



# Adolescent psychosocial wellbeing in the post conflict context of Sri Lanka

## Summary country report: stage 1

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# 1 Introduction

This summary report describes the first phase of fieldwork from the Sri Lanka component of a two-country study undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (UK), The Good Practice Group (Sri Lanka) and The Carter Center (Liberia) with the support from the ReBUILD Consortium, a research partnership funded by the UK Department for International Development. The study was initiated and designed by Fiona Samuels (project lead) and Nicola Jones of ODI, and the methodology was developed in conjunction with the two country teams. This document summarises the phase 1 Sri Lanka report prepared by the country leads, Kusala Wettasinghe and Sarala Emmanuel, and presents the findings from fieldwork<sup>1</sup>.

The overall objective of this research study was to consider whether current services and other responses for dealing with mental health and psychosocial problems experienced by adolescent girls in post-conflict settings, are sufficiently informed by context, gender and socio-cultural norms. The premise of the study was that services that do not consider these factors inadequately in dealing with post-conflict needs of primarily adolescent girls may even exacerbate discriminatory social norms and practices that they face. It is hoped that findings from this study will help inform programme and service delivery mechanisms as well as policy-makers on the appropriate/sensitive approaches to dealing with psychosocial stresses and issues of mental health among adolescents in post-conflict situations.

In the first phase of this study, the main objective was to map adolescents and adults perceptions of well-being and factors that have an impact on adolescent well-being. It also aimed to understand the nature of services available for adolescents at ground-level. A second phase that is to follow will look at how formal approaches for providing support for adolescent well-being can be strengthened and tailored to take into account the longer-term psychosocial needs of adolescent girls in post-conflict settings. It will also look at the gaps that need to be bridged in current human resourcing. The study primarily considers the psychosocial well-being of adolescent girls, drawing comparisons with the situations of boys where it impacts directly on girls' well-being. Phase one of this study was carried out in two villages of Sri Lanka: Diyagama in the Polonnaruwa District, North Central Province, and Kadalkiramam in the Batticaloa District, Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, in December 2013 and January 2014.

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<sup>1</sup> Fieldwork for the research reported on in here was carried out by Kusala Wettasinghe, Sarala Emmanuel, Fiona Samuels, Sivaprashanthi Thambaiah and Indrani Rajendran, with logistical assistance from Eastern Self Reliant Community Awakening Organization, Jatheen Athara Sahayogitha Sangwardena Kamituwa and Pulathisie Community Development Organization. The contributions of adolescents and adults who participated in the study are gratefully acknowledged. This summary report was prepared with assistance from Zainab Ibrahim.

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## 2 Methodology

A secondary data review was conducted as well as primary data collection that made use of seven research tools: In-depth interviews with adolescent girls and boys, in-depth case studies with young women, focus group discussions with adolescents, focus group discussions with parents, community meetings with older people, inter-generational trios and key informant interviews.

A purposive sample was selected with the assistance of local partner organisations in both locations. Phase one engaged with 60 adolescents (38 boys and 22 girls between the ages of 14-19 years) and 65 adults, in both locations. The adolescents included those who were going to school and those who had dropped out, those who were married and unmarried, working and non-working. Parents included mothers and fathers between the ages of 35 and 55 years of adolescents and/or younger/older children. Community elders included those who were residents of the two areas, between the ages of 55-70 years, and those who have faced crises such as experiences of armed conflict and the tsunami of 2004 that affected the area. The inter-generational trios, in each village, included three sets of three generations – grandmother, mother, daughter and one set of grandfather, father and son. The granddaughters and grandsons were adolescents between the ages of 14-19 years. Key informants included service providers at ground level, community level, divisional and district level:

- **Ground level:** Grama Sevaka (GS), Family Health Worker (midwife attached to the MOH office), School Principal;
- **Community level:** leaders of Community Based Organisations (Women’s Society, Rural Development Society, other key CBOs), community religious leaders, youth leaders, traditional healers (if available);
- **Divisional / District level:** Medical Officers of Health (MOH), Medical Officer for Mental Health (MOMH) (if available), Probation Officer (PO), Child Rights Promotion Officer (CRPO), NGO representatives

There were three main limitations to this study: Adolescents recollections of war were limited as it was conducted 4 years after the end of armed conflict, and the climax of war experiences in the two districts under study ended even before that in 2007. This made pre and post-war comparisons of adolescents’ experiences, limited. Instead, descriptions of war-time experiences are derived primarily from adults. Secondly, there were silences maintained around certain topics, and it was decided that it would be more sensitive to not probe as it may cause emotional distress or affect their coping mechanisms. Thirdly, the tight timeframe and difficulties in scheduling/rescheduling appointments affected participation by some service providers and community members.

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# 3 Locations of the Study

The field interviews for this research were conducted in Diyagama<sup>2</sup> in the Polonnaruwa District and in Kadalkiramam<sup>3</sup> in the Batticaloa District. These locations were purposively selected as post-war communities and because the communities had pre-existing relationships with reputed community organizations who could support the research process as well as follow up with any serious concerns that came out through the research in terms of security and risks for the participating adolescents.

According to the Sri Lanka Human Development Report (2012), income poverty in the Polonnaruwa District had come down from 12.7% in 2006-07 to 5.8% in 2009-10. Polonnaruwa had a Human Development Index and Gender Inequality index rank of 9, and the report noted that it was a comparatively better off district, but there needed to be continuous attention on development processes.

