



UNN PROGRAMMING/ PARTNERSHIPS

An innovative approach to gender equity in Sri Lanka



HOW NUTRITION-BASED
COORDINATION TACKLES CULTURAL
TABOOS AND EMPOWERS WOMEN

Tale 17

From December 2018 to March 2020, the World Food Program (WFP), part of the UN Network (UNN) in Sri Lanka, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), joined forces to launch the Community Health Advanced through Nutrition and Gender Equality project (CHANGE). The program aims to achieve gender equality and women’s empowerment through improved nutrition, food security, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), and access to health services. Six districts with a total of 8,000 participants took part, thanks to funding from the Danish Government.

Integration across sectors was central to the project design. “This was the first time the issues were connected in a way that was evident to participants,” explains Sarah Soysa, National Programme Analyst for UNFPA. “In the past, nutrition was dealt separately from gender-based violence, Sexual and Reproductive Health, etc. For example, the handbook changed for mother support groups (MSGs), one of the main components of the program. Training changed as well to make the explicit connection between how poor nutrition could affect a pregnancy; how gender-based violence could affect someone’s mental health,” she adds.



Lakmini Perera, a gender programme officer at WFP, agrees that one of the project's main achievements was collaboration. "Materials, partners and conversations around gender [were cross-pollinated]. It was also new for the government to collaborate across sectors – gender, health, and nutrition." This kind of model presents opportunities for a multiplier effect.

Innovative aspects of this program abound. A mobile phone application (app) was developed to track progress. Videos were made for 9th graders, designed to be shown to both boys and girls, during a class on life skills. Finally, cooking demonstrations were held with an added twist, (described below).

A new app for mother support groups

Originally, these groups were formed through a collaborative project between WFP and UNFPA to raise awareness on nutrition, with the potential to address more sensitive issues like SRH and gender inequities. As many as 1,250 MSGs meet regularly in six districts, and the programme touched on many of these during 'Training of Trainers' sessions that targeted medical officers and other community volunteers in 78 Ministry of Health areas.

To keep track of the frequency of MSG meetings as well as who is leading the discussion and what topics they covered, an app was developed. "Note-taking on meetings was not systematic," Sarah reflects. She elaborates by explaining that, "the app acts as a monitoring tool to put everything in one place. Pictures and stories can be uploaded. It helps groups connect with other groups. On a national level, program managers can access data, [and] see the progress in topics."

Still in its infancy, trainings on how to use the app had begun just before the COVID-19 pandemic shut the country down.

Videos that model new gender norms

Lakmini anticipates that the most valuable tools for participants will be the video series for schools, developed for the CHANGE programme. Two social and behaviour change communication (SBCC) videos have been produced in local languages. The series is based on life skills and incorporates nutrition as well as SRH, addressing topics such as puberty, menstruation and positive body image, to name a few.

“In the videos, we model a boy talking to the girl about some of these taboo subjects, to normalize these kinds of discussions,” says Lakmini. “It comes with a teacher’s guide to make sure the right messages are shared. We don’t have sex education [as part of the curriculum], so teachers don’t usually touch on these sensitive issues. Pending approval by the Ministry of Education and other government agencies, we think this series will be a useful tool, especially concerning gender norms and inequities.”



The videos also feature a section on ‘making healthy food choices’. The importance of consuming nutrient-dense food during adolescence is explained, emphasizing that healthy food choices ensure better concentration and productivity. It also touches on the long-term effects on immunity levels, obesity and noncommunicable diseases (NCDs). Another section reviews the benefits of being physically active.



UNFPA and WFP Country Representatives during a joint field visit for the CHANGE programme
UNFPA Sri Lanka

Multipurpose cooking demonstrations

Cooking demonstrations, led by WFP, started with food, but encompassed broader issues of gender equity. “The trend towards buying unhealthy, processed foods has been growing in impoverished communities. So, one purpose was to talk about the nutritional value of some of these foods, such as biscuits, [which are not healthy] and to promote healthier alternatives. Not only to mothers but also community leaders. The demonstrations bridge this knowledge gap,” Sarah clarifies and also help to build confidence among participants.

From there, topics extended to more delicate areas around decision-making in households. *How do families decide what to cook and serve? Where should various seeds be planted? Why do women serve the food but eat last? Who gets second helpings at the family table?*

Taboo topics, such as menstruation, were also touched on in these demonstrations, which aimed to include men in the conversation. The sessions functioned as a 'Training of Trainers'; group leaders from the MSGs were invited, along with midwives and health inspectors. Cooking techniques as well as these sensitive conversations would then go back to communities with the participants.

Looking towards the future: Phase 2

Both organizations, WFP and UNFPA, would like to build on the achievements of Phase 1 in another 18-month project cycle, especially after the first phase was interrupted by elections and COVID-19. Here are some of the goals they would like to incorporate, including those that will help the programme reach out to other sectors.

Climate resiliency

With increased frequency and severity of flooding, landslides and droughts, creating more resilient communities in the face of climate change is high on their list. Cooking demonstrations and other outreach materials will advocate for nutrition-sensitive agriculture, including the production and consumption of drought-tolerant varieties that are rich in micronutrients and locally available. Furthermore, Phase 2 could provide opportunities to promote biodiversity, including neglected and underutilized species, recognizing that the nutrient composition of different crop varieties can vary dramatically.



Bringing more men into the fold

The program provides a platform to actively engage men and boys to become advocates to tackle gender disparities related to nutrition and change discriminatory practices and behaviours. Scaling up this activity will encourage male participation in a more meaningful and systematic manner. “We’ve largely worked with mother support groups, and as a result, there was some involvement of men, but it was minimal. We would like to run a second phase where more men are engaged,” says Lakmini.

Involving youth

The desired Phase 2 will have a stronger focus on school-age children – both boys and girls – receiving the Life Skills Programme. A participatory approach will be used to ensure their input feeds into the development of project materials, thereby helping to maximize the prospects for the desired change.

A new approach to gender-based violence

The program officers are also looking forward to piloting behaviour change communication techniques to address this pressing issue in Sri Lanka.

Improving the nutritional status of girls, adolescents and women is a win-win situation. Innovative programs, like CHANGE, enable girls to perform better in school and boost their lifetime earnings, which further supports gender equality and women's empowerment. The collaboration between WFP and UNFPA in Sri Lanka puts gender equality front and center and has the potential to halt the intergenerational cycle of malnutrition. Incorporating metrics to measure nutritional impact will be key to guide future efforts and impart learning to other countries.

Watch this short video to learn more about the CHANGE programme in Sri Lanka:
<https://youtu.be/cQGnIENE1LA>.