

Children, religious practices, and spirituality in the post-war context of Sri Lanka

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Sri Lanka is a multi-religious country. The expression of patriotism knowingly or unknowingly disturbs the diversity of ethnicity due to its disturbing social setup in Sri Lanka (Jeyaseelan 2018, 83). The previous study shows that Buddhist faith encourages the faith development of children, and thus, it also increases the resiliency of children to face the challenges (Fernando and Ferrari 2011, 52–56). This chapter examines an empirical study on how the children of Sri Lanka express their spirituality in connection with their faith practices. A sample of 50 young children aged 12–14 years old, both war-affected and non-war-affected children in the post-war context of Sri Lanka, who practice the major religions, were interviewed. How the Sri Lankan children have hoped and persevered in their spiritual experiences during the war is analyzed in this research. In this context, the question is, how do the children give voice to their faith community experience in the post-war context of Sri Lanka? My research aims to find out how the spirituality and faith communities of war-affected children and non-war-affected children shape their own lives and the lives of the citizens of the country and the whole world. This chapter synthesizes the detailed role of the faith communities over the children, concerning their spiritual uplifting along with the lay theological foundation.

Keywords: Children, faith communities, spirituality, resilience, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Sri Lanka, situated in South Asia, is an island country in the Indian Ocean with a population of 21.8 million people, the majority of whom are Sinhala-Buddhists. The minorities are Christians, Hindus, and Muslims (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2020, 1). Sri Lanka has an ethnoreligious mixed community, which means that religious and ethnic identities usually intertwine and must be considered together (Gunatilleke 2018, 360). Though religions support people to develop their spirituality, at times, religion has been the main venue for the war and conflicts throughout the history of Sri Lanka (Fernando 1998, 87–89). Unfortunately, Sri Lankan

children also live in the same multicultural and multi-religious context that forms a variety of family structures and economic backgrounds where they are war, non-war or less-war-affected. This chapter analyses how children's faith experiences help them increase their power of resilience amidst their daily life circumstances.

Spirituality and resilience

The word 'spirituality' is often discussed in the academic world as well as in the daily lives of people. Until a few decades ago, spirituality was often defined as being opposed to material things or worldli-





ness and being attached to 'higher' 'spiritual' things (Brown 1993, 2990; Simon and Schuster 1983, 1751). Spirituality also was often associated with prayer and devotional practices in religious traditions. However, people's perception of the concept of 'spirituality' in contemporary times has significantly changed. Though spirituality includes sacred practices it goes beyond the scope of religions (Haight 2016, 144). This expansion of the understanding of spirituality develops beyond the prescribed day-to-day religious practices and now incorporates one's values and meaningful experiences (Hay and Nye 2006, 21–22). Other authors develop the idea of spirituality as a human capacity that helps to search for the meaning of life (Mata 2015, 18) or as a person's relationship (connectedness) with Oneself, Others, World/Nature, and the Transcendent/God (Hyde 2008, 43; Fisher 1999, 30–31). However, not all human beings believe in a form of supernatural power or practice religions or have faith in the divine existence. Therefore, there is also a secular understanding of spirituality, referring to the consciousness of a person, which helps them to realize their ego. This realization of persons' ego leads them to come out from it and relate to others (Hyde 2008, 43). Various authors agree that all human persons, including children, have a spiritual dimension (Nye 2009, 6; Champagne 2003, 44). Therefore, it is necessary to appreciate children's spirituality positively and help children to strengthen their spirituality (Miller-McLemore 2003, 148–150).

Different viewpoints seem to reveal an understanding that spirituality does not have a unique definition, and so far, there is no one particular description of spirituality. Thus, the various authors' convictions show spirituality to be a subjective experience instead of an objective definition.

Authors describe resilience as one of the human capacities that support human persons to adapt to life challenges that threaten a persons' daily activities (Masten 2014, 6). Resilience also means overcoming pain when someone faces violence or goes through traumatic experiences (Fernando and Ferrari 2011, 52–77; Halstead and Affouneh 2006, 199–215). Children show resiliency amidst various life challenges and, despite experiencing hardship and stress, children can proceed by relying on it (Aisenberg and Herrenkohl 2008, 303). However, not all children can discover the resilient power in them. Therefore, their family and society need to have responsive support for their development of resilience (Clinton 2008, 213–222).

