

**TransAct Sri Lanka: Promoting Civic, Political and Social Participation of Transgender  
Advocates in Sri Lanka**

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## **List of Acronyms**

- CBO** – Community-Based Organization
- CSO** – Civil Society Organization
- FGD** – Focus Group Discussion
- GBV** – Gender-Based Violence
- GRC** – Gender Recognition Certificate
- GTA** – Gender Transformative Approach
- ID** – Identity Document
- INGO** – International Non-Governmental Organization
- IREX** – International Research and Exchanges Board
- KAP** – Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices
- LGBTIQ+** – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer/Questioning and others
- LGR** – Legal Gender Recognition
- MEL** – Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning
- NIC** – National Identity Card
- SDGs** – Sustainable Development Goals
- SGBV** – Sexual and Gender-Based Violence
- SRHR** – Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights
- TAN** – Trans Advocacy Network
- ToC** – Theory of Change
- ToT** – Trainer of Trainers
- UNDP** – United Nations Development Programme
- WFD** – Westminster Foundation for Democracy

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## **Executive Summary**

Transgender people in Sri Lanka are persistently and systemically excluded from legal recognition and public services and from civic, political and social participation. For rural, Tamil-speaking transgender people—particularly those who are caste-oppressed and economically marginalised—these exclusions are exacerbated by intersectional stigma related to language, ethnicity, geography, gender, and post-war trauma. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, these populations are systemically suppressed, lacking access to educational institutions, identification documents, healthcare, housing, or democratic participation. These are more than just personal difficulties; they indicate deeper structural failures to uphold justice, dignity, and inclusive governance.

However, rural transgender individuals are not passive victims. They develop informal networks of care, engage in community-based activism, and face every day with resilience. However, their lived realities are often disregarded in national policy debates, academic research, and even major LGBTQ rights movements, which tend to focus on urban, Sinhala-speaking, cisnormative issues.

This project concept arose from a significant information gap: a near-complete lack of published research or disaggregated data that reflects the complicated, intersectional realities of rural transgender people in Sri Lanka. This study takes a qualitative, feminist, and intersectional approach. It is based on specific case studies and experiences shared with the author during community-based support work, particularly when transgender people sought assistance in accessing public services from which they had previously been excluded. These are not formal interviews, but rather genuine encounters based on trust and solidarity. All names have been changed to guarantee ethical integrity and participant safety.

**TransAct Sri Lanka** is presented as a transformative, community-led project that aims to provide 30 rural, Tamil-speaking transgender advocates with legal literacy, leadership skills, and rights-based advocacy tools. The initiative involves a participatory needs assessment, a collaborative development of a Tamil-language training manual, residential training on civic rights, GBV, SRHR, digital safety, and mental health, as well as fellowships to develop Advocacy Demand Letters and engage directly with decision-makers.

TransAct Sri Lanka is more than just a training project; it provides a political framework for trans-led civic development. The project expands beyond tokenism towards structural change by integrating community knowledge and strengthening grassroots

leadership, and promoting sustained engagement with institutions of governance, redefining participation and justice for those most marginalised in Sri Lanka's democratic system.

## 1. Introduction

Sri Lanka's continuous ethnic conflict and three-decade-long civil war have had lasting impacts for Tamil-speaking populations, particularly those who are marginalised by caste, class, geography, and gender (Venugopal, 2018; Melegoda & Gamage, 2020). The geopolitical and military aspects of the conflict are frequently highlighted in dominant narratives, but the structural exclusions that rural Tamil-speaking populations face on a daily basis—particularly women, including transgender and cisgender women, as well as transgender men—are often ignored (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020; WFD, 2022). While cisgender women in rural areas face systemic discrimination based on ethnicity, language, caste, class, gender, and geography (SSA, 2021; Melegoda & Gamage, 2020), **transgender women and men experience all of these exclusions, compounded by distinct structural marginalisations based on their gender identity and trans status** (UNDP, 2017; Transgender Assessment Report, 2017). These include being rejected by family and community structures (SSA, 2021; WFD, 2022), being pathologised<sup>1</sup> in legal and medical systems, and being erased in mainstream feminist and queer spaces (UNDP, 2017; Equal Ground, 2020).

This chapter provides an overview of how intersecting forms of marginalisation, rooted in war legacies, continue to shape post-war governance, development frameworks, and the systemic exclusion of rural Tamil-speaking transgender communities in Sri Lanka. It is divided into four sections: *Country Context*, *Trans Rights and the Limitations of Gender Equality Frameworks*, *Trans Rights and Human Rights*, and *A Transformative Approach to Civic Justice*.

### 1.1 Country Context

Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict is the result of colonial legacies and post-independence nationalism. Under British colonial rule, Tamil elites with English education were disproportionately placed in civil service positions, institutionalising ethnic favouritism. This colonial hierarchy instilled deep hatred in the Sinhalese majority (Venugopal, 2018, pp. 332-333). Following independence, the Sinhala-dominated administration attempted to

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<sup>1</sup> The pathologisation of transgender identities refers to the framing of gender diversity as a medical or psychological disorder, which has historically justified coercive practices such as forced psychiatric evaluations, sterilisation, and surgical requirements for legal gender recognition. This has led to widespread violations of bodily autonomy and has been condemned by international human rights bodies (GATE, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2024; UN OHCHR, 2024).

consolidate control through state policies such as the Ceylon Citizenship Act (1948)<sup>2</sup> and the Sinhala Only Act (1956)<sup>3</sup>, which disenfranchised Indian Tamils and marginalised Tamil speakers (Venugopal, 2018, pp. 333–334).

These exclusionary practices strengthened Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and laid the ground for prolonged ethnic conflict. Tamil dissension turned into separatist resistance, which led to the creation of the Tamil Eelam Liberation Tigers (LTTE). The 1983 Black July pogrom<sup>4</sup>, carried out with the state's cooperation or inaction, signified the start of a 26-year civil war defined by mass displacement, aerial bombings, enforced disappearances, and systematic human rights violations. Approximately 40,000 Tamil civilians were killed at the final phase of the war in 2009 (LLRC, 2011).

Although the war officially ended in 2009, its structural consequences continue to be felt today. Tamil-speaking populations are primarily concentrated in the Northern and Eastern provinces, which are still severely militarised, with police harassment, land seizures, and surveillance interfering with everyday life (Human Rights Watch, 2018). The state's postwar narrative has emphasised infrastructural development and national unity, ignoring requests for transitional justice and preventing the remembrance of Tamil civilian deaths (International Crisis Group, 2015, pp. 4–5).

Significantly, not everyone experiences these effects in the same way. In Tamil society, people who are categorised as "lower-caste" and economically marginalised have persistent barriers to political participation, education, and land ownership (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, pp. 9–11). Tamil women living in rural areas, especially widows and households headed by women, experience continuous gender-based violence, social exclusion, and economic insecurity. They often do not have access to programmes for development or rehabilitation (SSA, 2021, p. 8).

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<sup>2</sup> *The Ceylon Citizenship Act (No. 18 of 1948)* effectively rendered over 700,000 Indian Tamil plantation workers—later known as Malayaga Tamils—stateless by denying them citizenship, despite generations of residence in the country. These communities were excluded from voting, public services, and legal protections, deepening their socio-political marginalisation and institutionalising ethnic and class-based exclusion (Daniel, 1996; Shastri, 1990).

<sup>3</sup> *The Official Language Act (No. 33 of 1956)*, commonly known as the *Sinhala Only Act*, declared Sinhala the sole official language of Sri Lanka. This act systematically excluded Tamil-speaking populations—including both Northern and Eastern Tamils and Malayaga Tamils—from public employment, education, and state services, fuelling grievances that contributed to decades of ethnic tension and conflict (Wilson, 1988; Venugopal, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> *Black July refers to a series of anti-Tamil riots that broke out in Colombo and other parts of Sri Lanka in July 1983 following the ambush and killing of 13 Sinhalese soldiers by the LTTE. Government forces either looked away or actively participated in the violence. Over 3,000 Tamil civilians were killed, thousands of homes and businesses were destroyed, and more than 100,000 Tamils were displaced. The pogrom is widely regarded as the catalyst for the full-scale civil war that followed* (Tambiah, 1986; Hoole et al., 1990).

Transgender persons, who already experience systemic ethnic and linguistic marginalisation, face compounded exclusion tied to their gender identity and trans status. These elements are not additive, but rather co-constitutive<sup>5</sup>, resulting in a lived reality in which transgender people—particularly those from caste-oppressed and economically poor rural communities—are excluded from healthcare, education, employment, and housing. Many are forced to migrate to urban centres like Colombo, where they face additional economic exploitation and social exclusion (UNDP, 2017, pp. 17-18).

State policy, donor initiatives, and even LGBTQ+ advocacy often disregard these intersectional vulnerabilities, focusing instead on urban, Sinhala-speaking, cisgender gay men and lesbians (Transgender Assessment Report, 2017, pp. 18-20). A rural, Tamil-speaking trans man or woman from a caste-oppressed family may confront intersectional systemic stigmas across all aspects of identification while remaining missing from mainstream development and peacebuilding discourses.

In Sri Lanka, justice necessitates more than just token participation. By providing civic and political spaces for individuals who have historically been silenced, transitional justice must address the structural root causes of exclusion, such as caste hierarchy, land alienation, linguistic discrimination, and **cisnormative**<sup>6</sup> gender frameworks. It is the cornerstone of intersectional justice to bridge structural exclusion and political participation; it is not only a matter of recognition.

It is not just about inclusion; it is a transformative justice requirement to empower transgender people to engage in civic decision-making, particularly those from rural, Tamil-speaking, caste-oppressed, and economically marginalised backgrounds (WFD, 2022, p. 22). Their lived experiences expose the systemic failures of postwar governance and provide avenues for collaborative, community-based reform.

The long-term, institutional integration of transgender voices at all levels of governance is necessary for societal cohesion and true reconciliation. Transgender individuals must be recognised as co-creators of justice as well as recipients of rights. Sri Lanka can only progress towards a society where justice is shared rather than imposed—one

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<sup>5</sup> This project adopts an intersectional understanding of identity—not as comprising separate and additive parts (e.g., ethnicity + caste + gender), but as co-constitutive. Social identities and locations intersect through systems of power that collectively shape the nature of marginalisation and privilege. This framing draws on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw and feminist standpoint theorists.

<sup>6</sup> *Cisnormativity* refers to the assumption that all individuals identify with the gender they were assigned at birth and that this alignment is both natural and normative. It privileges cisgender experiences and delegitimises or erases transgender, non-binary, and gender-diverse identities in cultural, medical, and legal systems (Bauer et al., 2009).

that is not tokenistic but genuinely transformative—once their leadership is institutionally validated.

## **1.2 Trans Rights and the Limitations of Gender Equality Frameworks**

Despite the fact that equality before the law is guaranteed by Article 12 of Sri Lanka's 1978 Constitution, institutional and structural marginalisation continue to characterise transgender people's lived experiences. Widespread discrimination in sectors like education, employment, housing, and healthcare has been made possible by the lack of legal protection for gender identity and expression (UNDP, 2017, p. 4). The interlocking barriers of caste, language, geography, and class exacerbate these exclusions for trans people who speak Tamil and live in rural and economically deprived areas.

One of the most problematic legal procedures is the Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) process, which was first implemented in 2016 by a Ministry of Health circular<sup>7</sup>. Although it offers a possibility to amend the gender markers on identity documents, the process is based on a pathologising and medicalised model that compromises the right to self-determination. Due to financial, language, and geographic barriers, the majority of low-income, rural, Tamil-speaking transgender people are unable to meet the requirements for psychological evaluation and irreversible medical transition (UNDP, 2017, pp. 9–10). Therefore, a gatekeeping approach that institutionalises exclusion is reinforced by the GRC.

Additionally, national gender policy frameworks operate within a binary, cisnormative paradigm, often defining gender exclusively in terms of the economic inclusion, empowerment, and safety of cisgender women. Despite the importance of these initiatives, transgender women, transgender men, and non-binary people are often ignored or actively erased. Notably, the majority of gender equality initiatives overlook the fact that trans women are women and that women from economically marginalised, caste-oppressed, and Tamil-speaking rural communities continue to face structural marginalisation. According to Melegoda and Gamage (2020), this neglect results in a limited understanding of `gender justice` that fails to take into account the realities of diverse gendered lives (pp. 12–13).

Caste-based discrimination and the policing of gender nonconformity exacerbate the compounded stigma that trans people experience in Tamil-speaking communities. Extreme

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<sup>7</sup> The 2016 General Circular No. 01-34/2016 issued by Sri Lanka's Ministry of Health, Nutrition and Indigenous Medicine outlines the procedure for issuing Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs) to transgender individuals.

familial rejection and communal violence are prevalent for trans women in particular, which drives many of them into precarious forms of labour like survival sex work or internal migration to cities like Colombo. This displacement puts them at risk for increased homelessness, sexual violence, and human trafficking in addition to removing them from important familial and social networks (Peiris, 2021, pp. 18–20).

