

Navigating the Economic Crisis - Women in Urban Spaces

Through faith or politics



The current economic crisis in Sri Lanka has adversely impacted many facets of society, particularly women in poverty in the urban space. The rising cost of living and the overall contraction of the economy have made these women increasingly vulnerable, and more so, invisible. The daily challenges they face are often overlooked by the State and ignored by the wider public, who are unaware of such obstacles and unable to help due to the lack of visibility.

Through this project, the Centre for Equality and Justice (CEJ) hopes to raise awareness on the unique challenges these women face, as well as provide a platform for young women photographers to document the

lived narratives of these women. Two young women photographers were guided on sensitive processes of documenting human narratives, and then spent a month travelling to and interacting with women from different urban settlement communities around Colombo, including the Slave Island, Torrington, Narahenpita, Nawala, 60 and 44 waththas or urban settlements. The photographers spent time getting to know these women and were invited into their homes and communities to document their daily lives and raise awareness on the challenges they face.

The stories reflected in this scrapbook are the real accounts and direct

testimony of women impacted by the economic crisis, and have not been altered or edited in any way. The women who contributed to this scrapbook remarked that they hope this project is successful in raising awareness on the stark realities of the impact the economic crisis has had on their communities, and hoped for proactive action from the State.

All stories and images in the scrapbook have been obtained and published with written consent to share. Written consent from the parents of any children featured in the scrapbook have been obtained. Names and details have been altered to protect anonymity where necessary.

Uplifting each other through community

The Nawala Waththa has over 50 families living in a small space of two lanes and interwoven by-lanes with only 4 shared bathrooms for everyone to use. The women in the Waththa live bold and fearless lives where they are self-empowered and find their own means of survival for their families and children. The makeshift homes that they live in most often consist of only one or two rooms which is barely enough space for one individual, let alone whole families to live in. However, there is a strong sense of community in the Waththa, and the residents regularly support each other with what little they have.



Empowered Women, Empower Women

60 year old Ranjini lives in the Kollupitiya flats with her husband and brother. For over 40 years she has run her family business, a street shop in Pettah that sells hair clips and knick knacks, by herself. Through her hard work and dedication, she is the sole breadwinner of the family, providing for her husband, brother and two children with her income. Despite the challenges she has faced, Ranjini remains strong, and proud, and her husband supports her by keeping her company at the shop.





A mother's mission

Chamila is a young mother who lives in 44 Waththa with her children. She recently rented and shifted to a smaller house in another area of the Waththa in order to protect her children from the widespread drug use and gang violence in the area. Although paying rent for a new yet smaller house costs Chamila a lot more than she can currently afford, she remarks that she owes it to her children to shield them from the bad influences of the older teenagers in the area. "I would rather suffer than have my children give up their education to engage in drug use and petty theft".



There is no Work-Life Balance for Women

Sashini is a young woman from Moratuwa who is a wife and mother of three. She sells key tags for Rs.150 on the streets of Pettah to earn a small income for her family. Her husband works at Abans as a cleaner, and they struggle to feed their children with the rising cost of inflation. She strives to ensure that none of her children will ever have to give up their education.

"I am ashamed of my job, but I'm hopeful that my children will one day lead a better life than me due to my efforts".



Sunday family rituals

A young mother takes care of her children on a warm Sunday afternoon in 60 Waththa. Personal grooming and hygiene are one of the few ways in which the young women and girls of the community bond and spend time with each other.



In fear of collapse

Fathima Maseena lives alone in a small house in the 44 Watte in Maradana, and earns a living by selling short eats in the community. The rising food inflation and utility bills however have meant that she rarely earns a profit on most days.

“The beams of my house are infected with termites and the wood rot has caused the roof to break apart. It will cost me Rs. 30,000 to fix the roof and beams, and without this money I worry everyday that the roof will collapse on me”.



Light at the end of a tunnel?

Dimuthu is a mother of three living in Slave Island. After her husband passed away, she became the sole breadwinner for her three children, and unable to find anyone to care for them, she seeks odd jobs to earn a daily income. The Slave Island community rallies to support her whenever they can.

“My electricity bill is Rs. 20,000, and since I haven’t been able to pay for it for the past three months, they have disconnected the connection to my house”.



“Our poverty doesn't define our achievements”

Menike lives in a house with her 3 children, and husband “Rathu Mahaththaya” in the Narahenpita Waththa. Menike became the sole breadwinner in her family after her husband met with an accident that left him hospitalized for months. Menike earns Rs. 875 a day from cleaning work which is insufficient to feed

their family or pay the increasing utility bills. Menike's entire family of 5 sleeps together on a single bed. Despite her family's health and financial troubles, Menike proudly displays her children's school achievements on her wall.





