

Centre for Equality and Justice with the support of the High Commission of Canada and Muslim Women Development Trust (MWDT), held a Policy Dialogue in Puttalam on 6th March 2024. This Call-to-Action document has been compiled based on recommendations by diverse stakeholders that participated, including 50 CSO activists, government officials including Child Rights Promotion Officers, Women Development Officers, Probation Officers, and Legal Officers attached to the Legal Aid Commission, Counsellors, and Marriage Registrars in the Puttalam district.

Centre for Equality and Justice along with the above stakeholders call upon relevant authorities to address the following;

Language barrier in accessing services

- Ensure language accessibility in accessing public services, particularly for victim-survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), by implementing multilingual support systems in all service institutions.
- Advocate for the documentation of police complaints and official records in multiple languages, especially in the language that the complaint was made to facilitate effective communication and documentation of incidents.
- Campaign for the allocation of sufficient resources and training for public service personnel to address language barriers and provide inclusive services to all community members regardless of the language they speak.
- Lobby for the establishment of language-specific support mechanisms in healthcare facilities, ensuring multilingual instructions and staff training to effectively communicate with patients from diverse language backgrounds.
- Monitor the implementation of language policies to identify gaps and areas for improvement, and advocate for continuous efforts to address language barriers and ensure equal access to services for all.
- Empower communities to assert their rights to language access and demand fair treatment in accessing public services, including legal action against instances of discrimination or exclusion based on language.

Family and socio-cultural dynamics leading to SGBV

- Increase efforts to combat child abuse and SGBV within the district, particularly abuse perpetrated by fathers against their daughters, by prioritizing early detection

and intervention, and ensuring that that victim-survivors feel empowered and equipped to report such abuse, despite cultural taboos and stigmas.

- Address the vulnerability of women exacerbated by the absence of male family members and combat discrimination stemming from entrenched cultural norms and practices.
- Address the prevalence of child pregnancies, particularly in high-risk areas like Kalpitiya, by implementing targeted reproductive health education and support programs.
- Take targeted steps to better engage men in domestic conflict resolution by implementing outreach programs to address the barriers in their participation in support services.
- Harness the potential of social media as a tool to support vulnerable women, while also identifying and preventing its dual impact on vulnerable communities, particularly female-headed households by promoting safe online spaces and digital literacy resources.
- Advocate for improved reporting mechanisms and support services to empower victim-survivors to seek assistance from law enforcement agencies and access legal assistance.
- Prioritize the protection of women with disabilities by implementing specialized support services and raising awareness about their vulnerability to violence and abuse.
- Address the alarming rate of violence against women as evidenced by last year's statistics, including reported murders, domestic violence incidents, and cases of sexual abuse against both women and children, by implementing targeted intervention and prevention strategies.
- Address the correlation between increased substance abuse and incidence of SGBV within the district.

Economic Challenges

- Take immediate action to address the barriers hindering girls' access to higher education caused by spillover effects of the economic crisis, thereby empowering them to pursue higher educational aspirations without resorting to early marriage.
- Advocate for measures to combat abuse perpetrated by Microcredit Companies against rural women.
- Address workplace abuse experienced by women by providing avenues for reporting and addressing such incidents regardless of the perpetrator's position or affiliation.
- Recognize the link between SGBV incidence and financial dependence among rural women.

- Allocate additional resources and support to address the surge in SGBV incidents resulting from the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lack of mechanisms and resources to address SGBV

- Address the shortage of government officials equipped to handle SGBV cases, service the need for substantial resources, and refine the roles and responsibilities of government officials.
- Improve access to facilities for reporting and addressing Cyber Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (CSGBV) occurring in rural regions by decentralizing investigations and providing resources to regional Cyber Crimes Units.
- Reactivate the local level SGBV network that has been inactive for an extended period. Introduce Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) in schools across Sri Lanka to ensure holistic education on sexual and reproductive health.
- Establish an effective devolved mechanism to receive and investigate complaints of Cyber Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (CSGBV).
- Strengthen linkages with stakeholders and serve as a referral point for issues related to SGBV, directing them to relevant authorities such as local government officials.
- Encourage local women's organizations to inform and empower women to seek legal assistance when facing injustice.
- Advocate for dedicated officers specializing in addressing issues of SGBV in every police station, proficient in all national languages for effective communication with diverse communities, especially women and children.
- Increase awareness among government officials on SGBV and ensure they are better equipped to address and respond to SGBV effectively.
- Expand safe houses and other facilities for women, either through the empowerment of existing organizations and partners such as the Legal Aid Commission, Sri Lanka Red Cross, ICRC, Grama Niladhari Divisions, or, the establishment of new one partners and organizations.

Lack of awareness on SGBV and methods to combat the same:

- Raise awareness among women victim-survivors about their legal rights and protections to better protect themselves against SGBV.
- Enhance awareness on legal remedies available through Legal Aid Centres and encourage stakeholders to inform women of the services offered by the Legal Aid Commission, as well as facilitate legal awareness programs within the Legal Aid Commission.
- Provide entrepreneurial skills training for women victims of SGBV through cooperative societies, focusing on national and international marketing techniques.

- Support men facing financial difficulties to prevent incidents of SGBV perpetrated against women, through community discussions and assistance programs.
- Mobilize communities of women and girls to organize themselves and be aware of available support services.
- Advocate for increased government investment in establishing permanent safe houses for victim-survivors of SGBV in the Puttalam district.
- Establish a coordinated platform for government and non-government organisations to address SGBV against women and children.
- Foster economic empowerment of women through self-help groups and provide alternate avenues for reporting SGBV incidents and accessing assistance as women are hesitant to report SGBV incidents to public authorities.