

25th World Council of the Girls' Friendly Society to be held in July

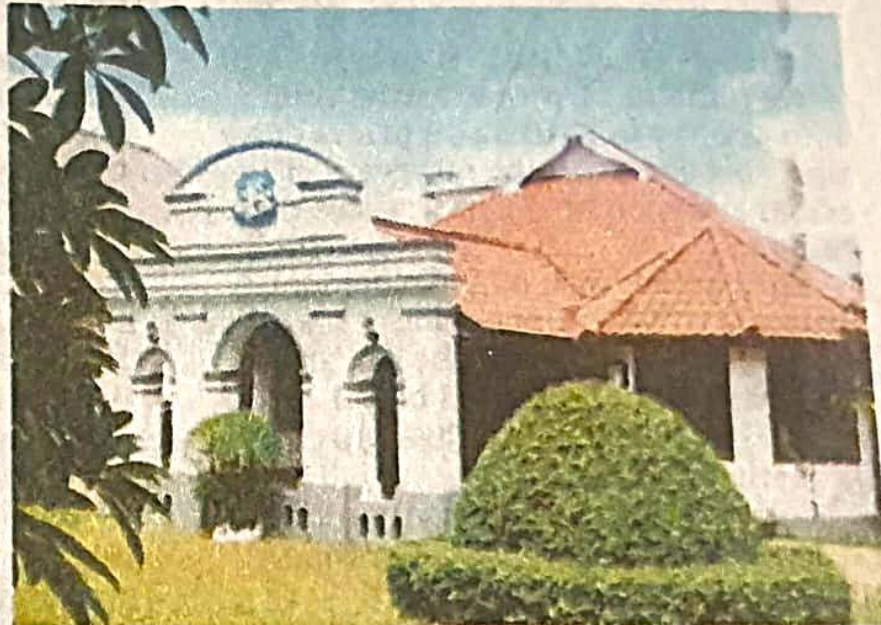
The 25th World Council of the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) will be held in Colombo from July 1-9, 2026, at the Ramada by Wyndham, Galle Face.

One hundred delegates from 24 countries will attend, fostering global dialogue, collaboration and sharing of initiatives aimed at empowering girls and women worldwide - especially through education, skills development and community service.

This event is especially significant as it is the first ever GFS World Council to be held in South Asia and the first occasion in which the World Presidency is held by a Sri Lankan, Ms. Jeanne Withanage.

In addition to business sessions, a variety of programmes have been planned, including informative speakers, workshops, the observance of "Orange Day," and a youth summit. An international fair will also be held, where delegates will display arts and crafts from their countries.

The GFS is a global Anglican organization of girls and women, founded in London in 1875 and now active in 30 countries. The Sri Lanka GFS was established in 1904 and serves girls and women of all races and religions across the coun-



The GFS Headquarters building, gifted by Mr Charles Peiris, in 1923. The GFS Hostel for working girls from the outstations who come to Colombo for employment was started in 1957. The Hostel is situated behind the Headquarters building

try through its outstation branches, especially its subsidized Hostel for working girls at its headquarters in a prime Kollupitiya location.

Sunday Island

June 28, 2026

25th GFS World Council to be held in Colombo

The 25th Girls Friendly Society (GFS) World Council will be held in Colombo from July 1 – 9. For the first time in its long history, the GFS World Presidency is held by a Sri Lankan Jeanne Withanage and this will be the first GFS World Council to be hosted in South Asia.

Founded in London in 1875, the GFS, a global Anglican voluntary organisation of girls and women, has grown into a worldwide movement with an active presence in 30 countries. The Sri Lanka GFS was established in 1904 and has dedicated itself to serving girls and women across the country, regardless of class, creed or race.

The World Council is to be held at the Ramada by Wyndham hotel and will be a landmark occasion for the Society and the region with around 100 delegates from 24 countries attending, sharing initiatives aimed at empowering girls and women worldwide and fostering global dialogue and collaboration.

The event underscores Sri Lanka's vital role within the GFS community and highlights the ongoing commitment to fostering growth, unity and service among young women and girls globally.

World President Jeanne Withanage who has served GFS dedicatedly over many decades was responsible for taking GFS Sri Lanka to new heights. As President, she established outstation branches, took on the ambitious world project 'English for Employment Prospects' among other significant initiatives. A Chartered Librarian by profession, Ms. Withanage was Sri Lanka's Representative of the US Library of Congress for 23 years and also serves as Country Director of a Christian service organization.