A mother's love can never be deterred

Sharmila is a 30 year old mother of three young children living in the Slave Island Community. Sharmila gave up working to take care of her children and now relies on her husband's income as a three-wheeler driver to make ends meet. She struggles to provide food for her children and they eat only a few leaves made into a mallung with rice for most of their meals. As a young girl she stopped

studying at the age of 10 because her father was diagnosed with diabetes and hence has made it her goal to ensure that all her children get a sound education. Her 13 year old son is a young artist and she is determined to support him to further develop his skills.

The cost of a marriage

This mother of two who wishes to remain anonymous, lives in the Narahenpita Waththa and spoke of the importance of marriage in the community. Marriage to a person outside of the Waththa community is often seen as a means of escaping poverty, and this woman recently spent her life's savings on a dowry and wedding for her only daughter. Even though she now lives in worse conditions she hopes that in time to come her daughter will relocate with her new family.





Smiling through the struggle

56-year-old Sabsara is a single woman living on her own in Slave Island, with no means of income. She describes her home as a hole in the wall that has been transformed into a make-shift abode with just a mattress as a door. Inside, she sleeps on wooden planks with a thin mattress on top. As she does not have a roof over her abode, water floods her house daily when it rains. She says that she survives solely at the mercy of her neighbours who routinely provide for her.

Pawning gold for a future

Vijayayalechchumi is a young mother in the Narahenpita Waththa who fears for her daughter's education. She is the primary income earner in her household and earns Rs. 1000 a day working for a cleaning service. As a young girl she remained uneducated and is still unable to read or write. She fears that her daughter too will be asked to leave school as she is unable to pay the annual school fees in time.

"The pandemic and rising prices have devastated my family and we have had to pawn all our gold jewellery and prized possessions in order to purchase food and other daily essentials. Even after this, we are still short of money for our childrens' school fees and have no more collateral left in case of an emergency".



Tough Choices

This is Nilanthi, a resident from Grandpass who works twelve hours every day as a parking ticket issuer in Colombo. As the sole breadwinner in her family, she supports her two children, a 19 year old and an eight month old by herself. With no support from those around her she has to resort to bringing her eight month old to the streets with her every day.

She remarks that many men in the area, either on their way to work or to pick their children up from school, often offer her money for sexual favours, which she refuses to indulge in. Her husband is a drug

addict who is out of prison and provides no support to the family. Her older son who is an Advanced Level qualified student wants to study abroad, leaving her desperate to find a way to help him. While she receives temporary support in the form of food and money from the households around her, she earns just Rs. 500 - Rs. 1000 a day, and seeks a more stable, permanent solution.





Sister, sister

25 year old Zahara and 31 year old Shafna are two sisters who run a street food 'kade' selling homemade goods to earn a living. They also depend heavily on Shafna's husband's salary from his job abroad. Despite the income from the shop and infrequent remittances, they live with no stable electricity and water connections.

"Our house was taken by the government three years ago for the supposed purpose of building the monorail. We have still not received a new house and we have had to make makeshift rooms on the street to survive. We hope we can one day get a new home".

Working for a better tomorrow

Lechchami and Shanthi are two women who live in the fishing community close to the railway tracks in Wellawatte. They both work a morning and night shift as cleaning staff in a nearby hotel and are the current breadwinners for their families. Both their husbands are fishermen who have been adversely affected by the rising cost of fuel and supplies. Due to the economic crisis and rising food inflation, both women are often unable to afford sufficient food and rely on their jobs in the hotel to give them leftover food to bring home and share with their community. Together they support one another despite their old age to work tirelessly from 8.00am every day.



Trying to make ends meet

Kaushalya lives in a house in 44 Waththa with her young family. She and her husband recently took out loans to repair the damaged walls and ceiling, however now face mounting levels of debt as their daily wage jobs can no longer pay off the loans with the rising inflation and utility bills. Next year, her young daughter will start school – and the expenses that will be added along with it compels her to borrow more money from those around her. Kaushalya remarks that she is grateful for the support from her community, however says that the frequent fights, drugs and alcohol abuse within the Waththa create a constant state of fear.



Family comes First

Asoka and her daughter-in-law, Sanjeewa live with three families in a house consisting of two rooms and a kitchen in the Nawala Waththa. Asoka is the matriarch of the family, is 72 years old, and suffers from high blood pressure. Although she is required to take a daily dose of eleven pressure tablets a day, the rising cost of medicine and inflation has compelled her to take just one tablet every other day to cut costs.

