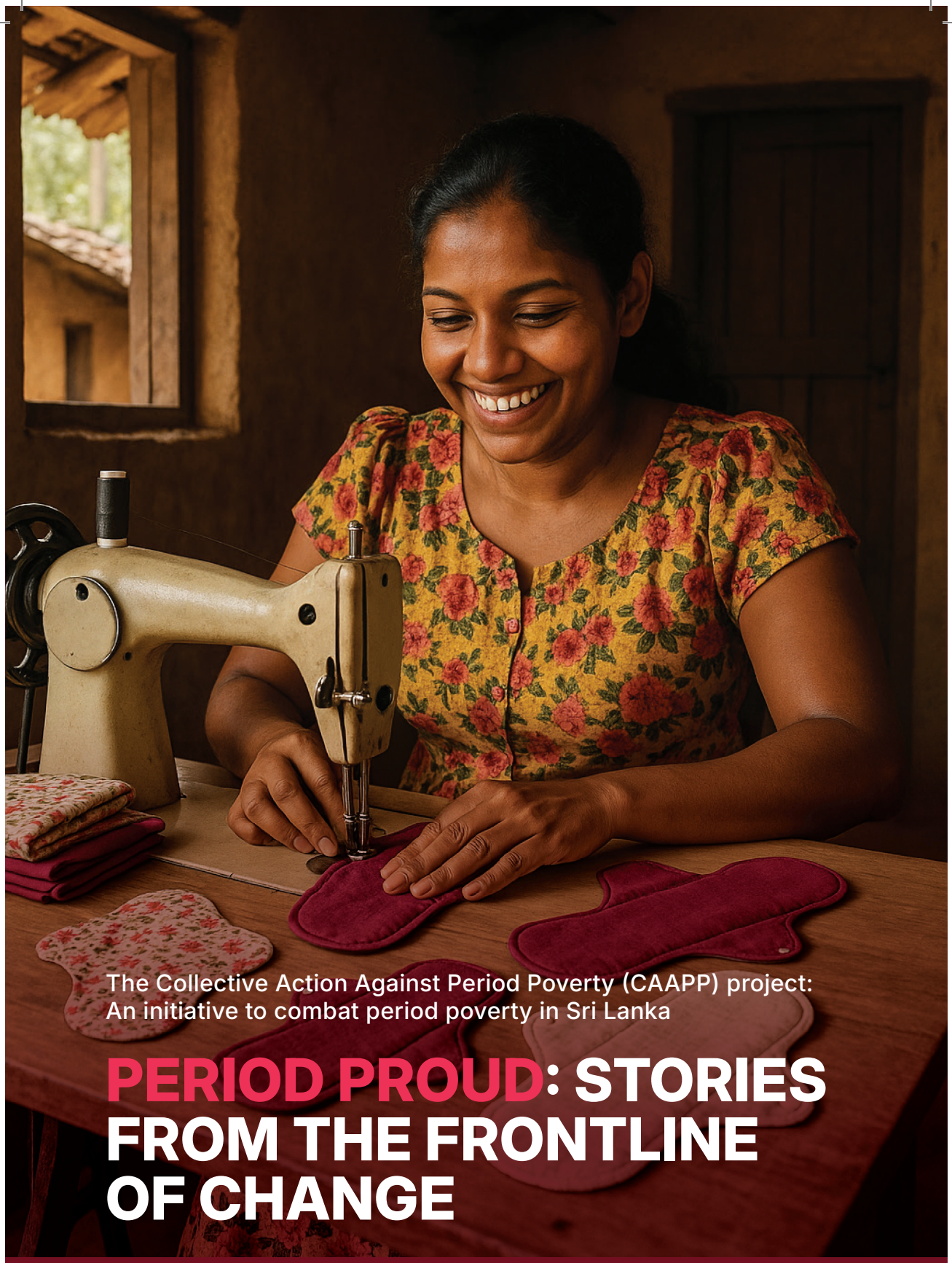

The Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project:
An initiative to combat period poverty in Sri Lanka

PERIOD PROUD: STORIES FROM THE FRONTLINE OF CHANGE

Impact stories from beneficiaries and partner NGOs of the CAAPP project

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Introducing CAAPP:
The Project and the Purpose of this Book

The Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, in partnership with The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPA Sri Lanka), launched the Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project to promote the inclusion and empowerment of menstruators.

As part of the Fonds Équipe France for Civil Society Organisations (FEF-CSO), this initiative prioritized sustainable, high-impact interventions to benefit local communities.

The CAAPP project focused on improving access to menstrual hygiene products, challenging stigma, empowering women through menstrual hygiene education awareness, and addressing critical gaps in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, particularly in schools. While its primary activities were concentrated in the Northern and Central provinces, the project also extended its impact through partners in the Eastern, Western, and Northwestern provinces, broadening its national footprint.

Led by 13 registered NGOs, the CAAPP project has brought about significant change in the lives of menstruators across Sri Lanka.

This book captures and celebrates that transformative impact. Through the stories shared, it highlights progress made in breaking taboos, advancing health and dignity, and ensuring access to essential facilities. It stands as a testament to the power of collective action in building a more equitable and empowered society for menstruators in Sri Lanka.

Message from the Ambassador - Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives

"In collaboration with 13 local civil society organisations, the CAAPP project has trained thousands of students on menstrual hygiene, upgraded facilities in vulnerable schools, and distributed reusable menstrual products to hundreds of women, enhancing their autonomy while reducing financial pressure."

France places gender equality at the heart of its foreign policy. On March 8, France launched its international strategy for feminist diplomacy (2025-2030), which aims to support international efforts to promote women's rights and gender equality. Gender equality was also a subject raised by Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya during her visit to France in April 2025. It is one of France's main areas of cooperation with Sri Lanka.

Through its feminist diplomacy, France promotes five historic priorities: defending sexual and reproductive health and rights; eliminating gender-based violence; promoting equality in and through education; supporting women's civic and political participation; and advancing economic justice and empowerment.

In Sri Lanka, where period poverty continues to affect many women and girls—particularly in rural and estate communities—the Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives sought to offer a practical and inclusive response. With a French budget support over two years, the Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project was launched to support grassroots civil society initiatives that expand access to menstrual hygiene products, foster public dialogue, and empower women and girls to participate fully in school, work, and community life.

The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPASL), with its decades of experience in sexual and reproductive health and deep engagement with communities, has been an essential and trusted partner. In collaboration with 13 local civil society organizations, the CAAPP has trained thousands of students on menstrual hygiene, upgraded facilities in vulnerable schools, and distributed reusable menstrual products to hundreds of women—enhancing their autonomy while reducing financial pressure.

Beyond these tangible results, the project has helped shift mindsets. The Period Proud events in Colombo and Jaffna brought together over 1,500 participants, sparking open discussion. The 'Sri Lankan Narratives on Menstruation' Photo and Art exhibition gave young people a platform to express themselves creatively and break the silence through powerful artistic statements.

The CAAPP project is part of a broader commitment by France to promote gender justice and inclusive development in Sri Lanka. Through the Feminist Opportunities Now (FON) and the Feminism: Action and Mobilization for an Inclusive Economy (FAME) projects, the French Development Agency (AFD) supports feminist organizations working to combat gender-based violence, empower women economically and reduce structural inequalities by promoting access to skills, resources, and decision-making.

As the Collective Action Against Period Poverty project draws to a close, we are proud of the foundations it has laid. The French Embassy hopes to continue its collaboration with The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka in the future—particularly at the intersection of menstrual health and disability inclusion—to promote dignity, equality, and opportunity for all.

Rémi Lambert

His Excellency Mr. Rémi Lambert
Ambassador
Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives

Message from the Executive Director - The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka

"The CAAPP initiative marks a significant milestone for FPA Sri Lanka, as it is our first project dedicated exclusively to addressing menstrual hygiene and period poverty in Sri Lanka."

It is with great pride that I share this message on behalf of The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPA Sri Lanka) for the Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project impact stories booklet.

The CAAPP initiative marks a significant milestone for FPA Sri Lanka, as it is our first project dedicated exclusively to addressing menstrual hygiene and period poverty in Sri Lanka. This pioneering effort was made possible through our inaugural collaboration with the Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, a partnership that has brought critical attention and resources to a long-neglected issue affecting thousands of women and girls.

Period poverty remains a pressing concern in our country. A 2022 analysis revealed that nearly 50% of households with menstruating individuals did not purchase sanitary pads, pointing to deep-rooted barriers in affordability and accessibility. In this context, the CAAPP project sought to drive sustainable, community-based solutions through a competitive and inclusive selection process. Out of 127 proposals received island-wide, 13 NGOs were selected by a steering committee for their innovation and sustainability.

The project's impact has been substantial. Over 40,000 school students have been educated on Menstrual Health & Hygiene Management (MHM) and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) practices. More than 100 healthcare professionals have been trained in MHM through the Health Promotion Bureau. Additionally, more than 80 schools now benefit from improved sanitary disposal systems and essential WASH infrastructure.

FPA Sri Lanka remains committed to continuing this work. We aim to build on the foundations laid by the CAAPP project by expanding our partnerships, advocating for policy change, and integrating menstrual health into broader sexual and reproductive health programming.

We thank The French Embassy for their invaluable support and look forward to continuing this journey of empowerment and equity.

Dr. Ruchitha Perera
Executive Director
The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka

List of Abbreviations

ACDA – Abhimana Community Development Guarantee Limited
CAAPP – Collective Action Against Period Poverty
CEPA – Center for Poverty Analysis
CSO – Civil Society Organization
EU Delegation – Delegation of the European Union to Sri Lanka and the Maldives
FISD – Foundation for Innovative Social Development
FPASL - The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka
FOSDOO – Federation of Social Development Organization
GN – Grama Niladhari
HDO – Human Development Organization (Kandy)
HDO – Humanitarian Development Organization (Vavuniya)
HPB – Health Promotion Bureau
JSAC – Jaffna Social Action Center
MHM – Menstrual Hygiene and Health Management
MM – Mindful Menstruation
MoE – Ministry of Education
MoH – Ministry of Health
MOH – Medical Officer of Health
NF – Nature Foundation
NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
PHI – Public Health Inspector
PHM – Public Health Midwife
RDHS – Regional Director of Health Services
RECDO – Rural Economic and Community Development Organization
SGBV – Sexual and Gender Based Violence
SRHR – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
SWM – Sarvodaya Women's Movement
ToT – Training of Trainers
UNFPA – United Nations Population Fund
UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund
WASH – Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WDO – Women Development Officer

The Role of The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPA Sri Lanka)

As the lead organisation of the Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project, The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka (FPA Sri Lanka) played a central role in ensuring the effective implementation, sustainability, and nationwide impact of the initiative.

The CAAPP project officially commenced in June 2023 under the Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, as part of the Fonds Équipe France for Civil Society Organisations (FEF-CSO). Out of 127 proposals received from Non-Governmental Organizations (NGO) across the country, 13 outstanding organisations were selected by a steering committee for their potential to implement impactful and sustainable menstrual health interventions.

The steering committee comprised the following members: Dr. Asanthi Balapitiya from the Health Promotion Bureau, Ms. Iresha Dharmasena from the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, Ms. Sarah Soysa from UNFPA, Dr. Nayani Dharmakeerthi from UNICEF, Ms. Seuwandi Yapa from the EU Delegation, Mr. Louis Bourdet from the French Development Agency, Ms. Olivia Bellemere from the Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives, and Dr. Ruchitha Perera from FPASL. The committee provided expert guidance throughout the duration of the project.

The committee's responsibilities included selecting the CAAPP project partner NGOs, providing technical guidance (e.g., workshops) and standardised materials (e.g., trainer manuals and resource personnel), reviewing partners' progress on a quarterly basis, offering value-adding input, and supporting national-level interventions and events.

CAAPP Partner NGOs and Their Geographic Focus

01

Abhimana Community Development Guarantee Limited

District
Matale

Province
Central Province

02

The Arka Initiative

District
Nuwara Eliya

Province
Central Province

03

Devasarana Development Centre & The Grassrooted Trust

District
Kurunegala

Province
North Western Province

04

Federation of Social Development Organization

District
Vavuniya

Province
Northern Province

05

Foundation for Innovative Social Development

District
Kandy

Province
Central Province

06

Human Development Organization

District
Kandy & Nuwara Eliya

Province
Central Province

07

Humanitarian Development Organization

District
Mannar

Province
Northern Province

08

Jaffna Social Action Center

District
Kilinochchi & Mullaitivu

Province
Northern Province

09

Nature Foundation

District
Kandy

Province
Central Province

10

Rural Economic and Community Development Organization

District
Trincomalee

Province
Eastern Province

11

Sarvodaya Women's Movement

District
Jaffna, Mulativu, Mannar, Kilinochchi & Vavuniya

Province
Northern Province

12

Save a Life

District
Jaffna

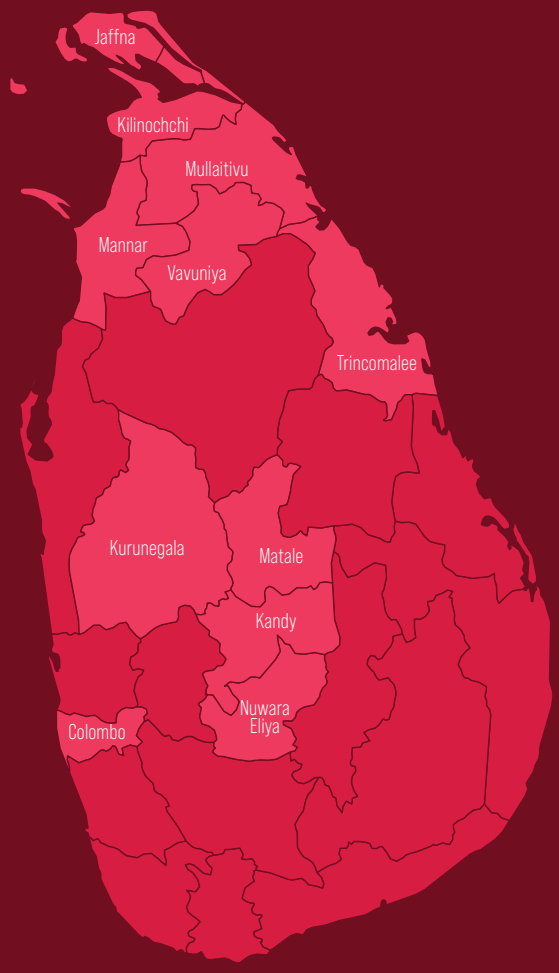
Province
Northern Province

13

Shanthi Margam

District
Colombo

Province
Western Province



FPA Sri Lanka's Contributions to the CAAPP Project

Monitoring and Support

Closely monitored and guided the project implementation of 13 partner NGOs.

