



***“DISTANCE LEARNING RESOURCES FOR  
RURAL WOMEN AND GIRLS  
IN SRI LANKA”  
A Case Study***

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# **Distance Learning Resources for Rural Women and Girls in Sri Lanka**

## **A Case Study**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A study was undertaken to identify distance-learning programmes to serve the needs for agriculture and rural development education in Sri Lanka. Specifically the study sought to assess the current distance learning programmes for their curricular content and outreach modality to meet the gender differentiated learning needs of rural households to improve their livelihood and quality of life.

A cross section of institutions from the government and non-government sectors and universities that implement distance education programmes were reviewed for their course content, target groups, problems encountered and number of beneficiaries. Only one organisation was found to target agriculture related activities using distance education methodologies. A descriptive survey was also conducted in eight districts with participants from different socio economic backgrounds through participatory methods to identify the training needs of rural households with special emphasis on access to information among women and girl children. The findings revealed that the participants showed an interest for vocational training, education and health, employment opportunities. It was identified that they preferred to learn through radio and print material followed by group work and demonstration and the majority preferred the afternoon for learning activities. Further, it was discovered that the family income and size did not influence their choice of area, mode and time of learning, and it was learned that the preferred areas for learning were geographically area specific.

**Key words:** rural, distance education, learning, women, agriculture, rural development

## INTRODUCTION

Rural<sup>1</sup> women in Asia contribute significantly to the agriculture sector, and rural development<sup>2</sup>. However, their access to information, communication, technology and production techniques remains to be improved (FAO, 2001). Information for rural women addresses the need to provide information for empowering women with knowledge for their advancement in the economic and social spheres, within their households, as well as in their communities (FAO, 2001). The remission in information for women related to economic and social participation and the technologies that disseminate information at high speed may lead to educational and information inequity suffered by rural women (UNDP, 1997). Lack of education and information may also result in stress and frustration for women and their families as well as inappropriate judgement, leading to ineffective and unproductive practices.

### Background and Statement of the Problem

Sri Lanka is situated in the Indian Ocean, and has a land area of 62, 705 km<sup>2</sup> (435x225 km). The highest elevation is at 2, 524 meters, with a temperature of 26°C-28°C in the low country and 14°C – 24°C in hill country. Sri Lanka is multiracial and multiethnic and has a total population (10 years and over) of 6,628,276 male, and 6,958,903 female, out of which 1,773,553 is urban, and 11,813,630 rural (Department of Census and Statistics, 2000). The literacy rate for women is 83.8% compared to 90% for men, excluding the northern and eastern provinces. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (2000), the labour force participation rate is 49.4%, in which urban is 43.2%, and rural is 50.3%. This is with a total employment rate of 92%, in which 94% male, 88.2 % female, urban 92%, and rural 92% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2000), with 25% of the employed women and 23.4% of the employed men engaged in agriculture and allied sectors.

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<sup>1</sup> Rural is defined by rural areas based on socio cultural, demographic, and economic information, with economic categories including agriculture, manufacturing, and service and social dimensions that include persistent poverty<sup>1</sup>, growth of retirement population (Deavers and Brown, 1985), growth of displaced persons and proportion of land in government ownership (UNDP, 1997). In contrast, political structures, locus of control, priorities for schools (Home, 1985), number of year round people per household, occupation and degree to which jobs are concentrated on a few industries, and monthly fluctuations in employment contribute to the definition of "rural".

<sup>2</sup> In Sri Lanka 66% of the population live in rural areas (Abeyratne Bandara, 1997). They present, particularly in the rural areas, a picture of abject poverty, mass illiteracy, loans wage earning, malnutrition, unemployment and unhygienic hiring conditions. Rural development may be defined as a process of enabling the villagers to fulfil their needs especially, physical, economic, social and intellectual (Mahajan, 1996; UNDP, 1997).

In relation to women's work, women have extensive workloads with dual responsibilities for farm and household production. They also have responsibilities for home maintenance and household crop production if they have land (Wickramasinghe, 1994). Nearly 68% of the women are involved in agriculture work in plantations and more than 70% of the rural women are involved in subsistence production (Wickramasinghe, 1994). Moreover, women have an active role and are heavily involved in livestock production, forest use, and fishery processing. They also contribute considerably to household income through farm and on farm activities, as well as by taking employment overseas most often in the service sector (Bulletin of Labour Statistics of Sri Lanka 2000; Kumar, 1998). Further, women's work as a family labour is underestimated (Sustainable Development Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2000; UNDP, 1997), and laws and traditional social norms are biased in favour of men and constitute a barrier to women's equitable access to resources.

