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Tsunami prompts women's swimming lessons

By Tom Parker

In Sri Lanka

"Many more women and children would have been saved if they knew how to swim," says Girlie Ganage, aged 44, as she practises her breast stroke in a private 12 metre pool.



Swimming lessons seem to be popular among women

The school teacher from Mirissa, in the south-west of Sri Lanka, is among 25 women here who have decided that it is time to learn to swim following the horrors of December's Indian Ocean tsunami.

But that involves breaking some unwritten rules.

"Before the tsunami, it would have been unthinkable. Men still don't believe me when I tell them," Mrs Ganage says.

The culture in Sri Lanka prevents mixed bathing in the few public swimming pools which do exist - most of which are in the capital Colombo - so opportunities for women have been almost non-existent.

"We could never go into the sea in our swimming costumes anyway, we have to go fully clothed, so it's impossible to swim," explains Pushpa Kodippila, 43, a mother of two.

'Water familiarisation'

The scheme is being run by Christine Fonfe, a British swimming teacher, who felt after the tsunami, that this was the chance to change cultural attitudes.

"The government should be doing more to encourage women to swim. Part of the problem here is the absence of female teachers," Mrs Fonfe says.

To get around the problem, Mrs Fonfe is planning to take local student Inki Surangi, 20, to the UK to train as an Amateur Swimming


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Association teacher. This will qualify her to teach other women in Sri Lanka how to swim.

But the inability to swim is not limited to women. Since the tsunami, children are being given "water familiarisation classes" as a form of trauma counselling.

"Children have been mentally scarred, they are terrified of water and the sea," says former Olympic Swimmer Julian Bolling, who is in running the Swim Lanka project with Dutch businesswoman Petronella Ballard.



Inki Surangi plans to become a qualified swimming instructor

"Common sense told us that you have to let someone face what they're afraid of. After their confidence in water is established they will be taught how to swim," says Mrs Ballard.

Paradox

The charitable organisation is travelling the tsunami affected areas of Hambantota, Tangalle and Galle with a mobile 5m x 3m fibreglass swimming pool, which children can come and use free of charge.

Mr Bolling says it's important do it now to prevent more serious psychological conditions in the future.

"We're trying to prevent post traumatic stress disorder, which can occur after the first few months of mourning. We need pools because the sea is too rough to learn in."



The Swim Lanka members want more pools to be built in the area

They are raising funds, through private sponsors, to build three permanent 25-metre pools in the same areas.

"We don't want the government involved, because they are so inefficient. It must be maintained by private local donors from each area. The foreign NGOs might not be around five years down the road, Mr Bolling says.

The eventual aim of both groups is for swimming to be incorporated into the national curriculum. But Mrs Fonfe is sceptical whether this will happen.

"There's been talk of it in the papers, but they want to charge parents for the privilege. It's something of a paradox that so many people live by the sea, but never have the chance to learn to swim."


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