**Diyagama** is situated in the Welikande DS division which borders the Batticaloa district to the East and Trincomalee District to the north. Due to its sharing a border with Thoppigala forest in Batticaloa, an LTTE<sup>4</sup> stronghold until 2006, the villages of Welikande have often been caught in the middle of various encounters. Diyagama has a population of 640 and 150 households which are predominantly Sinhala Buddhist.

Diyagama is a settlement of the Mahaweli Development Programme<sup>5</sup>. According to community elders, people had been living in nearby villages from as far back as 1956 and these early settlements had mixed ethnic groups with Sinhala and Tamil families sharing the same neighbourhood. However, when settlements were started under the Mahaveli Scheme, in the 1970s, they were divided into ethnic specific communities and resettled in separate villages. From 1988 to 1990, families were brought to Diyagama mainly from the Central and Sabaragamuwa provinces.

**Kadalkiramam** is in the North of Batticaloa District and is situated within the Koralaipattu DS division. Traditionally a fishing village and located close to the main access road to Batticaloa, it has easy access to services. Its population of 2,464<sup>6</sup> is majority Tamil. In terms of development indicators, according to the Sri Lanka Human Development Report 2012, Batticaloa District is among the three lowest ranked districts with regard to the Human Development Index and the Gender Inequality Index. Income poverty had increased from 10.7% in 2006/7 to 20.3% in 2009/10. According to the poverty head count index, Batticaloa district had the highest level of poverty in the country (20.3%) and also in terms of the poverty gap index, which was 5.1 (compared to a national average of 1.7)<sup>7</sup>.

Educational achievements for primary and secondary grades were lower in both Batticaloa and Polonnaruwa when compared to the national average. G.C.E. A/L achievement was 7.9% in Polonnaruwa, and 8.0% in Batticaloa, in comparison with a national average of 12.3%. The country average for attainment of university degrees or higher was 2.7% while it was 2.3% in Batticaloa and 1.3% in Polonnaruwa (Population Atlas, Department of Census and Statistics, 2012). According to the National Human Development Report (NHDR) 2014<sup>8</sup>, only 55% of the survey respondents in Batticaloa had completed secondary education (passed their GCE O/L examination).

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2 Pseudonym used to protect privacy of the community.

3 As above

4 Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, the separatist militant movement that engaged in a brutal conflict with the Sri Lankan state for 3 decades

5 The Mahaweli Development Programme was Sri Lanka's largest physical and human resource development project, initiated in 1970 and 'accelerated' in 1977 for hydropower generation, irrigation and agriculture. The project also entailed the relocation of mainly Sinhala settlers to cultivate the newly irrigated land (Werellagama et al. 2004).

6 Divisional Secretariat data accessed in 2014

7 This does not include several conflict affected districts in the North of Sri Lanka.

8 National Human Development Report 2014, UNDP Sri Lanka.

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Experiences of war/armed conflict are in the social narratives of both the villages selected. Diyagama saw some degree of conflict from the Southern JVP Leftist insurrections of 1971 and 1988-1989, and LTTE terrorism post 1983. At different points the community of Diyagama faced restrictions on mobility, disruptions to public services including healthcare, lived in fear of attacks, and suffered acts of violence. Kadalkiramam has always been in a high security area with large military camps and has a history of child recruitment during the war years by the LTTE and the breakaway Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) since 2004. As such, it also has a history of several child rights organisations working in the area.

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# 4 Defining psychosocial well-being through the well-being framework

Psychosocial wellbeing of adolescent boys and girls in the studied communities are discussed under seven domains, based on the framework developed by PADHI<sup>9</sup>. These domains are: 1) access to resources; 2) building social connections; 3) sustaining close relationships; 4) exercising participation/agency; 5) experiencing self worth; 6) enjoying spiritual wellbeing; 7) enhancing physical and mental wellness and security.

This study explored adolescents perceptions of well-being within these seven domains, and then looked at their actual situations of well-being, drawing on their own experiences as well as those of their parents, grandparents, other community elders and key informants. Data on how adolescents perceived well-being were generated by asking participating boys and girls in each location to think of a person doing well and a person not doing well, and without divulging details of the persons, discuss features from that person's life that indicated well-being and ill-being respectively.

The markers of well-being that adolescents in both areas identified were related to supportive families and school environments, positive social interactions, personal behaviours that were seen as socially or culturally acceptable and therefore positive, economic stability, a sense of self-worth and confidence, having religious or spiritual experiences, and taking initiative for one's own self-development.

*“My mother is the closest person to me...she is very affectionate towards me...she teaches me good norms and virtues and also the things which we should not do. She had warned me not to talk with elder brothers<sup>10</sup>, not to stay here and there in the village, and also not to go anywhere without telling her.”* (Girl 17, Diyagama)

*“I want to study and become a judge. ....My uncle and grandmother will support me.... My uncle wants me to do science. He told me to study to be a doctor. I told him if a doctor has a problem he has to come to the courts.”* – (Girl 15, Kadalkiramam).

The markers of ill-being included disruptive family relationships, negative social interactions which include keeping 'unsuitable/bad' company as well as poor social relationships, socially unacceptable/inappropriate conduct, unhealthy personal habits, being isolated, withdrawn, angry, apathetic or unhappy, having poor self-esteem, and economic difficulties.

*“Parents love their sons more than the daughters and whatever they ask they try their best to fulfill those. There are some boys who are being spoiled because of too much affection of their parents.”* (Girl 17, Diyagama).