Ensured accountability in community outreach and financial processes.

Finalised all documentation and content related to the CAAPP project.

Addressed challenges in a timely manner and took action to resolve them.

Collected data for the Monitoring and Evaluation Information Management System (MEIMS) to support sustainability and effective reporting.

Capacity-Building Workshop, Trainings & Exchange visits for Partners and Relevant Stakeholders

To systematically strengthen the capacity of partners, FPA Sri Lanka, with the support of expert facilitators and institutional collaborations, organized a series of targeted workshops and training sessions. These activities were carefully planned and implemented in phases to build knowledge and skills step by step.

Step 01 : Knowledge Enhancement for CAAPP Partners on Menstrual Health and Social Norms

The first phase focused on enhancing foundational understanding among CAAPP partners through the following workshops and trainings:

- Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management (MHM) Workshop
- Workshop on Menstrual Health Data and Statistics
- Introduction to Menstrual Products in Sri Lanka
- 5-Day Training of Trainers (ToT) on MHM, stigma, and discrimination
- Water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) Training Workshop, which included:
    - WASH in Emergencies
    - Sanitary Facility Maintenance
    - Gender-Responsive WASH
    - Environmental Impact of Product Disposal
    - Personal Hygiene

These sessions were conducted by reputable organizations and experts, including the Health Promotion Bureau (HPB), UNICEF, World Vision Lanka, The Arka Initiative, Selyn Foundation, Centre for Environmental Justice (CEJ), and others with specialized knowledge in these fields.

Step 02 : Training of Trainers (ToT) for Selected Stakeholders

Menstrual Health and Hygiene ToT:

Three ToT sessions were conducted in collaboration with the Health Promotion Bureau (HPB), targeting over 100 public health professionals, including doctors, nurses, Public Health Inspectors (PHIs), and midwives, in the Central, Northern, and Western Provinces. These professionals were trained to conduct ground-level sessions for CAAPP beneficiaries and provide technical support to partner NGOs and grassroots-level civil society organizations (CSOs).

Reusable Pad-Making ToT:

Conducted by the Selyn Foundation, this training empowered over 50 women from selected villages to become trainers and lead reusable pad-making sessions for grassroots CAAPP beneficiaries.

Step 03 : Capacity-Building Workshops for Grassroot CSOs Interested in Menstrual Health & Hygiene Management (MHM)

Two comprehensive training programmes were held for over 80 grassroot CSO members, focusing on:

- Menstrual Health and Hygiene Management
- Gender-Based Violence (GBV)
- Male Engagement
- Grant Writing and Social Media Management

Additionally, two networking sessions were hosted to encourage knowledge exchange and the sharing of best practices between CAAPP partners and CSOs from across the country.

Step 04 : Partner Exchange Visits Between Provinces to Explore Experiences, Impact, and Change

Year 1:

All partners were brought together in Kurunegala for an exposure visit to Devasarana Development Centre and the Grassrooted Trust. Participants observed the implementation of a “Menstrual corner” and studied the CAAPP project’s impact on behaviour, attitudes, and practices in the area.

Year 2:

An exchange visit from the Northern to the Central Province was organized, allowing participants to learn from the experiences of estate workers, school staff, and local villagers. The insights gathered were shared with partners from the Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces, fostering cross-regional learning and collaboration.

Resources & Technical Support Provided by FPA Sri Lanka

FPA Sri Lanka ensured consistent and comprehensive support to partner organizations through a range of technical and resource-based interventions:

- Trainer Manual on Menstrual Health & Hygiene developed and made available in Sinhala, Tamil, and English

- A resource person pool curated for use in localized trainings
- Menstrual product sample packs distributed to all 13 partner NGOs and MOH offices

- Pre- and post-training questionnaires provided in all three languages for effective training evaluation
- Ongoing technical assistance for:
  - Documentation of all activities by partner NGOs
  - Research studies led by partner NGOs
  - Social media campaigns and digital storytelling

National Advocacy and Visibility

FPA Sri Lanka amplified grassroots work by integrating national-level advocacy and public engagement, promoting awareness, inclusion, and collaboration. Key initiatives included:

- "Period Proud" Conferences:
  - Period Proud 2023 in Colombo - Reaching a public audience of more than 750 persons
  - Period Proud 2024 in Jaffna - Reaching a public audience of more than 2000 persons
  - Period Proud 2025 (May) in Colombo, expected to reach over 2,000 participants

- **Menstrual Health and Hygiene Day Celebrations,** creating public engagement and media visibility

- **Development of three academic** research studies to strengthen evidence and data availability in the field
- **National-level advocacy** promoting government collaboration to address community-level menstrual health challenges
- **"Sri Lankan Narratives on Menstruation" Photo and Art Exhibition:** A powerful storytelling platform that showcased lived experiences, cultural perspectives, and artistic expressions around menstruation across Sri Lanka. This exhibition served as a medium to break stigma, celebrate diversity, and elevate menstrual narratives into public discourse.

The CAAPP Project FPA Sri Lanka team:

Project Director: **Sonali Gunasekara,** Technical Advisor: **Dr. Rashmira Balasuriya,** Project Coordinator: **Jeyanthi Nadaraja**, Project Officer: **Pathini Anuththara**

Through these multifaceted efforts, FPA Sri Lanka led and supported every phase of the CAAPP project with commitment and care, ensuring that voices from the grassroots were heard, validated, and echoed at the national level in building a more inclusive and period-positive Sri Lanka.

A Community's Journey to Menstrual Health in Ambanganga Korale

About Abhimana Community Development Guarantee Limited

Abhimana Community Development Guarantee Ltd (ACDA), founded in 2007 in Dambulla, Matale, is a leading child development organisation in Sri Lanka. Guided by the vision "A society that protects rights and upholds human values," ACDA has empowered communities across Anuradhapura, Hambantota, Matale, Monaragala, Mullaitivu, and Polonnaruwa. The organisation specialises in child rights-based programming, child/youth participation, community-led protection, teacher training, and women's empowerment. ACDA actively engages stakeholders through strong government partnerships, youth committees, and district steering committees to ensure an inclusive, sustainable impact. Over 18 years, it has built a reputation for grassroots-driven, rights-focused development interventions.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP Project was implemented in the Ambanganga Korale Divisional Secretariat area of Matale District, covering 25 villages, to empower school students, youth and women on menstrual health.

This is a predominantly rural area facing major challenges in menstrual hygiene management. Before the project, awareness about menstrual health was minimal. Cultural taboos and misconceptions contributed to widespread stigma, preventing open discussion. Financial constraints meant many women and girls could not afford sanitary napkins, forcing them to use unhygienic alternatives and compromising their health and dignity.

Schools lacked adequate sanitation facilities, insufficient toilets, poor maintenance, and no systems for menstrual waste disposal. Many did not have a functioning water supply. These issues negatively impacted girls' school attendance and their overall well-being.

Government intervention in this critical area had been largely absent. Neither health nor educational authorities had addressed menstrual hygiene needs effectively, and the issue remained marginalized in local development agendas. As a result, generations of women and girls continued to suffer in silence without support, awareness, or access to essential hygiene services.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

In response to this pressing need, the CAAPP project was launched with the goal of breaking the silence around menstruation and creating a sustainable, community-based approach to menstrual health management in Ambanganga Korale.

Our first and most strategic step was to build strong partnerships with key government stakeholders who had direct influence over administration, health, and education in the area. Recognizing that systemic change could not occur in isolation, we engaged in active collaboration with the District Secretariat, Matale for overarching administrative support and guidance, and the Divisional Secretariat, Ambanganga Korale to facilitate community-level coordination and integration with local development activities. Zonal and Divisional Education Offices were involved to ensure that schools became key platforms for awareness and facility improvements. The Regional Director of Health Services (RDHS) was involved to align the project with the district's health development agenda and the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), local hospitals, and rural health institutions to deliver targeted health education and medical support to women and girls. At the project's outset, a District Steering Committee was formed with these organizations.

Through these partnerships, we were able to gain both credibility and access, making it possible to identify specific challenges faced by women and girls in the division. These included infrastructural gaps, economic constraints, cultural barriers, and knowledge deficits.

Together with our government partners, the CAAPP project began to chart a roadmap that would not only address the immediate concerns but also lay the groundwork for long-term, sustainable menstrual health solutions in the division. The CAAPP Project brought transformative and sustainable change to the Ambanganga Korale division by improving WASH infrastructure and promoting menstrual health education with the following activities:

"Thanks to the support from the CAAPP project, our school now has improved sanitation facilities, including clean and safe toilets with a proper water supply. The educational sessions conducted for both students and teachers on menstrual health were incredibly valuable, helping us create a more supportive and informed school environment."

Mr. Thyagaraja, Principal of Gammaduwa Maha Vidyalaya

Trained youth members led peer-to-peer sessions, supported by PHIs and PHMs, to break taboos and promote accurate information.

A large-scale social awareness campaign using street drama, posters, and social media helped normalize menstrual health discussions.

WASH facilities and sanitary pad burning units were installed in schools with the guidance of the Zonal Education Office.

Training on reusable sanitary pads was provided to 500 women who lacked proper facilities.

School-based awareness sessions, Training of Trainers (TOT) trainings, and five medical camps were conducted with the support of medical officers from the RDHS and MOH.

Grama Niladhari, Development Officers, teachers and health staff ensured successful community participation. Continuous support from the Divisional Secretariat and Zonal and Divisional Education Offices ensured the project's success.

Before the workshop, I felt shy and confused about menstrual health. After attending the session, I gained confidence and learned how to manage my period safely and hygienically. I even shared what I learned with my friends and family.

Ms. Danushika, Grade 11

"The initiative taken by the CAAPP project has made a significant impact on our community. The combination of educational outreach, reusable pad training, and medical camps has improved menstrual hygiene awareness and accessibility. It's a commendable step towards long-term health and dignity for women and girls in the area."

Mr. Ekanayake, Public Health Inspector (Ambanganga Korale)

Challenges and How We Responded

Initially, cultural stigma and taboos surrounding menstruation caused hesitation among students, parents and community members to participate in awareness sessions. To address this, Abhimana organized community sensitization meetings and youth-led peer education to build trust and normalize conversations.

Limited access to remote villages and poor infrastructure posed logistical challenges, which were mitigated through flexible scheduling, mobile outreach, and coordination with local officers who were familiar with the terrain.

Some schools lacked basic WASH facilities, making it difficult to introduce hygiene interventions; this was resolved by prioritizing infrastructure support and closely working with school administrations and the Zonal Education Office.

Resistance from some community sectors was reduced through continuous engagement with trusted figures such as Grama Niladhari, PHIs, teachers, and religious leaders.

Throughout the project, strong and consistent government partnership, especially with the Divisional Secretariat, RDHS, MOH, and education offices was the key strategy that helped overcome each challenge and ensured effective, community-driven implementation.

"Before the CAAPP project, menstrual health was neglected. Girls and women lacked access to sanitary products and proper facilities, and awareness was low. CAAPP's collaboration with local authorities brought education and improved infrastructure. Its empowered women and girls, opening dialogue and addressing a critical need in our rural community. I witnessed how openly girls began to speak about their needs and how mothers were empowered with the correct knowledge. This project filled a long-standing gap in our rural society, and I am proud to have supported it at the grassroots level."

Ms. Kumuduni, Grama Niladhari (Nagaliyadda)

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

Abhimana Community Development Guarantee Limited carried out the following activities:

10 Conducted educational workshops in 10 schools

20 Organized 20 peer-to-peer sessions facilitated by trained peer educators from youth groups

07 Improved infrastructure in 7 schools through the renovation and construction of toilets with water facilities and provided 5 disposal pad burning units to selected schools

500 Trained 500 women in the production of reusable sanitary pads, enabling them to produce and provide affordable menstrual products for themselves and the community

10 Distributed reusable sanitary pads to 10 schools

05 Conducted 5 medical camps focusing on menstrual health and overall well-being

Carried out awareness-raising activities through street drama performances and a poster campaign

3000 A total of 3,000 individuals directly benefited from the project

The CAAPP project in Ambanganga Korale stands as a powerful example of how community-driven efforts, when supported by strong partnerships and inclusive strategies, can break long-held silences and create lasting change. By centering dignity, knowledge, and access, this initiative has not only improved menstrual health but has also sparked a broader movement toward gender equality and well-being in rural Sri Lanka.


