

Equally Safe

Towards a feminist
approach to the safety
of journalists

ARTICLE 19

CASE STUDY

SRI LANKA

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First published by ARTICLE 19, 2022

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Thank you to the European Research Council-funded Gender Peace project at the Centre for Women, Peace and Security, London School of Economics and Political Science.

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Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the following contributors. ARTICLE 19 thanks each and every one of them.

Report author

- Lakna Paranamanna, communications consultant and journalist

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- Malsri Amarasinghe, Deputy Manager – News, TNL TV
- Mustaffa Mohamed Azad, Director, Sri Lanka Development Journalists' Forum Program
- Vraie Cally Balthazaar, feminist researcher and activist
- Nathasha Edirisooriya, Community Welfare and Development Fund
- Shyamala Gomez, lawyer and founder of the Center for Equality and Justice
- Dilrukshi Handunetti, senior journalist and admin of South Asian Women in Media Sri Lanka
- Lakmali Hemachandra, lawyer and women's liberation movement activist
- Dr Sepali Kottegoda, Director, Women and Media Collective
- Kumar Lopez, CEO, Sri Lanka Press Institute
- Thulasi Muttulingam, journalist and blogger, northern Sri Lanka
- Sanjaya Nallaperuma, former journalist at Sinhala Lakbima and Director of the Center for Journalism and Education
- Anjali Perera, television journalist, south-eastern Sri Lanka
- Nirasha Piyawadani, senior journalist
- Kaushal Ranasinghe, activist and freelance journalist
- Susanthi Somalatha, regional electronic media journalist
- Gagani Weerakoon, Deputy Editor, *Ceylon Today*
- Silmiya Yousuf, journalist
- Anonymous freelance writer, Colombo
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Two other participants are not listed here, at their own request.

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About this project

What might a feminist approach to the protection of journalists look like? What concrete benefits might it bring? And could it provide solutions to the well-documented – and highly gendered – abuse that women¹ journalists face every day?

While journalists and communicators² worldwide experience threats, surveillance, attacks, arbitrary arrest, detention, enforced disappearances, and murder for carrying out their vital work, women journalists deal with additional, gendered threats, violence, abuse, and harassment – in their workplaces, when out reporting, and online. They bear the brunt of not only the increasingly hostile environment affecting all journalists but also pervasive gender-based violence, gendered discrimination, and ‘[gendered censorship](#)’. These risks multiply for women journalists who experience multiple, overlapping discriminations on the basis of race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, sex characteristics, gender identity/expression, and religious beliefs (among others).

Current policies and practices – even those deemed ‘gender-sensitive’ – are failing to protect women journalists from these risks. A bulletproof vest may be useful in some contexts, but it will not protect a woman from sexual harassment in her newsroom, abuse when she shares her stories online, or assault on public transport when she travels to an assignment. Due to this lack of effective protection measures, women journalists have, in some cases, taken the situation into their own hands, creating solutions to keep themselves and their colleagues safe. These solutions are grounded in diverse feminist approaches that place women’s everyday experiences, lived realities, and protection needs front and centre.

In 2021, ARTICLE 19 set out to make these sometimes invisible practices more visible, building on our [existing programmes](#) on the safety of women journalists worldwide. We undertook original research globally and specifically in six countries – three in Asia (Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka) and three in Latin America (Brazil, Chile, and Paraguay) – guided by the questions:

What might feminist approaches to the protection of journalists look like, and what benefits might they bring?

From national organisations to grassroots networks, our findings document women’s monumental efforts to make structural changes, tackle entrenched patterns of gender-based discrimination and violence, and enhance the safety of women journalists. The initiatives showcased in these case studies are a testament to the creativity and resilience of those working on the feminist frontlines.

1. Introduction

Country context: Sri Lanka

In ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report 2022](#) – a global, data-informed, annual look at freedom of expression worldwide – Sri Lanka is ranked 107th out of 161 countries, with an overall GxR³ score of 36 out of 100. The country underwent a dramatic decline, falling nearly 30 points in two years, after the Rajapaksa dynasty returned to power in 2019. It is now classed as Highly Restricted.

Mahinda Rajapaksa, President from 2019 until 2022, used [national security as a framework](#) to respond to dissent, the Covid-19 pandemic, and governance. Under his presidency, surveillance increased, civil society actors were harassed and documented, and minority groups were marginalised. However, Rajapaksa also [faced the consequences](#): an economy in ruins, a huge loan default, and island-wide protests calling for his removal from power. As a result of these protests, he [fled the country](#) and resigned in July 2022.

