

Children and elders: Are we doing enough?

By
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On October first Sri Lanka celebrates 'Children's Day' and 'Elders' Day'. Many events will be organised for both categories. They will enjoy the attention and the gifts given. The organisers will preen themselves for their dedication to a good cause and may use these events for future fund raising. Politicians will spout rhetoric: never mind that the rhetoric hardly ever brings positive results.

In reality, in day to day life how well looked after are our children and elders? As a nation are we doing our duty by them?

The National Child Protection Authority is the premier authority for child protection. When asked about the horrific instances of child prostitution and trafficking and similar atrocities the Chairman, National Child Protection Authority, Attorney-at-Law H.M. Abhayaratne said that the underlying causes behind child prostitution, child trafficking and using children for begging are today's competitive life style and selfish economic conditions and adult behaviour which children emulate. He stressed that since 1948 no government has invested properly in children especially during the important formative years of one to five years and that this is a vital need. The government investment starts only when they are 18 at which time they have voting rights and other politically useful attributes.

Jeremy Sprigge, Communications Specialist for United Nations Children's Fund (unicef) office in Sri Lanka said:

"Sexual and gender-based violence remains a concern in Sri Lanka as does the abuse of children. Women and children continue to be subjected to violence ranging from physical and emotional violence to sexual harassment, grave sexual abuse and rape.

Children of all ages have the fundamental right to live, learn and grow without fear of violence, abuse, neglect, exploitation and discrimination. We continue to work with the Government of Sri Lanka and partners to ensure a robust child protection system is available to all children."

He cited data for 2017 (from the Police Women and Children Bureau), where 717 grave forms of violence against women including 220 cases of rape and 8097 minor forms of violence against women have been reported. Out of this 540 are listed as domestic violence. With regard to children in 2017 2,977 grave forms of child abuse were reported of which 1,374 were cases of rape. Also 2,188 'minor complaints' against children were received in 2017.

Separately 9,014 complaints were received by the NCPA in 2017 out of which 2,144 concerned cruelty to children.

The *Sunday Observer* spoke to Technical Advisor-Child Protection and Participation, World Vision Sri Lanka, Kanishka Rathnayake about some of the critical issues faced by Sri Lankan children and what needs to be done about them.

Speaking on education, Rathnayake said that in spite of some modernisation the Sri Lanka curriculum is outdated and must be updated to include subjects essential to obtaining 21st Century life skills like learning from failure, nurturing relationships and subjects essential for daily living like



Pic: Help a age Sri Lanka



World Vision Sri Lanka and SL Railways officials with poster

Pics : Wimal Karunathilake

money handling and self defence. Law, psychology and child rights as subjects should be integrated into the curriculum soon added Rathnayake.

The lack of human resources in schools must be addressed urgently he said. For example, aesthetic subjects especially at primary level are hampered by the lack of teachers. Many schools will have a music or dance teacher only and students will be compelled to offer this subject. There must be teachers to cover all aesthetic subjects, giving students a choice of subjects as aesthetic education is one of the fundamental areas in the emotional wellbeing of a person he emphasised. According to Rathnayake, many schools lack essential facilities. Overcrowding is a major factor and often for a class of fifty students there will be only one teacher. Classes should not consist of more than 20- 25 students (OECD criteria) and have one or two assistants. This is the practice in developed countries and this system should be established island wide in Sri Lanka for students to reap the benefits of the education system.

NCPA statistics

A study conducted by National Child Protection Authority in 2017 indicates that 80.4 per cent of children had undergone corporal punishment during the last term. This is despite there being a circular by the Ministry of Education prohibiting it. Corporal punishment needs to be eradicated as it damages children psychologically and a child growing up with violence may become a violent adult.

To mark 'Children's Day', World Vision International and Sri Lanka Railways launched a poster campaign under the theme 'Love over Violence' on September 24 at the Fort Railway Station. It is aimed at reminding train commuters, especially parents and adults, to end violence against chil-

dren and to bring them up with love and kindness. They will also carry out a poster and banner campaign at selected railway stations.