Expanding services within existing frameworks is not sufficient to achieve gender equality in Sri Lanka; a fundamental rethinking of the conception and governance of gender is essential. The complete spectrum of gender identities and expressions must be reflected in legal and policy frameworks, which must also encourage gender self-determination and affirm bodily autonomy. Achieving genuine intersectional justice requires reforming the GRC procedure, passing anti-discrimination laws, and ensuring that trans people—especially those from caste-oppressed, rural, Tamil-speaking communities—are meaningfully included in national gender and development policymaking.

### **1.3 Trans Rights and Human Rights**

The systematic exclusion of transgender people in Sri Lanka is more than just a social issue; it reflects the state's failure to protect fundamental human rights. Despite the fact that Article 12 of the 1978 Constitution provides equality before the law, transgender individuals are structurally invisible because there are no explicit legal protections for gender identity and expression (UNDP, 2017, p. 6). Access to justice is restricted by this invisibility, which also perpetuates a culture of impunity where discrimination and violence often go unpunished.

The lack of comprehensive anti-discrimination law remains one of the most significant human rights issues. Equal access to housing, employment, healthcare, and education is often denied to transgender people. For trans people who speak Tamil, these violations are exacerbated by language-based and ethnic marginalisation, particularly in rural areas where healthcare systems have inadequate resources and service providers often lack cultural competency (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, pp. 11–12; SSA, 2021, p. 14).

Gender-diverse people are often targeted by Sri Lanka's **Penal Code Sections 365 and 365A**,<sup>8</sup> which criminalise "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" and acts of "gross

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<sup>8</sup> **Sections 365 and 365A** of the Sri Lankan Penal Code—originally inherited from British colonial law—criminalise “carnal intercourse against the order of nature” and “acts of gross indecency between persons”. Although often cited as targeting same-sex relations, these laws have historically been used by law enforcement to arbitrarily arrest, detain, or extort transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, particularly those in public spaces or engaging in sex work (Human Dignity Trust, 2023; SSA, 2021).

indecentcy". Police often exploit colonial-era laws to harass and extort trans women and gender nonconforming individuals, especially those who are engaged in sex work or found in public places at night (SSA, 2021, p. 15). These actions are recognised by international human rights standards as violations of the rights to liberty, dignity, and nondiscrimination (OHCHR, 2024).

Systemic exclusion is further demonstrated by limited access to healthcare. Many trans people contend that medical professionals have misgendered them, refused to treat them, or engaged in moral policing. There are no national guidelines for transgender health, and there are very few gender-affirming services outside of major cities. Language barriers, financial limitations, and exposure anxiety exacerbate this exclusion for trans people who speak Tamil, rendering necessary healthcare unattainable (Transgender Assessment Report, 2017, pp. 13–14; UNDP, 2017, p. 17).

Similar barriers exist for the right to education. Many transgender youth drop out of education institutions as a result of bullying, sexual harassment, or rejection from their families and institutions. With the absence of adequate protections against gender-based discrimination in educational institutions, transgender students often experience isolation and systemic barriers to higher education. The consequent educational disadvantages significantly limit their employment opportunities and financial independence (UNDP, 2017, p. 9).

Framing these violations within a human rights framework highlights the critical need for legal and policy reform. Ensuring transgender individuals' right to legal recognition, bodily autonomy, safety, education, and employment must be prioritised at the national level. Addressing these structural failures is more than just an issue of inclusion; it is a call for intersectional justice.

### ***Trans Rights and the SDGs***

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development<sup>9</sup>, which Sri Lanka has voluntarily endorsed as a UN member state, represents a universal political commitment to advancing social, economic, and environmental justice, though it does not impose legally binding obligations

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<sup>9</sup> The 2030 Agenda was adopted by consensus through UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/70/1. While it outlines an ambitious set of global goals, it is not a treaty and thus carries no formal legal enforceability. Its strength lies in voluntary implementation, political accountability, and international cooperation frameworks such as the High-Level Political Forum (United Nations, 2015).

under international law (UN, 2015). The SDG framework, at its core, is a strategic leverage point through which nations may be held accountable for their international obligations towards the goals of inclusion, equity, and human rights (UN, 2015). Despite this commitment, transgender people—especially those from caste-oppressed, Tamil-speaking, and rural communities—are still systemically excluded from SDG-aligned national development processes (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, p. 15).

**SDG 5**, which declares "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls", is often interpreted and executed from a binary and cisnormative framework. In Sri Lanka, national gender equality programs predominantly target cisgender women, often disregarding transgender women, trans men, and non-binary people. While certain cisgender women experience significant and intersecting forms of oppression, notably based on caste, ethnicity, religion, class, and geography, mainstream frameworks continue to fail to capture the full spectrum of gendered experiences. Transgender people are still excluded from protections against gender-based violence, employment equality initiatives, and participatory policy-making spaces (SSA, 2021, pp. 21-22). Without addressing this structural exclusion, the goal of "gender equality" has the potential to reinforce rather than dismantle existing hierarchies.

**SDG 10**, which requires the reduction of inequality within and between nations, provides an important foundation for addressing intersectional discrimination. However, transgender people continue to be among the most disadvantaged groups due to institutionalised stigma, legal invisibility, and a lack of disaggregated data. The intersection of oppression through language, caste, class, gender identity, and rural marginalisation is often ignored in policy and practice (UNDP, 2017, p. 6). SDG 10 will remain a rhetorical promise with no practical consequences as long as targeted inclusion strategies are not implemented.

**SDG 16** aims to foster peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice, and establish accountable institutions. For many transgender people in Sri Lanka, this goal is still unattainable. They are often excluded from civic engagement, denied legal remedies, and exposed to abuse and harassment by law enforcement. Trans people, particularly those living in rural or Tamil-speaking areas, endure institutional marginalisation and are often seen as threats rather than citizens (Transgender Assessment Report, 2017, p. 17). These

exclusions highlight the critical necessity to incorporate gender diversity into justice and governance systems.

Additionally, national SDG reporting and development discussions lack transgender leadership and voices. Trans-specific priorities are rarely recognised in SDG localisation procedures, despite the agenda's commitment to "leave no one behind". Therefore, transgender communities—especially those marginalised by language, caste, and geography—continue to be excluded from the benefits of development.

Trans inclusion must be embedded in Sri Lankan policy as a substantive priority rather than only as a token gesture if it is to meet its obligations under the SDGs. This demands resource reallocation to historically marginalised groups, legal protections, participatory governance, and institutional reforms. If the SDG framework is used with integrity, intersectionality, and a rights-based approach, it has the ability to significantly change the systems of exclusion.

#### **1.4 Transformative Approach to Civic Justice**

Transgender people have long been excluded from political discourse and civic engagement in Sri Lanka, especially those whose identities are marginalised by the way institutions and society respond to factors like language, geography, economic class, caste, ethnicity, and gender identity (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, p. 14). The way civic spaces have been designed in post-war contexts has reinforced cisnormative, Sinhala-Buddhist, and urban-centric assumptions, providing limited space for non-conforming bodies and gender-diverse voices. These limitations are ingrained in the way political institutions have traditionally handled diversity; they are not coincidental.

In mainstream political spaces, transgender people from Tamil-speaking rural areas—particularly those categorised as caste-oppressed or economically marginalised—remain mainly invisible. In Sri Lanka, national LGBTQ+ advocacy has often concentrated on urban, Sinhala-speaking, cisgender issues, excluding trans people whose lived experiences deviate from dominant narratives. Consequently, stigma, limited mobility, and institutional barriers to access make these people among the least represented in national policy-making processes (SSA, 2021, p. 18).

Addressing these systemic inequalities must be the first step in a transformative approach to civic justice, not just by recognising identity but also by eliminating the

structural exclusions that influence how these identities are perceived. This demands much more than just changes to the law. Transgender communities themselves must lead initiatives to strengthen their capacities that are based on their own lived experiences and sensitive to the realities of marginalisation. Any initiative designed to promote trans civic engagement must be based on legal literacy, rights literacy, and leadership development (Transgender Assessment Report, 2017, pp. 18–19).

By centring trans voices in rural communities and equipping those individuals to regain agency in civic, political and social life, the TransAct Project exemplifies this strategy. The project enables transgender people to influence the policies that impact their lives by addressing the institutional barriers to visibility and participation as well as the internalised effects of exclusion. It emphasises that, although legal recognition is necessary, it is inadequate without community acceptance, access to state services and resources, and civic leadership platforms (WFD, 2022, p. 22).

The recognition of transgender people as legitimate political actors and justice architects, in addition to their rights, is ultimately necessary for civic justice to be truly transformative. This entails dismantling structural barriers, supporting trans-led leadership, and establishing meaningful engagement in all spheres of civic and political life. Only then will Sri Lanka be able to start creating a society based on shared power, intersectional justice, and co-governance, where inclusion is structural and sustainable rather than symbolic in nature.

## **2. Problem Analysis**

This chapter explores deeper into the interconnected legal, social, cultural, and systemic challenges that transgender people face in Sri Lanka, particularly those who are Tamil-speaking, live in rural or conflict-affected areas, are caste oppressed, and are economically marginalised. Despite the constitutional guarantees of equality, transgender people remain invisible within institutional and legal protections and highly visible to violence due to deeply ingrained structures rooted in caste hierarchy, ethnonationalism, heteropatriarchy, cisnormativity, and rural underdevelopment.

The chapter, which is based on lived experiences, confirmed empirical evidence, and legal analysis, points out the systemic inequities that exist in Sri Lankan law, policy, and society. This chapter, based on lived experiences, qualitative case studies, verified empirical

data, and legal analysis, emphasises the systemic injustices that exist in Sri Lankan law, policy, and society. The narratives are based on lived experiences shared with the author while working to secure denied public services, with pseudonyms used throughout to protect the identities of those individuals. Due to the lack of disaggregated quantitative data on transgender people living in rural areas, who are often excluded from most of the published studies that focus on urban, Sinhala-speaking, or cisnormative realities, this study uses qualitative insights to illustrate the compounded, intersectional marginalisation that these communities experience.

Importantly, many transgender people in rural Sri Lanka use hiding strategies or stay "invisible" in public life in order to survive while navigating hostile familial, institutional, and societal conditions. It emphasises both the erasure and the means of resistance practised by transgender communities, highlighting how exclusion is not incidental but systematically manufactured. The chapter analyses the linked effects of gender identity, ethnicity, caste, religion, and geography, indicating how these axes interact to exacerbate the marginalisation of rural and conflict-affected transgender persons.

It critically maps five key thematic areas: systemic challenges faced by transgender people; barriers to civic, political, and social engagement; limitations within mainstream LGBTQ+ movements; intersectional difficulties encountered in rural areas; and repression and resistance strategies advanced by trans-led networks.

Finally, the chapter claims that a trauma-informed, intersectional, and decolonial approach is required for any meaningful transformation of Sri Lanka's civic and legal systems—one that prioritises the agency, leadership, and lived realities of transgender people in the pursuit of genuine social justice.

## **2.1 Systemic Challenges Faced by Transgender Persons**

Transgender people in Sri Lanka, particularly those who are Tamil-speaking, from rural or conflict-affected areas, caste-oppressed, and economically marginalised, face deeply established structural challenges that prevent them from accessing their fundamental rights and living a life with dignity. The lack of accessible, rights-based legal gender recognition is at the centre of these challenges. Although a 2016 Ministry of Health circular established the Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) process, which allows individuals to change their gender markers on birth certificates, the procedure is nevertheless heavily medicalised,

unclear, and dependent on psychiatric discretion (Ariyaratne, 2021; Malalgama, 2017). To obtain medical approval, trans people must comply with extremely strict binary gender norms, including showing gendered household labour roles, reflecting Foucauldian power-knowledge regimes in which state institutions define and enforce "acceptable" gender (Foucault, 1979).

The lack of legal recognition has far-reaching consequences in many aspects of civic and social life. Transgender people are excluded from education, formal employment, healthcare, and housing unless they have gender-congruent documents (Equal Ground, 2014; ILGA World, 2021). Many people are denied access to banking services, state welfare assistance, or voter registration, resulting in systemic economic exclusion and increased vulnerability to homelessness and poverty. Ariyaratne and Ranketh (2023) show how transgender women, in particular, are frequently confined to unpaid care jobs or informal economies, reinforcing cycles of dependency and eroding their financial independence.

Although Article 12(2) of the Sri Lankan Constitution guarantees equality, there are no particular legislative safeguards against discrimination based on gender identity or expression (ILGA World, 2021, p. 5). Bureaucratic and legal systems continue to pathologise transgender people, as the GRC process necessitates psychiatric certifications and documentation of medical transition (UNDP, 2017, pp. 23–24). Access to this process is primarily centralised in Colombo, essentially excluding rural and Tamil-speaking trans people who suffer linguistic, financial, and geographic constraints (Gap Analysis, 2021).

### ***2.1.1 Legal and Bureaucratic Violence***

The medicalisation of transgender identities through psychiatric gatekeeping not only violates the principle of self-identification, but it also fosters a system in which transgender people are required to "perform" normative masculinity or femininity in order to achieve state recognition (Malalgama, 2017). This pathologising paradigm violates international human rights standards, including the Yogyakarta Principles, which recognise gender identity as a matter of self-determination.