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9 PADHI. 2009. A Tool A Guide and a Framework: Introduction to a psychosocial approach to development. Colombo: Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre, University of Colombo. Psychosocial Assessment of Development and Humanitarian Interventions (PADHI) was set up in 2006 as a two year programme under Social Policy Analysis and Research Centre (SPARC) affiliated to the University of Colombo.

10 Elder brothers – refers to older boys in the community, following the conventional practice of addressing/referring to people in the community through a relationship;

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*“I started volleyball at the age of 13...I have played volleyball, elle<sup>11</sup>, cricket and I was on the school team...I can run well...I got selected for the music competition too. After I attained age [reached menarche] they did not allow me to come to the road, I was not allowed to go to church, I only went to school and I stayed at home, They did not allow me to go for tuition, they did not allow me to go anywhere...”* (Girl 18, Kadalkiramam)

An interesting point to note is that adolescents seemed to take on the responsibility for their own well-being, either through pro-actively seeking positive relationships or experiences, or actively avoiding what is seen as negative behaviour.

*For my sister I have to build assets...I have to look after my parents...I want to build that (local) temple...that is my dream.”* (Adolescent boy, Kalkudah)

There were also gendered differences in the indicators, which will be discussed later. Further, interviewees in individual and group discussions pointed to early marriage as a problem, but adolescent boys and girls did not identify it as a marker of ill-being in this exercise to map out indicators.

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<sup>11</sup> A local team sport played in Sri Lanka



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# 5 Exploring experiences of adolescent well-being

Experiences of adolescent well-being were explored within the framework of the seven domains of psychosocial well-being, against the markers of well-being and ill-being as identified by adolescents from both villages.

## 5.1 Access to Resources

- **Education**

Access to education was valued in principle by both adults and adolescents spoken to in this study, but its translation into practice varied due to structural and other factors. Most students in the study locations – as much as two thirds of those enrolled in Grade one in Kadalkiramam - dropped out just before or after the GCE Ordinary Level examination.

The majority of adolescent girls said that their families encouraged them to study, but this changed when other issues and concerns cropped up. Socio-economic factors, poverty, parents' lack of formal education and their tolerance for children dropping out, all result in an environment in which pursuing an education becomes easily de-prioritized. These factors also work in combination with social concerns such as parents wanting to arrange marriages for teenage daughters, especially in cases where their daughters have begun an intimate relationship. Continued schooling was generally not considered an option for adolescent girls who eloped. In both villages families also defined a girl's future well-being in terms of a good marriage, rather than an education. Therefore the primary consideration is to protect her chances of a 'good' marriage, even if that means stopping her education to marry early. Some adolescent girls dropped out of school if they felt that pursuing an education in the face of hardship was too much of an effort and would not add any material benefit to their lives. Marriage was seen as an obvious next step for girls who drop out of school, which also reduced adolescent girls' interest in pursuing an education. In Kadalkiramam during the war, there was a practice of arranging marriages for adolescent boys because this prevented forced recruitment by militant groups. This practice stopped with the end of the war.

For some adolescents a determination to pursue an education and achieve academic success and employment, was sustained by at least one or more members of their family believing in and supporting them. This support can often be linked to other members of the family also being educated. It is also important to consider structural factors such as schools being within accessible distance and having access to school materials.

For adolescent boys, disruption in education stemmed from employment and earning at a young age due to poverty, and the chance to learn more immediately marketable skills. Together with their parents' lack of an education, these factors de-prioritised schooling to meet other needs, similar to girls. In some cases parents took boys out of school and sent them away for employment if their conduct in the community was problematic or to prevent them from associating with bad company.

Both boys and girls identified that a few supportive or harsh teachers stand out as influencing their attitudes towards the school environment.

- **Access to economic opportunities and assets**

Most adolescents wanted a 'good job' with a 'good salary' and were also not always keen on traditional livelihoods. But this was impeded by their lack of education as explained above. Adults expressed a desire for

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good vocational training opportunities closer to the villages and at affordable costs. The general perception was that, not having anything to keep mostly adolescent boys occupied, they fell into bad company and habits. Vocational training opportunities for girls' is more restricted than for boys and families are reluctant to send girls far from home. For girls who want to pursue very specific or non-traditional careers, this could be problematic. But despite the lack of vocational training services for girls, neither parents, nor key informants nor adolescent girls identified this as a concern. The growth of the tourism industry especially in the East has opened up employment opportunities for young people, but there is less enthusiasm to send girls to work in hotels due to a perceived link between girls working in hotels and prostitution. Some adolescent girls who drop out of school work in garment factories or nearby plantations, at semi-skilled or unskilled levels, earning low salaries. Some adolescent girls are also at risk of being coerced into migrant employment by foreign employment agencies, which is illegal under the age of 18. Employment for girls however is viewed as a temporary measure, enabling them to buy jewellery, furniture and electronic items that will make up their dowries for their marriages. This is a vicious cycle because not having a dowry places girls at risk of violence or other abuse by their future husband and/or his family. For adolescent wives who have been abandoned, sometimes with children, their motivation was to meet daily expenses and some depend on alms to support themselves and their children.

The Government has some vocational training services through the 'Gemi Diriya' apparatus that offers young people training in programmes such as beauty culture, mechanic work, masonry and computer related skills. These, however seem to be under utilized.