The GFS World Council opening service at St Michael's Church, Kollupitiya on Thursday, July 2, at 5.30 p.m. will see a colourful procession with GFS members from 24 countries carrying their country banners. On Friday, July 3, at 4 p.m., an International Fair will be held at the GFS Hall with member countries bringing their arts & crafts for sale. The GFS Youth Summit will take place on Saturday, July 4, at Christ Church Galle Face Church Hall.

Dr Radhika Coomaraswamy and Deekshya Illangasinghe are among the speakers at the sessions.

The closing service will be at the Anglican Cathedral on Thursday, July 9, at 10 a.m. with the new GFS World President Lois Frankforter from the USA being commissioned by the Bishop of Colombo.

**Sunday
Times**

June 28,
2026

25th GFS World Council in Colombo

The 25th World Council of the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) will be held from July 1 – 9, 2026 at the Ramada by Wyndham, Galle Face, Colombo 3. For the first time in the Society's 151-year history, the GFS World Presidency is held by a Sri Lankan and for the first time, the GFS World Council will be hosted in Sri Lanka, in the South Asian region.

One hundred delegates from 24 countries will attend, fostering global dialogue, collaboration and the sharing of initiatives aimed at empowering girls and women worldwide.

Sunday Observer

June 28, 2026

GFS World Council opens in Colombo

Banners held high and led by the hewisi band of Bishop's College, it was a vibrant procession that made its way into the Church of St Michael and All Angels at Kollupitiya for the opening service of the 25th Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) World Council being held in Colombo this week.

Held at the beautiful *Gal Palliya*, the service was attended by a colourful gathering of GFS delegates from 24 countries across the world, many dressed in their distinctive national dress.

The Archdeacon of the Anglican Diocese of Colombo, Ven Christopher Balraj officiated.

The GFS, a global Anglican voluntary organisation of girls and women, has been in existence since 1875 and present in Sri Lanka since 1904.

It was a proud moment for Sri Lanka to host the 25th GFS World Council, being held for the first time in South Asia with a Lankan, Jeanne Withanage, being World President, another first for the country.

Ms Withanage, in her address at the ser-

vice, spoke of the GFS mission, and described the organisation as a beacon of love, hope and empowerment to girls and women around the world.

"True to our founder's vision we have raised awareness of gender inequality, abuse and violence.

"We have cared for the environment, championed education and fostered leadership in many countries around the world. We have worked, silently, quietly, modestly, but with long lasting impact," she said.

Expressing how delighted they were to welcome the diverse GFS membership to Sri Lanka, she urged members "to grow together".

"Be bold. Walk on water.

Soar like an eagle. Jump high and catch a star. You can do it. We can do it. The GFS is doing it!" she said.

With a programme of diverse events, workshops and cultural activities, the GFS World Council continues till July 9, wrapping up with the closing service at 10 am at the Anglican Cathedral on Baudhaloka Mawatha, at which the Bishop of Colombo will commission the new GFS World President.

Pics by M A Pushpa Kumara



GFS World President Jeanne Withanage addressing the gathering



Colourful procession of GFS member delegations to the church



The procession carrying the GFS country banners proceeding up the church aisle

Sunday Times

July 5, 2026

GFS World Council 2026: Nine days in Sri Lanka

The 25th World Council of the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) was held from July 1 – 9, 2026, at Ramada by Wyndham, Colombo, with over 100 delegates representing 23 GFS member countries.

It was nine days of business sessions, inspiring discussions, interactive workshops, fun and fellowship. The GFS is an Anglican organization for girls and women founded in England in 1875 and established in Sri Lanka in 1904. A world council is convened every three years, and this was the first time in its 151-year history that a global gathering of GFS members was held in South Asia.

The inspiring opening service with Voice of Praise, Chamber Choir was held at the Church of St. Michael & All Angels, Colombo 3 with Ven. Christopher Balraj, Archdeacon of Colombo, officiating, assisted by Rev. Niroshan de Mel, GFS World Chaplain.

Addressing gender violence is a primary focus of the GFS. An excellent session was held with guest speaker, Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women. UN Orange Day was observed that day, and all wore orange. Several

countries shared reports of their activities aligned with this UN campaign. Human rights activist Ms. Deekshya Illangasinghe, spoke on the importance of empowering women.

