

“Let the Women  
Decide the Margin”

# POLICY BRIEF ON DESERTED WOMEN IN SRI LANKA 2023

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# Policy Brief on Deserted Women

## *Introduction*

This policy brief focuses on Deserted Women (DW) in Sri Lanka based on the action research<sup>1</sup> carried out for the project 'Let the Women Decide the Margin' implemented to mobilise, organise and empower DW to realise their economic potential, sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), political and social rights and work towards mitigating discrimination and harassment. The focus of the policy brief is to present recommendations for policy development, implementation of future programmes / activities and capacity development of service providers and CSOs/NGOs, based on evidence-based research for the well-being of Deserted Women.

## *Definition*

Since an accepted definition of DW could not be obtained, an operational definition was used for the action research and project activities. Accordingly, 'Deserted Women are those whose husbands/partners have left them'. Divorced women were excluded from the category of DW, other than those whose husbands had evaded paying maintenance fees.

## *Deserted Women in Sri Lanka*

Studies pertaining specifically to DW in Sri Lanka were hard to find. However, there are micro-level studies on Female Headed Households (FHH) where DW are included with other women belonging to FHH (Ruwanpura, 2003, Boyagoda, 2014, Bulumulla, 2015, Jeyasankar and Ganhewa, 2018, Vithanagama, Gunatilaka, & Kodikara, 2018). At the national level, according to the Household and Income Expenditure Survey 2019, it is estimated that out of the total 5.4 million households in Sri Lanka, 1.4 million households, or 25.3 per cent are headed by women (Department of Census & Statistics, 2022). As stated earlier, DW are very likely to be included in the category of Female Headed Households.

Information on DW can also be inferred from using marital status data. At the national level, Boyagoda (2014) citing Siddhisena says, marital disruption data collected by the Registrar General's Office pertain only to divorced or legally separated persons, and do not capture informal separations or desertions. The same applied to census data until 1981; however, the 2001 and 2012 national

1 Action research conducted in 2022, covered DW in four districts, Kurunegala, Anuradhapura, Vavuniya and Mullaitivu. The methodology comprised of a (i) desk study, including national and international research on DW, the legal framework, policies, and international standards and (ii) primary data collection - quantitative data collected in two stages: Stage 1- initial Baseline Survey 1,379 DW and in Stage 2 Sample Survey 140 DW. Deserted Women were identified using the snowballing sample method and through contacts, as there were no lists available giving information on DW.

A structured questionnaire was used to collect data through the Kobo Collect App. Key informant interviews were conducted with a few State officials from the selected districts.

censuses collected data on non-legal separations. Although a category named 'deserted', does not appear under marital status in the 2001 and 2012 Census of Population and Housing, there are two categories named 'Legally Separated' and 'Separated (not legally)' described as "legally separated- those who have been married legally but currently stay separated legally through a court order but not divorced. Separated (not legally) – those who have been legally married but stay separated at present on their own accord without being divorced or legally separated" (Department of Census & Statistics, 2015). The "separated (not legally)" category may include deserted women. According to the census of 2012, 58 males for every 10,000 males and 88 females for every 10,000 females live separately from their spouses even though they have not sought legal separation from their spouses (Department of Census & Statistics, 2015).

## *Key Features<sup>2</sup>*

### *Age*

The age distribution of DW has several implications on their economic vulnerability, health issues, and social protection which have inferences for policy advocacy and programmes for economic and social empowerment. The DW belonged to a range of age groups from young to the elderly. The ages were categorised as young, middle-aged and elderly. There were 11.6 per cent in the young age group, 71.8 per cent in the middle-aged group and 16.6 per cent in the elderly category. The relatively high proportion of the elderly, and especially the middle-aged group who will move into the elderly category soon is a concern considering that Sri Lanka is an ageing society.

The majority are in the middle-age or the working age group category. They are women who would be economically active or would look for employment unless they have other sources of income.

### *Education Attainments*

Education plays a vital role in women's empowerment as it is connected to employment and social status, and decision-making power, among others. The education level among DW was low. While a near majority of DW (50.9 per cent) had a secondary education, 21.6 per cent had education only up to Grades 1-5, while 3.6 per cent had never gone to school.