Economic assets of adolescent boys and girls follow clear gendered stereotypes. Movable property for boys is mostly vehicles, and for girls it is usually jewellery, furniture, electronic household items. Inheritance of land/immovable assets are also gendered and influenced by strong cultural and traditional practices specific to the location. It is also tied to practices of dowry for girls, with a daughter's inheritance sometimes determining how 'well' she marries and the lack of it causing family disputes.

- **Access to health services**

A proactive primary healthcare system is available for adolescent girls, and in both study locations has been important in keeping the rate of teenage pregnancies low. One of the main reasons is the Family Health Worker (midwife) outreach network that is attached to the offices of the MOH. They visit relevant households and provide advice on contraception, on pre and ante natal care, they hold clinics in the community for new mothers, and promote vaccination of infants. They also provide awareness of sexual and reproductive health and the negative impact of teenage pregnancies.

Another concern raised through this study is attempted suicides by adolescent girls in both areas, though official numbers are not available. Some of the reasons given are the break-up of intimate relationships resulting in a sense of shame and stigma, as well as difficulties in their family lives and resulting physical and emotional trauma. In Kadalkiramam there appeared to be a system of support for one adolescent girl in the study, who said she had access to a children's crisis centre through a youth club and the Probation Officer of the area. She also had the support of friends and teachers.

- **Access to transport services**

Poor transport facilities linking the two villages to neighbouring areas and towns, affects adolescent girls mobility and access to services outside the village. Girls are largely dependent on public transport unlike adolescent boys who can and are allowed to independently use other modes of travel such as bicycles and motor cycles.

- **Access to spaces for creativity**

Most of the spaces for adolescents to express their creativity are within schools but adolescents with talents who have dropped out of the school network rarely have other spaces to participate and explore their talents. For adolescents who want to pursue and develop their talents, opportunities such as training courses in dance, theatre etc, are limited, with some instructors finding it unprofitable to travel long distances to teach students in these areas. There are however more opportunities, through cultural festivals, in Kadalkiramam, especially for boys with some starting their own drama groups.

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Cultural influences affect adolescent girls' participation in sports activities in community playgrounds, although they may participate in school. Even if there were public playgrounds, it is possible that restrictions would still apply due to concerns over girls' attire and conduct in public.

## 5.2 Building Social Connections

There are several gendered values in the way adolescent girls are socialised that affect their ability to make social connections outside their immediate kinship and friend circles. The social connections that adolescent girls are allowed to have, are also tied to perceptions of boys and their behaviour. Boys are often criticized for what is generalised as 'bad' behaviour. The advice given to girls, often from puberty onwards, is to tell them to have minimum interactions with men and boys outside their circle of family, friends and selected neighbours. The idea is instilled in the minds of girls that they need to take extreme precaution when in the company of men and boys, and so they grow up with the idea that they need to be protected from the opposite sex. For girls this also means that their value and reputation as 'good' girls is linked to the distance they maintain from boys/men.

Girls interviewed for this study expressed some contradictory sentiments, on the one hand upholding these traditional values, but on the other questioning some restrictions on girls' mobility. This disconnect indicates perhaps that some girls think independently but deliberately restrict their social interactions. The premise for many adolescent girls in this study was that social acceptability depended on her being a 'good girl' rather than having wide social interactions. Being 'good' was also linked to not talking too much, a view that was also held across some inter-generational discussions with mothers and grandmothers. Girls' mobility is also often restricted to school, tuition classes, close relatives and friends, further affecting adolescent girls' ability to develop other positive social linkages. However, many adolescent girls and boys valued their closest friends highly, especially because some had strained relationships with parents and siblings.

Therefore, restrictive personal attitudes and notions of respectability, together with limits on mobility, combine to affect how adolescent girls make and keep friends, establish social connections and access support through these connections, for their own protection and well-being. The study looks at two different cases of adolescent girls who live in the same neighbourhood and have faced adversity, though of different kinds (see Box 1). One girl expanded her social circle and drew strength from it (Sulakshi), while the other deliberately restricted her social networks (Devi). One key difference in the two girls' lives was that the former had caring, close relationships in her life despite adversity, while the other did not, and held on instead to notions of maintaining her respectability. In terms of psychosocial support services, this indicates a greater effort needs to be made to reach out to adolescent girls who live within self-imposed restrictive boundaries.

### Box 1: Restricting vs expanding social networks

#### Devi's family status

Devi's mother and father separated and her mother migrated for work several years ago. She left her two daughters at her sister's. The two girls, Devi and her older sister faced many difficulties at their aunt's house. When her aunt ill-treated and neglected them, a neighbourhood elderly woman distantly related to Devi's family, took them in. Devi calls her ammamma (grandmother) and identifies her as the only person she trusts. Ammamma figures as the most important person in Devi's mind. Her relationship with her sister is also strained and she openly says she does not like mother. Devi spends the daytime at ammamma's house and nighttime at ammamma's daughter's house. Devi's mother has now returned to Sri

#### Sulakshi's status

Sulakshi's father died recently. She and her mother live on their own, close to her grandma's house. Her brother is a fisher. Her brother and sister are married and are living in the neighbourhood.

Sulakshi's responses to questions on her social interactions:

*"Closet person is Amma. I go to friend's house or we all go to the library; We do not go to Pasikudah; I go to Batticaloa for tuition class; I am good at sports, drama, I do everything; Cemetery? We go, my father died...on special occasions we go; I go to the temple, sweep the temple ground; From the children's club we go for*

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Lanka but Devi refuses to live with her. There are indications that Devi fears ostracizing by the community because of her mother's conduct, of which either Devi does not fully know or does not speak.