The delegates experienced a taste of culture with "Euphoria Ceylon," a wonderful open-air performance of Sri Lankan dancing and drumming by the National Youth Services Council, organized by the Mahaweli Consultancy Bureau. A talent night was also organized for countries to showcase their culture.

The delegates also took in the sights: a city tour, stopping at St. Peter's Church, Fort, the Seafarers' Church, an excursion to Kandy, visiting the Giragama tea factory and the historic St. Paul's Church and the Trinity College Chapel.

A Youth Summit was held for the first time, providing a special opportunity for young people from different countries to plan for the future of the organization.

The World Council concluded with a grand closing service at the Cathedral of Christ the Living Saviour, Colombo 7, where Rt. Rev. Dushantha Rodrigo, Bishop of Colombo officiated. The delegates were led in procession by the western band of Methodist College,



► Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy addressing one of the sessions

Colombo 3 and the junior students of Bishop's College presented an offertory dance. Jeanne Withanage, the outgoing World President from GFS Sri Lanka, presented Lois Frankforter of GFS USA to the Bishop for commissioning as the new World President.

The next World Council will be hosted in 2029 by GFS USA.

Sunday Times

July 19, 2026



The GFS World Committee (past and present) with Bishop Dushantha Rodrigo, flanked by outgoing World President Jeanne Withanage from Sri Lanka (right) and new World President Lois Frankforter from USA (left), at the closing service



GFS World Council : A milestone in global sisterhood and empowerment



Youth delegates at the the World Convention of the Girls' Friendly Society which concluded in Colombo on July 9

Sunday Island
July 19, 2026

From July 1 to July 9, Colombo hosted a historic gathering – the World Council of the Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) – bringing together 104 delegates and observers from 23 countries around the globe. This international event marked a significant milestone, as it was the first GFS world council to be held in South Asia, emphasizing the society's expanding reach and influence, a GFS news release said.

The Council featured an extensive agenda that included business sessions, workshops, special youth programmes and inspiring addresses on preventing violence against women, human rights and women's empowerment, it said.

Beyond the formal sessions, participants enjoyed a rich cultural experience, with a cultural show displaying Sri Lanka's rich heritage and a visit to a tea factory. They also had a memorable day trip to Kandy and were captivated by the country's history, traditions and natural beauty.

“The spirit of fellowship and sisterhood was unmistakable throughout the gathering. The shared purpose of improving the lives of women and girls around the world created a bond among attendees and this unity emphasized the importance of fostering friendship and collaboration worldwide,” the release said.

The highlight of the Council was the commissioning of Lois Frankforter from the United States as the new World President for the next three years, succeeding Jeanne Withanage of Sri Lanka.

SISTERHOOD THAT SERVES

As MEN we must recognise the equality of the sexes. We know that women have had a tremendous impact on history.

Women have shaped the course of world events. To deny this is to indicate that you are ignorant about history. Of course, let us remember that in addition to women who have shaped history, there are countless women today, who are contributing to society in their everyday lives, at the grassroots level.



■ ISHARA JAYAWARDANE

The Girls' Friendly Society (GFS) is a global, volunteer-based Anglican organisation operating in over 25 countries worldwide. Founded in 1875, GFS is committed to empowering women, girls and communities through faith-based service, leadership development, advocacy and sustainable community initiatives. The Society was established in Sri Lanka in 1904 and has since worked with girls and women across the country, irrespective of race or religion barriers.

The World Council is the highest governing body of GFS and is convened once every three years. For the 2023 – 2026 term, Sri Lanka, under the leadership of Jeanne Withanage, GFS World President, who holds the World Presidency, is hosting the 25th GFS World Council from 1st to 10th July 2026 at the Ramada by Wyndham Colombo.

Daily News attended the opening service at St. Michael's and All Angels Church, Polwatte last week and spoke to GFS World President, Jeanne Withanage and some foreign delegates.

The Closing Service on July 9, held at the Cathedral of Christ the Living Savior will mark the conclusion of the 25th GFS World Council and include the Commissioning of the new GFS World President, succeeding the current World President, Jeanne Withanage.

That day the opening service started off with a majestic perahera and a deeply moving church service. GFS was started in England, and this year it is a blessing for both South Asia and Sri Lanka. The organization is 151 years old.