To empower women and to enable them to perform effectively and efficiently in the labour force the literature suggests that it is imperative for women to be supported with access to information (FAO, 2000), knowledge and skills. A danger exists however, that with exponential growth in information related to economic and social participation and in the technologies that disseminate information at high speed, the educational divide (formal and informal) may be exaggerated among rural women (Sustainable Development Department, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2000). Therefore, it is advocated that Sri Lanka explores how she can fully utilize her resources for developing human resources for agriculture and rural development, particularly among rural women. Further, it is suggested that the educational resources in Sri Lanka be mobilised to eliminate the educational and information inequity suffered by rural.

To promote agriculture and rural development among women in rural communities in Sri Lanka, the purpose of this study was to explore the learning needs of women in agriculture and rural development in the rural communities, and identify programmes, and modalities for outreach of learning programmes for rural development and the empowerment of women. The significance of this study is that it provides direction for key partnerships to be forged for promoting rural access to education and contemporary learning and could facilitate productive associations among the existing educational systems that focus on formal and informal education. The partnerships between these two educational systems could accelerate the educational access to the rural population, particularly rural women and girls to achieve empowerment through information and knowledge. The study was based on the assumptions that women are from diverse socio-economic backgrounds; women are from diverse learning backgrounds; women



are interested in diverse areas for generating income; women are able to describe their lived experiences.

### **OVERALL OBJECTIVES**

The case study consisted of two sub projects: the objectives of the Sub Project 1 is to resource mapping to identify distance learning programmes available in Sri Lanka, and the Sub Project 2 is to determine the preferred areas for learning and distance education curricular and modalities to reach rural women.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A descriptive survey design was chosen for this pilot study. Key personnel in geographically placed areas in Sri Lanka from Governmental and Non Governmental Organizations were invited to present their experiences of working in rural communities. Following this, a 37-item trilingual (English, Sinhala, and Tamil) questionnaire to obtain information about women's preferred learning areas, time of learning, and mode of learning was designed by The Open University of Sri Lanka. In addition, as it was revealed in the literature review the questionnaire also obtained information to determine the social support that women may need to enable them to participate in learning activities, such as child care services. Both fixed-choice and open-ended questions were asked. One of the participating non-governmental organizations involved in work related to empowering women was given the questionnaire for content validity.

Then the questionnaire was distributed to eight geographically placed non-governmental organizations to actively participate in conducting focussed group interviews, and facilitate the process of participants completing the questionnaire. The areas of Anuradhapura, Batticaloa, Balangoda, Galle, Hambantota, Hatton, Monaragala, and Puttlam were randomly selected. To present a picture of the rural communities, researchers from the non-governmental organizations were also given guidelines to collect data on the area population, available socio-economic resources, agricultural and other income generating activities, institutional infrastructure, school, health and community centers, hospitals, shops, markets, transport, and water. Further, to ensure consistency in the manner of which data were collected guidelines were prepared and distributed. The guidelines included the steps to be carried out in preparation for collecting the data from the participants.

The researchers were invited to identify women and girls that were of the minimum age of 10, with no maximum age, and one per household (Department of Census and Statistics, 1997). Then they were requested to form groups with not less than 20 individuals per group with groupings of ages 10-30 years forming and groupings of 30 years and above forming together to conduct the focus group discussions. The groupings were specified in such a manner to ensure that a person that was below the age of 18 would be participating in the discussions in the presence of persons over the age of 18 and not on their own. Participants were informed of the purpose and voluntary nature of the study prior to the beginning of the focus group and completing the questionnaire. There were no anticipated risks or direct benefits for the participants in this study. Because the participants shared their personal and confidential information they were given assurances that their identities would not be revealed and their rights as human subjects would be protected. Researchers from the respective organizations were invited to actively participate in the process of collecting data. This was because it facilitated the process of accessing the gatekeepers of the rural community as they were already involved in carrying out work related to development in the respective areas and was known to the community. The researchers were given up to three months to collect the data, and once the data was collected the data was submitted to The Open University for Analysis through the use of descriptive statistics.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Sub Project 1**

This sub project focused on the types of distance education programmes relating to agriculture and related aspects conducted in Sri Lanka. In this sub project a cross section of institutions from the government and non-governmental (NGO) and universities that implement distance education programmes were reviewed. The following government and semi-government organisations were included in the sample: Department of Agriculture; Sri Lanka Broadcasting Co-operation; Sri Lanka Rupavahini Co-operation, People's Development Foundation; Centre for Women's Research; Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya; Maha Illupallama Community Broadcasting Service.

