



OPEN FORUM

ON PSYCHOSOCIAL WELL BEING AND HUMAN RIGHTS

22nd February 2024

Session Conducted by:
**Dr. Mahesan Ganesan &
Prof. Gameela Samarasinghe**

Organized by
**Family Rehabilitation
Center**



Introduction

The Open Forum was organized by the Family Rehabilitation Centre (FRC), bringing together individuals committed to improving the lives of people in Sri Lanka by addressing the intersection of psychosocial interventions and human rights. Participants, including experts, practitioners and representatives from funding agencies, convened with a shared goal of driving positive change in their communities. Discussions were held, insights and experiences were shared and the importance of evidence-based policies to support the well-being of all citizens was emphasized.

Insights into the FRC's initiatives over the past three decades were provided focusing on trauma rehabilitation, prevention and capacity building. Achievements such as counselling for over 20,000 individuals, training for teachers and community volunteers were highlighted.

Through their work, they aim to combat gender-based violence, promote gender equality, support survivors of trauma and address other pressing societal issues. Overall, the event served as a platform for collaboration, empathy and collective action towards creating a brighter future for Sri Lanka.

Guest Speakers

Dr. Mahesan Ganesan is a highly regarded Consultant Psychiatrist recognized for his significant contributions to mental health in Sri Lanka. He has played a pivotal role in spearheading mental health initiatives, particularly in the Natarajan region. Although retired from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Dr. Ganesan remains actively engaged with various organizations dedicated to capacity building, human rights and advocacy within the mental health sector. Currently serving as a Board Member of FRC, Dr. Ganesan's presentation at the open forum centered on advancing human rights and psychosocial health, underscoring his unwavering commitment to enhancing mental health outcomes in Sri Lanka.

Our next speaker is **Prof. Gameela Samarasinghe**, a Clinical Psychologist and Associate Professor at the University of Colombo. She is known for her research on psychosocial work and Transitional Justice in Sri Lanka. Prof. Samarasinghe has received awards like the Fulbright-Hays Senior Research Scholar Award. She earned her degrees from universities in France. Prof. Samarasinghe's expertise promises to bring valuable insights to our forum today.



Overview

Dr. Ganesan's talk revolved around the concept of mental health as a human right, as declared by the WHO and the UN. He emphasizes the importance of equitable access to healthcare services, highlighting societal responsibility in ensuring this right. Dr. Ganesan discusses the three levels of prevention in healthcare : primary, secondary and tertiary.

He explores the broader definition of mental health, beyond just the absence of disorders, focusing on psychosocial well-being and societal factors. Despite some positive aspects like community-based mental health services, Dr. Ganesan identifies several limitations and challenges, including inadequate primary prevention efforts, poor parenting, lack of support for caregivers and insufficient services for vulnerable groups.

He calls for advocacy, capacity building and collaboration between the state and non- state sectors to address these issues and promote better mental health services.

Prof. Samarasinghe begins by briefly sharing findings and recommendations from the Consultation Task Force on Reconciliation Mechanisms, emphasizing the importance of addressing psychosocial issues in the context of transitional justice. She highlights the complexity of psychosocial needs among individuals affected by human rights violations, underscoring the necessity of providing psychosocial support throughout the justice process. Prof. Samarasinghe emphasizes the need for transitional justice organizations to ensure access to psychosocial services, protect participants and manage their expectations and security concerns. She concludes by stressing the crucial role of psychosocial services in transitional justice, advocating for a comprehensive and community-based approach to support individuals affected by human rights.



Discussion

The Open Forum featured a question and answer session inviting renowned Psychiatrist Dr. Ganesan and Clinical Psychologist Prof. Samarasinghe to the stage. Questions from the audience focused on issues such as the effectiveness of training programs, systemic challenges hindering progress and strategies for better outcomes, especially within different contexts. There were discussions on cultural appropriateness, community involvement and the role of local leadership in driving change. The audience also raised importance of drug rehabilitation approaches, community mobilization and the integration of psychosocial support with transitional justice efforts.

Speakers emphasized the importance of finding champions within communities and supporting them, as well as the need for innovative solutions tailored to local contexts. Challenges such as bureaucratic obstacles, lack of sustained funding and systemic failures were acknowledged. Suggestions included nurturing community strengths, empowering survivors through testimony and community support and rethinking interventions to align with cultural norms.

The discussion also touched upon the challenges of navigating donor requirements, which sometimes prioritize short-term outcomes over long-term sustainability. There was a recognition of the need for more culturally appropriate and locally-driven interventions, rather than imposing foreign models that may not resonate with the community. Throughout the discussion, participants delved into the profound impact of psychosocial support on individuals affected by a range of interconnected issues, including human rights violations, the pursuit of transitional justice and mental health concerns.

As the dialogue concluded, it became evident that collaborative efforts are paramount in crafting effective solutions. By making the conversation more personal and focusing on the real-life experiences of individuals and communities, stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of the complex dynamics involved. This approach emphasizes the importance of engaging with communities directly, leveraging their inherent strengths and empowering them to take ownership of their psychosocial well-being.

The goal is to help people in Sri Lanka become more resilient and achieve overall well-being. This can be done by considering different viewpoints, honoring cultural traditions and supporting initiatives led by local communities. Policymakers and professionals can develop long-lasting solutions that tackle the various problems people face. Through ongoing dialogue and collective action, there is hope for positive change and meaningful progress in the pursuit of psychosocial support and societal resilience.