Sri Lanka's three-decade war between government forces and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (a militant separatist group from north-eastern Sri Lanka), which ended in 2009, resulted in unsafe work conditions for all journalists. But even after the end of the war, journalists' safety remained under threat; [19 journalists were killed](#) from 1992–2021, mostly by political and paramilitary groups, and [multiple accounts of violence](#) have been reported, including assassinations, enforced disappearances, abductions, and assaults. Web-based journalists have also [reported](#) 'harassment, threats, intimidation, and interference from members of state security services' when covering specific topics, such as the civil war and its aftermath. Journalists from the Tamil community, who make up [15.3% of the population](#), have raised particular safety concerns.

Of the journalists attacked and threatened between 2005 and 2015, [at least four were women](#). Thulasi Muttulingam, a journalist and blogger from northern Sri Lanka, told ARTICLE 19 that, over the years, her safety concerns have shifted from simply trying to stay alive during the conflict period to insecurities arising from cultural norms steeped in misogyny, male chauvinism, and patriarchal politics. The Covid-19 pandemic only exacerbated these insecurities, as well as generating new concerns, caused notably by a lack of personal protective equipment and the absence of a compensation scheme for loss of livelihood.

In 2021, 772 women journalists were registered under the government's annual media-accreditation programme – 23.6% of the total number of journalists.⁴ However, media accreditation (a process that in itself is not in line with international standards on freedom of expression) is only issued to journalists employed in registered and licensed outlets, meaning the actual number is likely higher.

Violence against women journalists in Sri Lanka

The journalists ARTICLE 19 interviewed for this research reported experiencing various forms of violence, including sexual harassment, assault, and online harassment and abuse, both in the newsroom and when out reporting. But despite the prevalence of such violence, it is not seen as a priority in newsrooms:

‘Training sessions are held by various organisations to raise awareness of workplace safety for journalists. But those in supervisory roles do not prioritise it because facing vulnerabilities is not their lived reality as men.’

— Gagani Weerakoon
Deputy Editor, Ceylon Today

The journalism, media, and communications sector is not specifically recognised in Sri Lanka's National Occupational Safety and Health Policy. A senior journalist from Colombo (who asked to remain anonymous) told us that the industry's lack of recognition has made it unsafe for women journalists:

‘Journalism is not listed as a trade and is not recognised as a profession in Sri Lanka. Women have long borne the brunt of this semi-formal, unregulated industry as structural barriers automatically impact the less empowered segments more severely.’

She added that men in leadership positions in the media are resistant to formalising journalism, and even when they give women positions of authority within editorial structures, those positions often lack decision-making powers.

Security concerns for minority and rural women

Women journalists from minority communities face additional security concerns due to dual marginalisation. For example, threats such as online harassment and abuse against Muslim women reporters visibly increased during the pandemic as a result of [misinformation targeting Muslim minorities](#), who make up [9.3% of the population](#).

While there are no specific statistics regarding violence against women journalists from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTQI+) community, activist and freelance journalist Kaushal Ranasinghe told us they are more likely to be sidelined if they are 'out' at work, especially at media houses that operate in local languages. He added that LGBTQI+ journalists also experience insensitive comments, verbal harassment, and discrimination.

All of Sri Lanka's mainstream media outlets, as well as the vast majority of its journalists, are based in Colombo. Women journalists based in the provinces, rural areas, and/or at outlets detached from mainstream newsrooms report different safety concerns depending on their region. For example, television journalist Anjali Perera, who reports from south-eastern Sri Lanka, told us:

'The most serious safety issue I face during work is the risk of wild elephant attacks. As a result, travelling for work alone or undertaking assignments in the evenings are no longer viable options.'

Furthermore, unsafe work conditions, such as travel issues (particularly in the context of the fuel shortages in 2022), have contributed to shockingly low numbers of women journalists in the provinces. Mustaffa Mohamed Azad, Director of the Sri Lanka Development Journalists' Forum Program, told us that, in most provinces, only 1–2% of journalists are women. The programme is trying to address this inequality through a [Media Gender Charter](#), which proposes standards and ethics for media reporting in relation to women and girls, and addresses gender equality in workplace policies, practices, and working conditions.

Online harassment and abuse

A 2021 [UNESCO report](#) observed an increase in online violence against women journalists. The report stated that such attacks often have political motives – [a trend also observed in Sri Lanka](#).