Table 1 shows the types of programmes used by the above organisations. Out of the seven organisations only the Department of Agriculture it was learned conducted programmes related to agriculture. The focus of the other organisations related to women's legal and other rights, obtaining loans, marketing and employment, and income generating opportunities.

**Table 1 Distance Education Programmes relating to Agriculture and other areas presently in Sri Lanka**

Programme/ Formats	DOA	SLBC	SLRC	PDF	CENWOR	SARVODAYA	MI-CBS
Print Material	Hand book and pamphlets on agricultural activities in Dinamina News Paper Article "Aswana" on Saturdays	.		Pamphlets, hand bills on nutrition, health and environment	Printed material on women legal rights	Print material on income generating activities	
Television Programmes/ Videos	"Krushisandella" "Mihikatha Dinuwo" "Govimata Aranaku"	.	"Nugasavena" "Siliya" "Kamatha"		Video documentation		
Radio programmes	"Gevatha" "Saraboomi" Farmer Quiz	"Kumudakarya" "Probodhini" "Lathamadulla" "Sriyakantha" "Dolindonkaraya"	.				"Harithadana "wva" "Gamikatha"
Information Technology				Use the Tele-centre for information dissemination and internet facilities	Use email and internet facilities through Tele-centres	Use email, internet through the tele-centres	

DOA - Department of Agriculture or Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock

SLBC-Sri Lanka Broadcasting Co operation

SLRC-Sri Lanka Rupavahini Co-operation

PDF - People's Development Foundation

CENWOR-Centre for Women's Research

SARVODAYA-Sarvodaya Shramadana Sangamaya

MI-CBC-Maha Ilupallama Community Broadcasting Service

## **Conclusions**

The organisations studied attempts to disseminate information to the wider population on issues varying from health, nutrition, agriculture, beauty culture, women rights and income generating activities. The Department of Agriculture, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Co-operation and its Maha Illupalama Community Broadcasting Service specially targeted women on agricultural activities. But in the absence of listener surveys, the programme effectiveness in reaching the rural women was found to be uncertain

### **Sub Project 2**

The results from the different areas are in alphabetical order: namely Anuradhapura, Balangoda, Batticaloa, Galle, Hambantota, Hatton, Monaragala and Puttlam. For the purpose of the study the analysis of the data focused on identifying the participants preferred areas of learning, their preferred modalities for learning, and the preferred times for learning. Data of each area are presented to provide a macro picture. First, the socio-demographic data extracted from the questionnaire completed by the sample population of each case study area (see Table 2) are presented. Figure 1 shows the preferred area of learning in the eight case study areas. The preferred mode of learning and the time of learning of all the case study areas are presented in Figures 2 and 3. This is followed by the results of a comparison among the case study areas on the impact of the age and income in relation to the participants preferred areas of learning, modalities for learning and preferred times for learning.

### **Impact of Age Group on all the Case Study Areas in Relation to the Preferred Areas of Learning, Mode of Learning and Time of Learning**

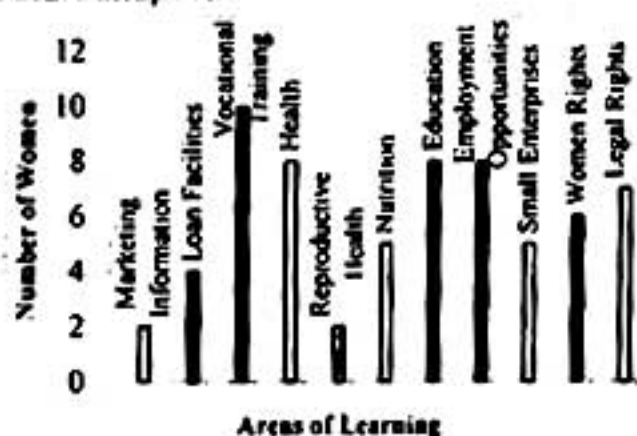
#### **Preferred Areas of Learning**

Comparison of all the case study areas reveal that on average the young age group of 10-30 years prefers either to continue their education or gain knowledge through vocational training. On the other hand, the age groups of 30-60 are mostly interested in small employment opportunities, health and nutrition except for a few case study areas that are mainly concerned about women and legal rights (for example, Galle). Conversely, the older age group expressed an interest in small industries related to agriculture and health.



