

SRI LANKA

Creating a digital safe space for adolescents to break the cycle of violence against children and women in Sri Lanka

RESEARCH INSTITUTION

Shanthi Maargam (Pathway to Peace)

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PROJECT AIM

To adapt and evaluate an existing face-to-face youth engagement model to a digital format to promote positive mental health and develop gender-equitable attitudes for the prevention of violence against adolescent women and girls in Sri Lanka. In so doing, we explore ways to adapt and create transformative, inclusive, safe digital spaces for youth linking individual level growth with an online system of peer and mentor support.

CONTEXT

Adolescence is a critically important developmental period during which gender norms are learned, internalized, and influence interpersonal relationships and behaviours related to reproductive and sexual health outcomes. Adolescents at risk of violence can be missed by child services suited to younger children and gender-based violence services designed mainly for women, and require services tailored to their unique needs. Shanthi Maargam (SM) - which translates to "Pathway to Peace" - is a registered non-for-profit in Sri Lanka that seeks to reduce violence in communities by healing the emotional traumas of vulnerable adolescents and youth. SM creates safe spaces, and provides psychosocial support services for at-risk youth.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, SM has been at the forefront of community mental health service delivery, shifting counselling and other support online for at-risk youth and finding new ways to remain connected to them. SM has used digital spaces for mentoring and building leadership skills among youth to encourage communication and action around childhood trauma, harmful myths, misconceptions, and gender stereotypes.

Our hypothesis is that a digital application which combines components of our Positive Youth Development Model (which includes PATHS¹, Parivartan², counselling, and peer support) has the potential to change attitudes and behaviours of young people, reduce violence and transform the way we offer services and support to marginalized youth. Focusing on adolescents in low-income urban communities in Sri Lanka, this project will engage youth leaders to co-create and evaluate a digital application that combines individual level support with peer-led, collaborative, online social spaces.

STUDY CONTRIBUTION

This work targets individual and societal level risk factors for violence against adolescent women and girls. Focussing on the intersection of mental health and violence perpetration, it builds individual level capacity, resilience, and agency while reducing harmful gender norms and attitudes. It removes some of the barriers to young people face in accessing services through providing resources and support online. Our intervention differs substantially in content and delivery from other existing youth engagement approaches: it will be adaptable and scalable to changing local contexts and needs; it improves the scope and reach of our work under uncertain and unpredictable conditions; and it harnesses recent investments in digital technology in ways that are safe, sustainable, and scalable in low-middle income settings. This work is interdisciplinary and builds local capacity for innovation, research, and practice.

¹ Ma C.M.S., & Shek D.T.L. Objective Outcome Evaluation of a Positive Youth Development Program: The Project P.A.T.H.S. in Hong Kong. *Res Soc Work Pract.* 2019;29(1):49–60. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1049731517711246>

² Das M., Ghosh S., Miller E., O'Conner B., & Verma R. Engaging Coaches and Athletes in Fostering Gender Equity: Findings from the Parivartan Program in Mumbai, India. New Delhi, India; 2012. <https://www.icrw.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Parivartan-Engaging-Coaches-and-Athletes-in-Fostering-Gender-Equity.pdf>

