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## Role Models and Ambitions : Sri Lanka

This three lesson Topic is built around the voices of teenagers recorded in and around the southern town of Galle, in the South Asian country of **Sri Lanka** discussing their role models and ambitions.

**Lesson 1 : Family role models**

**Lesson 2 : Other role models**

**Lesson 3 : Ambitions**

### Sri Lanka



The island of Sri Lanka is located 31 km off the coast of India. Since gaining independence from the British colonial powers in 1948 the territory (renamed “Sri Lanka” in 1972) faced the perennial problem of attempting to reconcile two contrasting peoples: the Buddhist Sinhalese majority, and the Hindu Tamil minority. For 25 years civil war raged in the north-east of the country, until in May 2009, when government forces seized the last area controlled by the Tamil Tigers rebels. At least militarily the conflict is at an end, and now teenagers like these in the recordings - who are mostly urbanized, educated

and relatively sophisticated - can concentrate on their studies. As we hear, they must work hard to fulfil their dreams and ambitions, and live up to their role models, in the increasingly competitive and cosmopolitan society which is modern Sri Lanka.

- Population: 20.2 million (UN, 2009)
- People: 73.94% Sinhalese, 12.7% Tamil, 7.1% Muslim, 5.5% Hill Tamil, and 1.5% other
- Languages: Sinhalese, Tamil, English
- Capital: Colombo (commercial), Sri Jayawardenepura (administrative)
- Area: 65,610 sq km (25,332 sq miles)
- Major languages: Sinhala, Tamil, English
- Major religions: Buddhism (70%), Hinduism (15%), Islam, Christianity
- Life expectancy: 70 years (men), 78 years (women) (UN)

- Main exports: Clothing and textiles, tea, gems, rubber, coconuts
- GNI per capita: US \$1,780

### **Role Models**

When asked to talk about their personal role models, many of these teenagers choose to name close relatives. The nuclear family is still a highly important social unit for most Sri Lankans, with relatives of the wife and the husband forming a crucial support social network. Kaveesha and Hasini (Lesson 1 Tracks 3 and 4) select their mothers as role models. Both women are described as caring, devoted to their families, and determined to give their daughters every possible help in achieving their goals. Even though Hasini attends school far away from the family home and must live in a boarding hostel, still her mother and other family members visit regularly, and give her advice on her school work.

Other close family members are also named as role models. In Lesson 1 Track 2, Randi tells us how fond she is of her “handsome” 24 year old cousin, who she believes reciprocates her affections. She may well be conscious of – and pleased - that in Sri Lanka, as in much of South Asia and the Middle East there is a strong tradition of marriage between cousins. Another close and special relationship is often between children and their aunts or uncles – not least because they may eventually become their fathers or mothers-in-law; in Lesson 1 Track 1, Asinika chooses her entertaining uncle as a role model.

But in many ways the lives of these students do differ from those of their parents generation, and many are now subject to much outside influence from the internet and broadcast media. The country’s first television channel was only launched in 1979, but now in Sri Lanka – as in most other parts of the world - there are large numbers of terrestrial and satellite channels readily available. Many show predominantly western output, and some of these teenagers are influenced by celebrity culture. In Lesson 2, some describe new, more glitzy role models; Keisha (Lesson 2 Track 2) selects Vanessa Hudgens, from *High School Musical*, whilst in Track 3 Sanjana speaks of her admiration for the late Michael Jackson – who had a huge following amongst many Sri Lankans.

### **Ambitions**

Modern life for these well educated teenagers, about to enter an increasingly cosmopolitan world, is highly competitive, and to succeed, a child must work hard from an early age, to gain educational advantage. Parents compete for places in the best schools, and many devote their lives – often as well as significant financial outlay – towards helping their offspring achieve ambitions to become doctors, software engineers, pilots or lawyers. Although state education is free, by the time children are working for their GCE Ordinary Level - and even more so if they then study for ‘A’ Level exams - the majority will also attend private tutoring classes. In Lesson 3 Track 3 Srimali, who wants to be a doctor, describes how her day begins at 5.00 in the morning for an hour’s study before breakfast, and apart from the occasional break to eat or wash, she then works

continuously until 10.00 pm. For Srimali, also for Navina (Track 4) who wants to be a software engineer, and Yashini (Track 5) who has ambitions to become a psychiatrist, their immediate goal is to be awarded a place to study at one of the country's eight prestigious universities. After this - and especially if they want to achieve higher degrees - many may also aim for a few years of study overseas.