

Uplifting Vulnerable Communities: Shanthi Maargam's Response to Sri Lanka's Economic Hardships and Mental Health Needs -November 2023

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1. Introduction

In the face of persistent economic hardships in Sri Lanka during 2023 it remains essential to recognize the ongoing struggles of vulnerable families in urban communities, including food insecurity, nutritional challenges, livelihood losses, and heightened protection concerns, leading to the adoption of negative coping mechanisms. After a year of this crisis that started in May 2022, families increasingly prioritize food consumption over vital expenses such as education, healthcare, and protection, putting pressure on parents and resulting in irregular school attendance and the risk of student dropouts. The crisis has also taken a toll on children's mental health. Furthermore, the escalating economic crisis highlights the urgent need for collective, secure, rights-based mental health interventions in Sri Lanka's impoverished urban communities, with nearly half of the country's children requiring humanitarian assistance covering nutrition, healthcare, clean water, education, and mental health services. In response, Shanthi Maargam is dedicated to enhancing its community outreach and advocating for national-level support. This project report covers the project interventions and counseling services aimed at sustaining the youth center's programs during this critical period of Sri Lanka's economic crisis, shedding light on their profound impact on youth beneficiaries and their families, demonstrating the center's commitment to uplifting the community and nurturing its youngest members by addressing their holistic needs and fostering resilience, personal growth, and hope.

2. Center Activities

2.1 Lunch program and free play

At our Shanthi Maargam Youth Center, we are fully committed to creating a nurturing and supportive environment for young individuals in our community. As part of our ongoing efforts, we consistently run a lunch meal program, which not only ensures that the youth have access to nourishing meals but also serves as a platform for building community and social interaction among our participants. In addition to our meal program, we actively encourage free play at the center. We provide a designated space for children and youth to engage in activities. This space acts as a safe haven where our youth can explore their interests and talents, socialize with their peers, and develop valuable life skills. Furthermore, we place a strong emphasis on the importance of emotional and mental well-being. To this end, we offer access to qualified counselors, ensuring that our youth have the support and guidance they need when they face personal challenges or seek advice on various aspects of their lives. This resource empowers our young individuals to address their concerns, build resilience, and make informed decisions. Our holistic approach at Shanthi Maargam Youth Center, which encompasses providing meals,

promoting free play opportunities, and offering counseling support, reflects our unwavering dedication to nurturing the well-rounded development of the youth we serve. By maintaining these programs, we not only provide essential services but also create a sense of belonging, encourage personal growth, and contribute to a brighter future for the youth in our community.



2.2 Children's day program

The Shanthi Maargam Youth Center recently organized a remarkable Children's Day event, notable for being entirely planned and executed by the center's youth club, showcasing their leadership skills and dedication. This event highlighted the spirit of leadership and collaboration among the young members and emphasized the girls' matured leadership training, promoting gender equality and youth empowerment. On October 7th, the event unfolded with the youth leaders transforming the venue into a vibrant, child-friendly space, featuring educational activities in the morning to stimulate young minds, foster teamwork, and unleash creativity. The post-lunch celebration provided a platform for children to showcase their talents, with lively dance performances, boosting their self-confidence and fostering a strong sense of community within the Youth Center. Parents actively participated, underscoring their support and involvement in maintaining this essential community space.



2.3 Drama therapy session

The Shanthi Maargam Youth Center hosted an enlightening drama therapy session for its children, led by Dr. Suleesha Perera and Studio International. This session aimed to enhance the children's communication skills, particularly when interacting with individuals with special needs, through sign language training and creative engagement. Beyond sign language, the facilitators provided personalized guidance to meet the children's specific needs, introducing a novel experience by blending sign language with musical dance. The children's enthusiastic participation demonstrated their eagerness to learn and engage with this unique educational opportunity, expanding their horizons, fostering deeper communication, empathy, and valuable life skills. The session empowered the children with essential life skills, enhancing their self-confidence, resilience, and positive impact on their surroundings, setting them on a path toward a successful and fulfilling future.



2.4 Focus group discussions

During the month of August, a focus group discussion with six children aged between 15 and 16 was conducted at Shanthi Maargam youth center. The main topic revolved around the characteristics of good and bad friends. We aimed to educate the youth about the physical and

emotional changes that arise during adolescence, the potential of these changes attracting strangers, and the skills to identify genuine friends. Throughout the session, participants were encouraged to share their personal experiences, deepening their grasp of the subject at hand.

