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Sr. Dulcie Peiris, superior of a Salvatorian convent in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka, with Dilrukshi Fernando and her daughters. The nun was on a follow-up visit to Fernando's home, which was built by the Salvatorian Sisters with support from Share Global. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

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Kapila Suranga never imagined that his request for a roofing sheet he saw lying discarded in a convent garden would make his dreams come true.

The Hindu daily wager in Kandy, Sri Lanka, noticed the sheet as he was cutting grass in the garden of the [Salvatorian](#) convent in Kandy. He told Sr. Dulcie Peiris, the convent superior, that the sheet would help repair his house's leaking roof.

The nun responded that they did not want to give him a damaged sheet; instead, she would visit his house.

"What we saw there was very touching. There was no house at all, and what they had were a few iron sheets and abandoned billboards molded in like a hut, where his wife and two small daughters lived," Peiris told Global Sisters Report. She pooled some resources to build a home for the Suranga family.

They were among more than 200 families from different religious backgrounds who have benefited from the housing project of the Salvatorian nuns in Sri Lanka. The nuns built the houses in various parts of the island nation mainly for single parents, widows and war victims. Some who were in need, like Suranga, also benefited.

Sri Lanka's 1983-2009 civil war between the Tamil and Sinhalese ethnic communities claimed up to 100,000 lives, mainly Tamils seeking a separate state, according to U.N. estimates. The official registry of the Sri Lankan government, however, puts the toll at 40,000. Both sides in the 26-year conflict are [under U.N. scrutiny for war crimes](#).

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Peiris accompanied GSR to Suranga's new house, where his wife, Dilrukshi Fernando, a Catholic, waited for them at the main road with her 2-year-old daughter, Bhagya (which means "lucky"). She then took the team to their dream house of two small rooms, a kitchen and living room.

The house was not plastered or painted, but Fernando and her two daughters — Bhagya and 6-year-old Amali — looked happy. Suranga had gone to his work as a grass cutter.

"We had always dreamt of having a house, but never thought it would come true so soon," said Dilrukshi Fernando, as Bhagya held her tightly and Amali stood at her side.

(Fernando is a common surname among Sinhala Catholics in Sri Lanka. The three women in this story with that last name are unrelated.)

The housing project was initiated by Sr. Dulcie Fernando, who was the congregation's Sri Lankan provincial for three terms, with a donation from an unidentified person in Europe. He donated \$3,000 for each shelterless family through [Share Global](#), an international Salvatorian Sisters solidarity office.



Sr. Dulcie Fernando, former provincial of the Salvatorians in Sri Lanka, with the owner of one of the first houses built in 2015, when the Salvatorians started building homes for homeless people in Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

The solidarity office helps sisters and laypeople initiate, coordinate and manage projects in various developing countries. They promote an equitable and sustainable society through education, health care, pastoral work and community capacity building, Fernando told GSR.

Another beneficiary is Mary Margaret, a war widow with a mentally challenged son and two daughters, in Kurunegala, about 25 miles northwest of Kandy in central Sri Lanka. The eldest daughter, whose husband recently died from a heart attack, has moved back to her mother's house.

The houses have basic structures without plaster, painting or electrical connections.

Sr. Fernando, who has initiated several community building projects in Sri Lanka, explains, "We had a limited fund for each house. We also believed in letting the family complete the construction so that they would feel it was their own."

However, many such as Mary Margaret could not complete the work because of dire poverty, Sr. Fernando added.

Sr. Shiroma Kurumbalapitiya, the present provincial who joined the home visits, said, "They are struggling to make ends meet during this pandemic. How can they complete the homes?"



Sr. Shiroma Kurumbalapitiya, Salvatorian provincial in Sri Lanka, with Mary Margaret, far right, a beneficiary of the housing project, and her niece in their new home. Her son is standing in the doorway behind the sister. (Thomas Scaria)

Margaret told GSR that they are happy with what they have.

"We are grateful to the sisters for providing this home and visiting us from time to time," said Margaret, who lives by selling lottery tickets. "But no one tries their luck during this pandemic."

Neighbors help her family with food and other items. She goes to the town of Kurunegala to sell lottery tickets at the bus stops and other public places. Lottery is quite popular in Sri Lanka, especially among those without resources, she said.