In 2021, several women journalists [spoke out about the sexual harassment](#) they had faced in the workplace, including alleged rape threats. However, according to feminist researcher and activist Vraie Cally Balthazaar, the situation did not improve for those who spoke out: 'In fact, some of them had to withdraw from online activity due to the backlash. But not even social justice was meted out to the alleged perpetrators owing to their connections and networks they belong in.' The revelations were expected to propel Sri Lanka's '[belated #MeToo movement](#)'; however, due to a lack of redressal mechanisms and accountability processes, they instead came to an abrupt halt.

Barriers to reporting abuse

The backlash against women who speak out, coupled with the lack of accountability for abusers, act as significant barriers to women journalists in Sri Lanka reporting abuse. A further barrier, as a senior journalist told us, is that speaking out results in women being labelled ‘emotional’ or ‘weak’ and deprived of career opportunities.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, a 2014 [study](#) found that women journalists in Sri Lanka maintain a ‘stony silence’ on gender discrimination and harassment at work. This is despite the existence of legal provisions to tackle workplace harassment. Shyamala Gomez, lawyer and founder of the Center for Equality and Justice, said a gamut of reasons discourages women from speaking out about harassment and abuse – from a gender-insensitive criminal justice system to authorities’ disinterest and patriarchal social structures.

Additional barriers exist for non-English-speaking journalists, who, according to senior journalist Nirasha Piyawadani, are less likely to be taken seriously if they do report abuse:

‘If the aggrieved party is an English-speaking journalist attached to a foreign media outlet, the response is empathetic and will likely yield a tangible result. But the same cannot be expected if a regional journalist is faced with an unsafe working condition.’

Existing protection mechanisms in Sri Lanka

The Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees freedom of expression, the right to engage in any lawful profession (which safeguards the professional rights of journalists), and equal treatment and protection. It also safeguards all persons from discrimination based on race, religion, and sex.

In domestic law, Press Council Law No. 5 of 1973 regulates the conduct of print media institutions and journalists and espouses press freedom. Although Section 8(4) of the Act states that the welfare of the profession of journalism is an objective of the Council, no express provision addresses workplace safety. The Industrial Disputes Act⁵ provides the right for a worker to seek redress if any terms or conditions of employment are violated by the employer. The Penal Code criminalises sexual harassment (of men and women), while soliciting and accepting sexual gratification as bribes are offences under the Bribery Act.

Sri Lanka has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) 1979 and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention of 1958 (No. 111), which place international legal

obligations on Sri Lanka to safeguard against all forms of discrimination against women, including sexual harassment and discrimination in the workplace. However, Sri Lanka has faced criticism for its lack of progress in implementing CEDAW.

The feminist movement in Sri Lanka

The feminist movement in Sri Lanka can be traced back to the early 20th century. According to feminist scholar and academic Dr Kumari Jayawardena, the movement had a 'dramatic start', winning the right to vote and installing two women in the legislature by 1932.⁶ After the 1950s, women from left-wing political parties also joined the feminist movement, which subsequently ventured into union work; a significant number of middle-class women were members of political unions that campaigned for equal pay and the right to enter the professions. After the 1970s, the movement focused more on issues such as patriarchy and violence against women.

Dr Jayawardena insists that feminism in Sri Lanka should not be viewed as a concept imported from the West. Dr Sepali Kottegoda, Director of the Women and Media Collective, agrees, arguing that the movement has undergone various phases and cannot be strictly compared with the movement in the West:

'Feminism in Sri Lanka has had different waves and, whilst many women's organisations have worked towards various causes affecting women in varied capacities, such women's organisations do not strictly label them as feminist campaigns due to the extreme connotations attached to the word "feminist" in Sri Lanka owing to cultural and social reasons.'

However they label themselves, Dr Kottegoda adds, Sri Lankan women's organisations and activists have always campaigned to empower women, including pushing for the introduction of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 1995, an end to sexual harassment, and the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005.

Lakmali Hemachandra, lawyer and women's liberation movement activist, said Sri Lanka still has work to do to take the feminist movement from academia to the grassroots. However, she added, the contemporary movement is active on social media, including campaigning against gender-based violence and harassment, supporting survivors, and calling for perpetrators to be held accountable.



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2. Case studies

Introduction

To identify feminist approaches to the safety of journalists in Sri Lanka, ARTICLE 19 employed an interpretive qualitative research paradigm, including desk research and interviews. This enabled us to identify four case studies: two policy approaches and two informal groups for women journalists.

Desk research

In-depth desk research was conducted to understand pertinent contextual information relevant to Sri Lanka's media sector and gender representation. Although the information available was limited, it helped to inform the interviews and to identify gaps in knowledge. Research on the safety of women journalists in other countries and regions was also explored to obtain insights on protection mechanisms elsewhere.