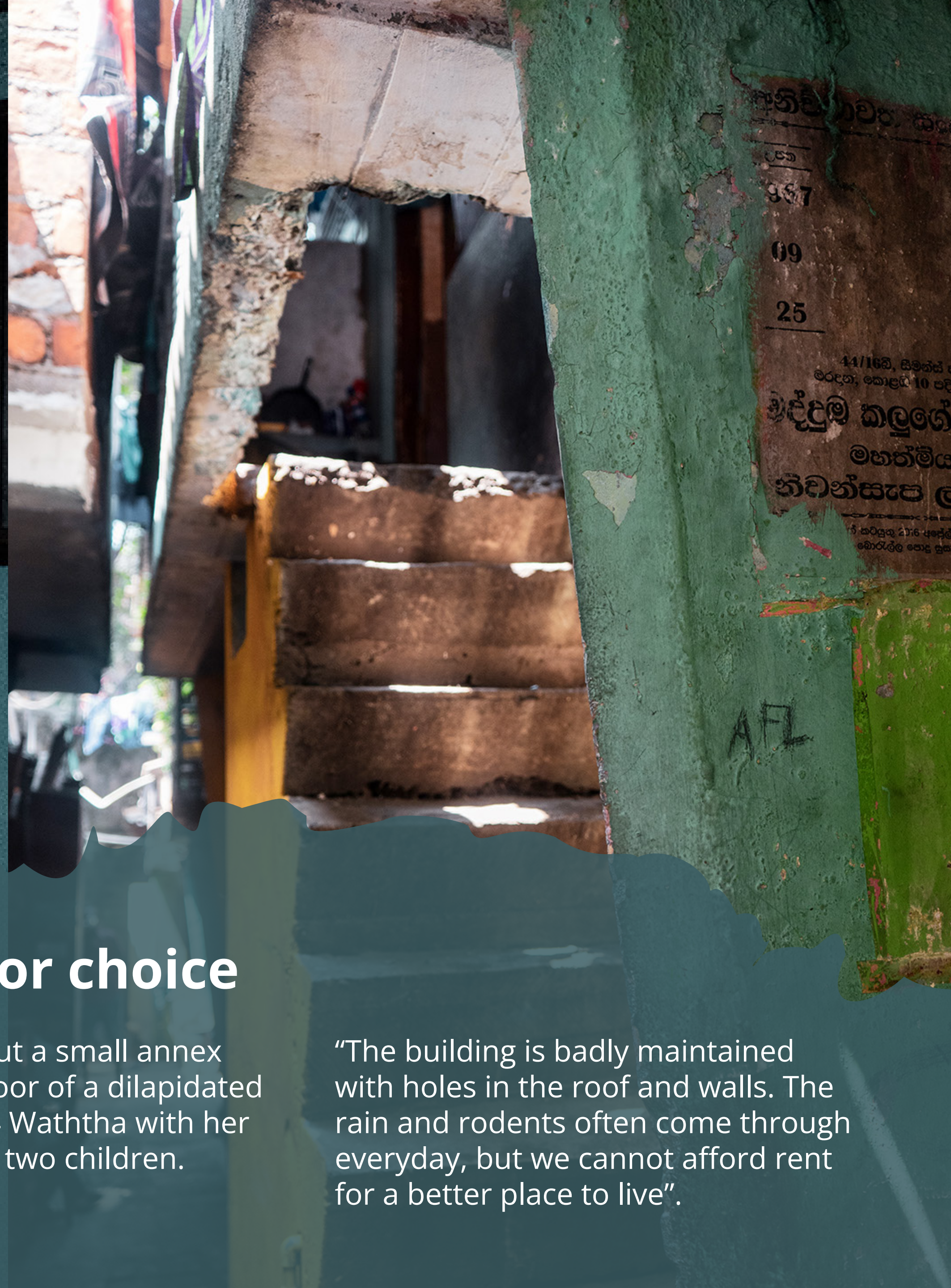
Sanjeewa is a 38 year old wife and mother of four, who used to live with her family before marriage in her family home in Kalutara. Upon marriage she moved with her husband into the Waththa to a small space of two rooms that are shared with her husband's mother and sister's families. She remains unemployed and at the mercy of her husband's and father-in-law's

income. She states that she could be well provided for by her own family living in better conditions if they moved back.