No More Silence
Empower Women and Girls
(CAAPP) Project
PERIOD EDUCATION
FOR EVERYONE


PERIOD
PROUD

Whispers Turned Voices: Menstrual Empowerment in the Hills

About the Tea Leaf Trust & The Arka Initiative

Tea Leaf Trust works with Sri Lanka's tea estate communities to create brighter futures by providing education, vocational training, and emotional support to young people. The Arka Initiative is a grassroots organization that promotes equitable access to sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services and information across Sri Lanka.

As part of the Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project, Tea Leaf Trust and The Arka Initiative collaborated to conduct educational workshops and distribute menstrual products, aiming to improve menstrual health and hygiene in underserved tea estate communities.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project was implemented in five rural tea estate communities—**Luccombe, Mocha, Gouravilla, Venture, and Dickoya** in the **Nuwara Eliya district.** These communities, often isolated and underserved, face a range of menstrual health challenges that deeply affect the daily lives of women and girls.

Period poverty remains a pressing global issue, and in these tea estates, it is worsened by a combination of social, economic, and infrastructural barriers. Menstruators in these areas face:

Limited access to menstrual products, forcing many to use unsafe alternatives such as rags, newspapers, or old clothes.

Persistent stigma and cultural taboos surround menstruation and create feelings of shame, secrecy, and emotional distress.

Inadequate water and sanitation facilities, which prevent safe and hygienic menstrual management, especially for working women and schoolgirls who often go from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. without the ability to change materials.

Lack of menstrual health education, leaving many women and girls unaware of safe hygiene practices or the health risks linked to poor menstrual care.

These issues directly impact the **physical, mental, and social well-being** of menstruators.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

To address these challenges, the CAAPP project designed a series of targeted activities that brought transformative and sustainable change to the five tea estate communities

Empowering Women with Menstrual Health Education

- 80 estate sector women were educated on menstrual health management, reproductive health, and healthy menstrual practices.
- Discussions also addressed cultural and religious beliefs related to menstruation.

Distribution of Period Cups

- Every woman participant received a menstrual cup, along with leaflets providing step-by-step guidance on use, insertion, removal, cleaning, and storage.

Pad-Making Machine

- A pad-making machine was introduced, empowering women to produce affordable, disposable sanitary pads for their own use and potential income generation.

Sustainable Menstrual Care through Period Cups

- Workshops introduced women to period cups as a sustainable, cost-effective menstrual care option.
- This was the first time many of these women had ever seen or heard about period cups, and it naturally created a sense of fear and hesitation, especially around insertion.
- Doctors played a critical role in easing these fears by having friendly, respectful conversations, conducting practical demonstrations, and patiently answering all questions.
- Fear of insertion was openly discussed, and participants were reassured through medically accurate, non-judgemental information.
- Knowledge was provided around myths about virginity. Women were clearly educated that using a period cup does not affect virginity and were given accurate knowledge about the hymen, cultural misconceptions, and bodily autonomy.
- Only married women were introduced to the period cup initially, in recognition of the cultural barriers and sensitivities surrounding unmarried girls using internal menstrual products.
- It took time for the women to get used to the idea, but with continuous support and peer sharing, they became more confident.

Challenges and How We Responded

The implementation of the CAAPP project faced several challenges rooted in deep cultural, social, and logistical barriers.

One major challenge was the **cultural resistance** to openly discussing menstruation. To address this, one-on-one conversations were held with trusted figures such as estate managers, creating safe and respectful spaces for women to share their concerns.

Fear around using menstrual cups—particularly fear of insertion and myths about virginity—was another significant barrier. This was mitigated through friendly and respectful discussions led by doctors, supported by peer testimonials and practical demonstrations. Accurate information was shared to break cultural myths, especially around virginity. Due to persistent fears related to virginity, menstrual cups were introduced only to married women in order to gain community trust and minimize resistance.

Scheduling difficulties also posed a challenge, as estate work routines left little time for sessions. This was resolved by negotiating flexible session timings with the support of the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), allowing participants to attend without disrupting their daily responsibilities.

Low attendance, caused by family responsibilities and workload pressure, was another hurdle. This was overcome through follow-up encouragement from peers who had attended the sessions and shared their positive experiences, helping to build momentum and participation.

"I learned about the connection between poor menstrual hygiene and health risks like infections. Because of financial struggles, many of us could not afford proper products. Using these cups will definitely improve our safety and health."

Ms. Indhuja, Venture Estate.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

Tea Leaf Trust collaborated with the Arka Initiative carried out the following activities;

458 Empowered and educated 458 estate women & 44 Tea Leaf Trust staff on menstrual health management

458 Distributed 458 menstrual cups to participants, providing sustainable period care

Introduced a pad-making machine, enabling self-production of sanitary products

Expanded access to free menstrual products at workplaces, improving hygiene standards

Increased awareness of hygiene protocols, boosting women's confidence to manage periods at work and school

Reduced menstruation-related anxiety and normalized open discussions around menstruation

Strengthened community dialogue around menstrual health, challenging stigma and cultural myths

Witnessing the women's enthusiasm and confidence was a powerful testament to the success of the CAAPP project. What began with hesitation and cultural barriers ended in empowerment, education, and lasting change.

"I had considered many menstrual products but found none that truly suited me. I am deeply thankful for this seminar, which introduced period cups to estate women like me. I am truly grateful for the awareness program."

Ms. Yogamalar, Luccombe Estate.

Mindful Menstruation: From Taboos to Trust

About the Athwela Partnership

The Grassrooted Trust

The Athwela Partnership consists of The Grassrooted Trust, the Women's Development Foundation, and Devasarana Development Centre. Each organization brings a unique flavor to the partnership. For example, the Devasarana Development Center and the Women's Development Foundation have more than 40 years of experience in organizing communities to build a collective voice against injustice.

The Athwela Partnership aims to strengthen the response to sexual and gender-based violence, the lack of comprehensive sexuality education and the lack of access to sexual and reproductive health services. The partnership intends to develop sustainable community-based solutions to combat the climate crisis and to reestablish biodiversity in the town of Ibbagamuwa.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The ground reality in Ibbagamuwa is no different from the rest of the island. The results of the 2023 survey indicated that myths around menstruation and the shame associated with it are the key challenges in addressing period poverty.

In the survey, 82 out of 107 women from the Ibbagamuwa division stated that they had been informed about menstruation before experiencing their first period.

67 of 82 respondents recalled the information that was shared with them. Their answers are categorized as follows:

Reinforcing the myth that menstrual blood is unclean.

28/67 had been told that menstrual blood is unclean, and/or that it contains bodily waste.

Identifying first period event.

18/67 had been asked to inform their mother if blood or any unnatural discharge appeared on their underwear. This included messages such as: "බඩ රිදෙනවනම් කියන්න" If your stomach hurts let me know; "ජංගියේ රතු පාට මොනවා හරි තිබ්බොත් කියන්න" – If a red substance appears on your underwear let me know; and "ගවුමේ රතු පාට පැල්ලමක් තිබුණොත් කියන්න" – If a red patch appears on your dress let me know.

Prepared for myth-based practices.

12/67 had been informed on what not to do after their first period. These included - "තනියම කොහොවත් යන්න එපා " – don't go anywhere alone; "රෑ වෙලා බැදපු කෑම කන්න එපා" – don't eat fried food at night; "කොන්ඩේ කඩාගෙන ඉන්න එපා" – don't wear your hair loose; "නාන්න එපා" – don't bathe; and "තනිවෙන්න එපා" – don't be alone.

Informed of a monthly cycle

9/67 women were told that period blood will occur monthly - "මාසිකව ලේ පිටවීම". This was also framed for some as "මාස් සුද්ධිය" or a monthly cleansing (given that blood was framed as unclean).

The CAAPP Project Intervention

Mindful Menstruation (MM) is a long-term intervention to create more understanding about the reproductive autonomy of women and girls. MM circles are the backbone of the intervention, where approximately 15 women from 8 villages in Ibbagamuwa meet once a month to discuss topics related to the body and autonomy. Myths that curtail reproductive freedoms are one of the key topics we discussed repeatedly, as years of practice and belief are hard to let go.

During this intervention, myth-based food practices, religious practices, hygiene practices, sexual, and reproductive practices such as virginity, are discussed multiple times to encourage women to critically assess these practices.

Many women believed that bathing during menstruation could lead to disease and that engaging in religious activities during this time is a sin. During this discussion many women highlighted the existence of a white snake who attacks if a menstruating women or girl enters the Ridee Vihara Temple situated in Ibbagamuwa – Rideegama. This is a strongly prevailing myth in Ibbagamuwa, and many women fear to even speak about it.

During monthly discussions, scientific information about menstruation is explained to the women and accurate information is shared on the අත්වැල එකමුතුව WhatsApp group to reinforce the messages.

These monthly meetings are a safe space for women to discuss topics like sexual pleasure, masturbation and safe sex, as learning and talking about menstruation gives them the confidence to express themselves more freely.

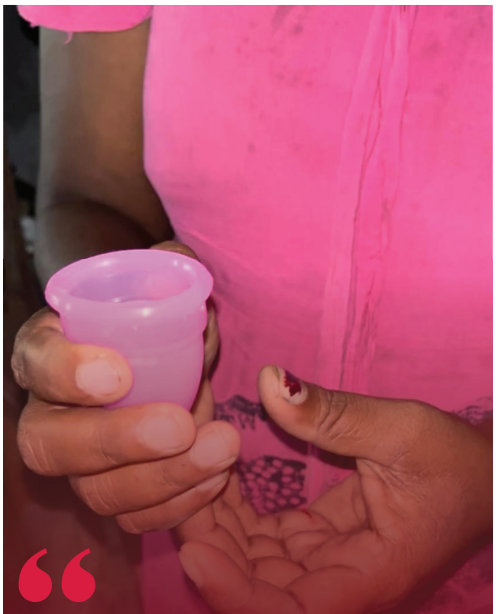
Women of the MM circle are introduced to the period cup, reusable sanitary pads and biodegradable disposable napkins to mitigate the environmental impact of single use, non – biodegradable pads. Discussions on de-constructing virginity are helping women experience the menstrual cup without fear or shame.

Challenges and How We Responded

One of the challenges that this intervention encountered was the lack of access to public spaces for women to meet and discuss their bodies and autonomy. In some instances, the village development society and funeral assistance society leaders refused to allow women to meet in the meeting hall, Samithi hall, while in other instances, they insisted on listening in.

Despite this obstacle, women remained determined to meet monthly, gathering at their homes, or other available spaces, such as under a tree. Only four groups have been able to use village public spaces such as the Bana Hall and the meeting hall, while the remaining four groups continue to meet in informal spaces.

Having access to public spaces to learn and create new knowledge about sexual and reproductive health plays an important role in reproductive justice. It also strengthens women's rights to organize and engage in policy-level negotiations concerning their health and rights.



"පෑඩ් ඇදගෙන රෑ තිස්සේ වැඩ කරන්න අම්මට අමාරුයිනේ. ඒ හින්දා එයාට ඔන්ලයින් වලින් මං කප් එකක් අරං දුන්නා. පෑඩ් වලට මට වියදමක් නැති හින්දා ඒ ගාන මට දරා ගන්න පුළුවන් වුණා."
"It is difficult for my mother do her night shift wearing pads, it's very uncomfortable I know. So I bought her a cup online. I can bear that cost because I don't spend for pads any more."

Ms. Sujikala, Salindapura, Ibbagamuwa.

"පෑඩ් වළලලා වත්තේ හැම තැනම, පැලයක් හදන්න වලක් කැපුවත් පරණ පෑඩ් අහුවෙනවා. ඕවා ඉතිං දිරන්නෑනේ, කප් එක හින්දා ඒ කරදරෙත් නෑ"
"Sometimes we find old pads when digging to plant vegetables. Now that problem is over because of the cup. No waste at all."

Ms. Sujikala, Salindapura, Ibbagamuwa.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

150

The Mindful Menstruation Circles programme has had a life changing impact on over 150 women in Ibbagamuwa

1400

1400 students across two schools are now benefiting from the WASH facilities built under the CAAPP project

15,000

Conducted online activities that reached over 15,000 online participants

Mindful Menstruation has not only broken taboos but has also nurtured trust, courage, and sisterhood among women in Ibbagamuwa. As women continue to reclaim their bodies, spaces, and voices, the CAAPP project stands as a testament to what community-led change can achieve—one conversation, one circle, and one woman at a time.

Breaking Taboos: Empowering Estate Communities to Embrace Menstrual Health

About the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD)

Founded in 2011, FISD is a well-established NGO in Sri Lanka working to promote the rights and well-being of marginalized communities. Its work focuses on four main areas: gender and development, child rights, alcohol and drug prevention, and mental health. FISD runs both long- and short-term projects in districts such as Anuradhapura, Monaragala, Hambantota, and Kandy. The organization promotes sustainability by strengthening community ownership and accountability, and it collaborates with CSOs, government bodies, and international partners. Through an integrated approach, FISD connects related issues and learns across areas to maximize impact.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project of FISD 'Menstruation Matters' was implemented in five estate communities; Panwila division, Hagala, Madagala, Kandaketiya and Lebonan (Liyangala).