[Kurumbalapitiya](#) said they are trying to get some funds to complete the houses and build toilets for those unable to do so.

The provincial said neighbors and local parishes cooperated in building the houses and continue supporting the families.

"So, this is not just a Salvatorian program, but a community building project where several stakeholders are involved," said Kurumbalapitiya, who added they receive funds from benefactors through Global Share. The house is built as a "collaborative project between beneficiary families and their community," she said.

The provincial says a condition for getting a house is that the family should have land with proper records. In some cases, local people have donated land to a family.



Sr. Shiroma Kurumbalapitiya, right, the Sri Lankan provincial of the Salvatorian Sisters, and her predecessor, Sr. Dulcie Fernando, at their provincial house in Kurunegala, Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

Hasitha Silva, a parish council member of the St. Anne's Cathedral, Kurunegala, took the team to a house in Yaggapitiya, an interior village about 20 miles from Margaret's house. It is accessible only by a rough terrain vehicle.

Soma Fernando, a widow, owns the house, among the first 20 built in 2015 under Sr. Fernando's supervision. The house was larger compared to others since the parishioners helped pool local resources. The local unit of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul also assisted, with some members volunteering free labor.

At the same time, there are houses that still are not completed even after six years.

"We have to understand that people were not able to plaster or furnish their homes due to poverty," said Sr. Fernando, adding that further funding is essential.

Their funds come from benefactors through their key Global Share promoters — Ursula Schulten in Germany and Yvonne Schmelzer in Italy.

"Recently, we have requested additional funds to support selected beneficiaries, but the pandemic situation has crippled everyone," Sr. Fernando said.

Some houses have extended their space, affixed tiles and plastered the walls.

Sr. Fernando took GSR to a home near Kandy. This house was improved substantially as its owner now works as a gardener in Saudi Arabia.



The newly expanded house of Meghala Thangavelu, whose husband works as a gardener in Saudi Arabia. Her son, Darshan Vinith Thangavelu, in doorway, wants to help other homeless people as he starts employment. (Thomas Scaria)

Their only son, 22-year-old Darshan Vinith Thangavelu, who completed the work, said, "We were very poor and my father did not have a job when the sisters came forward to help us."

Thangavelu, a former student of Fernando's who now works on a college administrative staff, told GSR, "My next dream is to become a teacher and, when I earn money, I want to help other homeless people."

Fernando said she had worked among women and children with a nongovernmental organization in Kandy before initiating the housing project with Share Global. The hill stations in and around Kandy were always prone to landslides and in one such incident several farmers had lost their houses, she recalled.

"But they never got a house from the government and this prompted me to initiate the housing programs," the sister said.

The project was initially implemented in the southern part of Sri Lanka. "Now we concentrate on the Tamil population in northern provinces like Jaffna, Mannar and Vavuniya who have lost everything due to 30 years of civil war," Fernando explained.

In Puttalam district, 80 miles northwest of Kandy, the nuns built many houses with local participation. "The beneficiaries were selected based on their eligibility and not according to their religion, caste or creed," Fernando said.

In many cases, local community leaders and parish priests also help in selecting the beneficiary families.

Kurumbalapitiya says a house is a basic need for people because "a roof over their head means total empowerment of the family."



The headquarters of the Salvatorian Sisters in Sri Lanka (Thomas Scaria)

The Salvatorians want to ensure those who live in the houses are empowered to lead a dignified life. "If they are sick, we reach out to them with nursing care. If their children are weak in studies, we give them tuition," she added.

Mary Margaret, a lay Salvatorian (not the woman of the same name who moved her family into a home built by the sisters), supplies building materials for the nuns in Puttalam and has built two houses for homeless families on her own.

Fernando said the laywoman helped keep their building initiatives alive "when we were really worried about the continuation of the project during the pandemic."

The businesswoman said she was inspired by the Salvatorians and would continue the mission "as much as I can." Her son is a Salvatorian priest.

Salvatorian Sisters, also known as Sisters of the Divine Savior, are spread over 45 countries and six continents. Salvatorians have priests, brothers and lay collaborators, besides the nuns.

The Salvatorian nuns are located in only one province in Sri Lanka with 73 members living in 15 convents. They hail from Sinhala and Tamil ethnic communities and are engaged mainly in social apostolates, such as peace building, non-formal education, empowering women and eradicating poverty.