Figure 1 Preferred Area of Learning

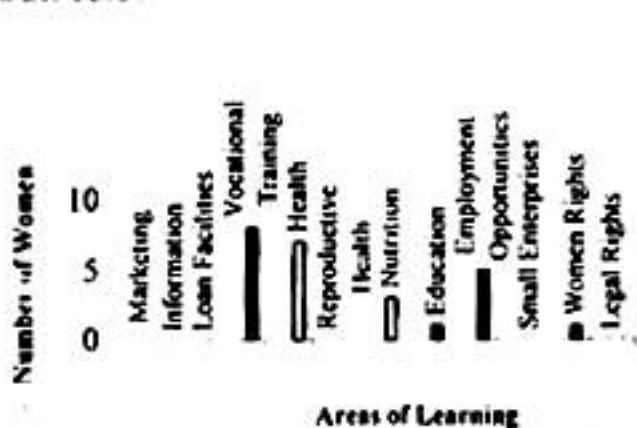
## Anuradhapura



## Balangoda



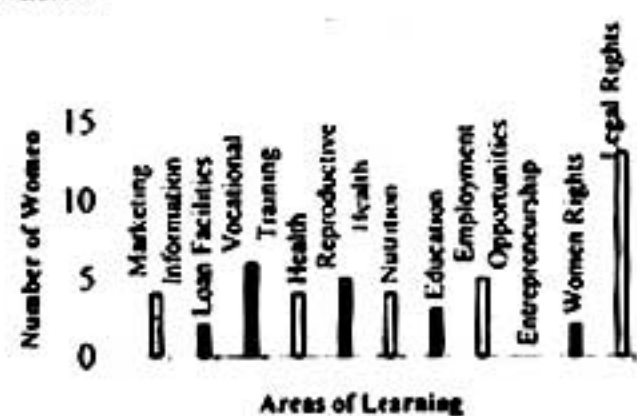
## Batticaloa



## Galle



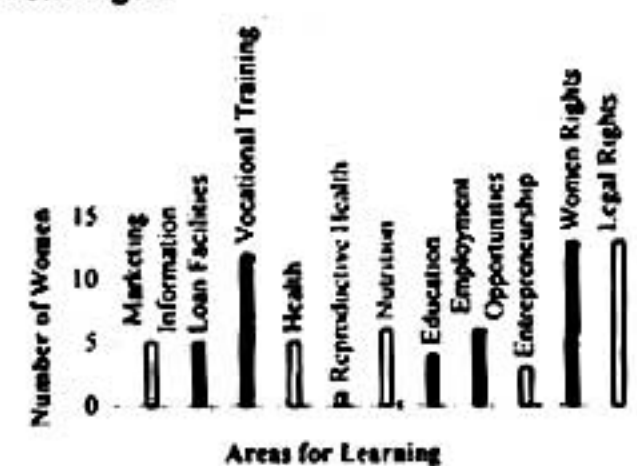
## Hatton



## Hambantota



## Monaragala

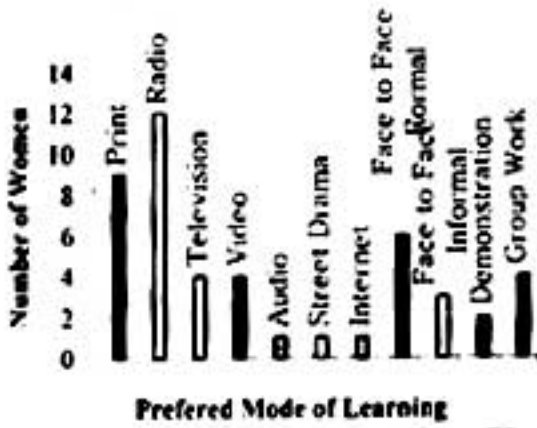


## Puttiam

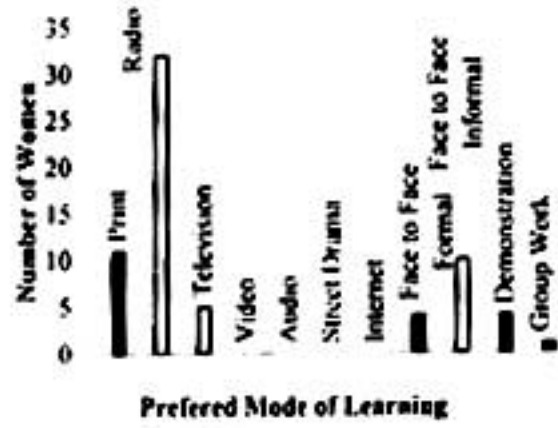


Figure 2 Preferred Mode of Learning

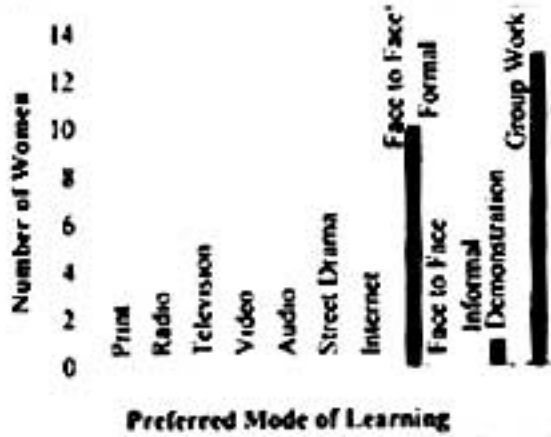