Before the inception of the project, FISD observed the following realities at the community level through a baseline survey,

Menstrual product usage: 92% of participants use sanitary pads, mostly disposable (92.5%), with only 5% using cloth pads. Use of alternatives like reusable pads, tampons and menstrual cups was unknown.

Decision-makers: 42% of respondents purchased menstrual products themselves, while 27.5% relied on their mothers, showing varying levels of autonomy.

Awareness levels: Only 17% of women and girls completely understood the menstrual cycle, while 43.9% were unaware. The initial emotional response to menstruation was fear (70%) and pain (20%).

Cultural taboos: Cultural and religious norms led to 51% avoiding bathing, over 76% avoiding the kitchen and pooja room, and many skipping religious activities during menstruation. Menstruation was largely seen as impure.

Men's involvement: 70% of men lacked awareness about menstruation, viewing their role as limited to financial support. Many felt discomfort discussing the topic publicly, citing cultural norms and time constraints. Below is a quote during a community consultation which shows how men perceive menstruation:

"Menstruation means the days of bleeding for women and girls. On those days, women mostly seem lazy, not wanting to do anything, and they may appear angry with us. It's called a period."

Additionally, the community also viewed menstruation as a natural and integral aspect of a woman's life that should be treated with respect and understanding.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

FISD implemented a holistic, transformative, and sustainable model to combat period poverty by challenging gender-discriminative norms, promoting menstrual health, and creating safe spaces for menstruators. Key strategies included:

- **Rights-based awareness:** Conducted programs to raise awareness on human rights including Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR), the right to information, and freedom from discrimination and Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV), alongside community-based WASH training.
- **Self-Care and collective care:** Promoted empowerment and reflection through tools like journalling, the Menstrupedia comic in Sinhalese, and storytelling videos on menstruation and male allyship. These tools aimed to reshape patriarchal norms and foster long-term behavioural change.
- **Skill development:** Built community capacity in areas such as menstrual hygiene management, communication, governance, and eco-friendly product creation. Initiatives like yoga, theatre-based advocacy, and WASH training culminated in community-led social action projects.
- **Male allyship:** Engaged men and boys through targeted programs to encourage their support for menstrual justice. Trained male mentors to advocate for menstruation-friendly practices in their communities.
- **Service coordination & networking:** Facilitated multi-sectoral collaboration and trained 35 civil society professionals in advocacy and networking. Teachers in Panwila received training on SRHR and comprehensive sexuality education.
- **Advocacy:** Hosted a regional symposium on 'Dignified Menstruation' to generate policy recommendations and share lessons learned, aiming to scale the project's impact at a broader level.

Challenges and How We Responded

FISD initially identified a lack of gender-sensitive trainers capable of addressing Menstrual Health Management (MHM) and deconstructing harmful social norms. In response, FISD invited partner organizations and the Regional Director of Health Services (RDHS) to conduct awareness-raising sessions on menstruation and MHM. To ensure consistency and quality, FISD developed comprehensive session plans for external facilitators and built the capacity of internal staff to deliver safe space trainings. These covered topics such as engaging community members, leaders, and teachers; understanding gender-discriminatory social norms; peer leader training; Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH); and implementing social action projects.

FISD also internalized one consultancy project—developing a journal for adolescent girls—and closely monitored facilitators and video production teams to ensure adherence to the 'do no harm' principle. Despite FISD's efforts at developing and raising awareness of inclusive information, access to language-inclusive service providers to the communities remained a challenge.

"Recently I joined many programs conducted by FISD including the menstruation related programs. This is very useful for us. As a woman I also believed many norms are created by our society. But now I know menstruation is one of the changes that happens in women's bodies. So, we don't need to hide from others. I have one daughter. She is in grade 2 now. As a mother, I will guide my daughter with the knowledge that I gained through this program."

Ms. K Sasikala, Lebanon village

Engaging women—most of whom are housewives—posed challenges due to their heavy burden of unpaid care work, which made it difficult for them to attend centralized sessions. Similarly, men were difficult to mobilize across communities due to demanding estate work schedules. To address this, FISD introduced smaller, community-based awareness sessions for women in the final quarter of the project to reduce mobility barriers. Most full-day training sessions were scheduled on weekends to avoid conflicts with income-generating activities.

Limited time for lobbying with government stakeholders and estate superintendents also hindered project implementation. Bureaucratic approval processes caused delays, making it difficult to secure release time for estate workers. While FISD conducted orientation sessions for government officers on the importance of MHM, SGBV forums, and strengthening women's Federations, the lack of sustained government commitment remained a challenge. Language barriers and limited availability of government officers for field visits further complicated service coordination.

Given FISD's emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement, it was not always feasible to involve all actors simultaneously in training sessions. As an alternative, FISD organized community-level edutainment events to mobilize participation. These included screenings of the film Pad Man, two "Paduru Party" events centred on the theme of "Happy Families," and a street drama focused on menstrual awareness. These events effectively helped normalize conversations around menstruation within the community.

Unpredictable weather conditions and the country's political instability also delayed project activities. Continuous elections hindered the organization of public gatherings, while heavy rains and landslides often disrupted the sole mode of public transportation available to many communities. As a result, FISD had to pause activities during adverse conditions and intensify efforts during more favourable periods.

"I am a mother of two children (a daughter and a son). I attended some of the programs conducted by FISD related to menstrual health. My daughter also participated in many programs related to this topic in the Panwila area. As per my perception these related programs are very rare in our area. But this is important for us. We learnt many unknown things regarding menstruation. Also, after attending these programs we changed our thinking pattern too. I understood that menstruation is a natural biological thing that happens in women's bodies. There is no need to hide it from the men (father, brother) in our family"

Ms. D. Lingeshwary, Lebanan Village

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

FISD carried out the following activities:

1000 Nearly 1000 individuals were reached through awareness sessions on Menstrual Health Management (MHM)

04 4 Community Empowerment models in 4 villages at Panwila were mobilized as safe spaces for menstruators

20 Approximately 20 community leaders were trained as mentors to disseminate scientifically accurate information on MHM and facilitate community reflection on harmful social norms 72 boys and girls were trained as peer leaders to advocate for community rights and lead change initiatives

03 4 social action projects were implemented by around 51 peer leaders in their community, including:

- Installing a sanitary pad disposal system in a school
- Organizing an artistic exhibition to raise community awareness on menstruation
- Producing a short film promoting male allyship in menstrual health
- Displaying long-lasting messages and guidelines for students on how to use WASH facilities effectively in CP/Knuckels Tamil School

13 13 rights-based awareness sessions were conducted for women, men, youth, and teachers, covering topics such as Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR), MHM, Right to Information (RTI), and WASH

20 Over 20 skills development trainings were held on topics including creating safe spaces, understanding social norms, conducting root cause analysis, use of drama and theatre for advocacy, yoga, making reusable sanitary pads, and designing social action projects

Through the CAAPP project, FISD not only broke the silence around menstruation but also fostered a culture of dignity, inclusion, and empowerment within estate communities. By centering the voices of women and youth and building allyship among men, the project planted seeds for long-term social change—where menstruation is no longer taboo, but a topic of shared understanding, respect, and action.


Menstruation
Matters

Laying the Foundation for Change: Advancing Menstrual Health Awareness in Vavuniya

About the Federation of Social Development Organization (FOSDOO)

FOSDOO has been focusing on the protection and empowerment of women, girls and children as one of its key thematic areas for over 25 years. With strong experience in addressing gender-based violence, domestic violence, and rights violations, the organization has built a trusted presence and recognition among the grassroot communities, government stakeholders and other actors in the Northern Province, especially in Vavuniya, Mullativu and Kilinochchi.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project aims to disperse knowledge among the community, to address period poverty and improve menstrual hygiene practices among girls and women in Vavuniya, Vavuniya South and Vengalacheddikulam. The project focuses on raising awareness, building skills, and empowering women, youth, and other at-risk groups to understand their rights, protect themselves and raise their voice for change.

In the Vavuniya District, period poverty remains a silent but harmful issue, disproportionately affecting girls, women, and youth. Cultural stigma, limited awareness, and a lack of access to affordable sanitary products have compromised the health, education, and dignity of females—especially in rural communities. Many girls miss school during their menstrual cycles due to inadequate facilities, a lack of knowledge, and poor access to menstrual products.

Despite many girls reaching puberty as early as age 9, menstruation remains a taboo subject, both in the community and in educational curriculum. This results in harmful practices, misinformation, and silence around menstrual hygiene. The low level of community understanding and willingness to discuss menstruation continues to undermine menstrual health and gender equality.

In addition, efforts to raise awareness faced further challenges, as some medical professionals and workers were reluctant when asked to deliver sessions on menstruation management to school students—highlighting the need for greater sensitivity training and support for health educators especially, to deliver and facilitate discussion on these topics among school students.

"Although we are trained in academic subjects, we lacked proper knowledge and sensitivity regarding menstrual health. This program opened our eyes to the real challenges students face, and we now are able to create awareness among co-teachers and students."

Mrs. Vinayagamurthy Jayanthini, Teacher - Rajendrankulam A.T.K School.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

FOSDOO, implemented the CAAPP project across key Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions in the Vavuniya District. The initiative focused on enhancing menstrual health knowledge among youth, adults, and government officials, while tackling period poverty through education, resource distribution, and community engagement.

Major activities included:

- Awareness sessions in 40 schools under the Vavuniya South Education Zone.
- Awareness sessions targeting women and youth groups in the targeted areas.
- Capacity building sessions for teachers, facilitated by trained healthcare officers and doctors.
- Capacity building trainings for targeted doctors, healthcare workers and other Government stakeholders
- Installation of proper sanitary disposal facilities in 14 schools.
- Distribution of sanitary products to needy students.
- Targeted trainings for both male and female students.

These sessions addressed critical issues such as menstrual hygiene, reproductive health, behavior during menstruation, and breaking cultural taboos.

"I had a health issue from birth but was too shy to seek help. After the awareness session, the midwife helped me get a medical consultation. I feel much better and more confident now."

Student - Muthaliarkulam School, Cheddikulam

Challenges and How We Responded

Initial resistance by key stakeholders: Principals and teachers hesitated to support menstrual health education due to cultural sensitivities.

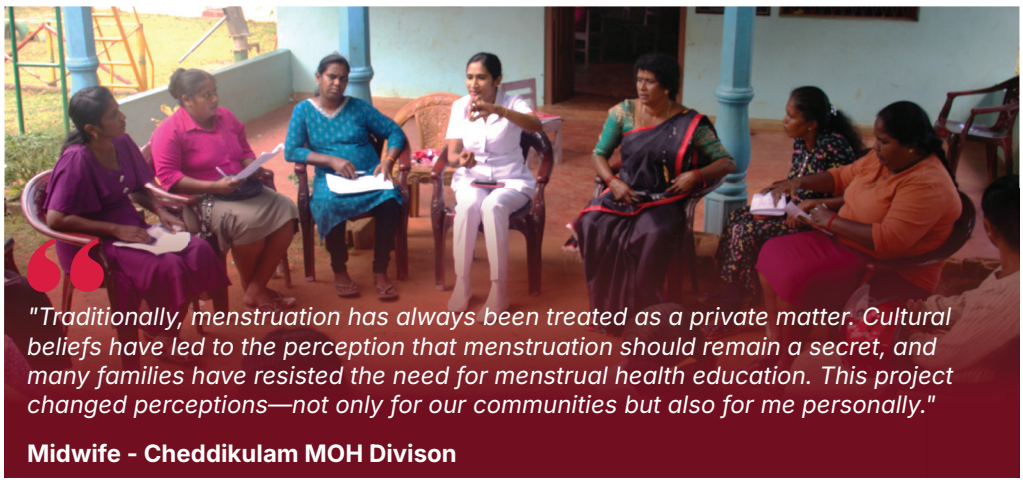
Mitigation: To overcome this, the project team conducted intense meetings and discussions with them to explain the objectives and importance of menstrual health education and how it was relevant to students' well-being, school attendance, and confidence. This gradually transformed attitudes and even male principals and teachers actively supported the awareness activities for smooth implementation in the schools.

Social stigma and myths: Deep-rooted cultural taboos made discussions around menstruation uncomfortable.

Mitigation: To counter these barriers, the project engaged local healthcare professionals and workers who were well-known and well-respected. Through their engagement, discussions of menstruation were normalized. The participants were comfortable asking questions and sharing their problems in safe and respectful spaces—schools and communities.

Some medical professionals were hesitant to openly discuss important topics related to menstruation, limiting the effectiveness of awareness sessions intended to educate school students and other target groups.

Mitigation: As part of adaptive management, a two-day Training of Trainers (ToT) was introduced and facilitated to familiarize targeted doctors and midwives with FPA's module on menstruation management and to make the participants understand the methodologies and tools to facilitate the awareness programs. As a result, awareness sessions at both school and community levels are now being conducted in a more simplified and accessible manner, improving understanding and engagement among participants.



"Traditionally, menstruation has always been treated as a private matter. Cultural beliefs have led to the perception that menstruation should remain a secret, and many families have resisted the need for menstrual health education. This project changed perceptions—not only for our communities but also for me personally."

