



# World Elder Abuse Awareness Day

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*June 15, 2017*

*"It is critical that we, parliamentarians, share a common vision for the future. It is therefore my hope that we push for more awareness raising on ageing issues at all levels, from the villages to the national parliament."*

In commemoration of the **2017 World Elder Abuse Awareness Day**, the Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) is pleased to share excerpts from an interview with the Minister of Social Empowerment and Welfare of Sri Lanka, **Hon. Minister S.B. Dissanayake**. In line with the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (MIPAA), the elderly have the right to a life of dignity, free from all forms of abuse, including emotional, physical, psychological or financial exploitation. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the prevalence rate of elderly abuse is expected to rise as countries continue to face rapid population ageing.

In this interview, Hon. Minister Dissanayake spoke to us about the **ageing situation in Sri Lanka** as well as the government's initiatives to support the needs of older persons.

Hon. Minister Dissanayake serves as the current Chairperson of the Sri Lanka Forum for Parliamentarians on Population and Sustainable Development (SLPPD) which is the member National Committee of AFPPD in Sri Lanka. SLPPD was re-activated in 2016 under his leadership and its activities were officially launched at the AFPPD-SLPPD National Inception Workshop held on February 16-17, 2017 in Negombo.

## BACKGROUND

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**Hon. Minister S.B. Dissanayake**

*Minister of Social Empowerment and Welfare  
Member of Parliament, Sri Lanka*

Hon. Minister S.B. Dissanayake is a member of the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and Minister of Social Empowerment and Welfare. Hon. Minister Dissanayake is a member of the Committee of Public Accounts. His political career includes: member of the Communist Party in Sri Lanka from 1970 to 1979; President of the Inter-University Students' Federation from 1972 to 1974; President of the Student Council of the Vidyodaya University from 1972 to 1974; and President of the Lanka National Student Council from 1974 to 1976.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that **1 in 10 senior citizens** experience abuse each month.

## INTERVIEW

February 17, 2017

**At the AFPPD-SLPPD National Inception Workshop, you have highlighted that one out of four Sri Lankans is expected to be over 60 years old by 2040. Could you briefly tell us more about the current situation of ageing in the country?**

Sri Lanka currently has the highest life expectancy in South Asia. The proportion of those aged 60 or older has increased substantially over the years. In 2012, this proportion was estimated to be over 12% of the population. Today, it is 14%. It is the government's responsibility to ensure that senior citizens are living in an honorable environment. Traditionally in Sri Lanka, the elderly often live with their children. However, today, we observe a higher rural-urban migration rate, especially among young people.

**In many cases where children settle in the urban areas, their parents often prefer staying at home in their familiar rural areas.**

In my personal case, my mother and father prefer staying in their own village home as well. When they visit my sister in the city, who is a medical doctor, they leave the city immediately after receiving treatment from her. It is often the case that children would like to take care of their parents, however, these conflicting situations become a challenge. It becomes even more difficult if children are living in foreign countries. Additionally, there are also cases where the elderly receive no support from their children.

**Could you comment on some of the government's actions to address these issues?**

Currently, there are about 390 elderly homes in Sri Lanka. However, very few are run by the government. Some are supported by the Provincial Council while the majority are run by voluntary organizations. These homes provide adequate services to the elderly, such as nutritious meals.

However, many face some challenges in terms of the quality of the beds, toilets and dining halls. Some homes are overwhelmingly understaffed such as two care providers per 100 senior citizens.

**We are aware of these issues and are taking steps to improve the conditions of elderly homes, as well as to increase the number of homes.**

Public-private partnerships have started in Colombo, and soon in Kandy, to support these initiatives. In addition supporting the elderly homes, the government has also provided a subsidy of 2,000 Sri Lankan Rupees per month to the elderly living in poor economic conditions without pensions. As part of this subsidy program, they can have access to special medical treatment as well as other support, including wheelchairs.

**According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it is estimated that 1 in 10 senior citizens experience abuse each month globally. This is likely to be an underestimation as the problem is widely underreported. Could you comment on this situation in the context of Sri Lanka?**

We are aware of elderly abuse cases where parents do not receive any help from their children.

**There is a law called the Protection of the Rights of Elders Act No. 09 of 2000, which established the National Council of Elders to promote and protect the elderly's welfare and rights.**

Under this Act, it is the duty and responsibility of children to provide care to their parents. In violation of this, they are obligated to provide a monthly allowance or a lump-sum payment to their parents. Additionally, each village unit in Sri Lanka has social service officers who can inspect the elderly homes. If violations are found, the government can intervene and legally close it down.



*Hon. Minister S.B. Dissanayake, Member of Parliament of Sri Lanka, opened the AFPPD-SLPPD National Inception Workshop on February 16, 2017 in Negombo, Sri Lanka. (Photo: AFPPD)*

**How can parliamentarians improve their role in addressing issues related to ageing including effective protection of the elderly?**

I believe it is also the responsibility of parliamentarians to raise awareness of ageing issues among each other as well as to the public. I commend AFPPD for their support in organizing the AFPPD-SLPPD National Inception Workshop which drew over 20 Members of Parliament. However, I was not fully satisfied with the participation by parliamentarians in which 20 additional MPs could have attended.

It is critical that we, parliamentarians, share a common vision for the future. It is therefore my hope that we push for more awareness raising on ageing issues at all levels, from the villages to the national parliament.

**The Sri Lanka Forum for Parliamentarians on Population and Sustainable Development (SLPPD) is the first National Committee of AFPPD with a special focus on ageing issues. As**

**SLPPD's Chairperson, could you share with us your hopes and expectations for the future?**

My short-term goal is to maintain the elderly homes which enable residents to live a healthy and happy life. Currently, we provide senior citizens with free transportation services (buses) depending on their needs such as going to clinics or religious sites. At the village level, there are also programs that bring the elderly together for physical exercises or leisure activities. This system is usually managed by retired teachers, retired government officials, religious leaders or business owners. However, the main challenge is the lack of funding. In the long-run, we hope to partner more with the private sector to strengthen healthy living programs for the elderly at the village level. This is critical as the prevalence rate of noncommunicable diseases among older persons is high, such as diabetes and high blood pressure.

We must continue to educate each other and raise awareness on critical ageing issues and the need to improve elderly care.