## Anuradhapura



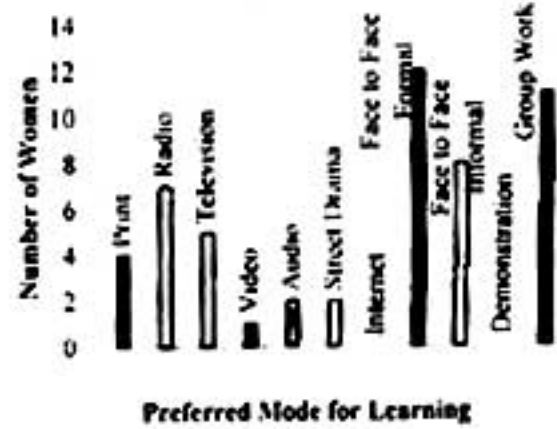
## Balangoda



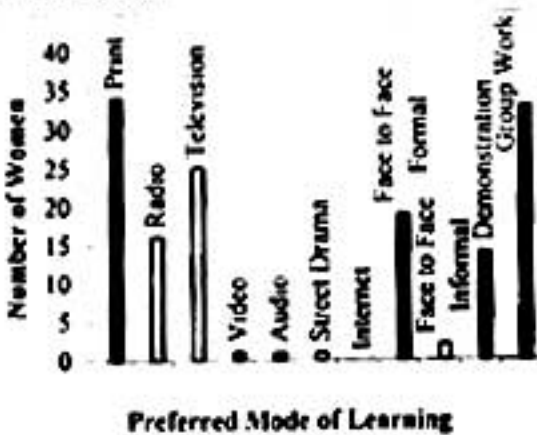
## Batticaloa



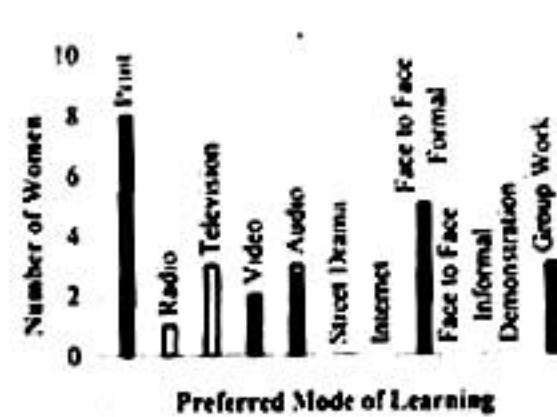
## Galle



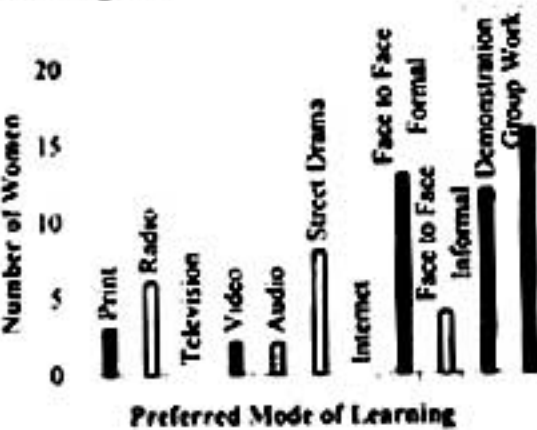
## Hambantota



## Hatton



## Monaragala



## Puttlam

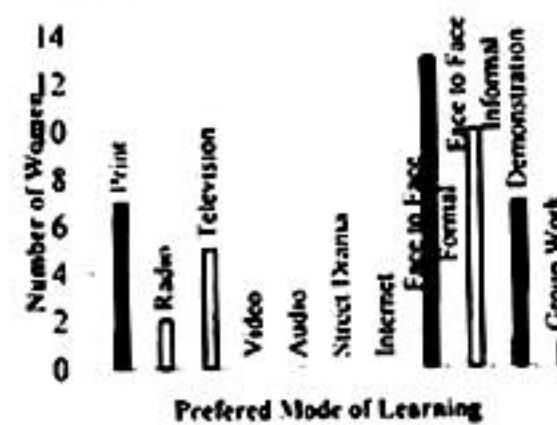
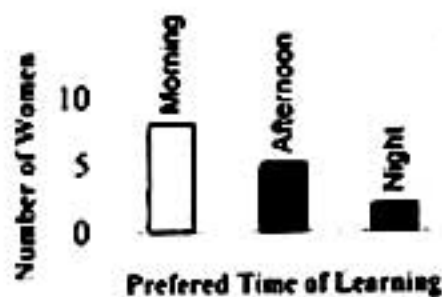
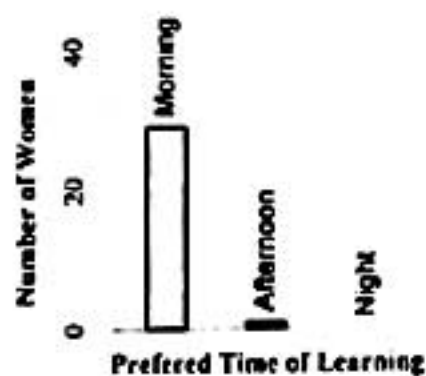