Spirituality in terms of connectedness might increase the resiliency of the child. In a particular way, spirituality that fosters resilience would contribute to children's resiliency to have a positive attitude even amidst pain and losses (De Souza 2006, 165–175). Having discussed spirituality and resilience, we now proceed to the aforementioned research that analyses the spirituality and resilience of Sri Lankan children.

Previous research

In the context of Sri Lanka, Chandi Fernando, a psychologist with the Toronto Catholic District School Board, and Michel Ferrari, professor at the Department of Applied Psychology and Human Development, University of Toronto, Canada, studied 62 children [5–18 years old] and 15 caregivers in the context of ethnic war in 2002. Their focus was on comparing the spirituality and resilience of war and non-war orphans from Buddhist and Christian orphanages with a group of children from non-war affected families. These war-affected children were in the Northern part of Sri Lanka, and they were later on taken to orphanages in the Western part of Sri Lanka (Colombo). Almost all of the 62 children [boys and girls] were Sinhala Buddhists, except for two who were Christians. These interviews took place mainly in two districts, namely the Colombo district from the Western Province and the Kandy district from the Central Province of Sri Lanka. This research was done to know by what means faith development substitutes for resiliency in war-affected children in the post-war context of Sri Lanka (Fernando and Ferrari 2011, 52–56).

The researchers used sand tray construction, narrating a story, and completing the sentence methods to engage with children. Children used sand tray construction materials to recreate a scene that had happened in their life, and were later allowed to narrate their stories. Secondly, children were given incomplete sentences, for example: "My father is..." (58), and they were to complete it as they wished. These activities measured the emotional and social behaviors of children. Some children participated in both activities, while others participated only in one.

According to Fernando and Ferrari, it is the Buddhist faith that encourages the faith development and resiliency of Buddhist children to face challenges. They specifically emphasized that Bud-

dhist faith practices lead to solidarity, and it helps them to love one another. By implanting human values, the faith practices help children experience interconnection with each other. In this study, they compared the Christian non-war affected children, and those children also emphasize resiliency as the strength to face their daily challenges (70–72). Thus, it was resiliency that was common in both groups. Fernando and Ferrari concluded that “Resilient orphans identified Buddhist and Christian practices used to promote their faith, personal well-being, and sense of belonging” (52). They highlighted that, contrary to previous studies, most orphans demonstrated inner peace and resilience even after having been exposed to war and other life circumstances. I will further explore their research in comparison to the current research in the discussion section.

While I appreciate the bold effort of Fernando and Ferrari for their work, my question is, what about the Tamil children who went through the same war experiences until the last phase of the war? And how would Hindu, Muslim, and Christian faiths also help the resiliency of children? This research was done in the year 2002 nearly 20 years ago, and we do not know how Sri Lankan children experience resilience and peace in the current context. This new study intends to understand how Sri Lankan children who belong to four faith communities share their spiritual experiences and how it has helped them to increase their resiliency. This research also tries to find out whether their faith in supernatural power becomes a hindrance in their life circumstances.

Current study

It is a qualitative empirical *Interpretative phenomenological* analysis (IPA) study that examines how the children of Sri Lanka express their spirituality. Voluntarily 50 Sri Lankan Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian children [12–14 years old, 23 girls and 27 boys] took part in the research. Participants included Tamil and Sinhala war-affected and non-war-affected children. The number of participants enrolled in the study is as follows:

25 war-affected children (This group consists of 7 Hindu, 6 Buddhist, 6 Christian, and 6 Muslim children.)

25 non-war-affected children (This group includes 7 Buddhist, 6 Christian, 6 Hindu, and 6 Muslim children.)

Settings

This research took place in several parts of Sri Lanka. The children whom the researcher interviewed were from nine of the 25 districts and six of the 9 provinces. These are the Northern, North-Western, Western, Eastern, Uva, and Central provinces of Sri Lanka. According to the Department of Census, Sri Lanka, in 2017, 98 percent of children attend school.¹ Therefore the researcher selected schools as a central place for interviewing children. Though the researcher received permission to do the interviews from 8 different schools, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she could only visit 6 schools. Interviews took place in six schools [3 Catholic, 2 Muslim, and 1 Hindu] and two children’s care homes. Tamil Catholic school had Catholic and Hindu children, while two Sinhala Catholic schools had Christian, Buddhists, and Muslim children. Both the Muslim schools also had a mixed group of Muslim and Christian children. The Hindu school had a mixture of Hindu and Christian children. The first care home is situated in the Vavuniya district, and it has both Hindu and Christian war-affected children from different villages of Northern province. It has children from only Tamil communities. Children from these homes faced the war when they were very young and lost some family members. The second care home is in the Colombo district, and it also has children from both Tamil and Sinhala communities in many rural areas of Sri Lanka. They have mainly come to this home because of poverty.

