a place for them to produce their handicraft as well as value-added food products.

With the halt in international tourism, we also realized that it would be a good time to shift our focus on catering to the local market more than before. To this end we launched the Tea Tasting experience at Sthree. With this launch, we also conducted a training programme for residents of the shelter, teaching them how to set up and present the tea. Our hope is to provide these girls an avenue for possible work in the future, with exposure to the service industry at the café.

This year also allowed us to conduct several training programs for entrepreneurs, to help them hone their skills and broaden their product range. An Advanced Shoe-making workshop was conducted with a national-level shoemaker who helped interested entrepreneurs improve their skills and learn more about the art. Our intention was to enable them to be more educated and engaged in the production of shoes.

Selected entrepreneurs were taught more about crocheting, with relevant training paired with upcycling skills. We were also able to conduct a training



programme on packaging their items to improve their presentation and attract customers.

The lack of tourists meant there was a lot of excess fruits especially rhubarb and strawberry targeted to the export market and tourism industry especially in the Nuwara Eliya region. We supported them to turn their produce into other by-products such as jam and chutney. Despite the lockdown we found windows of opportunities to do trainings in Nuwara Eliya and Kandy. A tie-dye batik training was also conducted for new entrepreneurs who wanted to start out their own businesses.

All trainings were conducted in small groups of 5-6 individuals and most women who participated were already engaged in similar productions. Our hope was that the training we disseminated

would help them expand and improve their businesses. Furthermore, most of the trainers were sourced from the Sthree entrepreneur society, thus improving their source of income.

Entrepreneurs who were heavily affected by COVID-19 were supported with tailor made trainings, online tutorials (via YouTube), startup packs for entrepreneurs, and support systems for entrepreneurs to build on their businesses by providing technological and information know how.

Through this array of programmes designed specifically for entrepreneurs during this pandemic, we at WDC aim to create resilient entrepreneurs who are capable of sustaining their businesses through trying times, while successfully earning an income to support themselves and their families.

TURNING TO TECH FOR EDUCATION

The Covid-19 outbreak initially caused a breakdown in education for many children at the WDC shelter as well as students at the Community Based Rehabilitation Centres. As a remedy to the issue, WDC introduced an online education system to children who had the necessary facilities with the support of their parents. This initiative was taken in spite of challenges staff face with using technology. It was certainly an achievement to note that parents took this as a positive initiative and supported the process to reach the expected outcomes.

However, there were also recipients who did not have the technical facilities to avail the above services and we utilised the postal services to reach them. During times when the postal network was also inactive there were delays in sending children the necessary information.

Despite all the difficulties, we continued to develop skills and capabilities to combat issues that arose in the community by the social development projects.

We did our best to ensure the

education of the girls at the shelter was without interruption. The WDC also had to look into ways of countering the inactivity of centers and field rehabilitation in the Community Based Rehabilitation Program, as this was hampering the development of the children. We once again turned to modern technology, navigating our way through many obstacles, and enabled children to continue their rehabilitation activities through WhatsApp and other social media platforms to reach as many as possible with a lot of support from their parents.

As an institution, it is a great achievement for us to have been able to create a positive impact in people's lives, in spite of the challenging times that were brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Daisy was orphaned at a very young age and had to work at different houses to get by. As a result of this, she was harassed and went through severe hardships. After being notified by neighbours, the Probation Officers were finally able to step in and take custody of her. She was then referred to the WDC through the courts.

Being timid in her manner, Daisy was gradually encouraged to focus on her education while at the shelter. As there were no Tamil schools close to the shelter, she was sent to the Sinhala medium school nearby. Here she learned Sinhala and started to slowly excel

EMPOWERING TO INTEGRATE

in her studies. Her reading and communication skills improved, as did her social skills. Daisy was unable to get through her Ordinary Level examinations, but showed a lot of interest in various crafts that were being taught at the shelter. Throughout the year, Daisy continued to work on her needlework skills and learned much about food preparation and preservation. She was a leader amongst her peers and even trained other girls in singing and dancing for festivals and other special events at the shelter.

When it was time for her to reconnect with society, as a young girl, she didn't have much choice in pursuing a career locally so she opted to seek employment as a migrant worker in the Middle East. With the support of the staff and management at WDC, she was able to successfully secure employment overseas and made preparations for her journey. Her vacations back in Sri Lanka were spent at the shelter as she did not have any other family. Daisy was very careful with her earnings and would use her savings

wisely. She was now stable in her thinking and lifestyle and had overcome the burdened life of her childhood.

Daisy's story shows us how important education and life skills are. The WDC has always placed great value on teaching such skills, enabling young girls to easily reenter society as independent and valuable citizens.

An entrepreneur of Sthree in her workshop proudly displaying her handcrafted jewelry



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We are very grateful for those who have supported us in an individual basis in cash/kind. Though we have not mentioned your names individually, we are very much thankful for your valuable contribution in achieving our goals as an organisation serving the socially marginalized.