



Sri Lanka, 9 March 2019

GHRD Report on *International Women's Day*

Report – International Women's Day 9th March 2019

On the 8th March 2019, GHRD held an event for the International Women's Day in Gampaha to highlight women's rights in Sri Lanka.

The event started with the welcoming speech of the principal of the school Ms. Nadee Tharangamala. She insisted on the importance of declaration of a Women's Day, to draw attention to the concerns faced by women around the world and thanked the organizers of the discussion for focusing on a contemporary concern faced by women in Sri Lanka. Ms. Tharangamala further emphasized that the number of incidents on sexual harassment has reported an important increase, with the influx of youth to the district due to its population on tuition classes, to which, efforts such as awareness raising on best practices with regard to sexual harassment in public transportation would provide productive solutions.

Following her brief welcome speech, Mr. Asitha Punchihewa, the Speaker of the session was invited to continue the proceedings. The speaker commenced by identifying himself through his relations with women, in various social roles he plays, and proceeded to recognize that there are growing challenges to women in a society, where they are seen as commodities. The discussion was then directed to recognizing the forms of sexual harassment, and participant students were asked to describe the forms of harassment that can be termed as sexual harassment. Following the explanations of participants, the question whether categorization of catcalling as a sexual harassment was posed to the audience. Following multiple opinions from participant students, the section 345 of Penal Code of 1995 was elicited, which states that sexual harassment in public transportation may range from verbal to non-verbal behaviour, including sexual remarks, whistling, groping and touching. Thus, the speaker insisted that sexual harassment doesn't necessarily need to involve sexual organs, as it's defined to include verbal abuse of sexual nature, according to the law of the country.

Mr. Punchihewa then brought the discussion towards best practices to respond to sexual harassment. Participants were asked if they would remain silent, act aggressively or respond in an alternate way, in the face of such an incident. The Speaker then went on to present a number of hotlines, which were described to be potent at recognizing and acknowledging sexual harassment and respond without a delay. Numbers 119 (Police Rapid Response Hotline), 118 (Ministry of Defense), 1955 (National Transport Commission), 1938 (Women's Help Line operated by Ministry of Women and

Child Affairs), 1929 (National Child Line operated by Child Protection Authority) were presented as hotlines to be contacted toll free, in case of a sexual harassment. It was encouraged to call 119 and 118, as they are directly linked to law enforcement agencies, that are assigned with public safety and security. It was advised to also contact the National Transport Commission's Hotline (1955), as it's directly responsible for public transportation.

Mr. Punchihewa elaborated that National Transport Commission is in the process of implementation of a procedure to monitor public transportation utilizing modern technology, allowing the situation to be monitored, and investigate into the complaint. 1938 and 1929 were described as follow-up mechanisms which can be utilized following the official complaint and the subsequent investigation by law enforcement authorities, as the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs and Child Protection Authority are obliged to follow up with law enforcement agencies on legal measures taken to bring the perpetrators to justice. It was further stated that Legal Aid Commission of Sri Lanka would provide legal assistance free of charge for the victims, to pursue their legal hearings. Participants were encouraged to notify the hotline numbers and memorize them, in the order presented, and utilize them in the future, if and when required.

Mr. Thanura Mendis, organizer of the session commended the enthusiasm showed by the stakeholders of the discussion, to ensure its productivity. *"It was encouraging to see the students participate in the discussion with much enthusiasm, although the topic of the discussion refers to a matter considered as a taboo in the society. However, it's important to openly discuss such social issues, to establish a discourse and recognize solutions through a dialogue. According to a United Nations Population Fund report in 2017, approximately 90% of female commuters in public transportation of Sri Lanka are subjected to sexual harassment, though hardly any of them pursue legal actions and seek for lawful justice. It is important to learn that it requires courage to enforce social change with regard to any concern, and thus, it's important that women raise their voices, which are supported by knowledge on the procedures available to ensure their safety, to ensure a positive change of social issues. Women in general refrain from raising their voices when they are subjected to sexual harassment in public transportation, in fear of backlash, though it's only through their continuous resistance that a change in attitudes could be brought forth."*

The session held at Lumbini Kanishta Vidyalaya in Gampaha, organized by GHRD was a successful initiative, which saw the eager participation of students of Grades 9, 10 and 11, and their teachers. It was evident that the knowledge shared and awareness raised were much needed, which will surely be utilized by the participants for the well-being of themselves as well as their peers, in the future.