Figure 3 Preferred Time of Learning

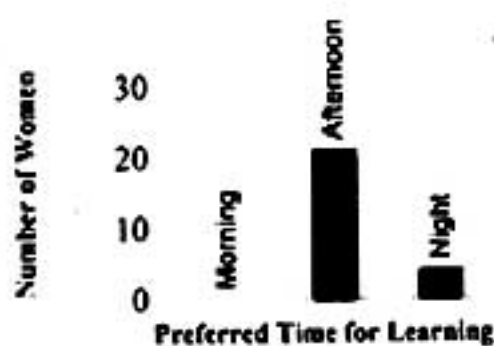
## Anuradhapura



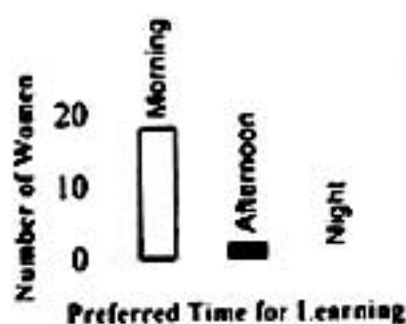
## Balangoda



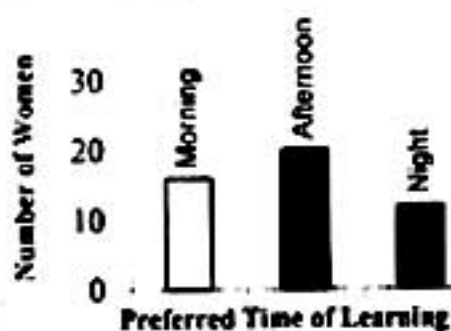
## Batticaloa



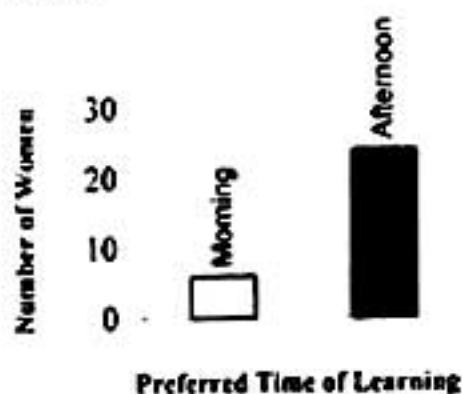
## Galle



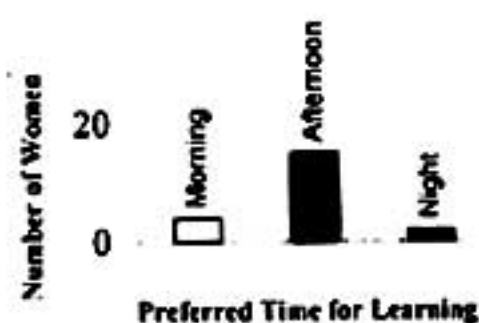
## Hambantota



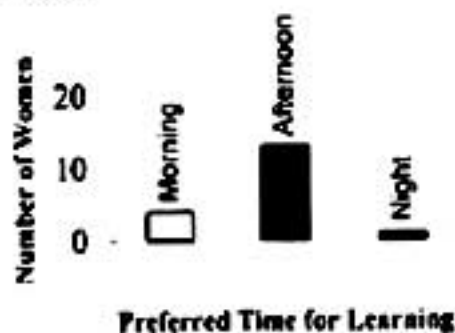
## Hatton



## Monaragala



## Puttlam



### Preferred Mode of Learning

On average the age group of 10-30 years preferred learning through print media, and formal education, such as face to face. However, the age groups of 30-60 years were mostly interested in group work, demonstration, television and radio. However, in Batticaloa, irrespective of age group the sample population expressed the wish for learning through group work, and demonstration.

### Preferred Time of Learning

There was no significant preference to the preferred time of learning.

## **Impact of Family Income on Preferred Areas of Learning, Mode of Learning and Time of Learning**

Analysis of the family income and the number of family members in the sample population of the case study areas revealed that there was no significant preference obtained in relation to preferred areas of learning, mode of learning, and time of learning. However, it was learned that the domestic responsibilities of women and their role as an income earner restricted the time that they had to invest in learning or other areas of career improvement<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> A basic handicap from which the adult women in the villages suffer in accessing information, knowledge and skills is lack of time. Poverty and domestic chores have reduced the lives of women to drudgery. The basic question regarding women's acquiring knowledge in Sri Lanka is motivation. One of the reasons for lack of motivation is that due to poverty, domestic work and responsibility of bringing up a number of children it is argued that village women do not find sufficient time to attend to their learning needs. Therefore, if there is a provision to take care of the children, women's motivation to attend to their learning needs has been found to increase (Bhatia & Mehta, 1985)