Devi's responses to questions on her social interactions were noticeably brief, answered only in short phrases.

*"I do not go anywhere; only school and tuition class (tuition class is at the school); I do not go to church. I pray at home; I do not go to friends' houses; At home we study at 6 p.m. eat and sleep; Saturday and Sunday, at home after tuition; I do not read story books (reads only educational books that grandma buys); I know Paskiudah but do not go there; I do not know where my friends go; I do not play; Once I did a dance performance in another school. Only I was trained. That teacher is not in the school now.*

*Ammamma is the closest, after that no one. I do not like amma (mother);*

*I do not go anywhere (because) people will talk (saying) that girl goes everywhere".*

*shramadana; There are four temples, I go to all four;*

*When my father was sick I stayed at my friend's house to study for my O Level exam; When father died my friends told me to study well ...it happens to all and not think about it....*

*I like school, but not much because sir hits us when we make mistakes; I go to learn handicrafts at the centre.*

*I like friends. I have friends, four girls, three boys; I do not have best boyfriend but all three boys are friends; I have ammamma but do not like her. She scolds; Then there is machchal (sister in law) and siththy (mother's younger sister).*

*I have many people, some more here too, machahal, mami (aunt), next door akka (sister), my brother's child, sister's child, another machchal.*

*When I am at home I learn English, watch movies, mostly sleep;*

*When I was small I could go to all the houses. Now can't go everywhere because people say bad things.*

Adolescent boys are allowed higher mobility relative to girls, but some restrictions they face affect their social interactions as well: for instance, being compelled to stay indoors at night so as not to run into police patrols that chase away young boys who are out on the road. Boys' movements in the community during the daytime are also closely monitored by law enforcement, including the Civil Defence Forces. Adolescent boys and girls also saw youth and children's clubs as another way to maintain social connections.

### 5.3 Sustaining close relationships

Close relationships where they existed with one or both parents were sustained by a sense that children could speak to one or both of them without fear of being scolded or punished. Some adolescents in this study expressed a feeling of being simultaneously close with and disappointed in a parent/s, due to their behaviour, such as a father's drunkenness in the family or being punished by a parent. A similar reaction was seen, of feeling trust and annoyance simultaneously with grandparent/s.

Other adolescents felt isolated at home when parents and/or siblings did not appear to understand them or their hopes and ambitions. In some cases this emotional distance led to adolescents forming close relationships with outsiders. Although not necessarily inappropriate, this does highlight possible risks to girls if they are driven to unsafe associations with people who could take advantage of them.

Some adolescents reported having loving and supportive relationships with other family members in the event that one or both parents did not live with them, while several adolescents had contrasting experiences of ill-treatment and emotional trauma at various relatives' houses. While some adolescents coped by finding other safe places to live or forming other close relationships outside kinship circles, some continued to feel a sense of rejection at the loss of family bonds.

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This study underscored the importance of adolescents having some supportive characters in their lives, family or non-family that would accept them. This included supportive teachers. However as sometimes happens, if supportive teachers were transferred or left, disadvantaged adolescents found it difficult to replace their loss with other supportive links.

#### **5.4 Exercising participation and agency**

This looked at both formal and informal spaces for adolescents to exercise participation and agency in matters of importance to the community, and in their own lives.

In both locations, adolescents were still seen as ‘children’ even at 17-18 years of age who should behave deferentially to adults and only engage in affairs ‘appropriate to children’. Affecting participation and agency of adolescents is also linked to the inability of adults to see adolescents as having needs and capabilities different from younger children, and so they are often not responsive to adolescents’ need for independence, to express themselves on issues affecting their lives and their communities. Interestingly, the age after which opinions could be voiced more freely and were thought to carry some weight, was said to be around 25 and above, when they had gained more life experience.

Obedience is inculcated as a value and there is a tendency among adults to expect high levels of obedience especially from girls, in addition to desired gendered stereotypes such as not ‘talking too much’ and ‘behaving nicely.’ This also affects their self-confidence and has resulted in space for participation and social interaction, more so for girls, shrinking further. Negative personal and family experiences as well as severe restrictions on girls’ mobility and social interactions outside of school have also curtailed girls’ interests and ability to participate in decision making processes or make informed decisions. As such, adolescents’ presence in community decision-making was largely invisible, although they were participants in community activities such as school events or funerals.

Some adolescent leaders however feel that they have some space to negotiate on certain issues relevant to young people at community forums, based on the credibility they have built up over the years, or their family status. And particularly if they respect gendered and age related social parameters as well as, particularly for girls, obtaining permission from family to associate with friends and others. Some enablers to adolescent girls’ participation are: if girls are aware of or have information on services useful to the community, are respected for being educated, having good judgement and are active in children’s clubs and youth societies. Within these spaces however, adolescents, especially young girls, navigate the paradox of wanting individual agency with the restrictions that arise from expectations around their behaviours prevalent in the communities in which they live. Respecting the boundaries of social acceptability ensures they have social support and while it limits participation in some ways, it can paradoxically, also support it in other limited ways. An adolescent girl leader in Diyagama visited the community hall at least once in two weeks to assist in the Gemi Diriya community development programme, of which she was also the youth Community Resource Person (CRP). However she shared that “It is rarely I go to the community hall alone. I generally go with my mother.”

