



Highlighting Rural Researchers

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Shirlyn Kunaratnam

Department of Rural Development

GETTING TO KNOW SHIRLYN KUNARATNAM

Shirlyn Kunaratnam is a researcher at the Rural Development Institute and a student of the Master of Arts in Rural Development (MARD) program here at Brandon University. She was born in a small village in a northern province of Sri Lanka. However, throughout her younger years, Shirlyn moved a lot with her family due to 30-years of ongoing conflict. Though systemic discrimination has influenced her upbringing, Shirlyn proudly identifies herself as a member of rural Sri Lankan communities.

80% of Sri Lanka is made up of rural and remote communities, and throughout her personal and professional experiences, Shirlyn has come to realize that there is deeply seeded connections between people living in these areas. Despite facing challenges such as war, tsunamis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and economic crises, rural communities exhibit remarkable resilience. These communal connections facilitate the unique ability to collaborate and rebuild during times of unrest – a trait sometimes difficult to identify in urban areas. This resiliency is one of the inspirations that sparked interest in Shirlyn to work within the field of rural community development. She has a deep passion for community-based work, and collaborations that are fundamentally created with and for community.

RESEARCH AND WORK EXPERIENCE

Shirlyn has been working with non-profit organizations – such as World Vision International, Stromme Foundation, and Hel Vetas – since 2004. In this time, she has been collaborating on community-based, grassroots projects related to food security, relief and rehabilitation, education, youth development, and community economic development. These experiences have allowed Shirlyn to garner skills related to project work, ranging from project design, community engagement, and project management. She believes that community development work must be founded on the understanding that communities are not recipients of aid but are the owners of problems and solutions. Community-based knowledge, perspectives and values are the key to community development, and the community-based approach allows for a holistic perspective, whereby no one member is left unspoken for. Shirlyn believes that a significant priority for community-based work is to ensure the projects are community-centered. This means that work must be done to build the capacity of rural communities so that they may independently manage their development initiatives after project work concludes. This assures sustainability moving forward, allowing for self-determination.

WHAT'S MORE

- Shirlyn is a Graduate student enrolled in the MARD program, and working as Immigration research Coordinator at RDI
- Shirlyn has 16 years of work experience in Community Economic Development, Relief and Rehabilitation, and Community Assessments
- Shirlyn held positions of Program Officer, Senior Program Officer, and Project Coordinator during her 16 years of work

Rural Development Institute
Brandon University
270-18th Street,
Brandon, MB R7A 6A9
204-571-8515
brandonu.ca/rdi



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My experiences have empowered me to formulate academic research projects that are not only theoretically sound but are also grounded in the practical needs of society

After the completion of her undergraduate studies in Sri Lanka, she was inspired to continue building on her professional qualifications and decided to continue her education in the Master of Arts in Rural Development program. She noted that the profound understanding of the complexity of rural community challenges gained through her prior experiences significantly helped to conceptualize course content. Likewise, the theories and concepts presented through her studies have been instrumental in applying academic insights to real-world settings.

ONGOING RESEARCH AND CURRENT PROJECTS

Shirlyn's Master's thesis focuses on identifying and understanding the challenges and needs faced by immigrant women in Brandon, Manitoba. While Shirlyn was analyzing the 124 resources on immigration through the 2021 RDI research repository, she noticed there was very little data regarding the gender perspective – this is especially true for the perspective of immigrant women. Though the articles predominantly centered around issues such as demographic challenges, economic hurdles, employment struggles, infrastructure gaps, access to resources, and integration challenges in rural Manitoba, there was little consideration to the challenges faced by immigrant women. Shirlyn recognized that rural women – irrespective of immigrant status – encounter common challenges. These challenges include finding suitable employment, accessing daycare facilities, education, and financial resources, and struggles of balancing work and family life. This motivated Shirlyn to investigate whether entrepreneurship could serve as an effective means to overcome some of these hurdles. As well, she is exploring the possibilities of forming women's groups interested in collective entrepreneurship.

Alongside her Master's research, Shirlyn's current role as a researcher at RDI has provided her with the opportunity to embark on several research projects. Shirlyn is also engaging in research with Westman Immigration Service (WIS) focusing on immigrant entrepreneurship and will be exploring the overall challenges of immigrants when they start up their businesses. This will help identify skills, training gaps, mentorship and funding opportunities. There is also potential opportunities to explore the challenges and needs of newcomers in Brandon with the Brandon Local Immigration Partnerships (BLIP). This participatory action research could help plan future projects effectively.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Shirlyn's personal and professional experiences have empowered her to develop project and research that are led by the communities themselves. With the passion in community-based approaches, she believes community development work can be done in a sustainable way, meeting the unique needs of each community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:



The Rural Development Institute is grateful to be affiliated with a variety of communities, agencies, academics and students across Canada and beyond. These relationships have facilitated the development of unique networks allowing for collaborative projects to take form, and RDI wants to extend its appreciation to all rural researchers.