Production services for household consumption of cooking, fetching water and fuel, child care, care of the sick and elderly is not considered as "work" for purposes of measuring economic output (FAO, 2000). In addition, participation in paid work outside the home is said to cause considerable stress and physical strain especially in the absence of adequate social support. This is also the case with unpaid "work" within the home. However, this is not to negate that learning is advocated to promote empowerment of women. Moreover, provision of support services is considered imperative to facilitate women's learning although strategies need to be developed to enable the women to access these support services (Bhatia & Mehta, 1985). Further, to facilitate woman's participation in the workforce, and to include women's participation as an indicator of access to work that has economic value it is imperative that the disparity between women's educational achievement and participation in the workforce is reduced (FAO, 2000).



**Table 2 Socio Demographic Data from Sample Population of the Case Study Areas**

Socio Demographic Data	Anuradhapura	Balangoda	Batticaloa	Galle	Hambantota	Hutton	Monaragala	Purtam
Age								
16-29	20	46	25	36	36	60	45	41
30-45	60	43	45	25	45	20	35	21
46-59	15	-	29	27	17	16	20	36
Over 60	5	11	1	10	2	4	-	21
Marital Status								
Single	-	46	1	35	10	40	33	21
Married	15	53	70	50	81	50	57	57
Separated	75	-	8	-	-	-	4	5
Divorced	-	-	8	-	4	-	4	5
Widowed	10	-	8	15	5	10	2	10
Ethnicity								
Sinhalese	100	63	100	10	97	100	100	11
Moor	-	36	-	90	-	-	-	47
Tamil	-	-	-	-	3	-	-	42
Religion								
Buddhist	75	53	-	20	77	-	100	4
Christian/	25	10	-	1	22	4	-	42
Catholics	-	-	100	-	1	96	-	4
Hindu	-	-	-	79	-	-	-	42
Islam	-	36	-	-	-	-	-	-
Education								
Non-Schooling (illiterate)	-	-	60	-	-	-	-	-
Non-Schooling (Literate)	-	-	-	47	-	23	-	31
Primary	-	-	20	45	34	23	33	36
Secondary	25	45	20	-	49	33	42	10
O/L	15	50	20	7	10	3	19	5
A/L	50	5	-	-	7	-	-	-
Diploma Degree	10	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Main Source of Income	Paddy Cultivation, Agriculture, Animal Husbandry	Paddy Home Garden Carpentry Sewing	Agriculture Wage Labour	Cow Products Home Garden Sewing Setting Cinnamon oil Breaking Lime Stone	Paddy, Home Gardening Banana, Brick Making and Animal Husbandry	Working in Tea Plantation	Paddy, Sugar Cane Cultivation, Agriculture, Banana, Animal Husbandry	Fishing, Onion Cultivation, Sack Preparation, Mangrove, Casual Labour, Pavement Setters
Monthly Income (SLR <sup>1</sup> )	3000-4000	3000-4000	500-1200	600-1000	2000-3000	2000-3000	2000-3000	500-1000

