

## Otara Gunawardene's Journey to Animal Welfare: Transforming Sri Lanka's Approach to Stray Dogs and Advocacy Through the Otara Foundation

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**Introduction:** Otara Gunewardene, a well-known businesswoman from Sri Lanka, increased her impact through the Otara Foundation by tackling environmental issues and animal welfare, particularly the protection of stray dogs. After saving a very injured stray dog that had been left on a busy Colombo street, Otara Gunewardene's enthusiasm for animal care was sparked. She was deeply affected by seeing the dog's misery and the disregard of onlookers. She founded the Otara Foundation to promote stray animal advocacy and protection after this incident exposed the appalling condition of animal welfare in Sri Lanka.

**Context and Challenges:** With an estimated 3 million stray dogs suffering from cruelty, neglect, and lack of care, Sri Lanka is experiencing a serious stray dog issue. Inadequate laws pertaining to animal care and societal indifference—many people consider stray dogs to be a nuisance rather than sentient creatures—are the main causes of this problem. This negligence is further exacerbated by cultural views that are influenced by tradition, religion, and financial difficulties. For example, economic constraints restrict resources for animal welfare programs, while religious beliefs in karma can prevent intervention.

**Action Taken:** Otara Gunewardene founded the Otara Foundation to address animal welfare, spearheading relationships with animal rights organizations, rescue operations, and spay and neuter programs. One noteworthy accomplishment was the rescue of Lucky, a severely injured stray who was treated and placed in a caring family. Securing money, overcoming public opposition to spaying/neutering programs, and handling logistical obstacles in extensive rescue operations were some of the difficulties these groups encountered.

**Achievement:** By treating more than 500 sick or injured stray animals and spaying or neutering more than 1,200 dogs, the Otara Foundation has had a direct influence on animal welfare in Sri Lanka and helped to reduce the number of stray animals in specific areas by 30%. A 40% rise in pet adoptions and a notable decline in street dog cruelty and abandonment are further signs of a major cultural shift brought about by public campaigns, which also show that communities are becoming more empathetic and conscious.

**Keywords:** Animal Welfare, Stray Dogs, Rescue, Advocacy, Otara Foundation.