#### **Formal spaces for participation**

Youth societies exist in both areas and provide some structured space for young people. In Diyagama this included young people who had completed school. The activities of the youth group were mostly events based and did not actively promote young people’s voices in community decision making structures. Another collective space in Diyagama, mostly for children under ten years, was the Sunday (Dhamma) school. The children’s club in Diyagama is not functional. In contrast in Kadaliramam, which has a history of child rights organisations working there due to its particular political context as mentioned earlier, there has been a historical focus on child rights, psychosocial support and empowering children’s voices in the community. Therefore, children’s clubs often include adolescents and through these, children have become school leaders and are active in community child protection mechanisms such as the Civil Protection Group and the Village Child Rights Monitoring Committees. Their influences on some social issues are, however, limited, such as alcoholism of adolescents. Community children’s clubs here are also linked to divisional and district level federations and youth clubs. There are also study circles in some schools in both areas, but in practice this has

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proven to be more of a space for parent-teacher meetings, where weak educational achievements are criticised, and weak students sometimes feel embarrassed or humiliated.

In both places however, these spaces excluded adolescents who had made difficult life choices at a young age. For instance, boys and girls who dropped out of school, girls who were married who in turn also distanced themselves from spaces to interact with other children's/youth, and boys who had started work. Boys labelled 'bad' were also kept at a distance. However, there have been instances where children's clubs have worked with a local NGO to help school drop-outs return to formal education.

### **Informal spaces for participation**

Adolescents appear to have more agency to participate in informal spaces, such as among immediate and extended family, among friends and in the neighbourhood. For instance, adolescents have been able to raise an opinion about difficult parental behaviour, or voice their opinion to a relative, especially if they enjoy being a well-liked niece or nephew. The effectiveness of their voice may be limited, or their parents may advise them to not interfere in others affairs. Adolescents also advise friends on behaviour they think will get them in trouble or difficulty. Among girls this is often related to their friends starting love affairs and/or considering eloping. Some girls and boys have won the trust of their peers as someone they can talk to and will offer good advice.

## **5.5 Experiencing self-worth**

Most adolescents in both areas demonstrated a strong sense of self-worth as assessed by responses to questions on how well they liked themselves and what their positive qualities were. Many of the adolescents also demonstrated high levels of resilience in the face of very challenging circumstances and experiences. There were also a few who found it more difficult to challenge the negativity of their circumstances, or expressed conflicting feelings as to their confidence, self-worth or ability. Often these were adolescents who had suffered repeated humiliations at the hands of relatives, and lacked parental affection or the caring support of other adults in their lives in a consistent way. So although they have aspirations for a better life, this is coupled with feelings of low self-worth.

The most frequently mentioned positive quality by both adolescent boys and girls was 'being helpful to others.' This is because it indicates one's capabilities, in addition to helpfulness being highly valued in communities. A few positive qualities identified by adolescents reflected the prevalent gender stereotyping. For instance, talking politely and not too much, were seen as positive feminine qualities, and were mentioned by girls. This is in contrast to communication skills being mentioned by some boys as a positive feature and a marker of youth leadership. Boys also valued themselves on being able to avoid socially criticised behaviour such as drunkenness or smoking.

Another indicator of self-worth was that adolescents had aspirations for a better future. These often included having a good job, earning well and saving, building a house and looking after family. For boys this sometimes included being able to provide a suitable dowry for his sister so that she can marry 'well'. Unmarried adolescent girls aspired to hold jobs in the future, often teaching, but a few girls wanted non-traditional career choices that included being a judge, an air-stewardess and an actress. These girls also spoke with a determination to achieve their goals. Many adolescent girls who were married aspired to have their own house and educate their children. But unlike girls in school, often they did not feel they had the agency to achieve these aspirations without the support of her husband.

### **Enablers of and barriers to self-worth**

When adolescents had the space to participate in school or community events or showcase talents, it increased their sense of self-worth. The findings of this study showed that where children had the affection and support of at least one parent and/or one or two extended family members, adolescents were able to distinguish themselves as not being inevitably linked to adversity and feeling that they could have a better future. Some service providers such as the Department of Probations and the Children's Crisis Centre have also been useful in providing protection to children in crises situations and helping them to resume their education.

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In contrast, barriers to self-worth included remoteness of locations and the lack of forums for young people to use their skills or talents. The absence of an encouraging environment resulted at times in boys engaging in what is seen as unhealthy behaviour such as consuming alcohol and watching pornography. For girls, it further reduced their access to socially accepted spaces where they could form strong social bonds, which some adolescents identified as a strength.

Negative labelling of adolescent boys and girls was seen as eroding self worth. For instance, calling boys 'bad' because they roam freely around the village and tease girls, or saying girls have a 'bad character' for making social calls/visits to friends or relatives. Often the well-intended disciplining of boys is done insensitively with little regard for their self-esteem, and may include physical punishment or public humiliation.