Midwife - Cheddikulam MOH Divison

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

FOSDOO carried out the following activities:

18 Conducted awareness on period poverty and SRHR to the targeted women groups - 18 sessions completed

115 Organized training for 115 teachers on menstruation management and period poverty - 03 batches

18 Conducted awareness on period poverty and SRHR to the targeted youth groups - 18 sessions completed

Printed and distributed leaflets on menstrual management in Tamil and Sinhala

2208 Provision of 2208 hygiene kits (soap and sanitary pads)

3000 Distributed 3000 leaflets on menstrual management in Tamil and Sinhala

Conducted a 2-day basic training to create basic understanding on menstruation management, sex and gender, and SRHR for selected Government officials - 03 batches

33 Conducted awareness on Menstruation Hygiene and Health Management (MHM) and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) basic awareness at a school level to the targeted students – 33 schools

Conducted 01 ToT on menstrual management to doctors and healthcare workers

15 Supported water and sanitation facilities to schools – 15 Menstrual Hygiene Management units were constructed in 14 schools

1750 Nearly, **1750 individuals** have been directly reached through the training and awareness raising program.

The CAAPP initiative by FOSDOO laid the groundwork for long-term social transformation. By addressing the root causes of period poverty through awareness, education, and accessibility, the project has significantly improved the lives of girls, women, and communities in Vavuniya.

Menstruation Matters: Building Confidence Through Education

About the Human Development Organization

The Human Development Organization (HDO) is a nationally recognized non-governmental and non-profit organization in Sri Lanka. With a strong commitment to social justice, HDO primarily serves underprivileged plantation and rural communities, especially the **Malaiyaha** Tamil minority. Its mission focuses on human rights, gender equality, sustainable development, and poverty eradication. HDO empowers women through coexistence societies, advocates for policy reforms, and amplifies marginalized voices locally and internationally. By fostering civil society networks, peace-building and collaborative coalitions, HDO continues to promote an inclusive and equitable society where all individuals can live with dignity, free from discrimination, and with opportunities for growth and participation.

Understanding the Ground Reality

As part of its broader vision for community transformation, the CAAPP project was launched across six targeted Divisional Secretariat (DS) Divisions, reaching numerous villages and plantation estates. One of its key focus areas was Vivekananda Tamil Vidyalayam, a school that faced critical menstrual health and hygiene challenges. The situation was deeply concerning, marked by:

- Young girls experiencing their first menstruation with fear, confusion, and isolation
- A lack of accurate information leads to the spread of harmful myths and misconceptions
- Silence from educators, leaving students without guidance or support
- Many girls stay home during their periods due to stigma, shame and discomfort
- Poor sanitation infrastructure —no clean toilets, no water access and no safe disposal methods.

This environment highlighted the urgent need for intervention. The absence of dignity, awareness, and basic facilities made menstrual health a barrier to education and well-being, reinforcing the importance of CAAPP's targeted efforts.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

Following the launch of the CAAPP project, a significant transformation took place at Vivekananda Tamil Vidyalayam. The introduction of awareness sessions created a safe and open environment for discussing menstrual health, hygiene, and the importance of breaking taboos that had long silenced these topics. Both girls and boys were included in these sessions, fostering mutual understanding and reducing stigma.

Affordable sanitary napkin vending machines were installed, with funds allocated for regular restocking to ensure long-term access.

In addition, proper disposal bins and upgraded toilet facilities addressed critical hygiene needs, promoting a cleaner and more supportive environment.

Regular educational sessions led by midwives and Public Health Inspectors (PHIs), along with targeted training for teachers to serve as menstrual health promoters, reinforced key messages and created a sustainable support system within the school.

These combined efforts shifted the school culture, making menstruation a subject of open, healthy conversation rather than shame, and empowering students to manage their health confidently.

"Before this project, I never realized how much menstruation could impact the lives of girl children. It was only after discussions with the HDO team, midwives, and PHIs that I truly understood the value of awareness sessions and the difference they can make among students. During this project, I began to wonder whether menstruation affected girls' school attendance. With help from the teachers, I started checking records and was surprised to find that it was indeed a major reason for absenteeism."

Mr. S. Sivanada Sundaram, Principal of K/Vivekananda Tamil Maha Vidyalayam, Kandy

Challenges and How We Responded

The CAAPP project led to significant changes in the school, particularly in how menstrual health was addressed. Before the initiative, girls had limited access to safe and affordable menstrual products, often relying on unhygienic alternatives. With the project's implementation, they gained access to essential products, improving menstrual hygiene and health.

However, the project faced initial resistance, as many principals and teachers were hesitant about conducting menstrual health awareness sessions involving both boys and girls, deeming it inappropriate. Despite this, continued engagement with the HDO team helped highlight the value of inclusive education, leading to support from educators.

Over time, open discussions about menstruation increased, gradually reducing stigma—though not eliminating it. Boys, once reluctant, began supporting menstrual health, contributing to a more inclusive environment. Male students and teachers also became involved in the discussions, signalling a cultural shift. These collective efforts not only improved menstrual hygiene but fostered a more respectful and supportive school atmosphere.

"As teachers, we used to think of menstruation as just a normal biological process and never gave much attention to its impact on students. After attending the HDO awareness sessions, we realized how important it is to focus on menstrual health and hygiene. We began paying closer attention and identified several issues among our girl students."

Ms. M. Kalaiselvi, Teacher – K/Vivekananda Tamil Maha Vidyalayam, Kandy

"After the sessions conducted by the HDO team, we were able to clear many doubts and gained a better understanding of menstruation. We received important clarifications and are now able to identify and differentiate between facts and the myths or social stigmas surrounding it. It was truly an eye-opening experience for students like us, helping us feel more confident and informed."

Miss. J. Abilashini, Student – K/Vivekananda Tamil Maha Vidyalayam, Kandy

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

HDO carried out the following activities:

25 Installed pad vending machines, sanitary napkins and disposal bins in 25 plantation sector schools, improving menstrual hygiene for schoolgirls

25 Conducted menstrual health and hygiene awareness sessions in the same 25 schools, reaching hundreds of students and teachers

30 Trained 30 women in reusable sanitary pad production, promoting sustainable practices and income generation

03 Provided 3 sewing machines and materials to 3 women's groups to support ongoing pad production efforts

2700 Reached 2,700 individuals through community-level awareness sessions, promoting knowledge and destigmatization

4500 Created and disseminated social media awareness videos, reaching 4,500 direct and 7,000 indirect beneficiaries

6000 Printed and distributed 6,000 informative leaflets on menstrual health and hygiene in local languages

Initiated a comprehensive research study on menstrual health and hygiene-related challenges among females in the plantation community of Kandy and Nuwara Eliya districts

20,000 A total of **20,000 individuals** directly benefited from the CAAPP project's interventions.

Through the CAAPP project, HDO has not only improved menstrual health and hygiene in plantation sector schools but also sparked a powerful cultural shift—one where periods are no longer a source of shame, but of strength and solidarity. By empowering young girls, engaging boys, and building community awareness, this initiative has laid the foundation for a more informed, inclusive, and confident generation

Periods Without Fear: Empowering Girls Through Education and Access

About the Humanitarian Development Organization (HDO)

Since 2016, the Humanitarian Development Organization (HDO) has been at the forefront of supporting war-affected populations in Sri Lanka's Northern Province. HDO's core mission focuses on promoting the safety, well-being, and empowerment of vulnerable communities, particularly women and girls, in post-conflict areas. Through its various initiatives, HDO works across sectors including gender protection, community development, health, livelihood and education. To ensure sustainability, HDO strengthens local structures like Village-Level Gender Protection Committees and School-Level Hygiene Promotion Clubs, partnering with stakeholders including the Ministry of Health, Education Department, and the Divisional Secretariat office.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project was implemented in six rural villages within the Madhu DS division in the Mannar district. One of the target schools, St. Lourds Maha Vidyalayam, faces severe menstrual health challenges due to poor infrastructure, stigma, and a lack of awareness. These issues have directly affected girls' school attendance and their overall well-being.

The school lacked proper toilet facilities, discouraging students from drinking water and changing their menstrual products, causing discomfort during menstruation.

Menstruation was misunderstood and treated as a form of "sick leave," leading to regular absenteeism among girls.

Menstrual health was a taboo subject, rarely discussed, and often ridiculed by male students, creating a culture of shame.

Teachers, parents, and male students had minimal knowledge of menstruation, offering little or no support to girls.

Around 30% of girls missed school during their periods, as recorded by school principals.

Students struggled to access sanitary products, with the nearest shop located 50 km away.

Many girls felt embarrassed and lacked resources to manage menstruation hygienically, affecting their health and dignity.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

The CAAPP project brought transformative and sustainable change to **St. Lourds Maha Vidyalayam** by improving the WASH facilities and promoting menstrual health education. New girls' toilets were constructed with changing spaces and disposal systems, while boys' toilets were also renovated, enhancing overall school sanitation.

A pad bank system was introduced, allowing students to access sanitary pads confidentially and consistently. The School Hygiene Promotion Club, formed through the project and took responsibility for maintaining the pad bank, encouraging sustainable hygiene practices.

These clubs led awareness campaigns, peer education sessions, parental awareness sessions, and hygiene drives that helped reduce menstrual stigma and promote long-term behavioral change.

Trained midwives and Public Health Inspectors (PHIs) conducted regular workshops for students and parents and follow-ups, ensuring accurate and continuous menstrual health education.

Teachers were also trained to become menstrual health advocates, fostering a supportive and open environment. Together, these efforts created a sustainable, inclusive, and healthier school culture for all students.

"Earlier, when I got my period, I was worried and ashamed and did not go to school. Now, I understand it is natural, and I feel much more confident. I no longer miss school or sports activities."

Miss. S. Vithusha, Student - Iranaiiluppaikulam GTMS School

Challenges and How We Responded

Initially, discussions around menstruation were met with hesitation from teachers, parents, and students due to cultural sensitivity. To overcome this, HDO partnered with midwives and doctors to introduce menstrual health through broader hygiene promotion. Street dramas on menstruation were developed and performed by students in schools, reaching other schools and helping to engage the wider community. This creative approach gradually normalized the topic. By the end of the project, students, teachers, and parents were confidently sharing their experiences.

Toilet maintenance was another key challenge, especially in rural schools where facilities were often damaged by male students. HDO established Hygiene Promotion Clubs, encouraging both boys and girls to take responsibility for maintaining school toilets. This fostered ownership and significantly reduced vandalism.

Additionally, unpredictable weather caused delays in toilet construction. HDO addressed this by hiring local workers who ensured proper storage of materials and worked extended hours to complete construction on time and with quality.

"Before the project, menstruation was an untouched term, and students would take sick leave. Now, our students and teachers have learned valuable lessons, and we have comprehensive hygiene facilities in the school."

Mr. Rajarathnam, Principal of Mn/St.Lourds Maha vidyalayam

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

HDO Vavuniya carried out the following activities:

06 Infrastructure improvements in 6 schools (renovation and new construction of toilets with water facilities)

200 Distributed reusable pads to 200 vulnerable students

06 Conducted educational workshops in 6 schools

400 Conducted awareness-raising street dramas that reached 400 individuals

20 20 women were trained in reusable pad production enabling them to generate income while addressing the local need for affordable menstrual products.

1200 A total of **1200 individuals** directly benefited from the project

HDO has not only improved menstrual hygiene facilities but also broken deep-rooted taboos surrounding menstruation in rural communities. By fostering education, access, and collective responsibility, the initiative has empowered girls to manage their periods with dignity and confidence. An effort to address a hidden issue has evolved into a collective journey toward empowerment, education, and lasting transformation.

Empowering Futures: How Investing in Menstrual Health and Hygiene Creates Lasting Change

About the Jaffna Social Action Center (JSAC)

In the heart of Sri Lanka's Northern and Eastern provinces, where communities are rebuilding and striving for a brighter future, the Jaffna Social Action Centre (JSAC) stands as a beacon of hope. Founded in 2003, JSAC is a dedicated special protection NGO committed to serving the most vulnerable – former internally displaced persons (IDPs), women-headed families, and children living in poverty across Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mannar, Vavuniya, Mullaitivu, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa districts.

Recognizing the profound impact of neglected needs on these communities, JSAC implements projects that not only address immediate challenges but also foster sustainable development, with a strong focus on safeguarding the well-being and rights of children and women.

Understanding the Ground Reality

One of the target schools (out of 10) is Kili/Paranthan Hindu Maha Vidyalayam, located in the heart of Paranthan town in the Kilinochchi district. The situation at the school before the intervention was as follows:

High Rate of Absenteeism: Girls' annual absenteeism was approximately 40% during their periods.

Lack of Sick Room: There was no designated sick room, leading girls to stay home during their menstrual periods.

Absence of Incinerators: The school lacked incinerators for the effective disposal of used sanitary pads, inevitably leading to clogged commodes.

Inadequate Toilet Facilities: There were no proper water facilities, and the existing toilets were shared with the staff of the Department of Zonal Education.

Lack of Understanding from Boys: Boy students did not consider understanding or supporting girl students during their periods.

No Access to Sanitary Pads: Students lacked an alternative way to obtain sanitary pads if their period started unexpectedly at school.