Furthermore, legislative provisions like Section 399 of the Penal Code, which criminalises "cheating by personation", are used against transgender people whose appearance does not match their state-issued documents (SSA, 2021, p. 31; HRW, 2016, p. 17). This criminalisation results in daily vulnerabilities, ranging from arrest and detention to

public humiliation, especially for Tamil-speaking, lower-caste trans people who are highly visible within militarised security contexts. The following case study, based on the lived experience of Shiva (pseudonym), a Tamil-speaking trans man from Sri Lanka's Eastern Province, provides important insight into the systemic violence experienced by rural transgender people when they interact with governmental institutions.

Shiva travelled to Colombo in April 2019, under increased security following the Easter Sunday attacks, to obtain his updated National Identity Card (NIC). Even when he had started hormone therapy, his official NIC still showed his assigned female sex marker. When Shiva arrived at the Department for Registration of Persons, he was forced to choose between two gendered security lines: the women's line, where his masculine look put him at risk of exposure, or the men's line, where his documentation identified him as female. "I didn't know which queue to stand in," he recalled (Shiva, personal communication, 2023). Shiva attempted to explain the situation by requesting to speak privately with the officer in charge but was denied, a refusal he attributed to both his transgender identity and Tamil ethnicity. "Because I'm Tamil, he refused to even listen." Instead, he was publicly humiliated and forced to remove his shirt and chest binder in a semi-glassed area visible to both civilians and armed officers. Officers poked his chest with rulers and gun barrels, mocking his body and unnecessarily questioning whether his breasts were "real". "It was the most humiliating, degrading, and terrifying moment of my life," Shiva recounted. "Even today, with my corrected ID, I hesitate to enter any government building."

Shiva's testimony shows how bureaucratic institutions, which specifically target Tamil-speaking, rural transgender individuals as threats to the state, combine ethnonationalist surveillance with cisnormative violence. His experience highlights the pressing need for gender-inclusive, trauma-informed reforms in all areas of public service.

### ***2.1.2 Discrimination in healthcare***

Transgender individuals face frequent discrimination in healthcare systems, as clinical practice is dominated by cisnormative preconceptions. Although transgender people's health and wellness require gender-affirming care, these services are limited, expensive, and sometimes provided in unfriendly settings (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 58). Sexual and reproductive healthcare programmes routinely exclude trans people, and healthcare

providers, especially in public hospitals, frequently misgender, mock, and refuse essential medical services (UNDP, 2017).

Healthcare settings, which are meant to uphold dignity and nondiscrimination, frequently perpetuate extreme transphobia. Manoj, a transgender man, was subjected to systemic humiliation and medical discrimination while seeking consultation for gender-affirming surgery (mastectomy) at the National Hospital's Plastic Surgery Unit in 2019. During his consultation, a senior female doctor forcibly exposed Manoj's transgender identity to other patients by parading him from bed to bed. She publicly stated that his desire for chest surgery was not a legitimate medical need but rather "cosmetic vanity" aimed at "pretending to be a man" (Manoj, personal communication, 2022). This particular case illustrates how Sri Lankan healthcare institutions are unwilling to recognise gender-affirming procedures as medically required, instead classifying them as cosmetic or deviant (Conversion Therapy Report, 2020, p. 14).

Devika, a transgender woman from the Monaragala District, sought emergency medical attention at a public hospital after surviving a sexual assault. Devika was mocked, misgendered, and subjected to invasive, humiliating questioning about her body by healthcare providers rather than receiving supportive care. Finally, she was denied treatment and forced to leave without assistance (Equal Ground, 2014). Devika's experience demonstrates how healthcare facilities, which are designed to be places of healing, often turn into sites of secondary victimisation for transgender people, particularly those living in rural areas.

These practices aggravate transgender people's trauma and violate their right to healthcare access under human rights laws. These lived experiences show how healthcare providers misuse institutional authority to dehumanise transgender people, violating medical ethics and international human rights standards. These instances of medical discrimination are not isolated incidents but rather show systematic institutional biases against transgender people in Sri Lanka's public healthcare system.

### ***2.1.3 Discrimination in formal education system***

Sri Lanka's educational institutions systematically marginalise transgender students through policies and practices that promote rigid binary gender norms. From application processes to everyday classroom interactions, trans adolescents face multiple forms of exclusion,

beginning with their inability to access education spaces that respect their gender identification (UNDP, 2017, p. 18).

School uniforms, which have been designed based on strict male-female binaries, have become an effective tool for controlling and policing trans bodies. Trans students are required to wear uniforms that do not correspond to their lived gender identity, which exposes them to bullying, harassment, and, in some cases, physical assault by both classmates and staff (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 71). Gender-segregated schools reinforce this violence by portraying nonconforming pupils as threats to school discipline and morals (Sri Lanka Rapid Situational Assessment, 2017).

The lack of comprehensive sexuality and gender education in the national curriculum promotes ignorance, stigma, and hatred towards transgender and gender-diverse children. Teachers and administrators commonly lack gender diversity training and are unprepared—or unwilling—to meet the unique needs of transgender students (UNDP, 2017, p. 18). School staff often misgender students, and verbal abuse from both teachers and peers is common, resulting in shockingly high dropout rates among trans adolescents. Bureaucratic hurdles reinforce educational exclusion. Students whose official documents, such as birth certificates or National Identity Cards (NICs), do not match their affirmed gender identity face significant barriers to registering for national exams such as the Ordinary Level (O/L) and Advanced Level (A/L) exams, as well as university admissions (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 71).

As a consequence, many transgender youth are compelled out of formal education and denied access to higher education, vocational training, and state employment opportunities. This educational marginalisation has a long-term consequence, sustaining cycles of poverty, informality, and reliance on risky survival economies like beauty salons, NGO fieldwork, or sex work (Gap Analysis, 2021, p.71).

#### ***2.1.4 Exclusion from state-run social welfare Schemes and development programmes***

Transgender individuals are systemically excluded from state-run social welfare programmes and rural development initiatives, exacerbating their economic marginalisation. Despite being among the most socioeconomically vulnerable groups, trans people are frequently denied welfare programs such as "Samurdhi"/"Aswesuma" poverty alleviation or

women-headed household schemes due to documentation challenges, misgendering, or familial alienation (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 67).

State-sponsored social welfare frameworks rely significantly upon conventional family structures. Many trans people who have been disowned by their birth families or forced to flee for survival do not have the appropriate family documentation to seek assistance (WFD, 2023, p. 24). Welfare programs rarely accommodate single transgender persons or recognise non-nuclear family structures, making trans people institutionally invisible.

Likewise, rural development projects, whether government or donor-funded, frequently exclude transgender people by design. Many community development programmes require gender-confirming NICs for eligibility, automatically excluding trans people who have not been able to legally correct their documents (Gap Analysis, 2021, p.67). Even where there are no legal exclusion requirements, informal social policing at the village level prevents trans people from attending community meetings or running for positions of leadership on Village Development Committees (WFD, 2023, p. 24).

Transgender people who attempt to get involved in participatory development initiatives often claim that they are ridiculed, ostracised, or viewed as spectators rather than actual stakeholders (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 85). As a result, many transgender people continue to face economic insecurity due to limited access to livelihood opportunities, vocational training, cooperative societies, and microcredit programmes.

The combined effect of these exclusions is substantial. By consistently denying transgender people access to school, welfare, livelihood support, and leadership opportunities, the Sri Lankan government and its development partners repeat and exacerbate transgender marginalisation at all levels of society.

## **2.2 Barriers to Civic, Political and Social Participation**

In Sri Lanka, transgender people are almost erased from public life due to deeply ingrained structural barriers to civic, political, and social participation. Legal disenfranchisement, bureaucratic barriers, widespread societal stigma, religious exclusion, caste-based prejudice, and media misrepresentation all contribute to these exclusions.

### **2.2.1 Legal and Electoral Disenfranchisement**

Despite Article 12(2) of the Sri Lankan constitution's guarantees of equality, transgender people are not accepted in Sri Lanka's civic institutions or election procedures. Because birth-assigned gender markers are used in voter registration systems, trans people whose documents do not correspond to their lived gender are subject to misgendering, harassment, or outright rejection at polling places (ILGA World, 2021, p. 7). Gender self-determination is eliminated as identity verification is done exclusively through National Identity Cards (NICs) (Human Rights Watch, 2016, pp. 21–23).

According to *Équité Sri Lanka* (2024, p. 5), 62.1% of transgender respondents said they abstained from political participation in the 2020 General Election because they were afraid of discrimination and had previously experienced sexual abuse at polling stations. Those who have completed legal transition procedures are further denied the right to vote since there is no system that accepts Gender Recognition Certificates (GRCs) as legitimate documents (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 23).

There are currently no transgender persons in offices in Parliament, provincial councils, or local government bodies, and political parties have not taken affirmative action to encourage transgenders to engage (Peiris, 2021, p. 15; *Verité Research*, 2022, p. 13). Transgender-led organisations are routinely left out of consultations on national development agendas and constitutional reforms (Westminster Foundation for Democracy [WFD], 2023, p. 24).

### **2.2.2 Civic and Institutional Exclusion**

Transgender persons experience systematic exclusion from all facets of civic life, including the ability to vote. Trans organisations are rarely invited in a meaningful way by state commissions, development planning bodies, human rights consultations, and gender equality panels; instead, they are frequently reduced to symbolic roles without power to make decisions (WFD, 2023, p. 24).

Local Grama Niladhari officials discriminatorily use their discretion to refuse trans people who are separated from their family the opportunity to register to vote (*Social Scientists Association [SSA]*, 2021, p. 64). Particularly marginalised are trans persons who

speak Tamil in rural areas, who experience marginalisation that is exacerbated by factors like gender, caste, ethnicity, and geography.

As was previously established, community development projects use homogeneous frameworks that completely ignore gender diversity while tokenistically including women. Through social policing, documentation barriers, or outright mockery, trans people are nearly always excluded from rural microfinance programs, vocational training, and participatory village councils (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 85).

### ***2.2.3 Religious Exclusion and Conversion Violence***

The marginalisation of transgender people has been endorsed and legitimised by religious institutions. Trans men are compelled to take off their shirts at Hindu temples like Nallur Kandaswamy Kovil, exposing their top surgical scars or binders to the public's view. Non-binary people are usually excluded from spiritual engagement, and trans women are only allowed admission if they hyperfeminise their appearance (SSA, 2021, p. 60).

Furthermore, some transgender people suffer severe psychological trauma as a result of being compelled to undergo exorcisms or "spiritual cleansing" procedures intended to "cure" them of their gender identity (Conversion Therapy Sri Lanka Report, 2020, p. 17). Caste hierarchy and religious exclusion frequently coexist: trans people from lower castes are denied access to community water, temple participation, and religious burial rights (SSA, 2021, p. 58).

### ***2.2.4 Family Rejection and Social Ostracism***

Sri Lankan society's fundamental family and kinship systems are used to target transgender people. Due to social and religious pressure, many trans people are forced into heterosexual marriages, denied inheritance rights, or exiled from their homes (WFD, 2023, p. 22).

The lack of social safety nets makes housing and employment insecurity even worse for disowned trans people. Risks are also present in romantic relationships: because same-gender or non-conforming partnerships are not legally recognised, and trans people are subject to police harassment, blackmail, and legal invisibility under outdated laws such as the Vagrants Ordinance and Penal Code Sections 365, 365A, and 399 (Human Rights Watch, 2016, pp. 21–23).

### **2.2.5 Media Stigmatization and Public Dehumanization**

The mainstream media in the Tamil and Sinhala languages continue to support the marginalisation of transgender people. While trans men are largely ignored, media narratives frequently sensationalise trans existence by portraying trans women as criminals, sexual deviants, or comedic characters (Gap Analysis, 2021, pp. 85–86). Online and offline abuse is encouraged by inaccurate reporting, misgendering, and the use of derogatory terminology like "ponnaya"<sup>10</sup> (SSA, 2021, p. 67). The lack of positive portrayals of trans life that emphasises accomplishments, dignity, and resiliency contributes to the ongoing stigma in society and normalises violence.

Furthermore, censorship exacerbates invisibility. The exclusion of trans voices from the public consciousness is furthered by the arbitrary prohibitions or delays of plays, films, and media narratives that focus on transgender experiences (WFD, 2022, p. 17).

## **2.3 Gaps in Mainstream LGBTQ+ Movements**

Despite significant advancements, particularly in increasing public awareness and advocating for the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships under Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, Sri Lanka's mainstream LGBTQ+ movement has remained limited to urban, Sinhala-speaking, cisgender gay and lesbian identities (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, p. 81; Social Scientists Association [SSA], 2021, p. 64). This narrow focus has consistently marginalised transgender people, especially those in rural, Tamil-speaking, Muslim, and caste-oppressed communities.

### **2.3.1 Prioritization of Decriminalization over Transgender Rights**

In Colombo-based LGBTQ+ advocacy, the prevailing narrative has been strongly biased in favour of legal decriminalisation initiatives. Although vital, this emphasis has overshadowed pressing trans-specific concerns such as access to cultural recognition, livelihood, safety, healthcare, and gender recognition (SSA, 2021, p. 64; Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 63). In these efforts to advocate, transgender people—especially those outside of Colombo—remain mainly unseen. While trans women are frequently tokenised at pride celebrations,

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<sup>10</sup> *Ponnaya* is a derogatory term used in Sri Lanka, predominantly in Sinhala and Tamil vernacular, to insult or feminise men perceived as effeminate, gender non-conforming, or homosexual. It is often weaponised to delegitimise transgender women and queer individuals by framing them as less than men, reinforcing heteronormative and cisnormative gender hierarchies (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

significant representation is lacking, particularly for trans males, non-binary people, and rural trans groups (Westminster Foundation for Democracy [WFD], 2023, p. 17).