## 5.6 Enjoying spiritual wellbeing

Religion plays a strong role in the life of both villages, with several Hindu and Buddhist temples and Christian churches established, including some historically revered sites. There are also traditional healers that some families depend on in addition to beliefs in traditional or folk Gods/Goddesses. There are also some shared deities and religious practices across both villages. The spiritual experiences of adolescents in these two communities were related to three main types of engagement. These include those who:

- **Closely identify with their family religion and maintain close ties with local places of worship**
- **Those who do not have significant religious convictions but participate in religious observances at places of worship for social interaction**
- **Those who do not believe in a particular religion but have their own understanding of right and wrong**

Most boys and girls interviewed fell into the first two categories, with two boys indicating the third. It is more common in Kadalkiramam for both boys and girls to regularly visit temples in the area than in Diyagama where more girls than boys engage in religious practices. For many young people, especially boys, participating in religious festivals and other events, is a form of social interaction. It is also common for adolescent boys to actively engage in organizing these events. In Diyagama for instance, the Devotees Council (Dayake Sabha) attached to the Buddhist temple organizes a fund-raising stall with the help of youth, to which families contribute. These religious and social community events were enjoyed by young people. In a few families parent/s had more liberal attitudes towards religion, discussing moral conduct through their understanding of right and wrong, rather than through religious teachings. This encouraged boys in these families to be guided by their own sense of good conduct and consider religious events mostly as spaces for social interaction.

There is increased post-war vigilance around the temples in Kadalkiramam, especially if boys congregate after dark. Adolescent boys have spoken of being scolded and chased away by police if they stay on temple grounds at night.

## 5.7 Enhancing physical and mental wellness and security

The physical and mental wellness of adolescents, especially girls is linked to their security and protection. This study did not assess adolescents' current state of mental or physical well-being, but rather their experiences of the factors that affect it. Some of these factors derive from experiences of the war and conflict faced by adults in the lives of these adolescents; and in many cases these experiences continue to affect the way adults negotiate relationships with their adolescent children even in post-conflict situation.

Unhappy family relationships, sexual abuse of girls including incest, emerge as main risks to girls' protection. Both adolescent girls and boys sense of wellbeing was also constrained by parents' concern about their protection and therefore, attempts to strictly control the adolescents.

Aggression or violence at home, parents' separation, migration of one or both parents, and parents' remarriage in many cases resulted in children having to live with extended family. Often these adolescents felt uncertain about their current situation in life and their future. While some adolescents living with relatives, especially

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grandparents, were looked after well, several others who were compelled to live with other relatives had difficult experiences and had to bear heavy workloads in the house, lacked support to continue their education and were frequently subjected to scolding and insulting. All of which can erode their self-esteem.

### **Sexual violence and exploitation**

Adolescent girls face threats such as sexual abuse, sometimes through being drawn into intimate relationships with boys/men who are seen as unsuitable. This clearly affects their mental or physical wellbeing and, amongst other things, can sometimes result in teenage pregnancies. Dropping out of school young, with future aspirations often tied to marriage, often makes girls easy prey to men who may abuse them. The way in which an abuser approaches an adolescent girl is sometimes misunderstood or misinterpreted as expressions of love, allowing the abuse to happen. Adults spoken to did not recognise a sexual relationship with an under-age girl as rape and neither did they consider it abuse, if the man/boy marries her as that is seen as saving her 'honour'. In the communities studied, it is socially unacceptable for girls to have sex outside of a permanent relationship, and doing so would result in attempts by adults or community elders to re-frame the relationship to give it legitimacy, not necessarily legally. For instance, being sexually abused is often re-interpreted as a love affair or marriage that failed by parents and sometimes girls themselves. Some adolescent girls for instance refer to abusers as their 'first husband,' giving him and thereby herself, social acceptability. Some experiences of adolescent girls who continued to live with their abuser revealed that these relationships often turn abusive. However, if a child is unclaimed by the father, he/she will be socially stigmatized, and so girls are often forced to stay even in abusive relationships. Some girls however have pursued legal action against perpetrators who were socially and politically powerful.

Incest has been identified as a serious issue in both areas by health care and child protection service providers, but this was not raised in any of the interviews and discussions, except perhaps once and obliquely, through this study. This is likely to be because incest is considered a grave violation of social and moral conduct which the community cannot re-interpret to give it social acceptability, and therefore is enclosed in secrecy.

### **Challenges for adolescents and parents in negotiating social controls**

Efforts to strictly control adolescent girls and boys behaviour, especially their social interaction emerged as a main reason that caused tension between parents and adolescents. Two different aspects of control were highlighted in the study. One was related to adults' difficult experiences of the past, such as abuse, either related to war-time conflict or otherwise. There are silences around painful experiences of the past but which nevertheless affect current relationships between parents/care-givers and adolescents. Arguably, these led them to severely restricting the mobility and freedom of their adolescent children or being overly critical of their social interactions. This in some cases has strained relationships or caused emotional distance between adolescents and their parents/caregivers.

In the post war situation parents/care givers and especially adolescent boys seem to struggle with negotiating over boys' freedom for social interaction. During the war, the conflict was one means by which social interactions and mobility of children and adolescents were regulated, especially in Kadalkiramam. For instance, boys used to stay indoors due to fear of recruitment by militant groups, or they conducted themselves within parameters of accepted conduct out of fear of punishment by these groups. The war also restricted access to services such as the internet and mobile phones. Post-war, parents say they feel they cannot 'control' their sons especially as they can now move freely, have access to technology their parents often cannot use and engage in what is considered 'bad' behavior, including alcohol use. This usually results in parents disciplining children through strict control instead of engaging in processes of negotiation or consensus-building which is ultimately likely to enhance adolescents' mental wellness and security. Parents' relative unfamiliarity with mobile phones and other information communication technologies was also extended to control girls' access to mobile phone. It was seen as a threat to girls because they could use it to maintain relationships with boys/men without their parents' knowledge.

