

Home gardening for food security and strengthening family relationships to prevent domestic violence

Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD), Sri Lanka

THE CONTEXT IN SRI LANKA

- Before the pandemic, FISD was working to address sexual and gender-based violence, challenge gender stereotypes and help set up mechanisms to respond to reported cases of violence. Lockdown stopped these activities.
- Violence against women and children escalated during lockdown. During the first wave a 40 per cent increase in cruelty to children was recorded.¹¹
- Women were overburdened with immense increases in household chores as everyone stayed at home. Social attitudes see all household work as women's responsibility.
- Women and children were at home with the perpetrators of domestic violence or abuse. There were many cases of sexual, emotional and physical violence. Corporal punishment was an accepted norm.

- Forced and early marriage became a trend during the pandemic; many girls left a home where they didn't feel safe to enter into early marriage.
- Food security was a major challenge and alcohol abuse increased. Loss of employment further plunged the poor population into poverty.

THE PRACTICE: THE HOME GARDENING PROGRAMME

The risks to food security increased during the pandemic. Vulnerable groups whose livelihoods vanished because of lockdown and who had limited or irregular income were especially affected. The government took swift action and launched the Saubhagya National Program on Harvesting and Cultivation to support one million home gardens. Vegetable seed packets were provided as well as technical advice.

11 <https://www.unicef.org/srilanka/press-releases/unicef-and-ncpa-gravely-concerned-increase-proportion-child-cruelty-cases-reported>

FISD was asked by the community platforms it was already working with to set up home gardening projects in their communities. Before COVID-19, FISD was already working at the community level to address the root causes of sexual and gender-based violence, question gender stereotypes and gender norms within the household and help women become confident in challenging them. FISD had also been helping women, men and children gain the tools and knowledge they need to improve their leadership skills. FISD saw this as a perfect opportunity to integrate home gardening into their 'Happy Family Programme' which addresses gender-based violence.

Home gardening helped bridge the physical gap caused by COVID-19 restrictions between FISD staff and the communities that they serve and gave the impetus to build a structured, stronger collective, based on mutual support.

HOW THE PRACTICE WAS IMPLEMENTED

FISD distributed seeds and provided technical knowledge related to planting and organised a discussion with the Women's Collective on how all family members should be involved in home gardening.

School shutdowns meant that children were at home and were involved in home gardening too. It was hoped that taking part in a common activity would occupy them in a positive way and make them feel that they were important contributors to household food security. Channelling their energy into a joint household endeavour turned out to be a major boost to their self-esteem. Moreover, when children saw their parents working hard, both mother and father irrespective of their gender, they knew that this work was important.

FISD encouraged all family members to allocate a common time during the day for home gardening so that everyone could work together. This was vital: it made each person an active participant, playing a key role in working together as a team. It proved strategic in dispelling pre-existing notions of gender stereotypes in the family, with everyone working towards a common goal. To create a common gardening time, families realised that everyone – husbands, sons, daughters and wives – needed to tackle all the other household chores together too, such as cooking, cleaning and laundry.

The home gardening programme is still ongoing, and FISD will encourage communities to carry on in view of its effectiveness in strengthening family relationships.

HOW THE PRACTICE WAS CONDUCTED IN THE CONTEXT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

To adhere to the government's COVID-19 guidelines, most services were provided digitally using WhatsApp calling and phone conferencing during the early stages of the strict lockdowns when in-person service delivery was impossible.

As well as supporting the home gardening programme, FISD also played a pivotal role in supporting families and communities with health guidelines during the pandemic. These provided information on how to follow the government's COVID-19 safety protocols at home and at work. Posters, messages and banners with key messages were distributed in communities and it was observed that community members were following all the COVID-19 protocols.

IMPACT

- Home gardening has been taken up by almost 1,500 families. The majority of these families have been influenced to reduce domestic violence and violence against children. There was no report of violence against children and relationships among family members became stronger in households who took part in the project during the pandemic.
- When everyone in the family gets engaged in household chores, these become less overwhelming and less time consuming for women and girls, and they feel supported. It also gives more time for parents to engage with their children and strengthen their relationships. Stronger relationships discourage violence and abuse and promote love and care instead. This helps to boost mental well-being for all family members during the pandemic.
- FISS received photographs from family members of fathers, mothers and children working together in their home gardens and, when restrictions eased, carried out field visits.
- FISS is continuing to collect data and information to help review the programme's progress and refine activities as required.
- It provided a holistic response to gender-based violence as children saw their parents working together on household chores, helping to overcome gender stereotypes and break established barriers.
- It created a structure for the entire family, with a new routine which was fun and an excellent collaborative activity. Children not only participated but also took decisions along with their parents. Simple things like deciding where to plant the seeds, what would be the children's responsibility, irrespective of whether they were a girl or a boy, helped them to feel loved and appreciated.
- The pre-existing Women's Collectives and the Men Engage Alliance gave FISS a framework for talking to parents about gender equality and how to reduce domestic violence. Women were encouraged to involve men and children in household chores. FISS developed a user-friendly leaflet in the local language.
- It was not easy to get men and boys doing household chores. Before COVID-19, FISS had been working with men's groups and youth groups including boys and discussing how to unlearn the gender stereotypes.
- COVID-19 caused economic hardship and so home gardening became an important economic activity.

WHY THE PRACTICE WAS EFFECTIVE

- Forming and deepening family ties has always been a key feature of FISS's community work. Home gardening was one strategic initiative towards that end at a time when families members were together at home during lockdown.
- Home gardens ensured that people would be food secure at the individual and family level.
- Home gardening also proved to be a useful stress buster that supported outdoor family time.