### ***2.3.2 Tokenism and Elite Capture***

English-speaking LGBTQ+ groups with an urban focus frequently uphold internal hierarchies that privilege cisgender gay men. While trans men and non-binary people are completely excluded from leadership or programmatic design, trans women are sometimes included as symbolic beneficiaries (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 62; WFD, 2023, p. 15). Donor-driven frameworks worsen this dynamic by ignoring indigenous and colloquial expressions of gender variety and universalising the word “transgender” through Western biological narratives. For instance, mainstream LGBTQ+ discourses ignore community-rooted practices like the ritual femininities of temple priests (e.g., Karu Māmā) and local gender identities like nachchi (Ariyaratne, 2022).

The experiences of transgender people who are Tamil-speaking, caste-oppressed and live in rural areas are still largely missing from national LGBTQ+ spaces. Caste-based exclusion, language marginalisation, and rural poverty are examples of intersectional realities that are rarely incorporated into queer programmatic frameworks (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020; WFD, 2023, p. 17).

### ***2.3.4 Strategic Exclusion and Structural Erasure***

According to Crenshaw (1989), “any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which [marginalised individuals] are subordinated” (p. 150). This strategic exclusion has been reflected in mainstream queer activism in Sri Lanka, which has prioritised donor-friendly narratives and more urban visibility over the most marginalised groups, including trans people from rural, caste-oppressed, and Tamil communities. The exact oppressions that LGBTQ+ activism aims to combat are reproduced by such structural erasure.

The continuous marginalisation of transgender people from mainstream LGBTQ+ activism highlights the critical need for autonomous, trans-led initiatives. By emphasising mutual aid, trauma-informed organising, and colloquial legal literacy, new community-led trans advocacy networks have emerged in Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Galle in an effort to close

this gap. Nonetheless, these initiatives are frequently overlooked, underfunded, and not included in national decision-making platforms (WFD, 2023, p. 15).

## **2.4 Rural-Specific Challenges**

In rural Sri Lanka, caste, class, ethnicity, language, gender identity, and geographic marginalisation all intersect to create barriers that are disproportionately worse for transgender people. The historical caste systems, post-conflict militarisation, displacement caused by war, and Sinhala-majoritarian state institutions of Sri Lanka are all major contributors to these multi-layered exclusions (Gap Analysis, 2022; LLRC, 2011).

### ***2.4.1 Militarization, Displacement, and Structural Poverty***

In the war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces, trans people who speak Tamil struggle with the effects of militarisation, such as trauma, poverty, land dispossession, and regular surveillance (LLRC, 2011; Final Report, 2022). Gender non-conforming bodies are disproportionately affected by post-war securitisation, which exposes transgender people to harassment at military-led social housing initiatives, checkpoints, and intelligence networks (Gap Analysis, 2022).

Additionally, trans people, particularly those from oppressed caste backgrounds, are excluded from housing, livelihood, and welfare initiatives since state-led development schemes frequently favour dominant caste groups or those with political links (SSA, 2021, p. 58).

### ***2.4.2 Healthcare and Legal Recognition Barriers***

The Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) procedure and healthcare service delivery are highly centralised in Colombo and other cities. Language obstacles, lack of information, travel inaccessibility, and financial limitations make it extremely difficult for transgender people in rural areas to get gender-affirming healthcare, psychiatric evaluations, and legal transition services (UNDP, 2017; Transgender Report, 2017). Due to this, the majority of trans people living in rural areas do not have legal documentation for their affirmed gender, which prevents them from accessing formal employment, education, and voting rights. According to Malalgama (2017), the inability to obtain a GRC or updated NIC is not merely a

bureaucratic barrier; it also systematically enforces economic marginalisation and social invisibility.

#### ***2.4.3 Caste-Based Exclusion and Community Alienation***

Caste hierarchies continue to be a key source of social exclusion in rural areas with a Tamil majority. Village wells, temples, cemeteries, cooperative organisations, and community events are frequently closed to transgender people who are categorised as “lower-caste” (SSA, 2021, p. 58). Caste discrimination is nevertheless subtle even in queer and feminist settings, excluding oppressed-caste trans voices from campaigning and leadership (WFD, 2023, p. 17). In this context, intersectionality functions as a form of societal violence, establishing a nearly impenetrable barrier to basic dignity, as trans persons are excluded not only due to their gender identification but also due to their caste and class background.

#### ***2.4.4 Language Barriers and National Invisibility***

Language marginalisation contributes to rural trans exclusion. Tamil-speaking trans activists are excluded from national advocacy forums dominated by Sinhala or English-speaking elites (WFD, 2023, p. 17). National policy consultations, funding applications, and legal literacy initiatives are frequently conducted solely in English or Sinhala, preventing trans people who speak Tamil from having an impact on larger LGBTQ+ and human rights agendas. By effectively silencing the voices of rural Tamil trans communities, this language exclusion solidifies Colombo's dominance in queer activism and institutional spaces (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 72).

### **2.5 Repression and Resistance: Trans Networks and Resilience**

Although transgender people in rural Sri Lanka have been subjected to systemic marginalisation, surveillance, and structural abandonment, their lives are not just defined by victimhood; trans communities, especially those from caste-oppressed, Tamil-speaking, and economically deprived rural areas, have shown remarkable resilience through creative, defiant, and community-rooted forms of resistance that are not merely coping mechanisms but transformative political actions that reimagine visibility, autonomy, and dignity on their own terms (WFD, 2023, p. 31; SSA, 2021, p. 22).

### ***Strength-Based Survival in Hostile Structures***

Transgender people from rural communities have learnt to navigate, manipulate, and sometimes co-opt hostile bureaucracies in highly strategic ways. Many transgender people continue to apply for the Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) by repeatedly pleading with clerks, doctors, and local officers—sometimes not for recognition, but for empathy, or at least sympathy—despite the onerous requirements of psychiatric evaluations, hospital referrals, and unsupportive state actors (Yutthaworakool, 2020, pp. 58–60). For example, despite unnecessary delays and unsolicited advice from medical officers who insisted on talking to her about marriage, lifestyle, and whether she was certain about her gender identity, Angel, a trans woman explained how she had to visit the hospital and psychiatric departments multiple times before receiving her certificate (Transgender Assessment Report, 2017, p. 10; Yutthaworakool, 2020, p. 61). Some transgender people strategically establish good relationships with lower-level bureaucrats who can help ease processes. Others have relied on peer networks to "share tips" about how to resolve documentation discrepancies through informal means, such as creating community affidavits and which sympathetic state actors to approach (SSA, 2021, p. 35).

### ***Pride, Protest, and Visibility: Everyday Acts of Resistance***

Pride events themselves turn into dissent when they are continuously marginalised. Taking part in visibility campaigns, such as Colombo Pride, has been a crucial strategy for sending the message, "We exist too." Rural trans people attend these events as a claim to space, society, and citizenship, despite tokenistic inclusion and minimal representation (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, p. 41; Equal Ground, 2020). Even if they encounter hate speech and trolling online, they use spoken-word performances, street theatre, and social media posts in addition to public events to promote awareness of gender identity struggles (IAGCI, 2018).

**Samanathmatha Piyasa**, a self-built "Equality Shelter", was established at the protest site by a group of queer activists during the 2022 ***Aragalaya*** movement<sup>11</sup>. In addition to protecting LGBT+ people from police brutality, this temporary shelter established a radical counterspace during a large-scale demonstration to demand queer and trans justice be

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<sup>11</sup> The name *Aragalaya*, which means "struggle" in Sinhala, refers to a mass protest movement that arose in Sri Lanka in 2022 in reaction to severe economic issues, including food shortages and widespread inflation. The movement resulted in the resignation of President Gotabaya Rajapaksa in July 2022. Transgender people actively participated in the *Aragalaya*, not only pushing for LGBTQ+ rights but also supporting broader demands regarding government accountability and economic reform.

included in broader democratic struggles (Housing Brief, 2023, p. 4). Trans allies created an **underground network of refuge** by providing temporary accommodation to displaced queer protesters even after the shelter was demolished (Housing Brief, 2023, p. 4).

### ***Resisting with Limited Means: Resourcefulness in Healthcare and Housing***

Some transgender people seek out informal networks in order to obtain gender-affirming medical care, particularly hormone therapy, in the face of institutionalised medical gatekeeping. Despite the potential financial and legal concerns, hormones are often distributed within trusted networks or obtained from overseas through diaspora channels (SSA, 2021, p. 24; Ariyaratne & Ranketh, 2022, p. 173). Many people travel to India or look for private doctors in Colombo who are sympathetic for procedures; they frequently pay out of pocket or use Facebook or WhatsApp groups to raise money (Yutthaworakool, 2020, p. 63).

In a similar way, housing is managed through short-term alliances. Many are housed informally by fellow queer people, particularly when they are forced out, displaced, or abused. Transgender rights activist Bhoomi Harendran emphasised the pressing need for trans-led drop-in centres after she struggled to locate a place to stay for a friend who had been kicked out by her family (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 50). Transgender people stated that landlords turned them away during the economic crisis unless they had "respectable" occupations or passed as cisgender (Housing Brief, 2023, p. 6).

### ***Political Education and Digital Organising***

Despite online harassment risks, digital spaces have developed into effective places for resistance. Online campaigns that educate the public, record police abuses, and elevate the voices of rural trans people who are unable to physically attend urban activist spaces are run by initiatives such as Sakhi Collaboration and Accept Lanka (Melegoda & Gamage, 2020, pp. 45–46). These sites also facilitate resource sharing, mental health support, and virtual solidarity. To equip trans adolescents with the skills they need to resist and advocate for themselves, grassroots trans collectives in Jaffna, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa offer mental health training programmes, operate helplines, and even conduct digital literacy initiatives (WFD, 2023, p. 31).

### ***Resilience as Decolonial Praxis***

It is important to recognise that these actions—sharing hormones, crowdfunding surgeries, claiming homes without documents, or taking advantage of protest sites—are not simply survival strategies but also expressions of decolonial resilience. These communities resist traditional development paradigms by emphasising radical care, community kinship, and non-extractive leadership. In doing so, they resist both state-sponsored erasure and elite NGO tokenism (Crenshaw, 1989; Ariyaratne, 2022). Their strength resides not in adaptation but in redefining belonging in their own way. According to Ariyaratne and Ranketh (2022), trans people in Sri Lanka are "queering not just gender, but also the very idea of citizenship, care, and kinship" (p. 173).

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

### **3.1 Gender Transformative Approach (GTA): Challenging Oppressive Gender Norms & Enhancing Leadership**

The Gender Transformative Approach (GTA) goes beyond gender awareness to actively challenge and dismantle current gender norms, repressive power dynamics, and systemic institutions that perpetuate inequality (Interagency Gender Working Group, 2009, p. 1; GTA Guide, 2022, p. 3). It advocates not just the inclusion of marginalised groups inside current frameworks but also the fundamental reformation of these structures themselves. When applied to the Sri Lankan context, the GTA highlights how transgender people—particularly Tamil-speaking, rural, caste-marginalised people—face entrenched structural discrimination, socioeconomic exclusion, and political invisibility as a result of systemic legal, cultural, and social barriers (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 2; WFD, 2023, p. 24).

The **lack of accessible legal gender recognition** is a major systemic problem. Transgender people are forced to deal with stigmatising bureaucratic procedures that require psychiatric assessments and medical transition evidence just to change identity documents because there is no self-determined legal framework for gender recognition (Yutthaworakool, 2020, p. 47; Equal Ground, 2020, p. 9). Due to ongoing disclosure of their transgender identity on official papers, people are still at risk even after receiving a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC). A GTA application necessitates a more in-depth analysis of the

ways in which institutionalised pathologisation and medical gatekeeping reinforce binary gender systems and control the bodies of transgender people. Rethinking legal gender recognition as a human right grounded in dignity, bodily autonomy, and self-determination is necessary to challenge these norms. Additionally, a GTA would require that transgender leadership be actively promoted in legislative processes, shifting from top-down policy reforms to rights-based, community-driven legal frameworks. In order to bring forth transformative change, legal processes that provide the confidential, readily accessible, and non-pathologising revision of all identity documents based only on self-identification must be institutionalised (Gender-Transformative-Research, 2022, p. 8). To undermine the state's role in legitimising trans marginalisation, such transformation is essential.