Her oldest daughter who just qualified with her Advanced Levels wishes to follow a higher-studies programme and so Sanjeewa looks around daily for a means of giving her a better education.

All three families survive on two gas cylinders and firewood for the month to cook their daily meals. With minimal income they most often skip meals and survive on mainly rice and two vegetables for the day as they can no longer afford to buy bread. Their home consists of just one window in the kitchen at the back of the house and the door at the entrance with two single bulbs to give them light.





Stuck for choice

Rosie rents out a small annex on the first floor of a dilapidated building in 44 Waththa with her husband and two children.

“The building is badly maintained with holes in the roof and walls. The rain and rodents often come through everyday, but we cannot afford rent for a better place to live”.



Ageing in poverty

Siththi Maridiya is a 75 year old woman living alone in a small annex in 60 Waththa. Outlived by her only daughter, she has no one to care for her in her old age, and does her best to live independently. As her house lies just below ground level it routinely floods with rain and wastewater during the monsoon seasons and her flooring is breaking apart as a result of it.



Living on luck

These women sell daily sweep tickets on the streets of Pettah as their primary mode of earning a living. Each ticket sells for Rs. 30-40, and these are the sole earnings the women take back home at the end of their shifts. The women joke that they wish that they too could one day win the lottery.





A family business

Chamalee lives with her family in a small house in the Narahenpita Waththa. Every member of her family is engaged in casual employment or menial labour to help make ends meet.

Chamalee was employed in a nearby beauty salon but had to quit her job to take care of her newborn baby. Chamalee's mother is a lawn sweeper at the Open University, and earns around Rs. 700 a day.

Her husband and son are daily wage earners who seek odd jobs whenever they can, and her sister's husband is employed in a woodwork shop. The entire family used to operate a small catering business for the neighborhood community however had to cease operations due to the pandemic and the rising food inflation that ensued.

Hygiene is a luxury

There are a total of eight communal washrooms available for all residents of the 60 Waththa in Torrington Avenue. Four washrooms are designated for men and four for women, however, only one washroom on each side is currently functional. Despite multiple requests to fix them from Waththa residents to the responsible parties, no action has been taken to address the matter.





Who can afford education anymore?

The Slave Island Waththa Community has over 120 families who share access to only 16 communal bathrooms. Nalika and Nirochana are two resident women who struggle to find the means to provide for their families. Nalika is a 55 year old woman who suffers from severe weight-related health problems, and since falling sick, is unable to work and relies solely on her husband's salary. Due to the small salary he earns, she has had to pull her daughter out of school as she is no longer able to afford the stationary and equipment for her daughter's education. She can only afford to eat rice and "kola" or leaves, as all other vegetables are too expensive . Nirochana is a 39 year old woman who has four daughters to provide for. She too relies on her husband's meagre salary, and is unable

to earn a living herself. After her husband underwent an emergency stomach operation and is now unable to work, she has had to rely on the kindness of the families and friends around her, to support her. She too is unable to provide stationary for her youngest daughter to go to school and has temporarily pulled her out of school. She is unable to afford food or milk powder and can only afford to provide plain tea as nourishment for her children. Despite all their challenges, these women sit together with smiles on their faces as they try to find solutions together for their problems. They had been a strong force protesting for equal rights during the Aragalaya (protests), and now admit that they are struck by poverty after voting for the wrong leaders simply because they were promised much more.





Who keeps our roads clean?

There are over 100 women CMC workers in Colombo, and this number keeps growing as more women seek opportunities to earn even a meagre daily wage to support their families.

Women can drive too

"I live here in the Wellawatta fishing community with my husband and children. My dream is to one day be a tuk-tuk driver just like my husband. I know that my true role is to be a good housewife and take care of the children, but I often day-dream about driving on the roads. Especially during this time, it would help to earn another income".





A grandmother's love lasts forever

Ranjani is a 51 year old woman who lives in a home of five along with her husband, son, daughter and her family. Prior to the pandemic, she earned a daily income by making home cooked lunch packets and selling them on the streets to passers by, earning a daily wage of around Rs. 700. Post-pandemic she is no longer able to afford adequate resources to make the lunch packets and has had to cease her daily occupation. As her family has fallen further into poverty, they can now only afford to eat rice for all their meals as bread and other items like milk powder are too expensive for them to purchase.



Faith

Although the residents of 60 Waththa live in poverty and hardship, a large part of the community is devoutly religious. The Waththa is multicultural, and people from many different faiths live and work together, finding comfort in their religion.

The photographs in this photo journal were captured by Suhela Abeynaike and Narthanie Serasinghe