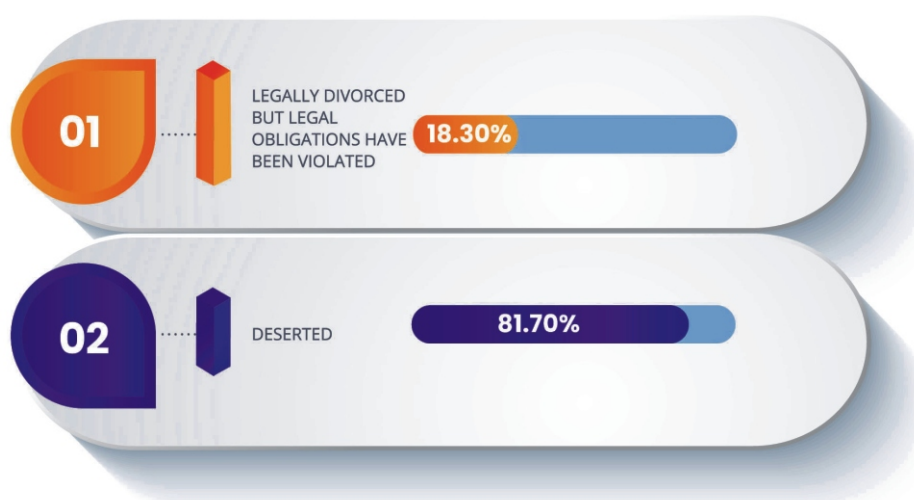
### *Type Of Desertion*

Marriage is important in the construction of womanhood in addition to other identity markers such as class, ethnicity, and caste. The absence of a husband due to death or desertion changes a woman's life drastically, making her life situations and experiences different from other women (Kulkarni et al., 2005). However, there can be a difference, especially in circumstances and consequences between women who had lost their husbands due to death and those facing desertion.

Abandonment by the husband without the consent of the wife (81.7 per cent) was the most prevalent form of desertion. A few cases of legally divorced

women whose ex-partners were absconding their legal obligations (18.3 per cent) were observed (Figure 1). Both groups faced similar economic and social vulnerabilities.

**Figure 1 :**  
**Type of desertion**



### *Age At The Time Of Marriage*

According to the Population Census 2012, the mean ages of males and females at marriage were estimated as 27.2 years and 23.4 years respectively (Department of Census & Statistics, 2015). However, the age of marriage of DW was contrary to the national statistics. Over 58 per cent of DW had married before the age of 22 years. A significant proportion (18.6 per cent) of DW were under the age of 18 years at the time of marriage. This is an important insight for future research and programme implementation.

### *Length Of Desertion*

Forty-four per cent of DW were experiencing desertion for more than 10 years. Fifty-six (55.8) per cent were living as DW for one to ten years. This pattern may exist because a majority of DW were either middle-aged or in their old age, while a majority had married before the age of 21 years. This also indicates the permanency of their situation, cultural impediments to women remarrying, and their love and concern for children as caregivers in the family.

### *Reasons For Desertion*

Several reasons had led to women's desertion. Of those, extramarital relationships of husband/partner came out strongly. Domestic violence and early marriage were also reasons. Since multiple reasons were given, a single respondent may have faced several issues leading to desertion by the husband/partner. The importance of family counselling and conducting awareness programmes for both women and men come out clearly.