Another ingrained barrier is **economic exclusion and employment marginalisation**. Due to employer discrimination, a lack of gender-inclusive workplace regulations, and mandatory gender-conforming dress requirements, transgender people in Sri Lanka experience systematic exclusion from formal labour markets regardless of nominal anti-discrimination principles (Wijayawardhana et al., 2023, p. 23). As a result, many are forced into unstable informal economies, such as sex work, where they are more vulnerable to violence, policing, and economic exploitation, especially trans women in rural areas (SSA, 2021, p. 44). GTA theory presents this as a systemic replication of gendered labour marginalisation rather than a personal failure. Under the GTA, challenging economic norms entails dismantling the ways in which formal labour structures perpetuate patriarchal and cisnormative ideals that exclude people of other gender identities from employment. Establishing spaces where transgender people can lead economic initiatives, establish cooperatives, and directing vocational and entrepreneurial programmes based on the realities of marginalised populations would be necessary to promote trans leadership in the economic sphere. The creation of legally binding corporate accountability standards that require non-discriminatory hiring practices, workplace gender-affirmation policies, and labour rights that specifically include gender-diverse employees are essential components of institutional transformation. Initiatives for surface-level inclusion run the risk of reinforcing rather than eliminating systemic inequities if they don't address the fundamental causes of economic exclusion.

Transgender people in Sri Lanka are severely marginalised by **civic, political, and social exclusion**. While transgender voices are invisible in democratic processes due to the

near-complete lack of transgender representation in political parties, policymaking bodies, and governance structures, experiences of harassment, misgendering, and exclusion at polling stations create significant barriers to political participation (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 56; WFD, 2023, p. 24). In order to implement the Gender Transformative Approach (GTA), governmental institutions that intentionally privilege certain groups of cisnormative individuals and marginalise gender-diverse identities must be fundamentally dismantled. The proactive establishment of political spaces that support and validate transgender leadership is necessary to challenge these norms. Beyond tokenistic inclusion, fostering long-term political participation through mentorship programmes, civic literacy campaigns, and leadership pathways that equip transgender advocates for significant positions in governance are essential to advancing trans leadership. Transformation of election processes is equally important: identification verification and voter registration processes must accept self-identified gender without any medical or bureaucratic barriers. In order to protect the democratic rights of all citizens, regardless of gender identity, electoral commissions must establish training programmes to educate election officials about gender diversity. Reforms run the risk of sustaining the very political marginalisation that GTA aims to eradicate if these systematic inequalities are not thoroughly addressed (Rutgers, 2018).

These political barriers are exacerbated by **social exclusions**, especially in rural Tamil-speaking areas. Traditional power structures in rural and post-conflict areas, which are often reinforced by militarised governance and rigid gender norms, systematically exclude transgender people from public life (WFD, 2023, p. 31). A GTA demands a radical reconstruction of social structures, not just surface-level inclusion. This includes changing religious discourse to promote gender diversity, restructuring community governance entities to guarantee transgender participation, and incorporating anti-discrimination principles into rural development practices (UNICEF, 2019, p. 7; Rutgers, 2018, p. 6). The only way to effectively address the persisting exclusion of transgender persons is through systemic social transformation. It is important to note that the GTA's application to these systemic barriers emphasises the fact that individual behavioural change interventions alone are incapable of bringing transformation. In order to address the root causes of oppression and challenge the very structure of exclusion, it must rather operate at several levels, including legal, economic, political, institutional, and cultural (Hillenbrand et al., 2015, p. 5).

Structural inequalities are fostered by interrelated systems; therefore, eliminating them necessitates an equally intersectional, holistic strategy based on participatory justice.

Finally, this systemic restructuring necessitates **gender-transformative leadership**. According to the theory of transformative leadership, gender transformative leadership is based on collaborative, justice-focused, and participatory practices that challenge unjust systems instead of making marginalised people fit within those systems (Shields, 2020, p. 27; Montuori & Donnelly, 2018, p. 14). Gender transformative leadership in the context of transgender advocacy in Sri Lanka refers to enabling transgender individuals as change agents by opposing the prevailing narratives that make them invisible and restructuring institutions to be truly inclusive. It necessitates radical, non-assimilative leadership dedicated to eradicating oppressive systems rather than modifying them (Gonzalez, 2022, p. 5).

In conclusion, the gender-transformative approach provides a crucial framework for tackling the structural barriers that transgender individuals in Sri Lanka encounter. GTA offers a roadmap to significant, systemic, and long-lasting change by resisting oppressive norms, fostering transgender leadership, and transforming institutional frameworks in the legal, political, and economic spheres. It reimagines not simply inclusion in existing structures but the development of completely new ones based on social justice, equality, and dignity.

### **3.2 Rethinking Discrimination through Intersectionality**

Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex, Kimberlé Crenshaw's revolutionary work from 1989, fundamentally changed the way that discrimination needs to be conceptualised, contested, and addressed. Crenshaw criticises feminist theory, antiracist politics, and U.S. antidiscrimination law for failing to take into consideration the **multifaceted nature of Black women's experiences**. She contends that these political movements and legal frameworks are based on a **single-axis model** of subordination, which emphasises either gender or race but not both at the same time (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

In response to this reductive approach, Crenshaw presents **intersectionality** as a theory of **interlocking and constitutive oppression** rather than merely a "layering" of identity categories. Oppression at the racial and gender intersection, in her opinion, is not just an addition but qualitatively different. Frameworks based on the experiences of more privileged group members, like white women in feminist theory or Black men in antiracist

discourse, are unable to adequately understand the forms of harm experienced by Black women and, by extension, other multiply marginalised groups (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Crenshaw uses the legal analysis of *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors* to demonstrate this point. In this case, Black women plaintiffs were not recognised as a distinct class because the court would only consider discrimination claims based on race or gender, but not both (Crenshaw, 1989, pp. 141–143). Their claim was rendered invisible by the law's failure to recognise their distinctive position. She demonstrates how people who live at the intersections of many oppressions are systematically erased by this **"single-axis" legal framework**. Comparably, antiracist initiatives usually focus on Black men and ignore gender, ignoring Black women's unique forms of subordination, while feminist groups tend to emphasise the experiences of white, middle-class women, regarding race as inconsequential (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 145). According to Crenshaw, even the progressive movements will continue to reinforce the exclusions they aim to eliminate unless the intersection itself serves as the foundation for analysis and solution.

Crenshaw uses her now-famous traffic crossroads analogy to give concrete form to this criticism. The individual standing at the intersection is exposed to the full force of approaching vehicles, and she encourages us to visualise discrimination as traffic coming from many directions—race, gender, class, etc.

“If a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident...” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149).

She is describing simultaneous effect, not layered or sequential harm, which is crucial. Intersectional oppression functions in a compound and mutually reinforcing manner, much like a traffic collision at a crossroads when numerous forces strike simultaneously. She cautions that judicial systems are like first responders who refuse to assist victims unless they can identify a single, legally identifiable cause of harm. This is a preposterous standard that leaves the most harmed without any recourse.

### **Applying Intersectionality to the Sri Lankan Transgender Context**

Crenshaw's intersectional approach provides a powerful theoretical basis for analysing the systemic exclusion experienced by rural transgender people in Sri Lanka, particularly those who are Tamil or Muslim, come from families which are categorised as “lower-caste”, and

live in post-war militarised areas. Similar to Black women in the United States, these people face **compounded and interlocking forms of discrimination** that are impossible to resolve with one-issue strategies that solely focus on issues of their sexuality or gender identity.

As previously stated, Tamil and Muslim transgender people in rural Sri Lanka endure increased family rejection due to conservative religious norms and cultural stigma. This situation reflects Crenshaw's observation that concentrating on race or gender in isolation obscures those at the intersection: focusing on gender identity alone is insufficient to convey the extent of violence and isolation created when trans identity intersects with caste, ethnicity, language, and geography (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 143).

Furthermore, this vulnerability is exacerbated in the Northern and Eastern provinces by the scars of post-war militarisation. Public spaces are inhospitable to gender-diverse individuals due to the aggressive enforcement of heteronormative and patriarchal beliefs by former military actors, many of whom still hold local power (WFD, 2023, p. 24). In this situation, the state acts as a **reproducer of exclusion** rather than a neutral arbiter, just as Crenshaw emphasises that American judicial systems maintain standards that benefit the most privileged members of marginalised communities (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 144).

According to the intersectional analysis, transgender people's exclusion from rural Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka stems from more than just their gender identity. Instead, it is exacerbated by economic marginalisation, interlocking stigma of being a member of caste-oppressed groups, limited access to legal representation in their own language, and linguistic marginalisation within Sinhala-dominated legal and medical systems (Gap Analysis, 2021, p. 18; SSA, 2021, p. 44).

This multidimensional oppression is directly connected to Crenshaw's criticism of single-axis solutions. In the same way that Black women in American courts were asked to separate racism or sexism, transgender people in Sri Lanka are often required to frame their struggles only in terms of gender identity, ignoring the caste, class, and ethnolinguistic elements that contribute to their marginalisation.

### **Toward Intersectional Justice**

It becomes clear from applying Crenshaw's intersectionality to Sri Lanka that fragmented, segmented policy approaches must be rejected. In addition to prioritising access to legal and healthcare systems in Tamil and Sinhala, it calls for community-led, multilingual, and

localised advocacy that challenges postcolonial legal structures such as vagrancy laws that criminalise transgender existence and fight caste-based discrimination within queer spaces (Human Rights Watch, 2016, p. 18).

As Crenshaw emphasised, only the most "legible" or socially acceptable members of marginalised groups are often protected by the law. This leads to lower-caste transgender sex workers in Sri Lanka being almost invisible, subject to regular police brutality and extortion, and having little access to legal assistance. Their marginalisation is fundamentally ingrained in institutions built on the single-axis recognition of harm, much like that of Crenshaw's Black female litigants.

Therefore, decriminalisation alone is not enough for an intersectional approach to justice in Sri Lanka. State institutions themselves must be restructured, from training for the police and judiciary to language availability in legal aid and the establishment of trans leadership in advocacy spaces that is inclusive of caste and class.

In conclusion, Crenshaw's intersectionality theory is more than just a demand to incorporate more marginalised voices; it is a mandate to reconstruct our frameworks from the bottom up. In the context of Sri Lankan transgender people, intersectionality shows that any policy will only benefit the most privileged among the marginalised if it does not fully address the intersecting systems of caste, language, class, gender, and ethnicity. The only way to make justice meaningful is to put individuals who are truly harmed at the centre of the problem; doing otherwise would make it harder to achieve.

### **3.3 Feminist Standpoint Theory: Situated Knowledges and Marginalized Epistemologies**

Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) provides a radical epistemological framework, arguing that systemically marginalised groups are uniquely positioned to produce more accurate, accountable, and liberatory understandings of those dominant systems (Harding, 2014, pp. 47–51). Drawing from Marxist and socialist feminist traditions, FST argues that the oppressed's epistemic advantage comes from their ability to expose the contradictions and exclusions that are normalised or disregarded by dominant perspectives, rather than from their actual suffering (Harding, 2014, p. 49). This assertion is furthered in Donna Haraway's *Situated Knowledges*, which denies the idea of a "view from nowhere" and contends that all knowledge is embodied, partial, and political (Haraway, 1988, p. 583).

These frameworks, when applied to the Sri Lankan context, reveal how the unique lived realities of caste-oppressed, rural, Tamil-speaking transgender people are systematically excluded from academic, legal, and policy discourses that purport to accurately reflect transgender lives. Although the Ministry of Health (2016) has established a state framework for gender recognition, the limited availability of services, language barriers, and provider biases indicate a deeper epistemological issue rather than a technical one: the knowledge systems guiding these policies are based on urban, Sinhala, cisnormative worldviews (SSA, 2021, p. 44; WFD, 2023, p. 24).

According to FST, the standpoint of individuals who are repeatedly marginalised must be the starting point for knowledge production. However, the almost complete exclusion of the experiences of trans people living in rural areas from national data sets, academic publications, and institutional reports is not only a void; rather, it is a deliberate and systematic act of erasure. This evidentiary gap is an example of epistemic violence: it supports an urban, homogenised idea of trans existence in Sri Lanka, leaving individuals at the intersections of caste, language, geography, and economic exclusion undocumented and unknown. As a practitioner working with these communities, I am constrained to rely on qualitative testimony and lived narratives—not by choice, but because there is **no quantitative data to account for their existence**. Therefore, instead of being a methodological limitation, this reliance on empirical data is a conscious, situated opposition to structures that do not name, count, or represent the most marginalised. According to Haraway (1988), situated knowledges do not universalise; rather, they emphasise what dominant systems ignore and demand accountability for what is excluded (p. 583).

This absence needs to be viewed as a **failure of knowledge production** in general, not just a statistical or logistical error, but an epistemological distortion with actual political ramifications. It determines who is visible, whose hardships are acknowledged, and who is systematically denied access to scholarly acknowledgement, policy benefits, and legal protection.

Furthermore, institutions all too frequently define the barriers that rural trans people encounter—whether they relate to obtaining legal documentation, affirming healthcare, or public space—as implementation issues. However, from a standpoint perspective, these are not deviations but rather the result of knowledge frameworks that were created without

them in consideration. They are actual manifestations of an epistemology that silences those outside the system and privileges those who are already a part of it.

FST exposes the unequal distribution of epistemic power, even in trans and queer advocacy forums. While rural, oppressed caste, Tamil-speaking trans people are consigned to passive categories like "beneficiaries" or "service users", upper-caste, Sinhala-speaking, metropolitan trans narratives generally dominate NGO reports and media platforms (SSA, 2021, p. 49). Their political awareness, collective strategies, and resistance are rarely documented or acknowledged as knowledge. FST rejects this hierarchy, arguing that epistemic legitimacy must be gained by reflexive, collective struggle rather than provided by institutional or funding connections (Haraway, 1988, p. 584).

