

BEHIND THE SCENES

A Look into the
Gendered Dimensions
of Sri Lankan Media

Media Empowerment for
a Democratic Sri Lanka
Program (MEND)

2023



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List of abbreviations

DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
EIGI	European Institute for Gender Equality
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GEM	Gender Equity in Media
GMMP	Global Media Monitoring Project
IFJ	International Federation of Journalists
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMS	International Media Support
IREX	International Research & Exchanges Board
IWMF	International Women's Media Foundation
KII	Key Informant Interview
LGBTIQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer
MEND	Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka
MGC	Media Gender Charter
SSI	Semi-Structured Interview
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USAID	<i>United States Agency for International Development</i>
WIN	Women in News
WMC	Women and Media Collective

Executive Summary

This study aims to address the lack of research on women in journalism in Sri Lanka by examining the relationship between gender, media, and the experiences of female journalists. It utilizes the findings of IREX's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Survey, which assesses gender equality within media organizations. The study's objectives include analyzing the survey findings and creating a guiding document for future gender work in the media industry.

The methodology involves using three tools to gather both quantitative and qualitative data from 12 media outlets in Sri Lanka. The study sample consists of professionals from print and digital media sectors, including journalists, production teams, administrative staff, and managers. The qualitative data includes insights from 156 participants and quantitative data from 86 respondents. The 12 media outlets are unnamed in this report to maintain the anonymity of the institutions and protect the privacy of the respondents who participated in the DEI process.

This study highlights several key observations regarding gender equality in media organizations. One major finding is the lack of comprehensive and accessible sexual harassment policies, as well as formal and confidential reporting mechanisms for incidents of harassment and misconduct in the workplace. The results stress the need for capacity building on gender sensitivity within media organizations and highlight a significant gap in female representation in top management positions within the media. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of gender-sensitive reporting, including the representation of women as experts and consultants, the avoidance of harmful stereotypes, and responsible reporting on sexual and gender-based violence.

This research on gender and media emphasizes the crucial role of media organizations in achieving gender equality. It calls for challenging traditional gender norms, promoting gender-transformative content, developing self-regulatory policies, and establishing monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track progress. By doing so, media can contribute to creating gender equality in content, workplace, management, and society as a whole.

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Introduction

The media not only reports on current events, analyzes trends, and provides entertainment, it also perpetuates cultural conventions, provides a framework for interpretation, and mobilizes individuals around a variety of issues. As such, it has the power to play a significant role in promoting gender equality.

Media today, from print to electronic to digital media, has a major role in shaping our perceptions and beliefs about the role of girls and women in society. These gender portrayals, which are often susceptible to traditional norms and harmful stereotypes, influence what society expects from people based on their gender, and what people expect of themselves.

Through a six-year partnership with USAID, IREX's Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka (MEND) program has worked to improve citizens' demand for, and access to, balanced, reliable, and objective news and information in Sri Lanka.

The Media Gender Charter for Sri Lanka was launched in 2021 after consultations with over 200 journalists, 21 media institutions, 20 gender experts, gender-based civil society members, academia, and 14 media associations and unions.

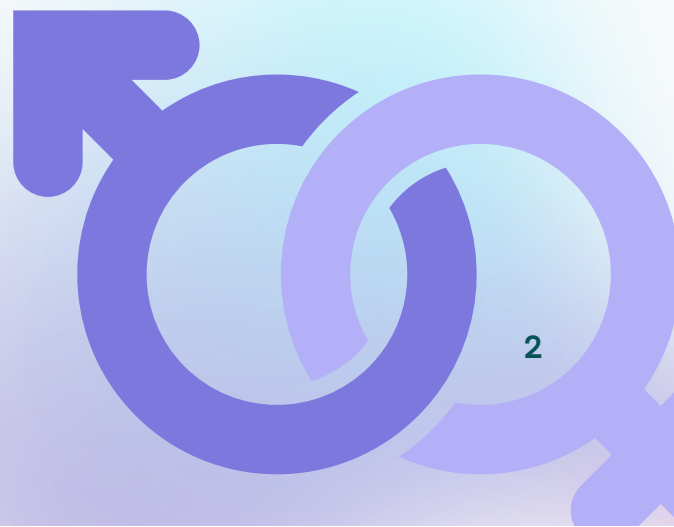
The Media Gender Charter establishes minimum standards, principles, and actions needed to underpin gender equality in Sri

Lankan media and outlines practical actions to support gender equality in media workplaces, journalists' organizations, and the media itself.

Following the launch of the Media Gender Charter, MEND began to implement its GEM program, designed to make the charter a roadmap for action among media outlets in Sri Lanka.

In 2021, the team developed a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) survey to pinpoint gaps in media outlets' gender policies and practices, after which MEND provided training and assistance to address any deficiencies identified.

Our program believes in the transformative role media can play in achieving gender equality in societies by challenging sociocultural norms and attitudes regarding gender, both in media content and in the media houses themselves. We hope this study, which reflects our learnings on gender and media through our GEM program, will help contribute to creating and sustaining gender equality in content, workplace, and management.



Background

In Sri Lanka, the media gender landscape does not differ greatly from global norms, as documented by international bodies over the past decade.

In 2015, the country report titled 'Media and Gender in Sri Lanka,' a part of the Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific Research Project conducted by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), clearly emphasized the lack of gender inclusivity and equity in Sri Lankan media. The report highlighted that despite some exceptional women at the executive and senior executive levels, decision-making roles in the Sri Lankan media are still dominated by men (IFJ, 2015).