Informal interviews

Over 21 stakeholders from the fields of media, communications, and civil society were interviewed to provide a holistic overview of the safety concerns of women journalists in Sri Lanka, as well as existing informal and formal safety mechanisms. Interviewees included print and web-based journalists, full-time staff and freelancers, and journalists from both the capital (Colombo) and the regions.

We interviewed women and men journalists of varied ethnicities, sexual orientations, and gender identities, which gave us further insights into whether existing safety approaches are intersectional. Due to Covid-19, all interviews were conducted via Zoom, WhatsApp, or phone. Interviews were unstructured and informal.

Expert interviews

Senior journalists, experts in media and communications, and LGBTQI+ and feminist activists were also interviewed to better understand the gender and media landscape in Sri Lanka. The insights gained complemented the findings from our informal interviews.

Sri Lanka Press Institute: Model Guideline for Safety of Women Journalists

To address women journalists' safety concerns, both within newsrooms and when out reporting, the [Sri Lanka Press Institute](#) (SLPI) – which represents journalists in print and electronic media – has produced a [Model Guideline for the Safety of Women Journalists](#). The SLPI has reached out to multiple print and electronic media outlets to raise awareness of the Guideline and urge them to implement it.

Developed through a series of discussions and negotiations with industry stakeholders (leading women journalists, editors, managers of media institutions, human resources officials, etc.), the Guideline incorporates women's lived experiences of power inequalities, discriminatory and exclusionary practices, and workplace safety concerns.

Furthermore, the Guideline takes a holistic approach to safety – physical, digital, and psychological. Kumar Lopez, CEO of the SLPI, told us that the aim here is to challenge the perception that 'safety' refers only to physical threats. This enables the reassessment of practices that, despite being abusive, have been normalised; for example, verbal abuse that is shrugged off as a joke.

Among other initiatives, the Guideline recommends comprehensive safety planning for travelling to assignments, risk assessments for high-risk situations (e.g. armed conflict or protests), and routine gender-sensitisation training at media organisations – including for senior management.

Although the Guideline focuses on women, its preamble states that its recommendations take a gender-neutral approach. Furthermore, it does not address the safety concerns of specific groups, e.g. women journalists who are freelance, LGBTQI+, and/or from the provinces. Addressing the safety concerns of these specific groups (and others) would improve future editions of the Guideline.

The anti-sexual harassment policy of *Himal SouthAsian*

This Colombo-based regional magazine has developed an anti-sexual harassment policy – the first of its kind in Sri Lanka. For media outlets that lack formal policies to tackle sexual harassment, this policy is a trailblazer, and encourages long-overdue action.

The policy is based on the principles set out in the [ILO sample sexual harassment policy](#) and the [Vishaka guidelines against sexual harassment in the workplace](#). All editorial members and staffers, particularly women, were consulted during its drafting. The policy defines sexual harassment and includes offences committed both within and outside the workplace and at the hands of co-workers, supervisors, or third parties, which acknowledges women's lived realities within a patriarchal system. It covers every staffer, regardless of whether they are an intern, freelance, or full-time.

The policy enables the aggrieved party to choose between two approaches – one formal and one informal – to deal with a sexual harassment incident. The formal process mandates an inquiry committee, made up of at least 51% women and including one independent, external party. In the informal option, the inquiry is dealt with by the aggrieved party, the accused party, and a mediator. Both options mandate a time limit for both the inquiry and delivery of the remedial/redressal procedures.

One of the key obstacles faced in developing this policy was that it took a significant amount of time to review and approve it. Furthermore, despite having now been approved, at the time of writing the policy is still awaiting implementation.

It should also be noted that, despite the goal of creating a sexual harassment-free workplace being a feminist one, given that women are disproportionately the victims and men disproportionately the perpetrators of sexual harassment, the words 'women' or 'female' are not actually mentioned in the policy. Furthermore, it is not clear how the policy will protect those who report sexual harassment from facing a backlash at work.

'Buddy system' to fight back against voyeurism

For several months, women journalists at a now-defunct Sinhala-language newspaper in Sri Lanka⁷ realised they were being filmed when using the restrooms at their workplace. While they were concerned for their safety, none of them spoke out about this due to feelings of shame and embarrassment, until one senior woman journalist publicly voiced her concerns. Her outing of the harassment encouraged younger women journalists to speak up.

Together, the women journalists galvanised into an impromptu, informal collective that took two key measures to fight the unidentified perpetrator(s) and regain their safety, freedom, and privacy at work. First, they lodged a formal complaint with the company's HR department. Second, they set up a 'buddy system' to ensure that, whenever a woman used the restroom, another woman stayed outside to act as a support and a deterrent. While the HR inquiry failed to find the perpetrator(s), the buddy system brought an end to the voyeurism.