This is the exact transformative goal of the TransAct initiative. TransAct equips 30 rural trans advocates with leadership, legal literacy, and participatory research skills, **repositioning them as knowledge producers** rather than just giving them a voice. By redefining who gets to define the issue and develop the remedies, it exemplifies FST's appeal to redirect epistemic labour from the outside to the inside. According to Harding (2014), when knowledge based on marginalised experience is politicised and collectivised, it produces not only deeper understanding but also more equitable outcomes (p. 60).

In conclusion, situated knowledges and feminist standpoint theory provide a framework for epistemic justice in addition to criticising exclusion. They force us to consider who is represented in the data. Whose discourse is legible? And whose facts are consistently denied? Any effort of intersectional justice in Sri Lanka must start with the caste-oppressed, rural, Tamil-speaking trans lives; this is the only epistemically and ethically legitimate place to start.

### **3.4 Theory of Change (ToC): Strategic Roadmap for Advancing Transgender Rights**

The Theory of Change (ToC) is a political and ethical position that questions how systems function and who gets to define social development. It is more than just a strategic framework. ToC, as articulated by activists, is more than just a technical tool for project planning; it is a radical methodology that centres the lived experiences of the most marginalised and disrupts power structures (Hivos, 2015, p. 13; UNDG, 2017, p. 4). For TransAct, the ToC is a declaration and a roadmap—a pledge to stop structural violence by

establishing change in the leadership, agency, and epistemologies of caste-oppressed, rural, Tamil-speaking transgender people in Sri Lanka.

The ideal way to conceptualise ToC is as a critical and participatory analysis of our presumptions about the causes and mechanisms of change (Vogel, 2012; Hivos, 2015, p. 12). This is particularly crucial in Sri Lanka, where urban, Sinhala-speaking, cisgender perspectives dominate the mainstream queer discourse, making the intersectional oppressions of transgender people in rural areas invisible. Because gender is a multifaceted issue that influences many aspects of human relations, TransAct acknowledges that sustainable transformation must take place concurrently at the individual, community, institutional, and structural levels by establishing a ToC based on a socio-ecological model (FAO, 2022).

The socio-ecological framework incorporated into this ToC emphasises that in order to confront repressive social norms, discriminatory institutions, and unfair governance systems, norm change must start with individual transformation and spread outward (ILO, 2022, p. 4). This strategy is supported by TransAct's ToC, which frames trans people living in rural areas as both subjects and change agents. The program's design depends on the idea that trans people will challenge restrictive structures and create novel forms of civic legitimacy from the margins once they are equipped with advocacy tools, legal knowledge, and engagement platforms (UN Women, 2017, p. 3).

### **Strategic Pathways of Change**

**Activities and Inputs:** The project starts with training 30 transgender advocates in rural areas about gender justice leadership, civic engagement, and legal literacy. It helps create trans-led advocacy demand papers that explicitly address community-driven policy changes related to gender recognition, education, employment and healthcare.

**Outputs:** These initiatives produce two main results: (1) a group of politically informed and equipped trans activists and (2) the submission of official advocacy documentation with institutions such as the Ministry of Health, hospital administrations, the Ministry of Education, the Department of Examinations, the Department of Registration of Persons and local government authorities.

**Outcomes:** In the short- to medium-term, the aim is to promote trans people's civic, political and social participation at the local and national levels, as well as institutional acceptance of

their demands. This involves the visibility of trans-inclusive narratives in governance spaces and changes to the way public officials interact with trans people.

**Impact:** The long-term objective is transformative structural change, which includes equitable access to healthcare, education, employment and legal gender recognition based on self-identification, and sustained trans-led civic presence in democratic institutions. This vision of change is not merely procedural but fundamentally reparative—it seeks to undo decades of erasure and exclusion.

### **Activist Mechanisms and Justice-Oriented Assumptions**

This ToC is driven by three fundamental activist mechanisms:

**1. Self-Determination and Agency:** This ToC opposes the idea that trans people in rural areas are helpless victims of marginalisation. Rather, it validates their ability to theorise and challenge authority, which is consistent with feminist ideas that knowledge and change must come from the edges (Hivos, 2015, p. 15).

**2. Collective Power and Intersectionality:** The project strengthens collective power and centres intersectionality—not only as an analytical tool but also as a lived reality that influences how people experience language-based exclusion, caste discrimination, and state violence—by creating community-led knowledge and advocacy networks (ILO, 2022, p. 5).

**3. Epistemic Justice and Situated Knowledge:** The ToC makes it clear that trans people living in rural areas are epistemic agents as well as beneficiaries. The use of their testimonies and practitioner insights is an essential epistemological intervention in a country where quantitative data on their experiences is either nonexistent or distorted (Haraway, 1988, p. 583; Hivos, 2015, p. 12).

For this reason, this theory of change is not neutral. It is a statement of intent to challenge the status quo by giving people most marginalised from traditional governance and development systems the ability to define, demand, and drive change.

In conclusion, the TransAct Theory of Change represents a conscious act of resistance against the top-down, technocratic methods that have traditionally failed to meet the needs of transgender people in rural Sri Lanka who are oppressed due to their intersectionality of identities. It is based on decolonial, intersectional, and feminist practice. This ToC maps not only a strategy but a political horizon—one in which rural trans people actively create more inclusive, just, and dignified futures rather than passively surviving within unjust

systems—by using the socio-ecological model and gender-transformative research frameworks.

## 4. Project Framework

### 4.1 Project rationale

Transgender people in Sri Lanka, particularly Tamil-speaking people from rural and post-war areas, endure intersecting and systemic discrimination in the legal, civic, social, and economic spheres. These exclusions are exacerbated by the lack of legal gender recognition, criminalisation under Section 399 of the Penal Code, and the difficult accessibility of the Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) procedure, which pathologises trans identities and is still out of reach for most rural, low-income people (UNDP, 2017; Equal Ground, 2021).

Rural, Tamil-speaking transgender populations are frequently ignored by national LGBTQI+ advocacy, which is still primarily urban, Sinhala-speaking, and cisgender-focused. Although there are grassroots trans-led initiatives, they do not have access to resources, training in policy advocacy, leadership development, or materials in Tamil that are specific to their circumstances. In the North, East, and Central provinces, where post-war administration, militarisation, caste-based exclusion, and economic hardship further isolate transgender people, these disparities are particularly pronounced.

The **TransAct Sri Lanka** project was conceived as a community-driven, rights-based solution to this exclusionary dilemma. The project, which is based on intersectional justice theories, aims to increase the civic, political and social engagement of 30 transgender advocates from caste-oppressed, rural, and conflict-affected communities. Through mentorship, leadership development, legal literacy, and trans-led policy advocacy, the project aims to equip participants with the tools they need to participate in democratic settings and challenge the institutional constraints on their agency and rights.

Additionally, by creating advocacy materials and training programmes in Tamil that connect to the lived reality of transgender people in rural areas, **TransAct Sri Lanka** prioritises culturally and linguistically appropriate resources. The project aims to create sustainable, trans-led movements that drive inclusive policy change by focusing on transgender people as civic activists and community leaders rather than as passive beneficiaries of aid. TransAct Sri Lanka addresses a pressing need: to close the gap between the lived realities of individuals who are marginalised—not in spite of, but because of, the way the system was constructed and the constitutional guarantees of equality.

## 4.2 Project goal

The goal of **TransAct Sri Lanka** is to equip and strengthen 30 rural, Tamil-speaking transgender individuals to participate meaningfully and sustainably in civic, political, and social life by increasing their legal literacy, leadership skills, and policy advocacy skills, thereby ensuring their rights, representation, and influence in Sri Lanka's democratic governance.

## 4.3 Project objectives

- **To strengthen the legal literacy, civic leadership, and policy advocacy skills of 30 rural, Tamil-speaking transgender individuals** through a structured, rights-based training and mentorship programme.
- **To develop, publish, and distribute a Tamil-language transgender advocacy training manual** that is contextually grounded, culturally accessible, and tailored to the lived realities of rural transgender communities.
- **To support each transgender fellow in designing and implementing at least one community-based advocacy initiative**, including the creation of locally informed demand letters or policy briefs through needs assessments and participatory consultations.
- **To facilitate a minimum of three structured engagement<sup>12</sup> platforms between transgender advocates and state/public service stakeholders**, enabling real-time advocacy experience and visibility in decision-making processes.
- **To document project outcomes, lessons learnt, and best practices** to inform future transgender-led civic and political participation initiatives and create scalable pathways for long-term policy influence.

## 4.4 Project outcomes and outputs

### Phase 1: Capacity Building and Training

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<sup>12</sup> "Structured engagement platforms" are formally organised spaces for discourse, such as public forums, stakeholder consultations, or policy roundtables, where transgender advocates interact directly with representatives from state and public institutions. These engagements are intended to provide practical advocacy experience by allowing advocates to communicate their demands, negotiate policy positions, and increase visibility inside governance institutions. They serve as both a learning tool and a strategic intervention, bridging the gap between grassroots activism and institutional decision-making.

**Outcome 1:** 30 transgender advocates from rural, Tamil-speaking, and caste-oppressed communities demonstrate increased legal literacy, leadership skills, and readiness to engage in civic and political activities within 12 months of project initiation.

- **Output 1.1:** Development and dissemination of a comprehensive Tamil-language Civic Rights and Advocacy Training Manual covering six thematic areas:
  - Fundamental Rights and Civic Participation.
  - Gender-Based Violence and Legal Protection.
  - Advocacy Tools and Research Methods.
  - Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) and Gender-Affirming Care.
  - Digital Advocacy and Online Safety.
  - Mental Health and Resilience.
- **Output 1.2:** Two 4-day residential training programmes were conducted, equipping 30 transgender advocates with technical, legal, and practical civic engagement and advocacy skills.
- **Output 1.3:** Post-training surveys indicate a minimum 60% increase in participant knowledge and confidence regarding civic and political participation and policy advocacy tools and best practices.

## **Phase 2: Fellowship and Advocacy Practice**

**Outcome 2:** 30 transgender fellows initiate and lead localised, community-driven advocacy actions across 6 districts within 3 months of training completion.

- **Output 2.1:** Each fellow produces a localised *Advocacy Demand Letter*<sup>13</sup> developed through empathy mapping and community consultations within their districts.
- **Output 2.2:** A minimum of three structured engagement platforms conducted between fellows and state/public service stakeholders, enabling real-time advocacy experience and visibility in decision-making processes.
- **Output 2.3:** Policy gaps, recommendations and community concerns documented and submitted to relevant authorities, with follow-up mechanisms initiated in at least 3 districts.

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<sup>13</sup> A localised Advocacy Demand Letter is a structured document developed by transgender advocates or activists to communicate specific demands for civic and political participation, as well as access to public services that have previously been denied to transgender people. These letters are developed using participatory approaches such as empathy mapping and community consultations within their respective districts, ensuring that the lived realities, marginalisation, and priorities of rural transgender populations are accurately conveyed. The process not only fosters collective agency but also allows for focused engagement with local authorities through context-specific, practical recommendations.

### **Phase 3: Knowledge Documentation and Network Building**

**Outcome 3:** A rural transgender advocacy network is established, strengthened, documented, and sustained beyond the project cycle.

- **Output 3.1:** A participant-driven summary report produced, highlighting community and stakeholder engagement, policy dialogue, and lessons learned from each advocacy effort.
- **Output 3.2:** A consultant-led *Lessons Learnt and Strategic Recommendations* report developed, providing strategic recommendations for scaling and sustaining transgender-led advocacy and movements.

#### **4.5 Project design**

**TransAct Sri Lanka** adopts a **transformative participatory framework** rooted in the principles of community ownership, trauma-informed leadership development, and intersectional gender justice.

##### **Key design elements:**

- **Participant-Centered Learning:** Trainings are designed based on the needs, languages, and lived experiences of rural Tamil-speaking transgender persons.
- **Intersectionality:** Specific focus on caste, class, gender, rurality, and post-war realities that shape transgender exclusion.
- **Transformative Capacity Building:** Trainings emphasise not only legal literacy but also emotional resilience, digital advocacy, and public leadership.
- **Empathy Mapping and Community Consultations:** Fellows use participatory methods to ground advocacy initiatives in real community needs.
- **Practical Advocacy Engagements:** Fellows are trained through simulations and direct stakeholder meetings to build confidence in real-world political negotiation.
- **Knowledge Generation:** Structured documentation at every stage to inform broader movements and future programming.

The project integrates learnings from the Gender Transformative Approach (GTA), Feminist Standpoint Theory, and participatory action research frameworks to create a model that is replicable and scalable across other rural transgender communities in Sri Lanka.