Hesitation to Discuss Menstruation: The school management, teachers, and students hesitated to speak openly about menstruation. Even when cascade trainings for both boys and girls were planned in a common area, the principal was reluctant to send the boys.

Neglect of SRHR Education: The concept of Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) was not taken seriously in teaching sessions. Teachers did not understand the importance of educating students about menstruation.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

The implementation of the CAAPP project at the school has led to significant attitudinal and infrastructural changes:

- **Enhanced WASH Facilities:** The wash facilities were improved, with readily available soap and water.
- **Sustainability through Health Club:** A health club was formed to reinforce the project's sustainability. Members of the health club take responsibility for monitoring the washrooms, incinerators, and the school premises.
- **Effective Waste Disposal:** Incinerators were built and are being used effectively, resolving the issue of clogged washrooms. Notably, the North Zonal Education Department, observing the effectiveness of the project, has also built washrooms with incinerators for their own use, thereby no longer needing to share the students' facilities.

"We as girls do not speak about this even with our close friends, but through the drama JSAC showed at our school, We realized how we are mistreating ourselves. So from the moment of the drama, we no longer felt afraid or ashamed of our menstruation. This should reach all the schools especially for boys"

Student - Kili/Tharumapuram Central College

- **Increased Awareness and Participation:** Following training for School Public Health Inspectors (SPHIs), Public Health Inspectors (PHIs), and Public Health Midwives (PHMs), the principal agreed to include boys in the training and actively participated himself. He realized the importance of the concept. Subsequently, during a donor visit, the school management requested further cascade trainings and awareness programs for students from grade 6 onwards.
- **Reduced Absenteeism:** Girls' absenteeism has considerably reduced (by approximately 20%).
- **Integration of SRHR Education:** SRHR-related lessons are no longer skipped. Teachers have taken the initiative to address their own discomfort and reluctance to discuss menstruation.
- **Improved Peer Support:** Male students no longer humiliate girls during their periods. If a girl is suffering or has stains on her uniform, boys either ignore it or discreetly inform a female peer. Boys are now more helpful.
- **Pad Bank Initiative:** The initiation of a pad bank has facilitated easy access to sanitary pads for students without hesitation. Despite the lack of a dedicated sick room initially, the management allocated space for one, and the CAAPP project provided beds, pillows, bed sheets, and first aid items, contributing to gender parity.
- **Teacher Empowerment:** Teachers also received first aid training alongside menstrual hygiene management training, enabling them to further empower other teachers and students through the health club.

Challenges and How We Responded

JSAC initially faced delays in obtaining approval from Government Stakeholders for infrastructure development in schools and for conducting the TOT for stakeholders. However, JSAC was later able to build a strong relationship with these stakeholders. The Schools, Zonal Education Departments, Regional Director of Health Services (RDHS) Doctors, SPHIs, SPHMs, PHIs, PHMs, and District Secretariats provided their full cooperation for the successful implementation of the project. They also contribute to the project's sustainability by monitoring the schools where the CAAPP project has been implemented.

We anticipated that the stigma surrounding menstruation in the communities of Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts would be a hurdle to conducting trainings and street dramas on menstruation, potentially causing community unrest. However, when adequate knowledge about menstruation was delivered through resource persons such as PHIs, PHMs, and professional drama troupes, people welcomed the concept. They expressed that this theme should reach the entire districts, not just a few villages or schools.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

JSAC carried out the following activities:

08 Infrastructure improvements in 08 schools (constructing MHM units, improving WASH facilities) 1100 students

10 Conducted awareness dramas in 10 schools (1278 students) and 6 villages (1015 individuals)

10 Distribution of Pad banks for 10 schools- 1100 female students

144 Conducted ToT for stakeholders (144 individuals)

1000 Sanitary pads, soaps and underwear were donated during the times of flood for the two district secretariats(1000 women)

1500 Sickroom renovation was done in 08 schools- around 1500 students both boys and girls use this facility

09 Conducted cascade trainings at 09 schools (686 students) and 11 communities (503 individual)

8326 A total of **8326 individuals** benefited directly.

Menstrual health is no longer a whispered struggle in these communities — it is now a shared responsibility and a symbol of strength. JSAC, through the CAAPP project, has proven that when we empower girls, we uplift entire communities. Let this be a call to keep the momentum alive, and to ensure that every girl feels seen, supported, and proud — every day of the month.

"Female students now do not consider menstruation a serious factor to take leave from school. They use the incinerators properly. Now the school has been provided with a pad bank so the students get the direct benefit. Boys too have become empathetic towards their female peers. The student attendance has improved by about 20%"

Mr. Madhusoothanan, Deputy Principal of the Kili/Paranthan Hindu Maha Vidyalayam

Menstruation Without Barriers: A Right, Not a Privilege

About the Nature Foundation

Nature Foundation (NF) is a registered non-profit organization dedicated to community development with a focus on environmental dialogue. Operating in Sri Lanka since 2005, NF is recognized by the Monaragala District Secretariat and the National NGO Secretariat. Guided by a board of respected scholars and community leaders, NF has expanded its reach by launching child education and youth entrepreneurship programs. Through its innovative and people-centered approach, NF empowers individuals to enhance their knowledge, achieve their goals, and lead their own development initiatives.

Understanding the Ground Reality

Many schools, where Nature Foundation works, did not have proper toilet facilities. The abandoned and unhygienic toilets usually created serious challenges for girls. These toilets are often broken, dirty, or completely abandoned, offering no privacy or running water. Girls, especially during menstruation, face difficulties in managing their hygiene, leading to discomfort and embarrassment. Without proper facilities, they often stay home during their menstruations.

All 10 schools selected for the CAAPP project did not have dedicated WASH facilities for menstruators. This situation resulted in frequent absenteeism and poor academic performance. The lack of safe, private toilets also caused stress and health risks. The school sources revealed that 70% of girls miss at least 04 days per month due to menstruation, significantly affecting their academic performance.

The CAAPP Project Intervention

With the intervention of the CAAPP project - supported by the French Embassy in Sri Lanka and Maldives, implemented in collaboration with The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka - the dilapidated and unhygienic toilets were converted in to clean and safer washing places for girls.

Awareness Programmes: School-based awareness sessions on menstrual health and hygiene were conducted for both girls and boys, while separate awareness sessions were organized for parents to enhance their understanding and encourage open, supportive conversations at home.

Access to Hygiene Products: Pad banks were established in schools, with menstrual hygiene products initially supplied by the project. These units are now sustainably maintained through student-led initiatives, including donations and the sale of handmade crafts.

Infrastructure Development: Several damaged toilets were fully renovated to ensure privacy and hygiene for menstruating students. Additionally, waste disposal units were installed in each school to support proper menstrual waste management.

Community Engagement & Breaking Stigma: A street drama group was established as an educational initiative of the project. Kandy District Street drama shows were performed in the project area. The awareness created through performances helped normalize conversations about menstruation, encouraging male students, teachers, parents and other community members to support menstrual health.

The renovation of school toilets by CAAPP has significantly strengthened the confidence and trust of menstruating girls. With the introduction of clean, private facilities equipped with running water and proper disposal methods, girls can now manage their menstrual hygiene comfortably and with dignity. This improvement has led to reduced absenteeism, as students no longer feel compelled to miss school during their menstruation due to inadequate toilet facilities.

Moreover, the availability of well-maintained and accessible changing spaces has contributed to a safer and more supportive school environment. Previously, girls faced challenges such as the risk of harassment when using poorly maintained toilets. The enhanced sense of safety now allows students to concentrate better on their studies and feel free from the stress of managing their menstruation in unhygienic conditions. The initiative by CAAPP has clearly demonstrated a positive impact created through proper sanitation facilities at schools.

Challenges and How We Responded

One of the biggest challenges was overcoming the deep-rooted stigma surrounding menstruation. Many parents and even teachers hesitated to discuss menstrual health, fearing it would be inappropriate. To address this, the project integrated awareness into broader health and hygiene sessions, making the topic less taboo.

In some schools, maintenance of new toilets was a concern. The project established hygiene committees, assigning responsibility to students and staff to keep facilities clean and stocked.

Another challenge was ensuring sustainability of the pad banks. Initially, students were reluctant to donate or participate in fundraising activities. However, with mentorship from teachers, students developed a mini-market initiative to generate funds for menstrual hygiene products.

"Earlier, I felt scared and embarrassed to come to school during my menstruation, because the toilets were dirty, had no water, and no proper place to change or dispose pads. Sometimes, I even stayed home and missed classes. But now, after the toilet renovation by the CAAPP Project, everything has changed. The toilets are clean, private, and have running water and bins for disposal. I feel safe and comfortable, even during menstruation. I can focus on my studies without worrying. I thank the CAAPP project, for understanding our needs and making school a better place for girls like me."

Miss. Oshadi Adhithya, Student - CP/Denu/ Lagamuwa M.V

"The renovation of our school toilet by the CAAPP project has made a remarkable difference, especially for our female students. Previously, many girls missed school during their menstruation due to the lack of clean and private facilities. Now, with proper private and hygienic washrooms and safe disposal methods, we have seen a noticeable improvement in attendance and participation of girls. The girls feel more confident and comfortable, and it has created a more supportive and respectful school environment. This initiative has improved hygiene and strengthened our efforts to ensure that no girl is left behind in her education".

Ms. Himali Senavirathna, Teacher - CP/Denu/ Lagamuwa M.V

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

Nature Foundation carried out the following activities:

40 40 school-based awareness sessions on menstrual health and hygiene were conducted in 10 schools with the participation of 1112 girls and boys

02 2 teams were **formed for the** production of reusable sanitary pads, each consisting of 10 members – 5 from each ethnic community

10 10 workshops were held to educate parents and 327 persons participated

10 10 pad banks were established in schools

10 10 damaged toilets were completely renovated ensuring privacy and hygiene for menstruating students. Waste disposal units were installed at each school to promote proper menstrual waste management

887 The CAAPP project has directly **impacted 887 girls across 10 schools**, improving menstrual health and hygiene for over **3,000 family members** in large

Dignity in Every Cycle: Empowering Muslim Communities Through Menstrual Health Education

About the Rural Economic and Community Development Organization (RECDO)

The Rural Economic and Community Development Organization (RECDO) has been serving communities in the Trincomalee District for over 25 years, championing grassroots development and social justice. Committed to promoting dignity and equity, especially for marginalized women and children, RECDO has become a trusted voice in tackling entrenched social issues. Through impactful work in community health, education, and gender equity, the organization has built strong relationships with local communities. In recent years, RECDO has prioritized menstrual health as a key element of gender justice, working with local and international partners to break taboos and ensure access to dignified menstrual care for girls.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project was commenced across five Medical Officer of Health (MOH) areas of four Divisional Secretariat Divisions, namely Kantale, Thambalagamam, Kurinchakerny, Kinniya, and Muthur. RECDO did a problem analysis which highlighted the challenges related to menstruation in the Muslim community, specifically in the Trincomalee district. A needs assessment was carried out by RECDO and five consultations were conducted in Kanthale, Muthur, Thoppur, and Kinniya, involving various stakeholders, women's organizations, female scholars (Muallimas) teaching in Islamic religious schools (Madarasas), university girls, women working in private companies, male Islamic scholars (Moulavi/Muallim), and government service representatives that included the Medical Officer of Health (MoH), medical officers, and midwives. These consultations were conducted to engage beneficiaries and partners from Trincomalee in determining the best solutions to combat period poverty.

The study and consultations conducted by RECDO revealed several deep-rooted cultural, religious, and infrastructural challenges affecting menstrual health and dignity among Muslim girls and women.

» Menstruation is considered a taboo topic, leading to widespread secrecy, shame, and stigma. Girls avoid discussing menstruation, especially with male family members, reinforcing the idea that menstruation is something to be hidden or ashamed of. Many girls feel embarrassed purchasing menstrual products, even in private settings.

- Menstruation is often misunderstood as a form of impurity or divine punishment. These misconceptions result in exclusion from religious practices and social activities, especially during Ramadan. Women are often restricted from participating in everyday activities while menstruating.
- Cultural and religious restrictions discourage menstruating girls from attending school or engaging in normal activities, affecting their academic performance, confidence, and future opportunities. This leads to school absenteeism, lower educational attainment, and reduced public participation.
- Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) education, especially related to menstrual hygiene, is severely lacking. Medical officers report that many Muslim girls and women, particularly in rural areas, have limited knowledge about menstruation and menstrual hygiene practices.
- Islamic religious schools for girls often lack basic water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) facilities. The conservative environment in many madrasas is not conducive to open discussions on healthy menstrual management.
- Many girls from marginalized areas (e.g., Thoppur, Muthur, Kanthale, parts of Kinniya) lack access to affordable, hygienic menstrual products. Harmful coping methods are common, including the use of old cloths, tissue, or reusing pads for several days. These practices pose serious health risks, including infections and long-term reproductive health complications.

"This project has been very important and useful to us. Although we initially wanted to establish a hygiene centre, we were unable to do so on our own. The initiative taken by RECDO is truly appreciated. As a ladies' Arabic college, we frequently observed students leaving the Madrasa, often saying they had a headache or were feeling unwell, symptoms related to menstruation. However, since the intervention, students no longer leave during their menstrual periods. We were fortunate to receive this support from RECDO. We are committed to developing a sustainable system to maintain and strengthen this centre for the long term. We extend our thanks to RECDO and the donors who made this possible.."