This case study shows how traditional institutional approaches often fail to protect women and instead place an onus on women to protect themselves. Although, legally and judicially, voyeurism is not defined as gender-based violence, it denies women the freedom and safety to participate in social, political, and cultural life. Furthermore, mental health experts note that voyeurism is linked to sexual objectification and that, within patriarchal societies like Sri Lanka, women are the most objectified group.

As such, while informal, this impromptu collective of women journalists was able to collectively challenge the perpetrator(s), despite the institution failing to offer any meaningful protection. It is possible, therefore, that a women-only approach to safety-related policies may put women at ease and win their trust – although effective institutional mechanisms to ensure women's safety are also crucial.

South Asian Women in Media: A digital safe space for women journalists

South Asian Women in Media (SAWM), launched in 2008, is a network of women media professionals based in Lahore, Pakistan, with chapters in every South Asian country. Each chapter runs a WhatsApp group, in which members can exchange views and network.

The SAWM Sri Lanka WhatsApp group serves as not only a discussion platform for women journalists, but also a safe space where they can share their safety concerns and experiences of abuse, whether physical, psychological, or otherwise. Senior members of the group intervene where necessary, directing women to the appropriate support channels and providing counsel to seek redress.

The group admin, senior journalist Dilrukshi Handunetti, told ARTICLE 19 that, after the #MeToo revelations, the number of women journalists who shared their stories of harassment increased. However, she said, the lack of formal mechanisms for women to report incidents, as well as the power imbalances between men and women, have led to the dismissal of the complaints – despite the willingness of most survivors to name their perpetrators. As a result, SAWM is now gearing up to call for action.

‘Women should not be negotiating for their space within their place of work. The time for responses designed by men, for men is over; it is time women took the lead in initiating action involving institutional systems with sound redressal mechanisms.’

– Dilrukshi Handunetti

Senior journalist and admin of SAWM Sri Lanka

The SAWM Sri Lanka group is a women-led, women-only space, which is essential to ensure victimised women can define and drive their own protection needs without fear of a backlash or discrimination. It welcomes members from all ethnicities, religions, races, sexual orientations, and gender identities, making the platform accessible and inclusive for all women. This combination of being women-led, women-only, and inclusive is key to its success as a safe space.

3. Conclusion

This report set out to identify formal and informal mechanisms to address the safety concerns of all women journalists. While the report found a few policy documents designed to address safety concerns which incorporated a feminist and gendered approach, these policies are not being fully implemented. There is no record of grievances being addressed through the implementation of such policies or formal mechanisms in the Sri Lankan media industry.

The findings highlight the need for authorities in workplaces, including the management, to take seriously safety issues impacting all women. This would indirectly boost protections guaranteed for all women journalists.

Furthermore, none of the current policy documents on safety address the concerns of regional and freelance journalists, which are two of the most vulnerable segments within the category of all women journalists. Elements such as the multiple factors of discrimination and associated safety risks should be taken into consideration in drafting safety manuals.

The scope of 'safety' needs to be expanded to encompass not just physical or psychological conditions but also factors such as financial security and job security. This would empower all women journalists to follow the required safety measures and mitigate risks involved in their professional engagements.

The proactive involvement of leadership and management in resolving their safety concerns is essential in creating a safe space for all women journalists. It is also important that women are not simply appointed to positions of authority but are granted credible levels of power, without restricting them on the basis of gendered roles and stereotypes, and to strengthen accountability mechanisms through the lived experiences of women.

Notes

- 1 ARTICLE 19 uses 'women' and 'men' to refer to all those individuals who identify themselves as such.
- 2 ARTICLE 19 uses a functional definition of journalists and communicators, as per the [UN Human Rights Committee General Comment 34](#): 'Journalism is a function shared by a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere'.
- 3 ARTICLE 19's [Global Expression Report](#) metric (the GxR metric) tracks freedom of expression across the world. In our 2022 report, 25 indicators were used to create an overall freedom of expression score for 161 countries, on a scale of 1–100, which places each country in an expression category.
- 4 Information obtained via telephone from the Government Information Department.
- 5 Industrial Disputes Act No. 43 of 1950 (as amended) (Sri Lanka), Section 31(b)(d).
- 6 de Alwis, M. and Jayawardena, K. (2001) *Casting Pearls: The Women's Franchise Movement in Sri Lanka*, Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.
- 7 We have not named the newspaper here, in order to preserve the anonymity of the individuals mentioned.



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