

# Improving Access to Hospitality Employment

Coordination and Facilitation of CARE International's Skills for Empowerment Project (2017–2018)

## The Issue

In 2017, Sri Lanka's tourism industry was poised for rapid expansion, with national projections targeting 4 million visitors and over 600,000 new jobs by 2020. Yet the hospitality sector struggled to recruit and retain youth—especially women—due to social stigma, safety concerns, and cultural norms. Many families considered hotel work inappropriate for young women, and vocational training curricula did not match employers' expectations, further limiting employability. In districts such as Trincomalee—a key tourism hub—1,200 hospitality sector vacancies remained unfilled, underscoring the disconnect between workforce readiness and industry demand. National youth unemployment, which had lingered between 17–20 percent for over a decade, emphasized the urgency of addressing these barriers.

| Barrier                     | Solution                                             |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| Cultural stigma             | Public awareness through hotel exposure              |
| Family resistance           | Built trust through practical training models        |
| Lack of confidence          | Soft skills training in leadership and communication |
| No prior exposure to hotels | On-site placements with Cinnamon                     |

## The Methodology

Chrysalis Advisory Services began with in-depth research, conducting interviews with 31 key informants and 55 hospitality students to understand contextual, cultural, and institutional barriers. These research findings led to the design of tailored training modules in collaboration with Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts, a leading Sri Lankan hospitality chain known for its nationwide presence and commitment to service excellence.

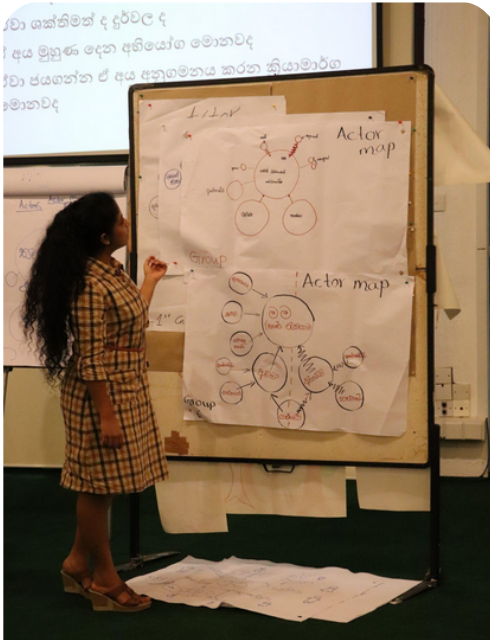


Forty-five rural youth were shortlisted through a structured selection process. Participants then underwent six months of technical training covering general management, food and beverage, housekeeping, and front office management—delivered by Cinnamon Hotels and Resorts with both classroom instruction and on-the-job exposure. Many trainees reported entering a hotel for the first time through this initiative. The training also incorporated English language instruction to support workplace communication.

The soft skills component was developed based on research recommendations, with a focus on communication, leadership, conflict sensitivity, and financial literacy. This module was attended by 18 youth, most of whom were women. Meanwhile, the program continued to draw on ongoing qualitative fieldwork to refine its approach. In addition, the team worked with HR departments at all seven partner hotels to analyze gendered implications and co-develop practical solutions that created an enabling environment for new recruits. Furthermore, Chrysalis conducted targeted community mobilization around each hotel location, organizing open days and parent engagement events to familiarize families with hotel operations, principles, and ethics.



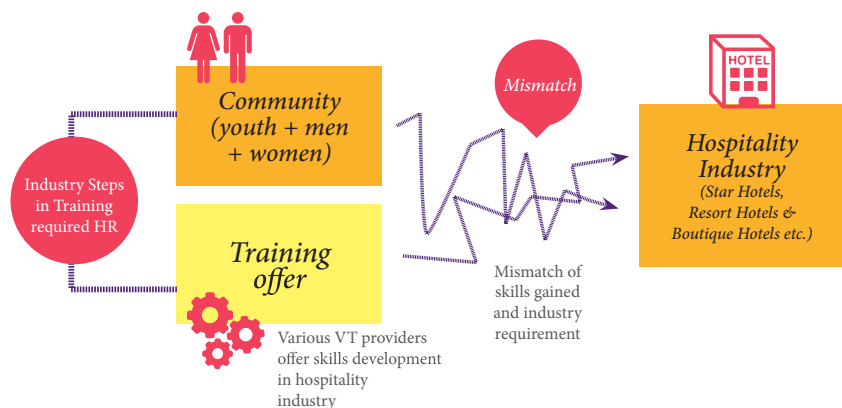
## The Outcomes



Actor mapping to identify key stakeholders and barriers in the tourism industry

The project created a structured, multi-dimensional model for improving access to hospitality employment. Technical training, coupled with targeted life skills, enabled youth to better understand workplace expectations and navigate employment pathways. By linking training directly to practical hotel placements, the initiative increased participant exposure to real-world hospitality environments—an important factor in overcoming stigma and unfamiliarity. The revised training approach also helped shift perceptions within sourcing communities and training institutions, highlighting hospitality as a viable and progressive career option. The soft skills module played a critical role in building confidence and supporting more inclusive participation, particularly among young

women. In parallel, the project produced one of the most detailed early mappings of the structural, cultural, and gendered barriers in the sector, providing a reference point for future program design.



The collaboration with human resources teams across seven hotels resulted in the adoption of gender-sensitive recruitment practices and workplace policies, ensuring that new recruits—especially women—felt supported and safe on the job. As a result of the community mobilization efforts, families became more receptive to youth, particularly daughters, joining the hospitality workforce. Although the tourism industry has evolved significantly since the project's implementation, the challenges it addressed remain highly relevant. Recruitment and retention in the hospitality sector continue to be shaped by public perception, gender norms, and systemic barriers—making this project a valuable model for inclusive workforce development in a sector central to Sri Lanka's economic growth.