News
Q&As



Salvatorian Sr. Princy Fernandopulle at her office at Children of Joy Child Development Center in Wattala, near Colombo, Sri Lanka. She explains the challenges in deinstitutionalizing child care and the steps taken by five women's congregations. (Thomas Scaria)



by Thomas Scaria

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Wattala, Sri Lanka — February 6, 2025

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Salvatorian Sr. Princy Fernandopulle has helped develop two child care centers in Sri Lanka — one for children affected by the nearly three-decade-long civil war and another for tsunami survivors.

The 56-year-old nun started Children of Joy Child Development Center in 2005 at Wattala, near Colombo on the west coast of the island, after a tsunami hit the Sri Lankan coasts on Dec. 26, 2004, and killed more than 35,000 people and displaced about a half million. The Child Development Center was opened in 2010 at Iluppaikulam village in Mannar in northern Sri Lanka after the civil war ended.

The trained social worker and child psychologist with 18 years of service headed the Wattala center until 2010 and, for six years, the Mannar center. Currently, she is back at the Wattala center, where she is working on a community model.



Salvatorian Sr. Princy Fernandopulle interacts with the mother of a resident of her center in Wattala near the national capital of Colombo. (Thomas Scaria)

Fernandopulle says they have started the process of deinstitutionalizing child care centers and placing children back in their families and community, as directed by the Catholic Care for Children International, or CCCI, a project of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG).

In Sri Lanka, the project was initiated by the Good Shepherd Sisters. Later, five other women's congregations, including the Salvatorians, adopted it.

Fernandopulle spoke to Global Sisters Report on the role of Catholic nuns in deinstitutionalizing child care in Sri Lanka and their challenges.

***GSR*: How do you look back on your life with orphaned children so far?**

Fernandopulle: I have lived most of my religious life with children orphaned by the tsunami or the civil war in Sri Lanka. The center at Wattala was among several rehabilitation programs for those affected by the tsunami.



Children of Joy Child Development Center in Wattala, near Colombo, was started to rehabilitate orphans from families affected by the 2004 tsunami. (Thomas Scaria)

You were a pioneer of a girls' home near Mannar too.

It was started by our then-provincial Sr. Dulcie Fernando after the war ended in 2009. I served there for the first six years. The girls were mostly war victims — some orphans and a few sexually abused. The Wattala and Mannar centers came up as our response to the urgent needs of the time. They function under government rules and regulations. Initially, we recruited the girls directly, but now the government probation centers refer them.

Are you happy?

Yes, several of our girls have done well in life after we educated them and provided skill training before reintegrating them into society. When they came to us, most suffered from stress disorders and trauma, but we could make them confident girls with ongoing counseling and life-skill training. But many missed their homes throughout their stay with us. Many tsunami orphans were helped to find jobs and marry. I have many fond memories of girls getting back into society.



The headquarters of Good Shepherd Sisters in Nayakanda, near Colombo, from where Sr. Niluka Perera and her team piloted a project on community-based care for children. Perera now heads Catholic Care for Children International, a project of the International Union of Superiors General. (Thomas Scaria)

Are you aware of the call to shift children from institutional to home-based care?

Yes. I am trying to cooperate with it as an inter-congregational movement in Sri Lanka. We discussed the project among ourselves and work together. Not only that, the sisters from the five congregations on June 24 met the government probation commissioner to apprise her about our community-based model of child care.

The commissioner has called all child care centers and children's hostels in the country for a meeting to discuss the concept and strategies for implementation. Such a response from the government will surely boost the initiative.

Advertisement

How did the women religious congregations begin the initiative?

The women religious under UISG discussed the proposal to start a global project such as "Catholic Care for Children International" in 2020. Good Shepherd Sr. Niluka Perera, a Sri Lankan nun, headed the department. Last year, Pope Francis appointed Perera to the Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors too.

Perera coordinated the formation of the project in Sri Lanka, first by the Good Shepherd Sisters, who manage several child care centers in the country. Other congregations also joined this initiative.

What do you do under this initiative?

Ours is an attempt to minimize institutional care of children and return them to their families, ensuring they get good health and education in a conducive environment. If the child has no parents, we seek support from their immediate relatives. The child care in families will be monitored by a social worker appointed by the church or the local administrative systems of the government.



Apostolic Carmel Sr. Maria Pramilda is pictured with two residents of a girls' hostel in Badulla, central province. The hostel is a partner in community-based child care in Sri Lanka. (Thomas Scaria)

How is it successful so far?

We started it as a pilot project with funds from the CCCI, and it is working well. If the results are encouraging, I am sure the government will make it a national policy. Every child has a right to live in his or her home. It is not an easy job, but if it works, it is the right approach.

Currently, we are doing a feasibility study and sensitizing the families on the need for children to grow up in families. However, home placement is not meant for every child. Child care institutions are also required for orphans or those with an unhealthy home atmosphere. So, we plan the community integration in phases in coordination with the government probation department.

> Ours is an attempt to minimize institutional care of children and return them to their families, ensuring they get good health and education in a conducive environment. If the child has no parents, we seek support from their immediate relatives.
>
> —Salvatorian Sr. Princy Fernandopulle
>
> Tweet this

What challenges do you perceive?

The safety and security of the children is our first concern. Several children turn up in government probation centers due to sexual exploitation, and many are victims of abuse by relatives. Such cases require much preparation and close monitoring before implementation. Otherwise, our children of joy may turn into children of sorrow again. Back to homes and back to communities is a healthy step, but it should be done with caution.

Does CCCI cater only to Catholic children?

No. It is only a model proposed by the Catholic Church. Sri Lanka has hundreds of child care centers run by other religions, especially the Buddhists. The focus is on children getting care in homes and communities. If the government enacts a policy to deinstitutionalize child care, it will be a national plan, not bound by any religion.

What is the way forward?

We look forward to the government's support in implementing the plan. Since the children in our centers have come through the probation centers, we cannot send them back to their homes without government intervention. Close monitoring is key to such a paradigm shift from institution to community care. Both the church and the state should work together for better results. If the model works well, it could be adapted by the government for all its centers.