"It is a gathering of ladies from around the world, and we recognize the fact that for women there should not be any barriers. The main aim is the empowerment of women," said Withanage.

Here the key words are – for women, THERE SHOULD NOT BE ANY BARRIERS. Women should not be held back by anything. For GFS all women are a sisterhood and there are no divisions. It is all about service to the community and nurturing women leaders. Here there is also a focus on the values of Christianity.

Experiential Lesson

When you share your ideas with others, that creates real progress and that is what we need right now, and it is wonderful that this event is taking place. Because that is the way we empower ourselves and others. By collaborating and sharing our ideas. Every experience is a lesson. Nothing ever truly goes to waste.

This is a historic milestone for our nation, marking the first time in the Society's 150-year history that Sri Lanka holds the GFS World Presidency and hosts a GFS World Council. It is also the first-ever GFS World Council to be held in South Asia. This international gathering brings together over 150 international and local delegates representing 24 GFS member countries:

Angola, Australia, Cameroon, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), England, Guinea, Ireland, Japan, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Melanesia, Mozambique, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Sierra Leone, South Africa, South Korea, South Sudan, Sri Lanka, The Gambia, Uganda, United States of America (USA) and Zambia.

I am of course highly alarmed when I hear men and women underappreciating the opposite sex. These seemingly harmless comments can go a long way when it comes to gender discrimination. The girl child and the boy child must be awarded the same respect. Violence towards women for any reason, is completely unacceptable. In fact, violence towards any human being for any reason is completely unacceptable.

Here we need to look at change and progress. Women need a voice like men, and today, women have that voice. We all have a unique identity, and that must be celebrated. Our identity means something to us. It defines our life. Misgendering happens a lot on the internet. It has happened to me as well. Sadly, it shows a certain level of insensitivity. We know that today the seeds of distrust are planted in our minds for various reasons. Therefore, we must strengthen our bonds of trust, not only between women, but between men and women. Above all we must believe in ourselves.

Rooted in Faith

"Our theme during the last three years is- rooted in faith and reaching for the stars. Nothing is impossible if you are rooted and grounded according to our belief in Jesus Christ. If you are grounded in faith, you can even change the world. GFS is an Anglican organization, and it is within the Anglican church, in all the countries. It is one Global movement. But we work with anyone and everyone- Christians and Non-Christians both," she explained.

Girls and women must understand their value and worth in society. We cannot ignore women and girls. They must not be undervalued added Withanage. Something must be done about this negative attitude. Abuse of women must not be tolerated and cannot be tolerated. Radhika Coomaraswamy who needs no introduction will be one of the speakers.

From the 1st to the 9th there will be business sessions as they mean business! But it is also about fellowship. It is also bringing publicity to the country by educating the delegates about Sri Lanka's traditions and culture. There will also be workshops and speeches. Here service to the community is their (GFS) driving force.

"Jesus Christ in the bible showed us that women have a place in society. During his time, he influenced change. So that is something our organisation does, giving women their due place."GFS helps women and girls from diverse backgrounds. Here they reach out to women and girls. GFS gives you opportunities to serve, and this is something that Withanage has received- an opportunity to use her talents and skills.

National President for Zambia for the GFS, Thelmalumbeta said that when she interacts with other GFS members from other countries, what she gains is the knowledge that she can take back with her to Zambia. No doubt all these remarkable female leaders have gained valuable insights during their visit to Sri Lanka. Their experiences have truly opened their minds. For some it could be a new experience, for others a re-awakening and for others a way of looking at problems and opportunities in a whole new way. For them there was so much to learn. So much to absorb. So many perspectives to understand.



Priests conducting the service

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Irish delegate with her friends

Incoming World President, Lois Frank Forter from the United States said that the fellowship of bringing women together was wonderful. "Here we all have a common purpose. We must work to improve the lives of women and girls around the world. We need to create a strong bond of sisterhood and friendship."

Klaire Harris also from America said that it was a real eye opener being together with people of different cultures in Sri Lanka. "It is so enlightening engaging in the conversations here. We can now understand how to make a better world with what we have." Sara Rademacher, from America, was in Sri Lanka about 10 years ago and what she really values are the bonds of friendships and connections. "Because here we are at the other side of the world. It is great seeing the growth and what everyone else is accomplishing. People are living out their faiths in so many different ways and putting that out into the world. That is so valuable to me."