In response to a tragic incident that deeply impacted a group of 8 children aged 13 to 19, who recently lost a close friend to suicide, a highly significant focus group session was conducted on 'Suicide Prevention during the month of September'. The session delved into their perceptions of the tragedy, addressing myths, beliefs, and misconceptions surrounding self-harm and suicide. It aimed to help them comprehend the multifaceted factors that could lead someone to contemplate such a drastic step. Furthermore, the session underscored the importance of emotional resilience and effective communication, counseling the children on managing their emotions and the therapeutic value of sharing. It emphasized the vital role that adults, such as parents, teachers, or counselors, can play in offering guidance and support during distressing times. This focus group session served as a pivotal step towards healing, understanding, and building a support system within the group, equipping them to face challenges and provide support to one another in the future.

Eight children between the ages of 11 to 15 actively participated in a focused group discussion centered around "Emotion Management and Healthy Communication." in October. The session encouraged cooperative teamwork and explored the consequences of neglecting these behaviors. The goal was to equip the children with essential life skills in managing their emotions effectively, offering guidance on understanding and controlling their emotions to lead more balanced and fulfilling lives. This engagement provided a valuable opportunity for these young individuals to develop crucial social and emotional skills and appreciate the significance of healthy communication and cooperation in their daily lives.



2.5 A workshop on cyberbullying awareness.

During the month of August, the SM Youth Center organized a highly informative session on cyberbullying, facilitated by experts from the Hithawathi organization. This engaging workshop drew active participation from 19 children, underscoring the critical importance of this topic in our digital age. Beyond raising awareness, the session equipped the young participants with valuable tools and strategies for online safety. Key points covered included data security, the

risks associated with sharing personal information, the benefits of educational content accumulation, password protection, guidelines for photo-sharing, and the dangers of befriending strangers online. The session also emphasized the importance of using authorized devices, defending against viruses, and addressing cyber threats. Both deliberate and unintentional online actions and their associated risks were discussed comprehensively, along with the pressing issue of cyber harassment. Furthermore, the session introduced the supportive role played by the Hithawathiya Foundation in this crucial domain



2.6 A workshop led by the Child Protection Officer from NCPA.

During the month of August , the SM Youth Center organized a comprehensive session for 19 children aged 10 to 19, led by the Child Protection Officer from NCPA, aimed at educating them about their individual rights and safety protocols. This innovative and engaging program went beyond the mere dissemination of knowledge, using creative activities to effectively convey important messages and raise awareness. The discussion revolved around the concept of body autonomy, stressing the importance of protecting themselves from potential harm. The children participated in interactive games that taught them how to react in emergency situations, emphasizing quick thinking and informed decision-making. The session also covered self-defense strategies, not only for encounters with strangers but also for situations involving familiar individuals. They learned to recognize potential dangers and take precautions to safeguard their well-being, regardless of the nature of their relationship with potential threats.



2.7 Training conducted by the Alcohol and Drug Information Center

On August 25th, the Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) conducted an awareness and training session focused on drug prevention at the Shanthi Maargam Youth Center, involving 30 children from Maradana, Gothampura, and Kurundugahawatta, aged 9 to 19. This educational program began by introducing the factors that may lead individuals to experiment with substances and then shifted to the health risks associated with cigarette consumption. Common misconceptions surrounding cigarettes and alcohol were addressed, along with the deceptive marketing strategies employed by these industries, including indirect endorsements in media and the use of celebrities to promote hazardous substances. The session integrated hands-on activities to help children recognize these external influences in real-life situations and equip them with strategies to respond wisely, aiming to cultivate a proactive mindset and provide tools for safeguarding against substance abuse. The children's and youth's dedicated and enthusiastic participation in this and other awareness initiatives this month demonstrated their genuine interest and proactive involvement in various activities, contributing to the success of the program.