### *Coping With Being In A Deserted Situation*

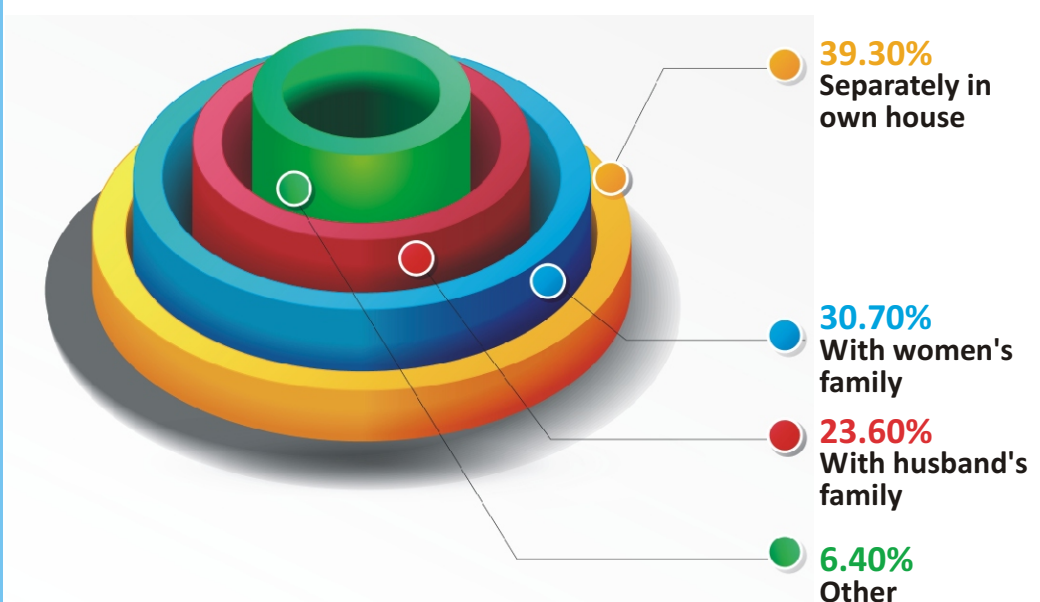
Deserted women had resorted to different actions in the event of desertion. Nearly 51 per cent had reported to the Police. Forty-four per cent of DW had turned to their families for advice. The Grama Niladari had been informed by 41.4 per cent. Only 32.9 per cent had resorted to legal action. A single individual may have resorted to one or several actions. However, 12.1 per cent had accepted victimhood and hence not taken any action.

Deserted women used different ways to cope with the situation. A majority, 89.3 per cent, had made up their minds for the sake of their children, while 30.7 per cent for the sake of parents to move on with their lives. Nearly 21 per cent of DW had started working to support themselves and their children and not be preoccupied with their plight. The importance of gender socialisation comes out clearly, where Sri Lankan women are socialised to bear suffering for the sake of the family even though it would affect their social wellbeing.

### *Living Arrangements At The Time Of Desertion*

The responses on the living arrangement at the time of desertion depicted in Figure 2 show that women who had lived with parents and families (either DW's family or her husband's family) had been deserted more (54.3 per cent) than the women who lived separately in their own house (39.3 per cent).

**Figure 2 :**  
**Living arrangement at the time of desertion**



Looking at the residency pattern at the time of desertion, a majority of the DW (57.9 per cent) had lived in their native village. Living in the wife's native village can affect the woman and husband in different ways. From the husband's point, not living in his village, being an outsider in the wife's village with no kinship ties and strong community bonds, and in addition, his status within the marriage would have made it easier to decide to abandon the wife. On the other hand, from the wife's point, in addition to coping with the situation, she would have confronted difficulties facing relatives and the community, as often a woman is expected to keep the marriage intact. This would have impacted the emotional wellbeing of the woman who, in addition, had to cope with other economic and social vulnerabilities.

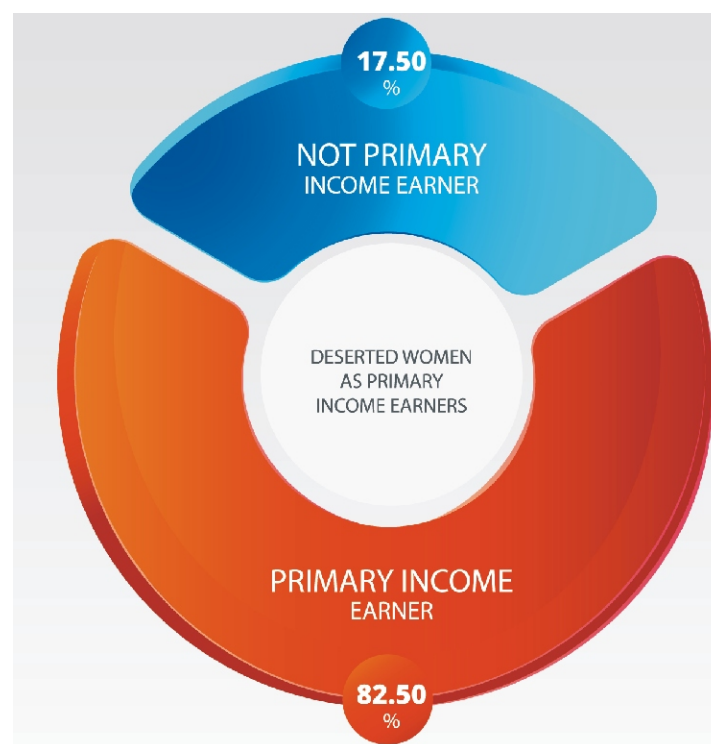
Some DW had to change residence as a result of desertion. Out of the DW interviewed, exactly half (50 per cent) had to leave the house in which they were living when the husband abandoned them. Out of them, nearly 74 per cent had made their own decision to leave, 31.4 per cent left due to harassment, 20.0 per cent were asked to leave and 8.6 per cent had to leave as they could not prove ownership of the house they were living in. Some women would have experienced not just one reason but a combination of reasons to leave. For many reasons, DW may have experienced multiple difficulties when changing residency, especially those with young children in need of care.

