

## Female Feet Fight Back

Before we get onto the football field and talk about the first female footballers, let us look at the area and conditions they hail from. Vavunathivu also known as the Manmunai West DS Division comprises of 24 smaller Grama Niladari divisions. This was one of the most affected divisions during the long and arduous conflict. This Division was considered an un-cleared area for decades. Now though, reconciliation has begun and the people are gradually trying to understand the dire need for education for their children. So far the statics reveal that out of 8,640 families in the division, 53.6% of the people, or in other words, more than half the more than half of the areas population people are struggling with their lives below poverty line. This is clear evidence of the inequality in this area. The Vavunathivu area is not only considered a rural area, it is also accepted as one of the most affected areas due to the civil war, with around 80% of the people struggling to eke out a daily existence due to poverty.



These and other factors have prevented parents from providing a suitable environment for their children to hone their academic skills. Not having a conducive learning environment has put these poor children at a great disadvantage by affecting them both emotionally and psychologically and stunting their academic growth. These children do not have many of the things that we take for granted. They have insufficient learning spaces. They have no one on one peer interaction. They have no recreation activities or facilities. In addition to these constraints, these children who may have latent talents, are deprived of



opportunities to showcase such talents. Probably the only chance they may get would be at Childrens day celebrations which come around only once a year. While there are some children's forum/clubs, adequate attention is not given to their core curricular activities, and one group especially, yes, the female students are regularly sidelined, sometimes even overlooked completely. Thus depriving them of opportunities to perform or take up leadership in the community.

It goes without saying that youth play a major role in the establishment of sustainable and equitable Human Development. However only about 35% or less of these youths are able to continue their journey up the academic ladder beyond upper secondary



level in this area. A sorry plight indeed. Another bane is the increase of non-communicable diseases, and a direct factor contributing to this is lack of good food habits and decreased physical activity. The sad truth is that less than 20% of these youth are able to get involved in the sports activities.

Panchenai is a very remote area in Vavunathivu. It is situated about 45km from Batticaloa in a sparsely populated but densely wooded area with limited access. The situation here gets even more precarious during disaster periods such as floods or drought. The village ends up completely cut off from the outside.



The mainstay of this village is rice paddy farming, with many trying to augment their meager income with unskilled labour, small scale vegetable cultivation and seasonal such as brick making and high crop cultivation. The lack of resources in this village is especially telling for the youngsters, both boys and girls. Besides not having opportunities to showcase their talents, even basic facilities are limited. For example while basic education is provided from grades 1 to 11 the dearth of teachers puts a massive strain on teachers and students alike.

A few years ago, a group of young girls between the ages of 13 and 16 were identified by a Physical Education Professional who was brought in. A lot of negotiating was done with these girls, their parents, teachers and other well-wishers. Efforts got under way to begin basic physical training for these girls with the aim of specialized training in the game of football. This was an uphill task right from the beginning. While Football is one of the most popular sports in the Batticaloa area, it is considered an all-male domain. The many football clubs that abound do nothing to eradicate this prejudice. So how could girls set foot in the boys zone? Couple this with the fact that the girls chosen were very shy by nature, the training was not easy. In addition there were cultural barriers prevalent in the village which added to the complications. But after much discussion and encouragement, the girls began arriving for practice. Getting them to practice was one thing, keeping them regular at their practices was a whole new ball game.



Despite all these obstacles as well as objections from the school authorities and Department of education, the Teacher in charge did not give up on his mission. He tirelessly organized practices in the morning before the school day started and also in the evenings after school. As time went on the girls developed a real interest in the game, and were able to convince their parents and other village leaders. The community was moved to initiate discussions educational authorities and the dialogue enabled the project to move forward smoothly. These young girls had got the winds of change to start

blowing, and all that was left was to see how the boys would react when the girls scored their first goal. Talent and leadership was beginning to emerge.

The next step was to form a girls football team. Here is where they faced their next challenge. The Panchenai village doesn't have any play-ground facilities to do their routine practices. They used to play on an open patch of rough ground full of gravel. The fledgling team had to play bare feet on this rough ground as they couldn't afford boots, leave alone goal posts and nets. Even a football was a luxury they couldn't afford. The parents or the teacher did not have the financial ability to supply their needs. After a while the players did get some used boots, and while it was useful it didn't fully meet their requirements.

Enter the Education Department. After witnessing the raw talent of these underprivileged girls, the department decided to help out albeit in a limited way. Friendly matches were organized to give the team chances to play with other teams and in the process to develop their strengths. This strategy proved highly effective and the team was able to qualify at divisional level.

Vavunathivu development organization (VDO) has been working behind the scenes right from the start of this project. VDO has been able to find outside resource personnel to identify and train these young girls, to liaise with parents, teachers and officials, to provide proper nutrition for the team, and to facilitate transport for their matches. VDO was able to watch with pride as these young champs collected the title for Batticaloa and the Eastern Province.



Pari Vidyalaya Girls Football Team qualified to play in the National Inter Schools games held in Colombo. For the first time this rural team reached for the stars as they beat all others to enter to the final. But in the finals they got 01<sup>st</sup> runner up title. It is clear that if given more support, resources and nutrition this team can be the best. Let us help them to become true champions

Prepared By

**A. J. Rajaratnam**  
**PC – LS 02 & 03**  
**VDO**