<sup>1</sup> US \$ 1 equals SLR 94.00

### **Limitations of the Study**

The following were identified as limitations to the study. a). The questionnaire was not tested prior to the pilot study, and during analysis the following weaknesses were identified: the questionnaire was not designed to invite specific answers from the respondent's in relation to their current or preferred areas of future employment, training received and preferred areas for learning. Then, as a result of not obtaining specific answers to the respondent's current areas of employment, it was not possible to ascertain the effect of their employment on the preferred time for learning. Further, although data was obtained on the preferred time for learning; the questionnaires also included errors in translation from English to Sinhala, as well as omission of essential information. Moreover, the completion of the questionnaire was not uniform. In that, while some questions were given priority and answered by the respondents, others marked all the answers irrespective of the questions and some respondents had left questions unanswered. In addition, the completion of the questionnaire in the different areas were done by different persons, which may have effected the data collected.

Another limitation was that socio-demographic data was not obtained from all case study areas. Further in selecting the sample, inadequate attention was paid by the researchers of the NGO's to obtaining a minimal sample of 30 participants for each of the case study areas, for example, listed below are the sample sizes of the different study areas.

**Table 3 Sample Size and Response Rate**

<b>Case Study Area</b>	<b>Sample Requested by Participating Researchers (n)</b>	<b>Response Rate (n)</b>
Anuradhapura	25	20
Balangoda	30	30
Batticaloa	30	24
Galle	25	21
Hambantota	50	50
Hatton	50	30
Monaragala	25	21
Puttlam	30	25

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Rural women in Sri Lanka contribute to rural development, however their access to information, knowledge, and skills is weak. To facilitate women's access to knowledge and skills to enable them to function effectively and efficiently within their communities this study explores and identifies women's learning needs related to agricultural and rural development. Specifically the study sought to identify the learning needs of women in agriculture and rural communities and identify programs, and modalities for outreach of learning programs for rural development and the empowerment of women. The case study areas of Anuradhapura, Balangoda, Batticaloa, Galle, Hambantota, Monaragala, Hatton and Puttlam were explored through a descriptive survey using a semi structured questionnaire, focussed group interviews and the assistance of non governmental organizations in working in those areas. On analysis of the data, the following were identified:

1. According to the individual study area analysis, all the study areas showed interest for vocational training, education and health. However, Hatton, Monaragala and Galle showed interest in women and legal rights.
2. Analysis of the mode of learning revealed an interest to learn through radio, and print material, followed by group work and demonstration. Monaragala showed an interest in learning through street drama. It was noted that women had wider access to radios, as even if they did not possess a radio themselves they would go to a shop close by and listen. Further, if they did not have electricity they would use a battery as power for the radio.
3. In relation to the time for learning, the majority preferred the afternoon, followed by morning.
4. In all case study areas, comparison of the age group in relation to the preferred areas of learning revealed that the age group of 10-30 years preferred to continue their education or gain knowledge through vocational training. Whereas the age group of 30-60 was interested in employment opportunities, health and nutrition. The over 60 however preferred to obtain information about small industries related to agriculture, and information related to health.
5. In relation to the mode of learning in all the case study areas the age group of 10-30 preferred to learn through print media, radio and formal education. The age group of 30-60 years preferred group work, demonstration and radio or television, and the over 60 years preferred group work.

- 6 In relation to time of learning in all case study areas the age group of 10-30 years preferred any time of learning but the age group of 30 -60 years and over 60 years of age group preferred afternoon for learning purposes.
- 7 The family income and the family size did not influence preference over the chosen area, mode and time of learning.
- 8 The majority of the sample population was in the age groups of 16-29 and followed by persons in the age group of 30-45.
- 9 The highest population of the sample population was married followed by single women
- 10 Educationally the majority of the sample population was qualified with ordinary level (O/L exam sat at the age of 15 years, prior to beginning pre university advance level education) qualification This was followed by persons qualified only with secondary or below ordinary level education
- 11 The sources of income were area specific In Anuradhapura the focus area was agriculture; Balangoda it was home gardening and carpentry, in Batticaloa agriculture and wage labour; in Hatton tea plantation, Monaragala animal husbandry and sugar cane cultivation; and Puttlam fishing and onion cultivation
12. The identified income was identified as varying from area to area, and the highest was found to be 3000-4000, and the lowest was identified as 500-1000.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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