## *Socio-economic Wellbeing Of Deserted Women*

### *Economic Well-being*

Deserted Women are economically vulnerable as the incomes derived from employment and as a family unit were low. In addition, 82.5 percent of DW were primary income earners in their families (Figure 3). A majority of DW (65.6 per cent) drew an income equal to or less than Rs. 10,000.00 per month. Out of those who were receiving an income through employment, a majority (50.3 per cent) worked as labourers / cleaners. Nearly 20 per cent mentioned farming as the income source. Some DW said that they were self-employed (14.6 per cent). Their income was dependent on several factors, such as market linkages, availability of resources- both material and financial, skills and climatic conditions. In addition, their income depends entirely on the amount of labour they can put in. All these contributory factors impact the economic wellbeing of DW.

**Figure 3 :**  
**Deserted Women as primary income earners**



### *Borrowings*

A majority of DW (64.3 per cent) had borrowed money to cover expenses. Those who had tried to obtain a loan had done so for many reasons. The main reasons were to cover living expenses (50.0 per cent), for emergencies (41.1 per cent) and to meet children's commitments (37.8 per cent). These came as multiple responses. There were a few DW who had tried to obtain a loan for farming (4), to build a house (2), and purchase land (1).

Informal lending sources are popular among rural women. Research and anecdotal evidence show that many of them are exploited, sometimes even ending in domestic violence, abuse, and self-harm. Some DW had interacted with formal financial institutions, and 41.4 percent had tried to obtain a loan from a bank.

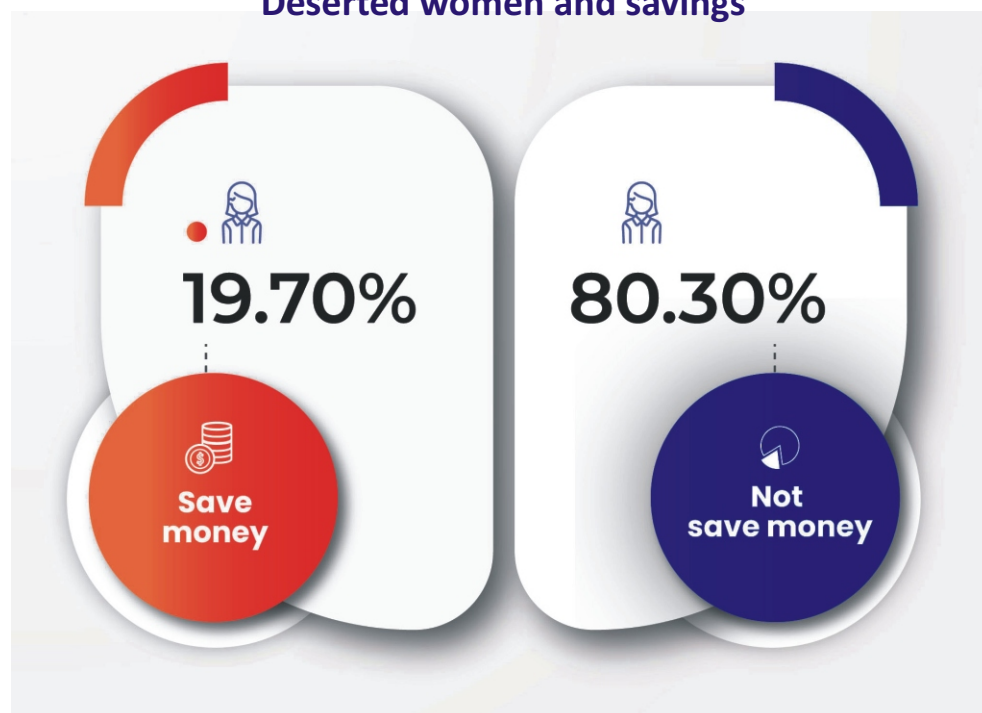
Of those who attempted to obtain a loan from a bank/ financial institution, 34 DW (58.6 percent) were successful. Due to different reasons, 24 DW (41.4 percent) were not successful. The two main reasons for DW's ineligibility to obtain a loan were, the absence of a guarantor, 16 DW (66.7 percent), and insufficient income to satisfy the lending institution, 13 DW (54.2 percent). The economic vulnerability of DW increases with the inability to obtain loans from formal institutions, making them dependent on informal lending sources for their credit needs.