Ms. Rifana Zakkab, Principal - Mathaniya Arabic College

The CAAPP Project Intervention

This pioneering initiative marks the first menstrual hygiene and dignity program specifically targeting Muslim girls in the Eastern Province. As a pilot project, it has gained significant appreciation from community and religious leaders, demonstrating a successful model that is expected to be scaled up across other schools and Arabic colleges. RECDO's strategic coordination, stakeholder engagement, and culturally sensitive approach have contributed to the program's effective implementation and sustainability.

In collaboration with South-eastern University, RECDO developed an Islamic perspective handbook on menstruation to address stigma, educate girls and women, and serve as a resource for Alims, Muallimas, parents, and educators.

A comprehensive study was conducted to explore Islamic teachings on menstruation, current awareness levels, stigma, harmful practices, and WASH facilities in Muslim schools and madrasas in Trincomalee.

A two-day training for 10–15 Alims equipped them to deliver Friday sermons integrating Islamic and medical perspectives on menstrual dignity, aiming to educate male audiences and encourage support for menstrual health initiatives.

A two-day training of trainers session for 15–20 SRHR professionals and religious educators enhanced their capacity to deliver rights-based, empowerment-focused menstrual health education aligned with donor objectives.

Targeting 1,500 girls across 10 Muslim schools and 5 madrasas in Kinniya, Kanthale, Thoppur, and Muthur, menstrual health summits were conducted. These summits included workshops, film screenings, and consultations to promote menstrual hygiene awareness and confidence.

Eight short dramas were produced and broadcast via Pirai FM and social media, addressing menstrual stigma and promoting dignity in a culturally appropriate and engaging format.

A pilot initiative offering a dignified, safe space for girls, including access to free menstrual products was implemented in two schools and two madrasas. The space also serves as a social hub for girls during and outside their menstrual periods.

Challenges and How We Responded

Delays in printing the Islamic handbook as per the timeline occurred due to the workload of the printers.

This is the first time menstrual hygiene was discussed openly, and it was met with hesitation from teachers, parents, and students due to cultural sensitivity. To overcome this, RECDO used trained Alimas, Alims, counselling teachers, MOHs, and WDOs to facilitate these sessions easily.

There were delays in the selection of restrooms in schools and Arabic colleges. As per our plan, the schools and Madrasas had to provide a suitable room for the restrooms, but the selected centers did not have enough rooms. RECDO then had an additional discussion with the local heads of the centers and explained to them the importance of the rest rooms in girls' schools and madrasas.

It proved difficult to select a consultant for preparation of the menstrual hygiene policy. As this is a pilot project, there was no expert consultant in this field. Therefore, RECDO decided to select consultants from a law and religious background.

Challenges were also faced in organizing workshops and seminars due to the recurrent examinations, elections, flooding and seasonal holidays in the schools and Arabic colleges. A change in the original timeline and preparing a tight schedule, helped complete the scheduled workshops.

"The establishment of a menstrual hygiene center in our school has brought several important changes in the lives of the students. It has encouraged us to pay more attention to both our physical and mental health. The difficulties we previously faced due to hesitation and lack of awareness have now significantly reduced"

Miss. Shaafi Misnath, Student - T/M/An Nahar Girls College.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

RECDO carried out the following activities:

500 Publication of 500 Islamic Handbooks on Menstrual Dignity

15 Trained 15 male Alims to conduct Friday Sermons

21 Conducted 21 Menstrual Health Summits in Arabic colleges and ladies' schools -1890 students benefited

341 Conducted an Islamic research amongst 341 students in Trincomalee on Menstrual Dignity

15 Conducted TOT sessions for WDOs, MOHs, Midwifes, Alims, Muallaimas, school counselling teachers - 15 participants directly benefited

3025 Provided Menstrual Products for 02 Muslim girls schools and two Arabic colleges - 3025 students benefited from this

08 Prepared and broadcast 8 short audio dramas on Regional Radio (Pirai FM) and social media – Facebook views were more than 10,000 views in total

The CAAPP project in Trincomalee stands as a powerful example of how culturally sensitive, community-led approaches can break taboos and restore dignity around menstruation. By centering education, inclusion, and access, this initiative has not only improved the menstrual health of Muslim girls and women but also laid the groundwork for a more equitable future. Through strong partnerships and local leadership, RECDO has sparked a lasting movement toward menstrual justice in the Eastern Province.


COLLECTIVE ACTION AGAINST PERIOD POVERTY
PROJECT "CAAPP"
What happens during the menstrual cycle?

“I Learn, I Share, I Grow”: Transforming Menstrual Health

About the Sarvodaya Women's Movement

Sarvodaya Women's Movement (SWM) is a Sri Lankan non-profit organization based in Colombo, initially founded in 1987 as a branch of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement and registered independently in 2001. SWM is dedicated to improving health services and overall well-being through a rights-based, professional approach. With a focus on public health, education, gender, and women's empowerment, SWM works closely with communities—especially in rural areas—to address challenges affecting women, children, the elderly, and marginalized groups, aiming to ensure equitable access to quality social services and national resources.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP project's introduction of reusable sanitary napkins in 5 districts in the Northern Province responded to an urgent need for affordable, sustainable menstrual products and menstrual health education.

Women and adolescent girls—particularly single mothers and war widows from low-income households—struggled to afford commercial sanitary products regularly. Many resorted to unsafe alternatives due to cost, lack of access, or unavailability in local markets, leading to discomfort and potential health risks during menstruation.

Adding to this, most women had no comprehensive knowledge of menstrual hygiene and management (MHM). Basic practices such as proper washing, drying, and storage of cloth materials were poorly understood. Myths and misconceptions around menstruation further discouraged hygienic behavior and open discussion. This lack of awareness created shame and secrecy around periods, making it difficult for women to seek support or explore alternative products like reusable pads.

Environmental concerns were also significant. With limited waste disposal systems in rural areas, communities faced growing challenges from improperly discarded disposable pads, which were often burnt or buried. This reinforced the need for reusable, eco-friendly solutions.

Furthermore, although reusable pads offer a sustainable option, the target communities lacked the technical knowledge and resources to produce them. There were no structured opportunities for learning or skills development related to pad-making, and cultural stigma made it difficult for women to engage publicly in such activities.

These combined challenges—economic, educational, environmental, and cultural—underscored the need for a locally driven, skills-based intervention that would introduce reusable sanitary pads while also promoting menstrual health awareness and women's empowerment.

"This project gave me more than just a skill—it gave me a purpose. I never imagined I could stand in front of other women and teach something that changes lives. Now, I earn, I share, and I grow with every session. I see women smile with confidence again—and that's the real reward."

Mrs.Basnayake, Anuradhapura

The CAAPP Project Intervention

The CAAPP project brought transformative and sustainable change to menstrual health and hygiene in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, while empowering women and girls through entrepreneurship. The reusable pad-making initiative specifically targeted single mothers and war widows from low-income families across the region.

A total of 150 women were selected—30 from each district—to be trained and empowered through this program. The project aimed to support women and girls experiencing period poverty by providing education on reusable sanitary pads and promoting comprehensive menstrual health awareness.

Trainees were educated on how to produce reusable sanitary napkins as a sustainable and affordable alternative to commercial menstrual products. The sessions also focused on breaking taboos around menstruation and creating awareness about menstrual health.

One-day training sessions were conducted in each district, where participants were provided with all necessary materials and toolkits. As part of the initiative, mother support groups were established within each district to ensure continued peer learning and community support.

In the future, the project aims to expand these efforts by further strengthening women's economic empowerment—supporting them to market their products with the required certifications, and scaling the initiative across the province.

Challenges and How We Responded

One of the major challenges we faced was the delay in obtaining government approval for the production and distribution of reusable sanitary napkins. This delayed our progress in the initial stages of the project. To address this, we proactively engaged with the relevant authorities, providing additional documentation and clarifications to help expedite the approval process. This approach enabled us to move forward with the initiative and continue working towards our goals.

Another challenge was sourcing suitable fabrics locally in the Northern Province, which impacted the production process. The lack of access to appropriate materials in the region hindered our ability to scale production efficiently. To mitigate this, we plan to compile a list of reliable fabric suppliers in Colombo and share their contact details with the entrepreneurs involved in the project. This will help them directly access the raw materials needed for production, ensuring a more sustainable and effective supply chain.

Additionally, the production of reusable sanitary pads is currently limited to just five districts in the Northern Province, which restricts the overall reach of the project. To address this limitation, we aim to expand the initiative to all 25 districts of Sri Lanka. By identifying additional support structures, streamlining the supply chain, and ensuring the availability of key resources, we hope to scale the project and create a greater impact across the country.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

The Sarvodaya Women's Movement carried out the following activities:

500 Supplied reusable and disposable sanitary napkins to 500 adolescents

150 Screened 150 women for health-related concerns

50 Delivered 50 school awareness sessions in all 5 districts, impacting 2,500 participants

05 Established 5 management committees, one in each district, to oversee project activities

05 Conducted 5 national-level focus group discussions to gather insights and feedback

10 Organized 10 awareness programs focused on eco-friendly menstrual products

35 Held 35 awareness sessions on menstrual hygiene management across all 5 districts, reaching 1,750 participants

150 Provided training for 150 women on making reusable sanitary pads through a Training of Trainers (ToT) approach

Created and shared social media posts to raise awareness and disseminate the project's message

150 Conducted 5 project orientation and brainstorming sessions, engaging 150 participants

Distributed toolkits to support mother support groups in the community

Launched a national-level guidebook for menstrual hygiene management

5750 In total, 5,750 individuals directly benefited from the project, making a significant impact on menstrual hygiene awareness and the availability of essential products

The CAAPP project in the Northern Province is a testament to how localized, skill-based interventions can challenge taboos, restore dignity, and open new paths for women's empowerment. By centering education, environmental consciousness, and economic opportunity, this initiative has not only improved menstrual health but has also planted the seeds for long-term change—led by women, sustained by community, and driven by the belief that every woman deserves to manage her period with confidence and pride.

Bloom Advocates Leading the Menstrual Health Movement in Jaffna

About Save a Life

Save a Life

Save a Life is a youth-led NGO based in Jaffna, working across Sri Lanka in the fields of Health and Environment. Its cross-cutting focus areas include Youth Development, Gender Equality, Economic Empowerment, and Lasting Peace. The organization aims to build informed, resilient communities by fostering leadership and innovation among young people. Save a Life is guided by core values that shape its mission and approach. The organization is committed to equity, transparency, participation, innovation, and zero tolerance for discrimination. These principles drive inclusive engagement with communities and stakeholders, promote accountable and ethical practices, and ensure sustainable, forward-thinking solutions. At every level, Save a Life fosters a safe, just, and empowering environment that reflects its vision for a healthier and more equitable future.

Understanding the Ground Reality

Save a Life is working to reduce menstrual stigma, promote sustainable practices, and improve menstrual well-being. The project focuses on schools, universities, and underserved communities, aiming to increase awareness, build young advocates, and create supportive environments for menstrual health. In Jaffna and other parts of the Northern Province, menstruation remains a sensitive and often avoided topic. Cultural taboos, silence, and misinformation have made it difficult for young people, especially girls, to access proper menstrual hygiene and support. Many students lacked access to sanitary products, safe disposal systems, or private changing areas in schools. Fear of embarrassment, social restrictions, and a lack of knowledge led many girls to miss school during their periods. Conversations at home and in school were minimal, and even teachers had a limited understanding. Without proper infrastructure like incinerators or pad banks, menstrual health remained a neglected issue impacting not just hygiene, but also dignity and access to education.

"Yoga sessions not only helped students manage pain but also encouraged open conversations about menstrual health."

Mr. Piriyanthan, Teacher - Kaithady Nuffield School

The CAAPP Project Intervention

A key highlight was the formation of the Bloom Advocates—a group of 25 youth leaders recruited through an open social media call. These volunteers were divided into five teams: Beacon, Compass, Eagle, Pure Vibes, and Spectrum, and were trained to lead menstrual health education and advocacy across schools, universities, and communities. With mentorship from the Department of Medicine, University of Jaffna, they received technical support to design culturally sensitive and fact-based awareness programs.

Each team focused on a specific geographical area:

Beacon Team worked in J/Senguntha Hindu College and J/Vannarpannai Navalar Maha Vidyalayam, raising awareness and advocating for access to pad storage facilities.

Compass Team supported menstrual health education for women and girls in J/Kokuvil Sri Ramakrishna Vidyasalai, J/Periyapulam Maha Vidyalayam, and GN Division J/98.

Eagle Team led awareness campaigns in J/Kopay Central College and J/Puttur Sri Somaskanda College, while advocating for the installation of incinerators.

Pure Vibes Team focused on students in the Faculty of Arts and Department of Psychology at the University of Jaffna, promoting access to menstrual products and improved facilities.

Spectrum Team conducted awareness campaigns in J/Columbuthurai Hindu Maha Vidyalayam, J/Koddady Namasivaya Vidyalayam, and among youth groups, promoting the message that “Menstrual Health is a Human Right.

