



PROFILE

A.G. Chitrani: Transforming others' lives with her courage **Leader from Trincomalee, Sri Lanka**

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Born and brought up in Nelsonpura in the Gravets divisional secretariat area of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka, A.G. Chitrani is one of thousands of women victims of the brutal and protracted war between the government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). In April 1991, her husband, a fisherman, was lost at sea while fishing in the eastern coast of Sri Lanka. When her husband disappeared, Chitrani was 35 years old with four children between the ages of 15 and 22. After days of weeping, with no one but her children to cling to, a devastated Chitrani realized that she

could not afford to spend any more precious time mourning her loss. Several other families were coping with similar war-related disappearances. It seemed to her that they would have to rise from the difficulties they collectively faced.

Eking out a living by selling string hoppers, Chitrani, over time, initiated the formation of a group of women hailing from ten families in her village, all of whom shared the experience of dealing with the disappearance of a family member. As 35 women from 15 other villages of Trincomalee district joined, the group expanded and came to be known as Diriya Kantha Sanwidanaya (Organization of Women with Courage). At a later stage, National Fisheries Solidarity Movement (NAFSO) intervened to form a district women federation, named Uthayan

in Trincomalee district. Under Chitrani's leadership, there are now 350 women members from 15 villages working together in Uthayan to address women's issues.

"We know how difficult it is to lose the family breadwinner. An obvious concern is that of survival. Also, ensuring that our families stay protected from society and from the military are other issues we face. This is very worrying especially when families have girl-children", says Chitrani.

In 2004, with the war not yet over, the beleaguered women and men of Sri Lanka faced another difficulty—the Asian Tsunami. During these trying times, the Diriya Kantha Sanwidanaya, with support from many funding agencies, extended basic help to families who had suffered losses. It reached out to men who had lost their boats and engines and engaged in other forms of rehabilitative work.

"From one disaster to another, we women had the courage to face our difficulties and to organize support to rebuild the lives of our children and our communities", says Chitrani.

Recently, Uthayan launched a campaign on violence against women. In October 2015, it also launched an education campaign in Trincomalee and approached the District Secretary with a petition demanding immediate action against child abuse and violence against women.

Uthayan's participation in the National Fisher Women Federation, the active women's wing of a national fisher peoples' movement, has ensured that its voice can now be heard from the district right up to national level. Chitrani, as the Executive Committee member of the Federation, leads the women of her community to a future full of hope. ❏