#### 4.6 Project principles

The project follows a set of guiding principles to ensure long-lasting, rights-based, and transformative change:

1. **Trans-Led and Community-Owned:** Centering transgender persons as planners, implementers, and leaders of the project.
2. **Intersectional:** Addressing the compounded marginalisation faced by rural, Tamil-speaking, caste-oppressed transgender persons.
3. **Rights-Based:** Anchored in constitutional, human rights, and social justice frameworks.
4. **Participatory:** Ensuring that participants shape curriculum design, implementation strategies, and advocacy content.
5. **Capacity-Building Focused:** Strengthening both technical skills and emotional resilience for sustained activism.
6. **Evidence-Based:** Utilising a demand-driven approach informed by needs assessments, KAP surveys, and community consultations.
7. **Sustainability-Orientated:** Building self-sustaining networks and advocacy coalitions for long-term trans leadership.
8. **Language-Accessible:** Prioritising Tamil-language resources to address linguistic marginalisation.

## 4.7 Project schedule

Timeline	Activity / Milestones
June – August 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Select consultant(s) for needs assessment and training manual development</li> <li>- Call for applications and headhunt participants</li> <li>- Conduct needs assessment with selected transgender participants</li> </ul>
September – October 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develop training manual based on needs assessment findings</li> <li>- Review and finalize the Tamil-language training manual</li> </ul>
November – December 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct two residential training programs on civic rights and responsibilities</li> <li>- Launch fellowship component for Advocacy Demand Paper development</li> </ul>
January – February 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facilitate community consultations and empathy mapping by fellows</li> <li>- Fellows begin developing and implementing advocacy demand papers</li> </ul>
March – April 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Conduct practical advocacy simulations and meetings with public stakeholders</li> </ul>
May 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Participants develop summary documents reflecting on advocacy experiences</li> </ul>
June 2026	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Consultant compiles final Lessons Learnt document</li> <li>-Project team completes evaluation and documentation</li> </ul>

## **5. Strengthening Project Impact**

### **5.1 Stakeholder Engagement**

Sustainable and systemic change for transgender rights in Sri Lanka requires not only empowering transgender advocates but also strategically engaging a diverse set of stakeholders who influence civic and political ecosystems.

#### **Government Institutions:**

Engagement with local government authorities, divisional secretariats, provincial councils, and national ministries responsible for social justice, human rights, and local governance is critical. These entities serve as both duty-bearers and gatekeepers of civic participation. Through structured stakeholder meetings, participants will advocate for administrative reforms, more accessible gender recognition procedures, and inclusive policy making. Building relationships with government officials will also create opportunities for transgender inclusion in public consultations, village committees, and district-level decision-making processes.

#### **Trans Activists and Networks:**

Existing transgender leaders and grassroots movements offer invaluable experiential knowledge, mentorship, and community legitimacy. By collaborating with established trans advocates, TransAct fellows can build solidarity, avoid duplication of efforts, and amplify collective demands. Inclusion of these leaders in training design, mentorship activities, and policy engagements will ensure that the project builds upon and strengthens existing advocacy ecosystems rather than operating in isolation.

#### **Legal Experts and Human Rights Defenders:**

Partnerships with lawyers, legal aid organisations, and constitutional experts will be critical in equipping transgender fellows with the technical language, frameworks, and advocacy strategies needed to navigate and challenge discriminatory laws, such as Sections 365, 365A, and 399 of the Penal Code. Legal experts will also support the refinement of advocacy demand papers to ensure their feasibility, rights-based grounding, and policy relevance.

#### **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs):**

CSOs working on gender equality, human rights, rural development, and post-conflict reconciliation bring critical capacities and access to broader platforms. Their participation in capacity-building trainings, mentorship programmes, and advocacy engagements will strengthen fellows' networks, enhance visibility, and position transgender rights as an integral part of broader civil society agendas.

By engaging these stakeholders systematically, TransAct Sri Lanka aims to create a multi-level advocacy movement rooted in local leadership but connected to broader institutional and societal frameworks.

## **5.2 Partnerships and Fundraising**

The sustainability and scalability of TransAct Sri Lanka depend heavily on strategic partnerships and resource mobilisation efforts beyond the initial project lifecycle.

### **Partnerships with NGOs and Community-Based Organisations:**

Building partnerships with NGOs working on marginalised communities' empowerment, youth leadership, civic education, legal reform, and mental health is vital. Collaborative projects such as joint policy submissions, co-hosted advocacy events, and joint training initiatives can multiply impact. Establishing memorandums of understanding (MOUs) with key organisations can ensure continuity of support for transgender fellows beyond the project's end.

### **Engagement with Donor Agencies and International Allies:**

International development agencies, embassies, UN bodies (e.g., UNDP, OHCHR), and global LGBTQI+ rights organisations are critical allies. Through project impact reports, success stories, and advocacy campaigns, TransAct Sri Lanka can attract funding for future expansion, research, and policy initiatives. Aligning the project with international human rights frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Yogyakarta Principles, and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) recommendations on LGBTQI+ rights will strengthen fundraising efforts.

### **Resource Diversification and Innovation:**

The project will also explore diversified fundraising approaches such as community crowdfunding, micro-grants for grassroots advocacy, and partnerships with socially

responsible businesses. Building a resource mobilisation plan aligned with the project's intersectional and transformative ethos will ensure that fundraising efforts do not compromise community ownership and political integrity.

By embedding fundraising into the project's advocacy vision, TransAct Sri Lanka can evolve from a standalone intervention into a catalytic platform for sustainable trans-led advocacy movements across Sri Lanka.

### **5.3 Capacity to Implement the Project**

The successful implementation of TransAct Sri Lanka relies on the project's ability to harness existing community networks, grassroots leadership, and knowledge systems.

#### **Leveraging Community Networks:**

The project draws upon extensive peer-support networks, CBOs, and informal transgender collectives operating in the North, East, and Central provinces. These networks have deep trust within communities and intimate knowledge of local challenges. By recruiting fellows through these structures, grounding training curricula in community realities, and facilitating peer-to-peer mentorship, the project ensures that interventions are culturally sensitive, accessible, and sustainable.

#### **Building Local Ownership:**

Participants will not be passive recipients but co-creators and leaders of the project's processes. Through empathy mapping, community consultations, and local advocacy planning, fellows will build grassroots ownership of civic engagement initiatives, making them more resilient against political backlash and societal resistance.

#### **Embedding Sustainability Mechanisms:**

Beyond training individual fellows, the project is designed to seed sustainable trans-led advocacy networks. Fellows will be encouraged to form regional caucuses and build alliances with marginalised communities and establish informal resource-sharing collectives. Additionally, creating and disseminating a Lessons Learnt document and Advocacy Summaries will institutionalise knowledge, enabling future cohorts and organisations to build upon the project's achievements.

### **Organisational Strengths:**

The project leverages technical expertise in rights-based programming, community-led development, and advocacy training methodology. Strategic collaborations with consultants specialising in legal reform, civic engagement, and psychosocial resilience further bolster implementation capacity.

Thus, by rooting project strategies in participatory, community-centered, and intersectional approaches, **TransAct Sri Lanka** ensures not only successful implementation but also the long-term strengthening of rural transgender leadership and political agency in Sri Lanka.

## **6. Target Group**

### **6.1 Geographic Focus**

TransAct Sri Lanka will focus primarily on rural and peri-urban areas in the Northern, Eastern, and Central provinces of Sri Lanka—three traditionally underserved and conflict-affected regions.

These geographical areas were selected based on multiple interconnected factors:

**Post-war vulnerability:** Communities in the North and East continue to suffer the consequences of the armed conflict, such as poor civic infrastructure, limited access to services, and systemic neglect towards minority voices—conditions that disproportionately affect transgender people.

**Language and cultural marginalisation:** Tamil-speaking transgender people in these provinces often face intersectional discrimination based on language and gender identity, and their needs are often disregarded by Sinhala-dominated, urban-centred LGBT rights initiatives.

**Limited institutional reach:** Government programmes and mainstream LGBTQI+ organisations are mostly concentrated in Colombo and other urban areas. As a result, rural trans populations continue to lack access to legal aid, healthcare, employment opportunities, and advocacy platforms.

**Grassroots potential:** Despite these barriers, the target areas are home to strong and resilient peer networks, community-based groups, and emerging trans advocates with

extensive lived experience and contextual knowledge who, with appropriate assistance and training, are uniquely positioned to lead local regional movements.

TransAct Sri Lanka aims to decentralise advocacy leadership, challenge systemic exclusion at its source, and promote trans-led civic participation from those who are excluded by making investments in these geographical areas.

## **6.2 Beneficiaries**

### **Primary Beneficiaries:** Transgender Rights Advocates from Rural Areas

30 transgender people between the ages of 18 and 35 who speak Tamil will be the project's direct beneficiaries. They were selected from grassroots peer support networks in the Northern, Eastern, and Central provinces. These people either demonstrate a significant interest in civic engagement or are already involved in community leadership roles, but they lack the institutional access, legal knowledge, or technical resources necessary to scale their impact.

These fellows receive structured capacity-building, training, mentorship support, financial assistance for fellowship projects, and opportunities to interact directly with policymakers. The project aims to equip them with not only knowledge but also the psychological resilience and networks required for long-term advocacy.

### **Secondary Beneficiaries:** Policymakers, legal actors, NGOs.

TransAct Sri Lanka aims to bridge the gap between transgender populations and decision-making institutions. The following will be secondary beneficiaries:

**Policymakers at the local and district levels** will become more aware of issues that the transgender population is facing through direct interaction with trained advocates.

**Legal actors**, such as lawyers, human rights commissions, and public administrators, will receive advocacy demand letters and stakeholder inputs, making them more accountable for trans-inclusive governance.

**NGOs and civil society networks** that focus on development, human rights, gender, and reconciliation will benefit from collaborating with emerging trans-led networks in the provinces.

These stakeholders are essential for ensuring that advocacy outcomes shift from individual empowerment to systemic change.

**Tertiary Beneficiaries:** The Broader Transgender and Queer Community

The project's long-term outcomes will benefit transgender and queer people throughout Sri Lanka, particularly those living in rural and conflict-affected areas. The project aims to shift public discourse, challenge structural transphobia, and normalise trans leadership in Sri Lankan civil society by increasing visibility of transgender advocacy in civic spaces, disseminating a Tamil-language training manual, fostering knowledge sharing among fellows, and establishing a network of rural transgender leaders advocating for inclusive policies and services.

## 7. Budget

Budget						
Description	Unit	No of Units	Cost per Unit €	Funding Required €	Funding Available €	Total Cost €
Personnel (Salaries, visiting expert, support personnel, trainer, consultants, etc.)						
Project Manager	salary per month	12	200.00	2,400.00		2,400.00
Project Officer	salary per month	12	125.00	1,500.00		1,500.00
Finance Officer	salary per month	12	150.00	1800.00		1,800.00
MEL Officer	Quataly	4	250	1000		1000
Sub-total				6,700.00		6,700.00
Operations / Maintenance (training, catering, accommodation, renting of a venue, transport, etc.)						
Venue	rent per day	4	165	660.00		660.00
Accommodation	rent per day per room	28	140	3,920.00		3,920.00
Consultant	per day	4	100	400		400
Catering	Catering cost per day	80	20	1,600.00		1,600.00
Travel - intercity	Travel cost per fellow per day	5	160	800.00		800.00
Travel - within city	Travel cost per fellow per day	48	10	480.00		480.00
Social Action Project - Funding	Funding per fellow	15	30	450.00		450.00
Sub-total				8,280.00		8,280.00
Equipment and supplies (procurement/or renting of small equipment and supplies needed for the project activities, incl. goods, material, etc.)						
Designing - Training and evaluation material	Designing cost per package	1	270.00	270.00		270.00
Printing - Training and evaluation material	Printing costs per package	15	25.00	375.00		375.00
Training pack	Each pack includes notebooks, files, stationery, pen drive, water bottle etc.	15	10.00	150.00		150.00
Sub-total				795.00		795.00
Marketing						
Marketing material	Including banners and backdrops for training days and Social Action Projects		200.00	200.00		200.00
Sub-total				200.00	-	200.00
<b>Total</b>				<b>15,975.00</b>		<b>15,975.00</b>

## **8. Risk Analysis and Mitigation**

**TransAct Sri Lanka** operates in a complicated sociopolitical setting where transgender activism often encounters systemic hostility, institutional stagnation, and limited financial support, despite being rooted in a community-led and rights-based framework. This chapter analyses important risks associated with the project and outlines strategic mitigation strategies that guarantee both the safety of participants and the overall success of the project.

### **8.1 Risk: Political Backlash and Institutional Resistance**

The political and legal environment in Sri Lanka is still far from conducive to gender diversity. Some political actors may view initiatives to increase transgender people's civic and political involvement to be controversial or a threat to "traditional" norms, which could result in opposition or backlash. Engaging with government agencies that are insensitive to transgender realities may also present difficulties for participants.

#### ***Mitigation Strategies:***

- **Stakeholder Sensitisation and Strategic Framing:**

The project's messaging will emphasise its alignment with Sri Lanka's commitments under international human rights treaties while being framed within the constitutional protections of equality, nondiscrimination, and civic engagement.

- **Gradual Engagement:**

Before moving on to district or national policy discussions, advocacy efforts will start at the local level, concentrating on topics that affect the community to foster relationships and lessen perceived risks.

- **Legal and Organisational Backing:**

Fellows will be connected to legal aid organisations and human rights activists who can provide prompt assistance in the event of rights violations, such as arrests or harassment.

- **Documentation and Transparency:**

All interactions with stakeholders will be documented, and partner CSOs will be kept updated, ensuring a layer of visibility and accountability around the fellows' activities.