### *Savings*

The high exposure to economic vulnerability among DW is evident when only 20 per cent of them had been able to save money (Figure 4). Of those who had saved money, 59.3 per cent of them said they saved in a bank, and 63.0 per cent said they saved with Seettu groups (informal groups). A single

individual may use multiple means as evident from their responses. Savings were mostly used for emergencies (74.1per cent) and to cover children's expenses (63.0percent).

**Figure 4 :  
Deserted women and savings**



### *Social Wellbeing Of Deserted Women*

The State provides several social support benefits such as Samurdhi, Elders Allowance, Disability Allowance, Allowance for Kidney Patients, etc. Such benefits target different categories in the population to enhance their wellbeing. Fifty-six per cent of DW said they received social support. Senior citizens with low or no income was the largest age group receiving state assistance. A majority of young DW did not receive social security benefits.

Health status is an important indicator of social wellbeing. Although an accurate health assessment was not attainable, the respondents' perceptions regarding their health situation were obtained. A majority of DW did not claim to have any illness. However, with increasing age, the situation differed as an observable drop could be seen in the number of DW saying that they did not suffer from any illness. Similarly, chronic diseases were more common among the elderly, NCDs being a prevalent condition among them. Thus, the importance of health education for both young and old comes out clearly in this study.

Children of DW too faced problems such as dropping out of school and poor performance in studies. Some DW reported the difficulty of giving daughters in marriage. While these problems have an impact on children's futures, they also impact the emotional wellbeing of the DW.



## *Discrimination*

Less than half of the DW had faced discrimination. They had faced discrimination from family members, relatives, neighbours, and communities as they were held responsible for the breakdown of their marriages.

They had to face discrimination at weddings, religious and cultural events. This behaviour may be a result of the myth that a 'Deserted Woman' is a bad omen, who should not be seen at auspicious events. They faced condemnation and ill-treatment at family functions, and unfairly treated in apportioning family property.

Deserted women were of the view that the community discriminates against them by looking down on them, rejecting them, and blaming them for their husband's actions. A few DW said that CBOs do not like to provide them with credit due to the difficulty of finding a guarantor.

Deserted women faced discrimination in receiving State entitlements and benefits, such as Samurdhi, COVID-19 relief, elders' allowance, allocation of houses, allocation of land, etc. This may be due to the absence of a proper list of DW. The State authorities not recognising DW as eligible for State entitlements and considering desertion as a temporary phenomenon would marginalise these women from society. The action research findings reveal the permanent nature of desertion.



## *Harassment / Violence*

The type of harassment faced by DW was mainly verbal (94.2 per cent) and psychological/emotional (70.6 per cent). Physical (17.2 per cent) and sexual (12.5 per cent) were other types of harassments faced by DW. Around one-fourth of DW faced verbal and psychological harassment from the community, strangers, former husband, and friends. Subjected to gossiping, unpleasant remarks, and being blamed for the desertion were how DW were mostly harassed, as viewed by them. Constantly asking them for reasons for not remarrying and bothering them with marriage proposals were other ways of harassment.