Data collection

The researcher gathered qualitative data from the participants by doing interviews after receiving ethical approval. These interviews took place between 15th October 2020 and 15th February 2021 in different places of Sri Lanka. Each interview lasted about 30–45 minutes. The researcher collected the data with the consent of the children and their parents/guardians. She contacted interviewees individually and asked open-ended questions, which children were free to answer. She transcribed the interviews, and with the help of the qualitative data

1 Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka. (2017). <https://www.parliament.lk/uploads/documents/paper-presented/performance-report-department-of-census-and-statistics-2017.pdf>. [accessed March 25, 2021].



analysis software, NVivo12, she added codes to the data. Names of the participants and personal information are anonymized. The researcher identifies children with a nickname in the discussion section.

Results

Although each participant was presented with 17 questions, I only discuss three main questions in this chapter. The discussed questions are as follows.

1. Is your family involved in spiritual practice?
How do you practice it?
2. In what ways will spirituality help you to live in harmony with others in the post-war context of your country?
3. Can you tell me how do you experience God or divine existence differently now than before you faced war or other circumstances? And does your faith experience remain the same, or is it changed/different?

Children also got the opportunity to draw a picture to express how their spirituality leads towards a peaceful nation. Many children painted pictures that included all four religions. Most of the children drew temples, church, and a mosque, while other children painted a representative of each religion or symbol of denominations. Some of them also drew a picture of Sri Lanka and a dove as a symbol of peace. A few children also drew a school or a playground in which children gather as one family. When the researcher asked about their drawings, most of them replied that if these four religions work together respecting their cultures and religious practices, there will be peace in the nation.

Spiritual practices of Sri Lankan children

The researcher interviewed 13 Buddhist children (6 war-affected and 7 non-war-affected). Those war-affected children are children of army or navy forces who fought during the war. All 13 of them go to the temple to worship and learn about their religion. When these children shared about their spiritual practices towards a peaceful living, there were various opinions. Many of them directly said that Sri Lankans have to live in peace and unity. Most of the children shared that we have to respect everyone and every religion. They also highlighted that they had faced a terrible war, and therefore they wished

to have no more war in the future. There were also other points such as respecting the way of talking, helping each other, and listening to others' ideas. Many of them positively answered that their spirituality helps them live in unity, while it also encourages them to be patient and avoid unnecessary disturbances.

There were 12 Christian children (6 war-affected and 6 non-war-affected) in the group. Among them, 11 were Roman Catholic and one Non-RC child. They were from both Sinhala and Tamil communities. Like the Buddhist children, these Christians also integrated many religious practices when they shared their daily practices. Their daily spiritual practices are loving everyone, reading the Holy Bible, attending daily mass, praying, helping others, and living in unity. When it comes to whether spirituality helps them tolerate others or not, most of the children positively replied that it helps them in many ways to tolerate others. They also said that it helps them love and respect each other, and at the same time, by being patient with others, they try to live peacefully. Many of the war-affected children firmly mentioned that they do not want war. Both war-affected and non-war affected children highlighted that living as children of one motherland, accepting and respecting everyone, respecting other ethnic groups, and living without partiality would lead Sri Lankans to build up a peaceful country. Children were also aware that spirituality leads them towards a peaceful nation, and their replies also have more positive views about it.

Among the 13 Hindu children (7 war-affected and 6 non-war-affected) interviewed, there were different spiritual practices: helping and supporting others, going to the temple, and fasting and praying, living together with others, cleaning common places such as temples and schools, sharing with others. Like Buddhist and Christian children, all the Hindu war-affected children also said that their spirituality motivates them to live in peace. Children shared that their spirituality helps them to live together with others from different religions. Most of the time, these children grow and study with Tamil Christian or Muslim children. Like Buddhist and Christian children, Hindu children also plead to avoid fighting among religious or ethnic groups. They also underline, that loving others, living in peace and unity, sharing with others, and being in solidarity with others are actions that support children's spirituality. Hindu children also emphasized that respecting other religions, being patient, and