3.Provision of Free Counselling Services

Despite the dynamic challenges, including shifts in work capacities and ongoing political and economic complexities, Shanthi Maargam remains unwavering in its commitment to providing essential mental health support to children and youth. Our dedication to delivering free counseling services continues steadfastly with our hotline accessible daily from 8:00 AM to 10:00 PM. This critical resource is poised to offer immediate assistance through first aid and psychological counseling via phone, while our proficient team of counselors is readily available to lend a compassionate ear, provide valuable guidance, and extend unwavering support to those in need. Complementing the hotline, we conduct one-on-one counseling sessions to address more intricate mental health concerns, with the majority being held online, ensuring accessibility and safety for both clients and counselors. Our services are offered in multiple languages, including Sinhala, Tamil, and English, to accommodate the diverse needs of our community. Our holistic service approach aims to elevate the mental well-being of children and youth, and we are determined to reach as many individuals as possible by providing counseling support in diverse languages and through various platforms. In the face of external challenges,

Shanthi Maargam persists in its commitment to positively impact the mental health landscape, striving to deliver accessible, high-quality counseling services to ensure no individual is left unsupported during these trying times. Noteworthy, our hotline counseling team has been actively engaged, handling 477 hotline calls, conducting 110 tele-counseling sessions via the hotline, facilitating 182 one-on-one online counseling sessions between July to October 2023, underscoring our ongoing commitment to providing mental health support to the community.

4. Project updates

4.1 TAF Project

Counselling workshops, support groups, and one on one sessions.

As part of the TAF project, a series of psychosocial awareness workshops, support groups, and one-on-one counseling sessions were conducted in two community schools. Some of the workshop topics, such as "sexual and reproductive health," were chosen based on concerns identified during earlier one-on-one sessions with students, with the aim of addressing misconceptions, providing accurate information, and addressing student queries on the subject. A total of 8 support groups and 77 one-on-one sessions were conducted from August to October. The adaptability of our support program to changes in the school's academic and event schedule highlights the dynamic nature of our efforts and the importance of aligning with the evolving needs of the school and its students, emphasizing the significance of flexibility and collaboration to ensure effective assistance.



4.2 SVRI project

In the course of SVRI Mobile app development, the tech team of the project presented the initial mock-ups for a youth-centric tool, which were subsequently subjected to a trial with a youth group at the SM center on the 21st. The findings and insights garnered from this trial were effectively communicated to both the tech and research teams involved. To gather valuable insights into reaching the LGBTQIA community, a pivotal internal meeting was convened on August 17, 2023, where the Yellow Dot program counselors actively participated and shared their expertise. Furthermore, feedback and input on the mock-ups were diligently collected through a productive meeting held with two directors on August 15, 2023. To delve

into the realm of gamification and content, a crucial meeting was scheduled with a one director on August 4, 2023, which facilitated the exchange of creative ideas and strategies. The project team convened two significant tech meetings on August 8, 2023, and August 23, 2023, with a specific focus on advancing the product development process. On September 1, 2023, the team made strides by initiating counseling access testing with the SM staff, a vital step to ensure the user-friendliness and effectiveness of the app. The momentum continued with two more tech team meetings held on September 6, 2023, and September 9, 2023, where the primary agenda revolved around deliberations on the user interface (UI) designs for the app. To explore and ensure the inclusion of LGBTQIA-appropriate content within the app, an insightful meeting with Sherry Joseph was successfully conducted via Zoom on September 11, 2023. Additionally, a crucial phase commenced in September with the initiation of the drafting process for the App User Agreement and Privacy Policy document, reinforcing the project's commitment to user privacy and data security.

4.3 CAAPP Project

Shanthi Maargam has recently entered into a contract for a new project with a focus on multiple critical objectives. The project's primary goals include the promotion of menstrual health and hygiene, the improvement of WASH facilities in educational and community settings, and the reduction of stigma and discrimination associated with menstruation. For this project, a dedicated research consultant has been carefully selected. The research project, aptly named "Exploring Menstrual Practices & Policies," is designed to undertake an extensive exploration of various aspects related to menstrual practices and policies. This comprehensive scope encompasses an investigation into existing menstrual practices, the effectiveness of current policies, the prevalence of stigma and discrimination related to menstruation, and the accessibility of menstrual products. Particular attention is given to addressing the critical issue of period poverty within our target communities. Dignified Menstruation emerged as a central theme during an extensive training session conducted for all 13 NGOs and 6 youth leaders associated with Shanthi Maargam. This insightful session was led by resource persons from the Nepal - Global South Coalition.