A majority of DW (76.3 per cent) had not heard about cyber violence, highlighting their vulnerability to such violence due to a lack of knowledge on cyber violence. However, few DW admitted that they had been subjected to cyber violence (2.1 per cent).



## *Women's Rights*

The 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka contains the provision of non-discrimination on the grounds of sex, among others, and the guarantee of the fundamental rights of women (Articles 10-17). The UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) ratified by the Sri Lankan Government in 1981, guarantees equal rights irrespective of sex and marital status. In 1993, in line with the CEDAW, the Women's Charter was adopted.

A little more than half of the DW said they do not know that the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees non-discrimination on the grounds of sex.

A majority of DW said that they did not know about the Women's Charter. A high majority wanted to become knowledgeable on women's rights as they thought it was important, which is positive and important for empowerment.

### *Sexual And Reproductive Health Rights (srhr)*

As claimed by DW, their overall knowledge of SRHR was poor. However, they showed a willingness to learn about their rights. Out of those who said they know, a majority of DW had become knowledgeable from information provided by the Family Health Worker, while some from the MOH office. A few had received knowledge from awareness programmes conducted by UN agencies/ CSOs / NGOs. Since multiple responses were given, a single individual may have received knowledge from several sources.

Only a few DW believed that they possessed adequate knowledge about HIV/AIDS and STDs. However, the willingness to learn and realising the importance of obtaining such knowledge was a positive attitude observed.

### *Recommendations*

Stakeholder	Recommendations
<b>Government</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Include DW as a distinct social group in policy matters.</li> <li>● Mapping of DW at DS level.</li> <li>● Form a special committee at the DS level to target DW/FHHs focusing on economic, health, legal and social aspects and have regular meetings under the leadership of the Divisional Secretary.</li> <li>● Ensure that DW have access to State social support benefits based on the legitimate status of DW.</li> <li>● Conduct awareness programmes through women's societies to promote sensitivity towards DW to bring about an attitudinal change within the community and to make their life easier and non-discriminatory.</li> <li>● To bring about an attitudinal change, create opportunities for DW to take leadership roles in women's societies, community projects, etc.</li> <li>● Look into the issues of land ownership related to DW.</li> <li>● Provide livelihood opportunities with financial literacy and training for DW to enable them to engage in stable income-earning opportunities.</li> <li>● Provide child and elderly care services at the village level to support working DW.</li> <li>● Promote voluntarism to take care of elderly and small children that are dependent on DW.</li> <li>● Create awareness of available legal aid information that could be accessed by the rural population by strengthening the available mechanisms.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Support DW to take necessary legal action and claim maintenance or other benefits.</li> <li>● Ensure that DW have equal access to health services including Well Woman Clinics for reproductive health without prejudice.</li> <li>● Pay special focus on the health of elderly DW as they could be overlooked for being outside the reproductive age group.</li> <li>● Provide necessary mental health care and psychosocial support services to both DW and their children in need.</li> <li>● Provide awareness to school children on gender and human rights issues</li> <li>● Enhance knowledge of human rights, women's rights and SRHR among DW.</li> <li>● Community Police to identify vulnerable women who face economic difficulties and need counselling support in their area of operation and refer them to relevant officers at the divisional level.</li> </ul>
<b>CSOs and NGOs</b>	<p>Develop a pool of trainers from CSOs/NGOs to create awareness at their project locations on :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gender issues, causes of desertion.</li> <li>● Women's rights, rights violations, SRHR, violence and cyber violence.</li> <li>● Stigma and discrimination against deserted women.</li> <li>● Conduct targeted programmes for DW by Trainers of Trainers to create awareness and empower DW on the importance of : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Saving.</li> <li>➤ Acquiring knowledge of relevant laws.</li> <li>➤ Following good health behavioural practices including reproductive issues.</li> <li>➤ Services and benefits available from the State and eligibility criteria to access them.</li> <li>➤ Knowledge on cyber violence, women's rights and SRHR.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Sensitise and empower communities (women, men, and youth) to stand against discrimination and harassment experienced by DW.</li> <li>● Provide livelihood opportunities for DW to enable them to engage in stable income-earning opportunities.</li> <li>● Form DW's groups to be united and empowered to raise a voice to bring social justice.</li> <li>● Strengthen networking among like-minded organisations who work for/ with DW at the national and regional level.</li> </ul>



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