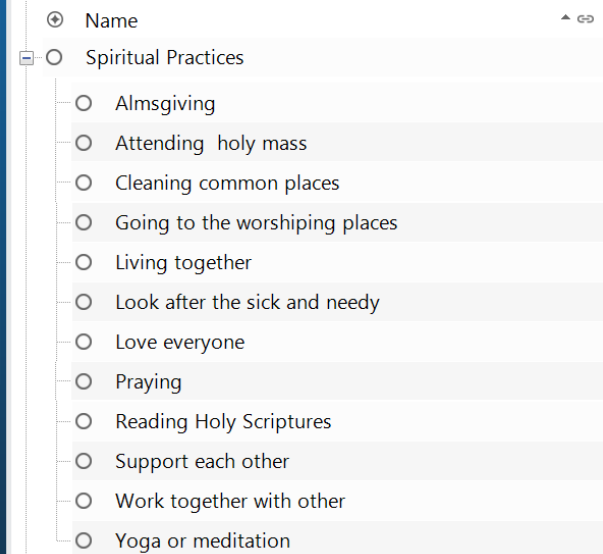
accepting and respecting each other, would encourage every Sri Lankan to have one united nation.

All of the 12 Muslim children (6 war-affected and 6 non-war affected) in this study speak Tamil as their mother tongue. These Muslim children's spirituality is, like the others, also mixed with their religious practices. Most of them refer to going to the mosque, praying five times, and studying the Holy Quran as part of their spiritual practices. Like others, they also mentioned that if Sri Lankans need peace in the country, they all have to live in peace and harmony. They also suggested that Sri Lankans have to learn to respect everyone and all the religions that exist.

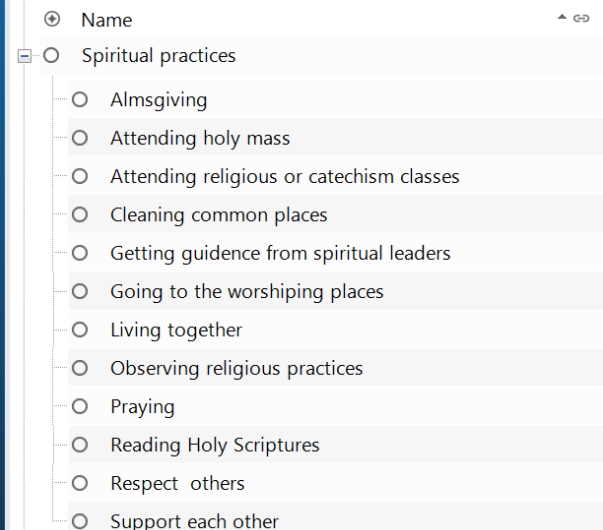
Both war-affected and non-war-affected children shared various daily spiritual practices. It is interesting to note. There was a mixture of both religious and spiritual involvement when they shared their daily practices. That shows the engagement of the faith communities of the Sri Lankan children in which they live and grow. Both war-affected and non-war-affected children expressed *living together or learning to work together with others* as one of their spiritual practices. Their responses also give an overview that, even after facing the terrible war and other life circumstances, Sri Lankan children continue to have spiritual practices among their faith communities and with others in the country. There were many different views when children connected their spirituality with peace in the post-war context of Sri Lanka. Most of the children directly expressed that they need to live in peace and harmony and requested to respect everyone's religions, ethnicity, and languages. Children emphasized that Sri Lankans need to learn about the other religions and languages that are practiced and spoken in the country and learn to live as children of one Motherland.

The following two diagrams visually illustrate the spiritual practices of Sri Lankan children.

War-affected-children



Non-war-affected children



Faith and resilience of Sri Lankan children

All 50 children were asked how they experience the presence of the divine power in their daily life. Except one non-war-affected child, 49 of the 50 children replied to the question. Five war-affected children openly said that during the war, they felt the absence of divine power. Another 45 of them experienced the divine presence during the war, and they continue to hope that the supernatural power will protect them. However, children who were not aware of divine presence during war highlighted that at present, their faith in transcendence is increasing, and they agree their faith is deepened more than before. For example, Jevathy, one of the