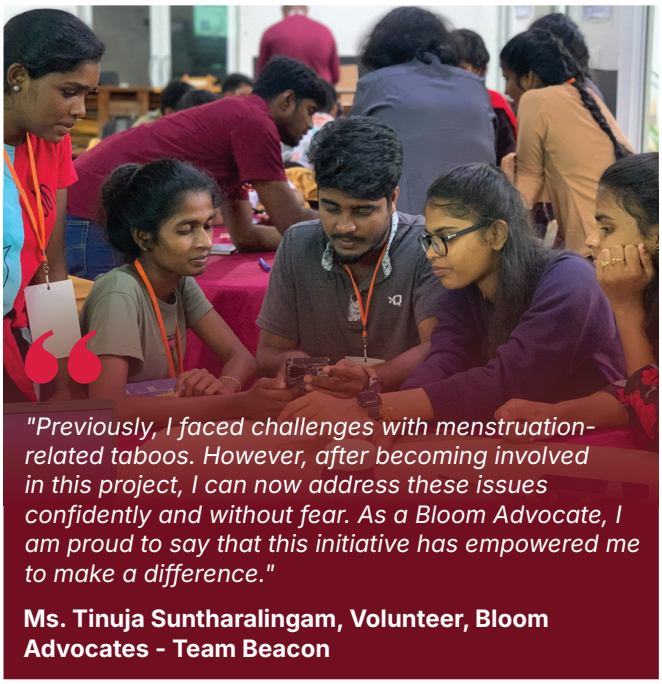
These youth-led teams not only created awareness but also worked closely with school staff and community members to push for structural changes. Their efforts played a vital role in breaking the silence around menstruation in Jaffna—a region where open discussion on the topic was once unheard of.

Challenges and How We Responded

In Jaffna, introducing menstrual health was especially difficult due to deep-rooted myths, taboos, and social restrictions. Public discussions on menstruation were rare and often discouraged. At the start, Save a Life faced hesitation from students, parents, and teachers, making it hard to openly engage communities.

To address this, the team began with broader SRHR sessions and gradually introduced menstrual health topics. The involvement of Bloom Advocates—local youth—was essential in breaking the silence. Their presence helped build trust and normalize the conversation through peer-led sessions, storytelling, and respectful community engagement.

Infrastructure upkeep was another challenge. School-based MHM committees were formed to maintain incinerators and pad banks. This student-led model promoted shared responsibility and care. In more resistant areas, continued support from Bloom Advocates helped sustain trust and encourage long-term change.



"Previously, I faced challenges with menstruation-related taboos. However, after becoming involved in this project, I can now address these issues confidently and without fear. As a Bloom Advocate, I am proud to say that this initiative has empowered me to make a difference."

Ms. Tinuja Suntharalingam, Volunteer, Bloom Advocates - Team Beacon

"This kind of initiative is so important for raising awareness among youth. We appreciate your efforts and encourage you to work closely with the Gender Cell Unit in our university to continue these activities."

Prof. S. Raguram, Dean - Faculty of Arts, University of Jaffna.

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

Save a life carried out the following activities:

3700+ 3,700+ individuals directly reached, including approx. 2,200 students and 1,500 community members

05 5 schools received sanitary pad incinerators, improving hygiene and comfort

14 14 awareness sessions conducted for students, parents, and teachers

25 25 Bloom Advocates trained and actively lead community engagement

05 Yoga for Menstrual Pain Relief introduced in 5 schools, improving mental and physical well-being

05 Stronger partnerships built with schools, universities, the Divisional Secretariat, and health institutions

School-level MHM committees and pad banks established and sustained

Menstrual hygiene kits (pads, soap, disposal bags) and guidebooks distributed

Mentorship from the Department of Medicine, University of Jaffna ensured accurate and inclusive education

Yoga Video Guide is now widely used in schools and endorsed by the Education Department

Through this project, menstruation is no longer a hidden or shameful topic in many schools and communities. Youth leaders, especially the Bloom Advocates, continue to be role models and change makers, ensuring that menstrual health is recognized as a right and supported through lasting systems of care and education.

Bleeding Behind Closed Doors: Menstrual Stigma in Colombo

About Shanthi Maargam

Shanthi Maargam is committed to providing safe spaces for emotional healing and holistic learning for adolescents and youth in poor urban communities of Sri Lanka. The name Shanthi Maargam, meaning "Pathways to Peace" in Sinhala and Tamil, reflects its mission to help young people heal from trauma, manage emotions, and foster peaceful communities. Since its establishment in 2016 as a registered NGO, Shanthi Maargam has worked with vulnerable youth to address emotional trauma and reduce violence. Operating in a low-income area, it has become a trusted community-based mental health service provider, supporting 200 clients monthly and training 20 interns annually.

Understanding the Ground Reality

The CAAPP Project, conducted by Shanthi Maargam, was carried out across poor urban communities in Colombo, including Gothamipura, Wanathamulla, Obeysekarapura, Suduwella, and Slave Island. Despite being in the heart of the city, these areas faced serious menstrual health challenges rooted in stigma, myths, and a lack of proper support.

- A lack of scientific research meant communities remained trapped in cycles of misinformation.
- Menstruation was rarely discussed openly, seen as something shameful or private.
- Girls' first periods were marked with costly "big girl" parties, but real menstrual health education was missing
- There was a lack of knowledge about new menstrual products and about good menstrual practices.
- Many women hid their periods from male partners and avoided speaking about menstruation at all.
- Cultural myths led girls to avoid nutritious foods during menstruation, harming their health.
- Some mothers migrated abroad to earn money for these celebrations, leaving their children in the care of others outside the family

The CAAPP Project Intervention

Shanthi Maargam conducted a research study in collaboration with the Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), covering urban communities in the Colombo District, including Gothamipura, Wanathamulla, Obeysekarapura, Suduwella (Maradana), and Slave Island. A total of 602 participants took part in a research study titled "Exploring Menstrual Practices, Stigma, Discrimination, and Access to Menstrual Products and WASH Facilities." Key findings revealed widespread misconceptions and poor access to menstrual health resources.

In response, Shanthi Maargam organized a series of community and school-based awareness sessions. These sessions included counselling awareness, dissemination of research findings and medical education.

Shanthi Maargam also conducted community training workshops, reaching many participants from the target areas.

A teacher training workshop was held for Mariyam Girls' School teachers in Slave Island, and a pad bank was established there to improve access to menstrual products.

Additionally, Shanthi Maargam conducted a Training of Trainers (ToT) programme for selected community members, aiming to build local capacity.

Throughout the project, counselling sessions were provided, along with ongoing hotline sessions and tele-counselling sessions. To ensure long-term success, Shanthi Maargam also organized training sessions for its own counselling professionals to enhance their skills.

Challenges and How We Responded

A major challenge was the cultural taboo surrounding menstruation, making many participants uncomfortable discussing the topic. To overcome this, we created respectful and inclusive sessions with facilitators, counsellors, and local figures like teachers, using storytelling and personal sharing to ease participants into the conversation.

Engaging with the community for collecting data for our research study was challenging, as outsiders were not always welcomed. We worked closely with community leaders identified through Grama Niladhari officers, which helped us connect better with the community.

Organizing open community workshops was difficult too, with married women, unmarried women, and teenage girls all attending together, representing multiple age categories. This made it tricky for the resource person to manage the sessions, but we improved logistics to make things smoother.

Getting permission from the education department to run workshops at schools also took time as they were focused on academics. We built strong relationships with education authorities to gain approval.

"I had never even heard about tampons, menstrual cups, or period panties before attending the CAAPP training. I didn't know such things existed. But during the session, we not only learned about them, but we were also allowed to see and touch these products. It really opened my eyes to how many helpful options are available for managing our periods."

Community member - Slave island

"Before joining the CAAPP training, I believed that women should not work during their periods, visit religious places, bathe, or eat meat. These were beliefs passed down in our culture. But during the training, doctors clearly explained that these beliefs are not based on science. Now I know how to take care of myself properly during my period, without feeling shame or fear."

Community member - Obeysekarapura

Transformative Outcomes of the CAAPP Project

Shanthi Maargam carried out the following activities:

200 Established a pad bank at Mariyam Girls' School in Slave Island (200 Students)

500 Conducted 8 community-based training workshops, benefiting 500 individuals

602 **Conducted a research study on menstrual health practices, stigma, and access to products, reaching 602 participants**

350 Organized 350 participants in research finding based awareness sessions , counselling awareness and medical education sessions

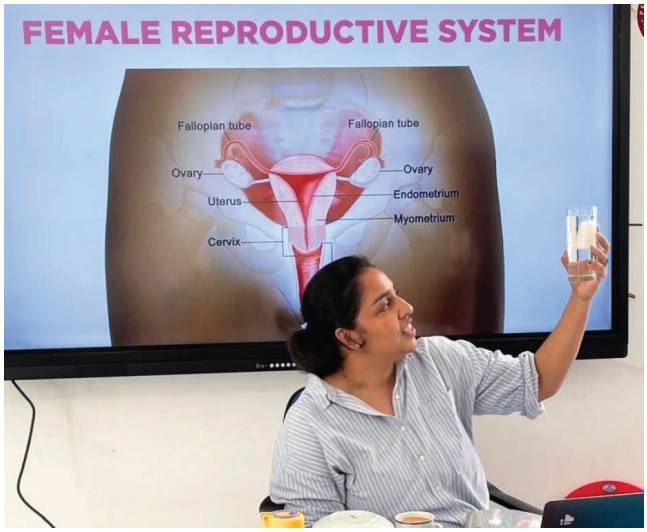
30 Trained teachers at Mariyam Girls' School to improve menstrual health education (30 participants)

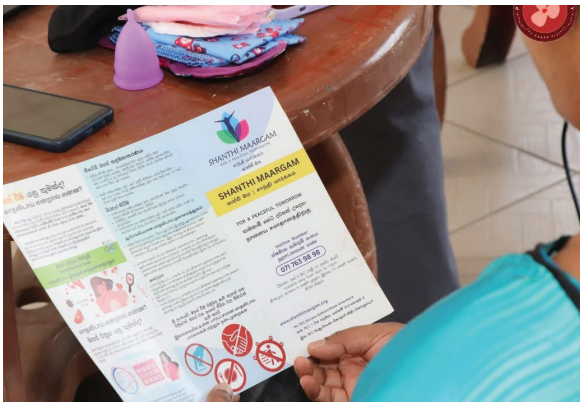
638 Provided 638 counselling sessions, 48 ongoing hotline sessions and 138 tele-counseling sessions

Conducted a Training of Trainers (ToT) programme for selected community members

1318 A total of 1318 individuals (500 community members / 550 students / 238 counselling beneficiaries/ 30 Teachers/) directly benefited from the project

The CAAPP project created space for open conversations around menstruation in communities where the topic was often hidden in silence. It gave girls, women, and even community leaders the knowledge and confidence to break myths and support each other. By building awareness and improving access to menstrual products and care, Shanthi Maargam helped bring dignity, choice, and understanding into the lives of many. The journey continues, but these first steps have already made a lasting impact.


FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE SYSTEM
Fallopian tube
Fallopian tube
Ovary
Ovary
Uterus
Endometrium
Myometrium
Cervix


SHANTHI MAARGAM
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Impact Highlights of the CAAPP Project

The Collective Action Against Period Poverty (CAAPP) project has created lasting change by improving access to menstrual health, hygiene, and dignity across Sri Lanka. Here's a snapshot of our impact:

76,000+ 76,000+ individuals directly benefited from the CAAPP project.

23,487+ Increased access to period products for 23,487+ students.

106 Sanitary disposal systems, wash facilities, and infrastructure developed in 106 schools.

4,023 4,023 youth trained on MHM, stigma, and discrimination, and mentored as peer leaders.

1,000+ Yoga for period pain introduced in 5 schools, reaching 1,000+ students.

42,453 42,453 school students trained in Menstrual Health & Hygiene (MHM) and WASH

4,000+ 5 national-level events (Period Proud – Colombo 2023 & 2025, Jaffna 2024, Photo and Art Exhibition, Kite Festival) reached 4,000+ participants.

03 3 research studies on period poverty conducted in Kandy, Colombo, and Trincomalee.

70 70 students with special needs supported through tailored interventions.

200 200 doctors, nurses, and midwives trained in Central, and Western provinces

84 The PAD bank concept implemented in 84 schools.

458 458 women in the estate sector now have access to period cups.

3,090,294+ Social media campaigns by the 13 CAAPP partners reached 3,090,294+ people.

60+ MHM best practices shared with 60+ CSOs/ CBOs to promote sustainability

26 26 period kits distributed to NGOs and local MoH offices.

15 15 incinerators installed in schools to support safe sanitary disposal.

01 1 pad-making machine built in the estate sector.

300 300 women trained in reusable pad making.

50 50 master trainers empowered on MHM, stigma, and discrimination.

10 10 restrooms established in schools for improved menstrual hygiene access.

200 200 stitching tool kits were provided to support women in making reusable sanitary pads.

03 Three sewing machines were provided to support women in making reusable sanitary pads.

03 A national book on MHM published in 3 languages.

200,000 The CAAPP project has reached over 200,000 indirect beneficiaries.

An Islamic MHM handbook developed for faith-based inclusion.

The Menstrupedia book was locally adapted for the Sri Lankan context.

Teleconsultation services were established to address menstrual health concerns

A trainer manual on menstruation produced in Sinhala, Tamil, and English.

The CAAPP project stands as a model of collective impact, bridging grassroots action and national advocacy to create a more period-friendly Sri Lanka for all.

The CAAPP Project Implemented By:

Technical Partners:

The Family Planning Association of Sri Lanka

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THE CAAPP PROJECT

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