

## The Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project

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### Aim & Target Population

The community-based Sri Lanka Women's Swimming Project (SLWSP), was founded by Christina Fonfe' in the aftermath of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. The Project began in Weligama and is now currently located in the small coastal town of Habaraduwa, on Kogala Lake, and in Galle, the provincial capital.

The aim of the project is to reduce drowning by teaching women and teenage girls to swim so that they, in turn, can teach their own children and families to swim. The best are trained as swimming teachers to international standards and this provides an immediate micro-economic benefit and elevation of social status to those women in the community. Five years on, in Jan 2011, the Project is to set up a residential Women's Swimming Centre to accelerate the output of female swimming teachers.

### Background

Swimming is not a universal skill in Sri Lanka; in the recent Tsunami, 80% of the fatalities were women (1). In cultures where females are chaperoned away from male company and who wash whilst clothed at the well or beach, there are few opportunities for women to learn to swim, whereas boys grow up in a world of agility; girls do not swim or climb trees (2). In the tsunami, some women who survived the first wave, drowned through fears of immodesty, not leaving the water when its force had removed their outer garments (3).

### Discussion

The focus on teaching children first is laudable but introduces a decade of delay before any can be trained as swimming teachers; moreover, even without a man in the house, women, not children are the keystone holding the family together. Overall, then, the drowning survival odds are stacked against women by culture and couture, as evidenced by the last tsunami. The critical paths are the shortage of female swimming teachers, the need to teach women out of sight of men and the unsuitability of western teaching methods geared to competition rather than survival.

The SLWSP has adopted the following four point policy to reduce drowning:

- Teach women and teenage girls first
- Teach people to float-and-breathe first, then how to swim
- Qualify female teachers to international standards which include rescue and CPR
- Embed the project in a rural coastal community

### Implementation of Swimming Methods

Current research (4, 5) indicates that floating and breathing should be the immediate reaction to sudden unexpected immersion in water. This fits with the International Federation of Swimming Teachers Association 2010 definition of 'Can Swim Safely' as a 10 minute float and 100 metre uninterrupted swim (6), the benchmark used by the project. When fatigued, such a swimmer can always float as required. Initial instruction takes place on a one-to-one basis, which guarantees a near 100% success rate in achieving a balanced float in the first or second lesson. Swimming on the back is then developed into bilateral front crawl using the Total Immersion Method (7). Each student has to bring a friend and then teach the newcomer what they have learned; this reinforces the instruction, lays the foundation of what a mother will teach her children and identifies future potential swimming teachers.

### Conclusion

The SLWSP has addressed the need to reduce death by drowning by placing the skill of teaching swimming in the hands of 1,700 mothers or future mothers, so they can teach their children, thus immediately addressing the interests of the two greatest identifiable groups at risk from drowning: women and children.

### Acknowledgements

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