War-affected children	Non-war-affected children
“Lord Siva protected us during the war. Though it was hard to face, we are still alive and living. My faith has increased.” Aravind- A Hindu boy	“All are living together after the war. Lord Siva has been continuously protecting us and providing us what we need. My faith remains the same.” Kama-la- A Hindu girl
“It was rather difficult to face the terrible war. Sometimes, I felt that God is far away from me. But now I experience God’s presence as my mother. I feel that my faith is also increasing.” Logashwary- A Christian girl	“God encourages me to face any problem in my life. He supports my family and me. My faith remains the same.” Hiran- A Christian boy
“During the war, we were displaced. When we had troubles, Allah protected us. Whenever we face difficulties, we pray to Allah.” Jasmina- A Muslim girl	“When we have problems, we ask Allah to assist us. He indeed provides us and helps us to face the daily challenges.” Fakir- A Muslim boy
“When I think about the war, I am still afraid to talk about it, but now it has changed. Even though many died during the war, my father was saved. My faith has increased now.” Rukshi- A Buddhist boy	“Lord Buddha helps us in all our needs, and I experience the power of his presence in my daily life. My faith has increased.” Eshan- A Buddhist boy

Table-01: Faith and Resilience

war-affected children states that “My father died during war at that time I felt that God has abandoned us. My faith has changed now, and I experience God’s help.” Their faith in a higher power encourages them to face their daily struggles of life. What is to be specified is that children from all four religious communities experience the presence of Buddha/Allah/Siva/God in their daily activities. Table one shows some the replies of children.

Discussion

Fernando and Ferrari discovered that children in war situations spoke more about risks. In the sand tray activity, stories of children with both parents and non-war orphans were not problematic. However the war-affected children’s stories were colored with the loss of their dear ones, fighting, displacement, desertion, and poverty which demand clinical support of war-affected children. Fernando and Ferrari highlighted that war-affected orphans expressed their abilities to face challenges even amidst war despite being confronted with life circumstances, in contrast to the children who had their parents experienced fewer difficulties, for example, poverty (64).

My findings are consistent with those of Fernando and Ferrari. Even in the post-war context of Sri Lanka, war-affected children are more confronted with life circumstances than non-war-affected children. They still mourn for the loss of their parents and dear ones, some are still afraid to think about their past experiences. Children are aware that due to the war they were displaced, became weak in their studies. Many Sinhala and Tamil war-affected children expressed that though they were very young during the war, they could remember how they underwent struggles. At the same time, non-war affected children, apart from facing few a natural disasters and poor economic problems at home, narrated non-problematic experiences of their daily life. Nevertheless, comparing with the war-affected children, non-war affected children showed fewer life challenges, except for a few natural disasters (floods) and poverty.

Fernando and Ferrari emphasized that Buddhist monks, caregivers, teachers, and other volunteers supported the vulnerable children in increasing their resiliency. They noticed that war orphans took caregivers as their parents and other fellow orphans as their siblings while such behaviors were not noticed in other children who had their parents. The non-war affected children appreciate the help of

caregivers while preferring their parents. The war-affected orphans, on the other hand, experienced parental care and support from caregivers. According to them, this interconnection between caregivers and children reduces the feeling of insecurity. They also emphasized that the caregivers not only supported these children but their families as well. Since children were at children's care homes, their parents did not need to spend a lot of money on them. The caregivers also arranged visits to their families during school holidays and provided all the necessities. Fernando and Ferrari highlighted that providing children a proper education, care, and religious activities cultivate resilience in children (60).

The results of Fernando and Ferrari are also noticeable in the current research. Many war-affected children expressed that sometimes they call religious sisters as mothers. The interviewed war-affected children who lost both parents expressed that they relate to their caregivers (religious sisters) as they would relate to their parents. At the same time, children who have parents or single parents did not speak about a deeper relationship with the religious sisters, preferring to talk to their parents through phone calls and visit them during school vacation. The children who do not have anyone remain with sisters even during holidays. Most of the children in the children's homes shared that their caregivers support their families, and it helps them not worry about their families. Children expressed that the sisters provide them with all the necessities, including proper education and psychological support. Even the Hindu children underlined that they do not see any partiality in the caregivers. They take care of both Christian and Hindu children in the same way. Sisters allow them to participate in Hindu religious activities and take them to the temple, just as they take the Catholic children to the church. This kind of care encourages them to grow positively in the mixed group. Like those children in the study by Fernando and Ferrari, children in the current study also underlined that the support of their caregivers is an added strength for them to face the daily challenges. However, I wonder whether they talked positively about sisters because I am also a religious sister, or would they also have given the same answers to laypersons?