According to NCPA statistics in 2017 there were 312 cases of children being procured to beg while in 2018 315 cases were recorded. 2017 saw 2144 cases of cruelty to children being recorded and in 2018 it was 2413. Sexual harassment complaints were 501 and 555 for 2017 and 2018 respectively while cases of trafficking stood at 116 for 2017 and 125 for 2018. Abduction cases stood at 42 for 2017 and at 45 for 2018. Rape cases numbered 340 for 2017 and 311 for 2018. Grave sexual abuse cases stood at 309 in 2017 and 375 for 2018. Complaints of CYPO neglect of children stood at 390 for 2017 and 536 for 2018. Domestic violence complaints were 80 in 2017 and 104 in 2018.

While statistics show such a horrifying picture of abuse against our children can we just do our mite on special occasions and satisfy our conscience. Today, it is another's child: tomorrow it could be ours!

October first is also World Elder's Day and what of the elderly? The *Sunday Observer* contacted Samantha Liyanawaduge, Executive Director of Helpage, Sri Lanka for his views.

He said that according to the 2012 Census and Statistics (no Census of the elderly has been taken since then) the percentage of the elderly in Sri Lanka was 12.4 per cent and the current estimate is approximately 13.5 per cent.

The WHO prediction for the year 2030 is 20 per cent and this would mean one out of every five persons. As a result there would be four people to care for one person. The WHO prediction for 2040-45 is that one out of every four persons will be a senior citizen with the number of care givers being reduced to three.

The increase in the aging population in Sri Lanka stems from improved healthcare facilities leading to longevity and a decrease in the birth rate due to birth control and a low fertility

level. Women have longer life spans than men. In Sri Lanka, the elderly are cared for by families. More help including financial support should be given to families so elders can receive home care and be with their families, emphasised Liyanawaduge. This should be the focus of the Government and other concerned organisations he said underscoring that elders' homes should be a last resort catering to the really homeless and they should have a challenging environment to stimulate mental and physical activities he said.

According to the 'Elders Protection Act No.9 of 2000, age should not be a barrier for any person to receive any products or services from any organisation.

Fiscal policy

Liyanawaduge pointed out that under the Sri Lankan fiscal policy there are flagrant violations of this act. For instance, an elderly person aged 60+ cannot take a loan from a bank. There is also no protection for the monies invested by Senior Citizens in failed financial institutions.

This type of occurrence should not be allowed to happen and stressed the need for greater vigilance. Liyanawaduge further said that raising awareness and implementation of the National Transfer of Accounts (NTA) where a system of compulsory savings, investment income, contributory and non-contributory pension schemes and assistance extended by the Government would protect the required level of income of the elderly and make their sunset years secure.

Though it is mandatory under this Act to facilitate access to public places for the elderly most places do not even have a ramp he said. Our public transport system too lacks facilities for elders. Retirement in the mid fifties is unfavourable to both the institution and the individual as he would have gained much knowledge and experience by the time he is 60+ years.

So, retiring him in the mid fifties or at 60 years will be detrimental to the institution and he too would be deprived of more productive years and an income earning capacity.

The empowering of Senior Citizens is the key to their wellbeing said Liyanawaduge.

ADA

'Age Demands Action' (ADA) is a worldwide campaign to raise awareness on issues faced by the elderly, challenge discrimination and fight for their rights.

This program consist of many activities including a walk which takes place annually to mark the International Day of Older Persons on October first. Helpage will hold this walk in Kataragama this year.

This year the national event to mark Elders's Day will take place in Anuradhapura.

The young and old need to be cherished, loved and cared for by all. But sadly it is not happening and those responsible are either turning a blind eye or sweeping problems under the carpet.

It is time all concerned bow their heads in shame over their negligence and strive to do better making the welfare of the young and old their clarion call.