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Ministry



Sr. Priyangani Hathurusinghe, the principal of Ave Maria Convent, collects donations after Mass at St. Mary’s Church, one of the largest churches in the heart of Negombo, on March 9. St. Euphrasia's Home for women relies on contributions to serve and shelter women in distress. (Quintus Colombage)

by Quintus Colombage

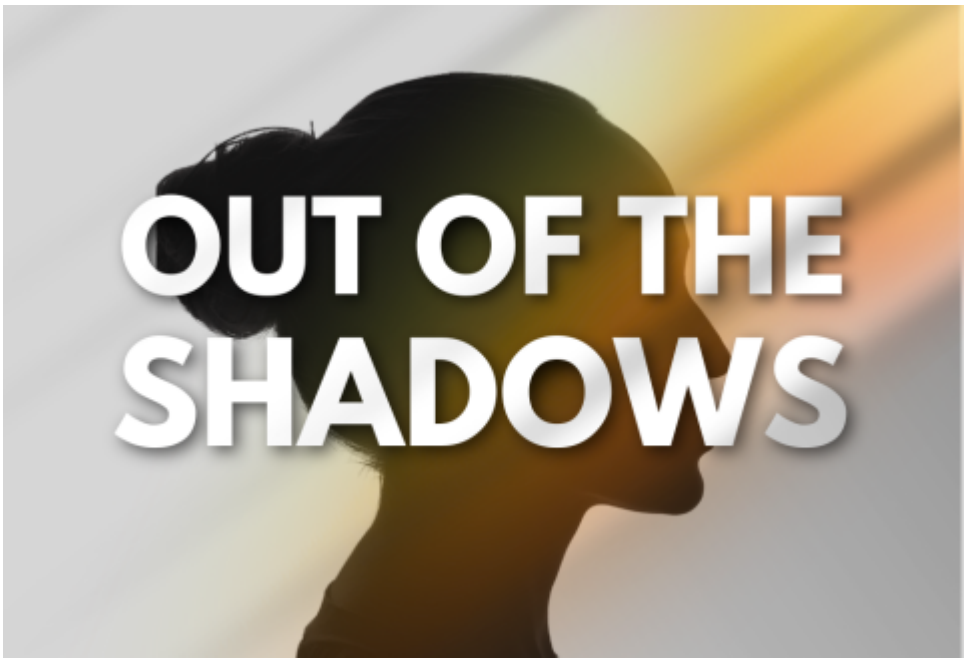
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***Editor's note**: This story is part of Global Sisters Report's yearlong series, "Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women," which will focus on the ways Catholic sisters are responding to this global phenomenon.*



(GSR logo/Olivia Bardo)

At 19, Shalini De Silva* was raped and impregnated by her teacher, who is also a relative. It forced her to move away from home during the most traumatic period of her life.

"I attempted to abort, and then I tried to kill myself," she said, adding she was desperate to avoid social stigma related to rape and having a child born out of wedlock in conservative Sri Lankan.

At five months pregnant, De Silva, a Buddhist, had no one to turn to until she heard about the Good Shepherd sisters who ran a home for unwed mothers and their children in Nayakakanda, some 10 kilometers south of the capital, Colombo.

De Silva is one of the hundreds of women who have found shelter and care inside St. Euphrasia's Safe Home since its founding in 1938.

"I am alive, thanks to the nuns," De Silva, now 35, told the Global Sisters Report.

Her teenage pregnancy shocked her family. "My father stopped talking to me, and my two siblings looked down upon me. None found anything wrong with the man who raped me," she said.

The only solace was "my mother, who stood with me and helped me find the nuns' place. She also frequently visited me there," De Silva said.

The nuns also helped her to continue her studies and find a job. De Silva is now a manager in a reputed company in Colombo and is married with three children.

The nuns on a mission

On Ash Wednesday, Good Shepherd Sr. Rosary Perera joined other nuns of her Ave Maria Convent in Negombo on the street seeking donations.

Perera, the house superior, said their congregation launches a nationwide campaign every Ash Wednesday to help unwed mothers and abuse victims in the country. Dressed in her religious habit and pectoral silver cross, Perera moved around the street with a donation box and asked passersby to donate money.

At St. Peter's Church in Negombo, Perera explained the sisters' mission and the urgent need to help vulnerable women.

"Many people had donated, prayed for their mission, and expressed their continued support," Perera told Global Sisters Report. Public support and generosity are key to continuing the mission, she said.



Sr. Rosary Perera stands outside St. Peter’s Church in Negombo, Sri Lanka, on March 5, collecting donations for the care and support of rape victims, abuse survivors, and unwed mothers of all faiths. (Quintus Colombage)

One in five women, or about 20% of women in the country, face violence from their intimate partners, said the Women's Wellbeing Survey, the first national survey on violence against women, released in 2020. More than 40% of the victims never report or seek redress for the violence because of shame or fear of backlash, the survey said.

In 2024, nearly 3,000 children faced abuse, including more than 1,500 rapes and sexual abuse, said data from the Sri Lanka Bureau for the Investigation of Abuse of Children and Women.

Human Rights Watch also documented in 2013 a series of rape and sexual abuses committed by the military and police on Tamil women in northern districts even after the civil war ended in 2009.

According to a 2024 United Nations Population Fund report, teenage pregnancy in Sri Lanka has gradually declined.

The national data indicate that in 2009, 6.5% of all registered pregnancies occurred among teenagers, dropping to 4.4% in 2018 and 3.8% in 2023. However, certain regions continue to experience high rates of teen pregnancies.

The nuns who change lives

The Good Shepherd Sisters, also known as the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, a global Catholic religious order, arrived in Sri Lanka in 1869. Some 375 sisters in 72 convents minister in the country, serving destitute women, victims of abuse, single mothers and prisoners.

They also run 17 child care centers that serve about 800 children.

The sisters opened the St. Euphrasia's Home for women in 1926 for girls in distress and a separate home for unwed mothers — St. Euphrasia's Safe Home — in 1938. They added a nursery and kindergarten later.

The safe home works with government permits, and children are given for adoption, if necessary, following the government process with the help of the Department of Probation and Child Care Services.

The nuns are unsure how many women they have helped, but a senior worker at the safe house said at least 25 women are there on any given day.

The home relies on contributions, much of which comes from the annual campaign, Perera said.

Good Shepherd sisters across Sri Lanka join the annual campaign, said Sr. Mary Praneetha from St. Anthony's Convent in Weliweriya, the only Catholic village in a predominantly Buddhist area.

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Sr. Priyangani Hathurusinghe said that in addition to seeking donations on the streets, she wrote to the parents of her school's students to support their mission for women and children.

Fr. Shantha Sagara Hettiarachchi, parish priest at St. Mary's Church in Negambo, told his parishioners that the Good Shepherd sisters "offer unwavering support to unwed mothers, who have often been abandoned and stigmatized by society."

After the March 9 Mass, he told GSR that the nuns need the parish's help "to rebuild their lives, regain their dignity and help them face society again. "

Sunil Fernando, 53, a teacher and counselor, said the nuns' campaign also makes society aware of the challenges unwed mothers face, particularly in rural areas.

De Silva helps the nuns with the campaign "because I know the need for money to take care of so many pregnant women and newborn babies who have no one to support them."

**Shalini De Silva is the pseudonym of a victim who requested not to reveal her identity.*

This story appears in the **Out of the Shadows: Confronting Violence Against Women** feature series. View the full series.