Most of the children in the study of Fernando and Ferrari are Buddhist, and there are only two Christians. Therefore, they mainly spoke about how the Buddhist faith nurtures the faith development of children. They emphasized that Buddhist practices

do not stop with faith activities, but also lead children to be benevolent towards the other. Buddhist practices support children to have many moral values such as caring, accepting, empowering, and a sense of belonging. They underlined that Buddhist faith practices stimulate resiliency in the lives of Sri Lankan children. Firstly, it helps children to accept and overcome their traumatic experiences, while it also motivates them to restructure their cognitive system. Secondly, Buddhist faith practices, through its rituals, interconnect children with a larger community in which they live and grow. They mentioned that Buddhist rituals support children to accept their life experiences (70).

In the current study, Buddhist children often expressed their traditions and rituals. They are also aware that the teaching of Buddha supports them to have a moral and truthful life. As that of Buddhist children, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian children also underlined the importance of daily spiritual practices. They explained how their faith in the transcendent has helped them to believe that they were protected during the war. They also realize that the power of divine presence continuously protects them. Few war-affected children highlighted that during the war, they doubted whether the supernatural power abandoned them. However, when children explained their faith, they highlighted that they are now aware that even after losing many things during the war, they are still alive because of the supernatural power. Thus, like the findings of Fernando and Ferrari, these children expressed as well that one of the main reasons they can face trials of war is their faith in supernatural power. These children also mentioned that their religions teach them to live in peace and harmony with others.

According to the findings of the interviews, many children are capable of facing challenges through spirituality, which strengthens their resilience and faith in transcendence. However, children are aware that they have not yet fully recovered or overcome the loss of their parents, as well as other war or difficult experiences. In this context, parents, teachers, religious leaders, and other caregivers have to be more responsible for children. Sri Lankan children face many physical and mental disorders due to war and other life challenges, and there are only a limited number of child counselors in Sri Lanka (Chandradasa and Champika 2018,1). The lack of counselors demands training more people who can counsel and support them to overcome and heal



those past wounds and memories. These children might have many life stories to tell, and they need someone who would listen to them and help them recover from their painful experiences. Therefore, they need pastoral counseling to heal them from their past traumatic experiences.

Differences between previous research and the current study

While the former study took place during the war, and interviewed a majority of Sinhala Buddhists and few Sinhala Christians, this present research is done in the post-war context and includes children belonging to all four religions as well as children from Tamil communities. Fernando and Ferrari established that Sinhala Buddhist/Christian children have potential resiliency to face challenges while they longed to have parental love, support, good education, and security, etc. This study extends the scope of resiliency to children of other religions and ethnic groups and demonstrates that, on top of basic needs, they also speak about lasting peace. Both war-affected children and also non-war affected children have the intention of making a cohesive nation. They underline that all religions teach mutual respect, love, support, and, above all, peaceful co-existence. Thus, while confirming the results of Fernando and Ferrari, this study adds more detail about Sri Lankan children and their resiliency in different ethnic and faith communities. In sum, a child's spiritual development takes place amidst the religious, cultural, economic, and political environment in which a child lives.

Limitations

That this study is carried out only in six districts of Sri Lanka with a small sample of 50 participants, the results of this research cannot be generalized. These are one moment interviews. Future studies conducted with other children in Sri Lanka can validate the current findings. The researcher is a religious sister, and although she built trust with children, they might have shared only limited information due to personal discomfort.

Conclusion

The results of Fernando and Ferrari and the current study show that war-affected children in Sri Lanka are more likely to face many life challenges than non-war-affected children. However, despite these differences, both groups show a certain resilience. Faith in transcendence might help children to face challenges. Support of parents, relatives, teachers, and religious leaders encourages their spiritual development. Spirituality can strengthen them to have a positive attitude even amidst pain and losses. According to the responses of the children interviewed, spirituality continues to contribute to peacebuilding, empowering the relational dimension of human beings as children of the same God or transcendence and stimulating human ethical responsibility to care for each other. There are a lot of social and religious issues among religious communities in Sri Lanka. Children long for collaborative faith communities in the post-war context of Sri Lanka. They long for a harmonious livelihood amidst various ethical, cultural, and religious challenges. Spirituality and resilience of Sri Lankan children can become a means to overcome their traumatic experience of war and other life challenges, and it will encourage peaceful living. Hence, it is necessary to support their spiritual well-being and assist them in their resilience.

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