## **8.2 Risk: Resistance from Conservative or Religious Groups**

Rural transgender activists often work in communities dominated by patriarchal norms, religious dogma, and caste-based structures. Local religious authorities or traditional family structures may oppose advocacy initiatives, resulting in social exclusion, threats, or violence against fellows, especially if these efforts are viewed to challenge gender or cultural norms.

### ***Mitigation Strategies:***

- **Community Grounding and Entry Points:**

Fellows will receive training in culturally sensitive interaction, empathy mapping, and inclusive language to help them find the right points of entry and avoid confrontation.

- **Mobilisation of Allies:**

In order to find allies who can legitimise and support the fellows' work from inside of the community, the project will locate and involve youth workers, teachers, and moderate religious leaders.

- **Psychosocial Support:**

Throughout and following the programme, fellows will have access to peer support systems and psychosocial counselling, which will increase their ability to withstand criticism.

- **Flexible Implementation:**

With the help of mentors and project personnel, fellows will have the freedom to modify project activities and messaging according to their contextual risk levels.

## **8.3 Risk: Funding Shortages and Sustainability Challenges**

The long-term sustainability of the project could be put at risk if planned fundraising efforts fail if donor commitments are interrupted. This may compromise the capacity to develop and disseminate materials, offer fellowships, or scale advocacy.

### ***Mitigation Strategies:***

- **Diversified Resource Mobilisation:**

The project will look into community-based funding strategies, microgrants from regional LGBTQI+ funds, and private-sector social responsibility partnerships in

addition to pursuing support from bilateral donors and international human rights organisations.

- **Low-Cost Scalability:**

Upon development, training materials can be freely distributed to other CBOs and trans-led collectives to guarantee replication without requiring significant financial investment.

- **In-kind Partnerships:**

To save operating expenses, the project will actively seek donations in other forms, including media partnerships, venue sponsorships, and expert volunteer hours.

- **Documented Impact for Future Grants:**

In order to show accountability and improve competitiveness for upcoming grant cycles, MEL tools and evaluation data will be edited into impact narratives that are interesting to donors.

#### **8.4 Risk: Participant Safety and Retaliation**

Given the visibility of fellows in local communities, there is a risk of targeted retaliation by family members, religious leaders, or public officials, especially in areas with entrenched transphobia.

##### **Mitigation Strategies:**

- **Anonymous Reporting and Rapid Response:**

Fellows will be able to report threats or violations through a confidential incident reporting mechanism, which will prompt support organisations to take rapid action.

- **Safe Housing Referrals:**

In partnership with LGBTQI+ support groups, safe temporary housing options will be provided to any fellow who is experiencing violence or displacement.

- **Code of Ethics and Security Training:**

Fellows will get both physical and digital security training, including topics such as risk assessment, secure communication methods, and boundary-setting techniques when interacting with the community.

Despite being real, the risks connected to TransAct Sri Lanka are manageable. They stem from the very structures that the project aims to dismantle. The project is

well-positioned to foresee and negotiate obstacles with foresight, integrity, and resilience because risk mitigation is integrated into every step of planning and implementation, with a focus on community knowledge, legal assistance, and trauma-informed care.

## **9. Sustainability Strategy**

The sustainability of TransAct Sri Lanka is based on community ownership, resource innovation, and institutional integration. Beyond its 12-month lifecycle, the project aims to establish trans-led leadership structures, financial resilience, and long-term advocacy ecosystems in rural Sri Lanka.

### **9.1 Community-Led Sustainability**

TransAct prioritises community-based leadership by establishing a cohort of 30 trained transgender fellows who will serve as focal points for trans advocacy in respective districts. These fellows will organise regional caucuses, collaborate on localised action plans, and establish peer mentorship mechanisms to cultivate a self-sustaining network of rural trans leaders. The project facilitates continual knowledge transfer among trans activists across generations and geographical areas by making the Tamil-language training manual available as open-source.

### **9.2 Financial Sustainability**

To reduce financing instability, the project will follow a diverse resource approach, which includes:

- Strategic requests for grants to LGBTQI+, gender justice, and human rights funders.
- Crowdfunding initiatives help to build grassroots support and visibility.
- Partnerships with socially responsible businesses and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for financial assistance and co-funding.
- Fellows will be trained in basic fundraising, proposal writing, and social media storytelling so that they can mobilise resources independently after the project is completed.

### **9.3 Institutional Sustainability**

To ensure long-term impact, TransAct will integrate leadership training into existing community-based organisations (CBOs) and peer networks. Selected CBOs will be equipped to conduct future training cohorts, reproduce the manual's modules, and mentor new fellows. By embedding resources and leadership within grassroots institutions, the project ensures that trans advocacy is not only sustained but also scaled from within.

## **10. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)**

### ***Monitoring***

Monitoring will take place throughout the project, with methods such as baseline/endline surveys, attendance logs, training evaluations, and mentorship feedback. A baseline Knowledge, Attitudes, and Practices (KAP) survey will be administered to fellows to assess their basic understanding of civic rights and activism. Monthly check-ins and reflective feedback sessions will enable real-time modifications and promote ongoing fellow participation.

### ***Evaluation***

A midpoint evaluation will be conducted after the residential training phase to record early learning outcomes and identify opportunities for course adjustment. A final external evaluation will compare pre- and post-project survey results, as well as focus groups and stakeholder interviews. Evaluation will consider not only results but also participant transformation, advocacy outcomes, and institutional transformations.

### **Learning and Ongoing Engagement**

Learning will be incorporated at all phases through post-action reviews, peer exchanges, and fellow-led reflection spaces. A final Lessons Learnt document will synthesise findings. To sustain learning, the project will encourage continuous engagement through digital forums, mentorship networks, and open access to training resources, ensuring that fellows are linked and supported beyond the formal project duration.

## **11. Reporting**

TransAct Sri Lanka's reporting strategy would be transparent and interactive, ensuring accountability, visibility, and knowledge sharing throughout its lifecycle.

**Annual reports** will include main activities, outcomes, challenges, and learnings. These reports will contain data from the MEL framework, such as participant feedback, outcome indicators, and stakeholder engagement summaries, and will be distributed to donors, partners, and community networks.

**Media engagement** will be utilised to emphasise transgender voices and raise public awareness. Fellows' advocacy initiatives and success stories will be featured in local language media, social media campaigns, and digital storytelling formats, subject to consent and ethical guidelines.

**Knowledge sharing** will occur through the open distribution of the Tamil-language training manual, *advocacy demand letters*, and *lessons learnt* report. These findings will be shared with CBOs, NGOs, policymakers, and academic institutions to help guide future transgender-inclusive programming and policy development.

## **12. The Way Forward**

**TransAct Sri Lanka** is intended to serve as the foundation for a long-term, trans-led civic and political movement in Sri Lanka, rather than a one-time intervention. As the initial phase closes, the model will be strategically scaled to ensure that the knowledge, skills, and leadership capacities produced through this project are institutionalised and expanded nationally and regionally.

The future focus will be on **increasing impact, expanding geographic reach, and establishing long-term support networks** for rural transgender advocacy. This will necessitate not only resource mobilisation, but also collaboration, knowledge sharing, and political influence.

### **Strategic Next Steps (2025–2028):**

- **Expand to five additional districts**, focusing on under-represented rural and estate sectors in Uva, Sabaragamuwa, and Southern Provinces.
- **Train and mentor 100 new transgender fellows** utilising a structured Trainer-of-Trainers (ToT) framework, with TransAct alumni leading the way to ensure peer-driven growth.
- **Integrate the training manual** into at least three community-based organisations (CBOs) or LGBTQ rights collectives, allowing for ongoing replication.
- **Build a national Trans Advocacy Network (TAN)** that connects fellows, allies, and CSOs to promote rural transgender voices in policy forums and on international platforms.

This strategy guarantees TransAct's sustainability as a **trans-owned civic justice platform**. The project aims to enhance the political voice and democratic engagement of transgender

individuals throughout Sri Lanka, particularly those who are often marginalised, by relying on alumni leadership, expansion in existing community networks and strategic funding.

### **13. End Note**

TransAct Sri Lanka affirms a simple but urgent truth: transgender people are not passive receivers of aid or publicity; rather, they are leaders, organisers, and political actors who can shape the country's future. However, systematic marginalisation has long denied rural trans people the skills, platforms, and recognition that are necessary for them to claim their place in civic life.

This project is a call to action to address that injustice, not through symbolic inclusion but through resourced, community-based, and trans-led leadership. Change that lasts must start at the edges and work its way in. This entails investing in the most marginalised, relying on lived experience, and starting from scratch to establish institutions of care, solidarity, and strategy.

As this initiative progresses, the goal is clear: to establish long-term, intersectional advocacy led by trans people themselves, particularly those from rural, caste-oppressed, and linguistically marginalised communities. Anything less risks perpetuating the structures that this initiative aims to demolish.

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## 15. Annexures

- **Annex 1:** Logical Framework

## Annex 1

	<b>Narrative</b>	<b>Verifiable Indicators</b>	<b>Means of verification</b>	<b>Assumptions</b>
<b>Overall Goal</b>	To equip and strengthen 30 rural, Tamil-speaking transgender individuals to participate meaningfully and sustainably in civic, political, and social life by increasing their legal literacy, leadership skills, and policy advocacy skills, thereby ensuring their rights, representation, and influence in Sri Lanka's democratic governance.	% increase in transgender persons actively engaging in civic and political activities, # of policy or social initiatives influenced by transgender advocates.	Baseline and Endline Surveys, Project Reports, Testimonials from Participants	Transgender persons have access to safe spaces, resources, and opportunities to engage in civic and political processes despite societal and institutional barriers.
<b>Outcome 1</b>	30 transgender advocates from rural areas of North, East, and Central provinces demonstrate increased engagement in civic and political processes.	% of trained transgender advocates engaging in civic and political activities, # of advocacy initiatives implemented.	Baseline Survey, Endline Survey Post project reports	Transgender persons have access to safe spaces to engage in advocacy and political discourse.
<b>Output 1</b>	A comprehensive training manual developed in Tamil language to enhance transgender advocacy skills and knowledge on civic and political rights.	% of participants who find the manual useful.	Training Manual, Distribution Records, Expert Reviews	Experts and stakeholders contribute effectively to manual development and ensure relevance.
<b>Activity 1.1</b>	Conduct a needs assessment/KAP survey to identify gaps in knowledge, challenges, and barriers to civic participation among transgender advocates.	N/A	Needs Assessment Report	Participants provide accurate and comprehensive input during the assessment.

<b>Activity 1.2</b>	Develop training manual on effective civil and political participations	N/A	Training Manual, Expert Reviews	Adequate expertise and resources are available for content development.
<b>Output 2</b>	In-depth training sessions and fellowships conducted to equip transgender advocates with the skills to lead community-driven advocacy efforts.	% increase in knowledge levels among trained transgender advocates, # of fellows successfully implementing community - driven advocacy initiatives.	Pre/Post training surveys, Trainee reports	Participants remain engaged throughout the training and fellowship programs.
<b>Activity 2.1</b>	Implement two residential training programs covering six thematic areas related to civic and political participation.	N/A	Attendance Records, Training Session Reports	Participants can travel and attend in-person training sessions.
<b>Activity 2.2</b>	Facilitate fellowships for transgender advocates to develop individual advocacy demand documents.	N/A	Advocacy Demand Documents	Participants have access to mentorship and guidance throughout the fellowship.
<b>Output 3</b>	Increased engagement between transgender advocates and stakeholders including public service providers to create inclusive platforms for advocacy and policy reform.	% of transgender persons obtained public services through their own engagement and advocated for their community needs, % of advocacy issues acknowledged by public service providers.	Policy Meeting Reports at public offices, Stakeholder Feedback, Baseline and Endline Survey	Public service providers are open to engaging with transgender advocates and responding to their demands.

<b>Activity 3.1</b>	Conduct practical training and simulations on presenting advocacy demand documents and engaging with stakeholder including public service providers.	N/A	Stakeholder Report, Participant Feedback	Stakeholders and participants attend engagement sessions and respond positively.
<b>Outcome 2</b>	Strengthened transgender advocacy networks through institutionalized training resources.	% increase in participation in advocacy networks, # of advocacy collaborations initiated.	Community feedback, Post project survey	Participants continue advocacy beyond the project period.
<b>Output 1</b>	A strengthened network of transgender advocates and community leaders equipped with advocacy tools, with documented lessons learned.	# of transgender advocates engaging in sustained advocacy, # of policy changes influenced.	Advocacy Reports, Community Impact Assessments	Participants actively contribute to knowledge sharing and capacity building within their communities.
<b>Activity 1</b>	Develop a summary document capturing advocacy efforts, stakeholder engagement outcomes, and participant feedback.	N/A	Advocacy Report, Stakeholder, Feedback, Participant testimonials	Participants and stakeholders contribute meaningfully to documentation.
<b>Activity 2</b>	Develop a Lessons Learnt document, reflecting on the positive and negative outcomes of the project and provide	N/A	Lessons Learned Report, Project Evaluations	Insights from the evaluation inform future advocacy and capacity-building initiatives.
	recommendations for improvements for future expansions of the project.			