### **Services available to deal with adolescents' protection issues**

Support to deal with adolescents' protection issues can come from a variety of sources including child protection mechanisms. While Kadalkiramam is directly linked to a Probation Officer, Diyagama is directly



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served by a Child Rights Protection Officer whose mandate is to mainly promote awareness on child protection issues and services. Issues of abuse in Diyagama and surrounding villages are reported to the Probation Officer in Charge in the Polonnaruwa district.

Sexual activity with a child under the age of 16 years, even with consent, is considered rape, and parents can file legal action. But parents rarely do because they are keen that the girl lives with the boy/man until the marriage can be registered, for reasons of legitimacy as explained earlier. Therefore most complaints from parents in these situations are of domestic violence, harassment or abandonment, after the adolescent girl has begun living with the boy/man. Probation Officers say they receive the highest number of complaints relating to protection of young girls, on sexual abuse of under-age girls, teenage pregnancies and incest involving girls of 10-11 years or younger.

In the case of incest, silences of families hinder victims accessing services and often incest was revealed only when the abused girl was pregnant or had health issues. The PO in one area made a case for stronger social sanctions such as preventing perpetrators from accessing formal or informal leadership roles in the community and kinship circles, to control incest. This is seen as important because perpetrators of incest are people known to children and live within the same kinship circles. Further, legal procedures take time, and the abused child may have to continue living in a threatening environment.

Amongst other support mechanisms to deal with protection issues is the Gender Based Violence (GBV) Desk at the nearby Base Hospital in Batticaloa that intervenes in the case of rape and sexual abuse and assists survivors to take legal action against perpetrators. Support includes counselling to the survivors and providing psychosocial support such as organizing for survivors to live in temporary shelters and linking families with legal support, if necessary. In the case of children and adolescents, probation officers are also informed to provide continued support for the affected children.

Communities often react with judgment and social stigmatization towards victims of abuse and their families, including in cases where a girl has eloped but not married. In both cases the victim's future is seen as being marred irreversibly. Her ability to resume a school education is also affected, at times because school authorities refuse to let her continue on the basis that she is a discredit to the school. However, being able to resume an education is one way that a victim of abuse can overcome the negative incident and progress in her life.

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# 6 Conclusions and recommendations

Below are outlined some key conclusions and recommendations arising from the first phase of this study on adolescent psychosocial wellbeing in two Sri Lankan post-conflict contexts:

- While there is an availability of educational services in both communities, structural and socio-economic stresses as well as adult and adolescent attitudes, serve to de-prioritize educational achievements in many cases. A few adolescents in both areas are defying this to complete their school education and achieve desired careers.
- Some adolescents talked about supportive and caring behaviour of some teachers that encouraged them to continue their school education; others, however, spoke of harsh and humiliating treatment by teachers that eroded their self esteem. Therefore, further exploring teacher-student interactions and how they impact on adolescent well-being could be useful to understand how school environments can be more responsive to the realities and needs of adolescents, especially in difficult circumstances.
- Primary healthcare services are proactive and have had some measure of success in reducing teenage pregnancies. But community members' lack of awareness of SRH and perceptions around, for instance, the negative effects of using contraceptives, reduce the effectiveness to some degree.
- There is a lack of vocational training opportunities of interest to adolescents and, where they exist, they are under-utilised. It would be useful to further explore the reasons for the lack of outreach of available vocational training services.
- State services focusing on the protection of children exist, and there are indications that sensitive and committed service provision depends on the efficiency and sensitivity of relevant officials. However, a lack of consistently available services has been identified by key service providers as a notable gap in service provision, especially for those adolescents who drop out of the school system. There needs to also be a coordinated mechanism within the state system to provide consistent counseling support by qualified counselors to adolescent girls facing these challenges. There are currently a few counselors within the state system at District Secretariat offices of Women's Bureaus, but these cannot be accessed urgently or regularly. Counseling support is available in some schools, but this is not accessible for those who have dropped out.
- The issue of attempted suicides by adolescent girls is also a concern and needs to be explored further.
- Some of the main factors affecting the physical and mental well-being of adolescents are: sexual abuse, abandonment after brief intimate relationships, incest, the breakdown of family relationships, ill-treatment at the hands of relatives, harsh punishments at school and negative labelling by the community. This is exacerbated by communities' emphasis on a 'good marriage' for their daughters, even at the expense of marrying an abuser and while under-age, so as to avoid shame and stigma. The value of a girl in the community is also seen in terms of how 'well' she marries.

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- The space for adolescents to participate in decision-making processes at community level is significantly limited, and adolescents' desire for some degree of independence is not duly acknowledged by adults in the communities.
  - Cultural values and norms related to girls conduct and mobility in public has affected their confidence and ability to build wider social connections. Within a small minority of girls, their own enterprising qualities and/or the support of their family have seen them become youth leaders in their communities. The collective culture valued by these communities has had the twin effect of restricting spaces and abilities of adolescents, due also to gendered norms and practices, while at the same time providing them with a support network in the face of adversity.
  - Despite difficult circumstances, adolescents in both areas have demonstrated resilience, which appears to be strengthened by having one or two caring adults in their lives and/or supportive kinship and friend circles. The discourse on adolescents' wellbeing must recognize their resilience in the face of often extreme adversity. Service provision for adolescents should not undermine this resilience but build on it and focus on addressing sources of vulnerability and adversity that may be beyond adolescents' control.



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