More than half of eligible respondents (58.92%) said women were present at the executive level in their organizations. But when asked about the composition of the top-level management in their workplace (including board, executives, chief financial officer, general manager etc.), more than half of those who answered this question (57.69%) said that women comprised fewer than 10 per cent of these positions. At a senior editorial level (director, editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive producer, bureau chief, photographic editor, digital editor), 55.1% of respondents

said women made up fewer than 10% of these positions in their organizations. Only 8.16% placed the percentage of women above 50%.

The journalists from whom qualitative data was obtained for the country report stated that "besides an inherent gender bias, women's talent is not nurtured, nor are they pushed towards assuming leadership roles" and "men are likely to feel that way because systems are created and maintained by men, in a way that facilitates their career progress; women have to work twice as hard to prove their professional worth."

The IFJ also found that in Sri Lanka women were more strongly represented in feature writing and men were more strongly represented as columnists. Furthermore, 60% of total survey respondents said that they were given the opportunity to choose their subject areas. However, more men had this opportunity (75%) compared with just 49% of women. Women journalists primarily covered topics such as gender, human rights, the environment, arts and culture, and rarely covered sports and law. On the other hand, the most popular subject areas for men were politics, investigative reporting, human rights, and education. IFJ noted that the above data reflects that women, whether or not they freely choose their subject areas, were confined mainly to areas considered 'soft' news or traditionally assigned to women journalists.

The situation has not improved noticeably since then.

A 2017 study shows that Sri Lankan media continue to perpetuate sensationalism and gender stereotypes, breaching international and local standards of ethical reporting, which results in victim-blaming in reporting incidents of gender-based violence. In doing so, journalists ignore their social responsibility for delivering accurate information that could help prevent gender-based violence and related crimes in the future (Abeywardana, 2017).

In 2021, a #MeToo movement was launched on Twitter by women journalists in Sri Lanka who had experienced harassment in the workplace. Women journalists shared their experiences through an online outpouring, revealing the prevalence of salacious remarks, body shaming, unwanted physical advances, unwelcome expressions, rape threats, and various other forms of abuse in newsrooms.

The majority of the perpetrators of these incidents were their seniors and bosses, which indicates a similar trend to global findings. However, the Ministry of Mass Media dismissed the issue, saying that the government would not recognize complaints of sexual harassment made on social media platforms (IFJ, 2021).

The existing literature on the gender landscape of the media industry in Sri Lanka shows that women are still largely non-existent in decision-making roles and continue to face glass ceilings and reinforced stereotypes that affect their autonomy, safety, and progress in their careers.

Nevertheless, there is a need to understand these challenges at a deeper level through research, followed by policy changes to ensure the fair and equal treatment of women in the media sector of Sri Lanka.



Objectives

There is a troubling lack of research related to women in journalism in Sri Lanka. This study aims to address this dearth of quantitative and qualitative data by examining the complex interplay between gender, media, and the experiences of female journalists in Sri Lanka.

The study highlights the challenges and opportunities for gender equality in journalism and provides insights into the strategies needed to empower and support female journalists in their professional endeavours. It draws on the findings of the research conducted by IREX with twelve media outlets across Sri Lanka to provide more insight into the practical realities within media organizations for women journalists and areas to be taken into consideration to make the media landscape more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable.

As such, the primary objectives of this study are to:

- Draw on the findings of IREX's DEI Survey.
- Produce quantitative and qualitative research around gender in the media in Sri Lanka.
- Develop a guiding document for future gender work with local media.

Methodology

IREX's DEI survey was the first of its kind, designed to identify the gaps within media outlets in Sri Lanka in relation to gender equality. Using a series of tools that were developed in English, Tamil and Sinhala, the DEI Survey works with the institutions in a confidential

process to gauge the effectiveness of their current policies and practices, in line with the Media Gender Charter's (MGC) objectives. It covered the four main areas of concern identified by the MGC: Policy, Staffing, Organizational Culture, and Media Content.

Semi-Structured Interviews (SSI)

The SSI is an online form consisting of 24 questions, administered to all staff of the participating institution. A minimum response rate of 80% is required for the SSI to be considered valid.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD)

A series of focus group discussions are conducted with a cross-section of employees divided according to gender (female and male) and job roles (editorial and administration) to gain greater insight into attitudes, perceptions, and issues surrounding the areas examined under the DEI Survey.

Key Informant Interviews (KII)

The objective of these interviews is to understand the perception of individuals from senior management regarding the level of gender sensitivity within the institution. Interviews are conducted with members from the senior management and directorial levels (e.g., Chairperson, Managing Director etc.)

The qualitative data collected from the twelve media outlets through focus group discussions and key informant interviews over the course of two years was examined by utilizing the thematic analysis method to identify repetitive patterns and recurring themes in the data. Based on the learnings from the individual media outlets, the researchers used a deductive approach to examine whether the key

themes which emerged from each outlet were reflected among their peer organizations. A six-step process which included: familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and writing up was adopted to review the qualitative data through the thematic analysis method.

Quantitative data was also collected from twelve media outlets through an online questionnaire (SSI). The minimum acceptable respondent rate was 80% for each media outlet. A pilot phase was initiated with four media outlets during the first period of data collection, following which the SSI questionnaire was revised extensively for clarity and feasibility. This pilot sample was excluded from the analysis of this report to improve the accuracy of the findings since the questions and survey structure varied widely. The researchers prepared a data-cleaning plan prior to the analysis. The questionnaire was designed in the form of nominal, ordinal, and interval scale variables to make it suitable for both descriptive and inferential analysis. Once the data was cleaned, the researchers calculated descriptive statistics to summarize the distribution and variability of the data. At certain points, the correlation was tested to identify the relationships and triangulated with qualitative findings to provide the conclusions.

Sample

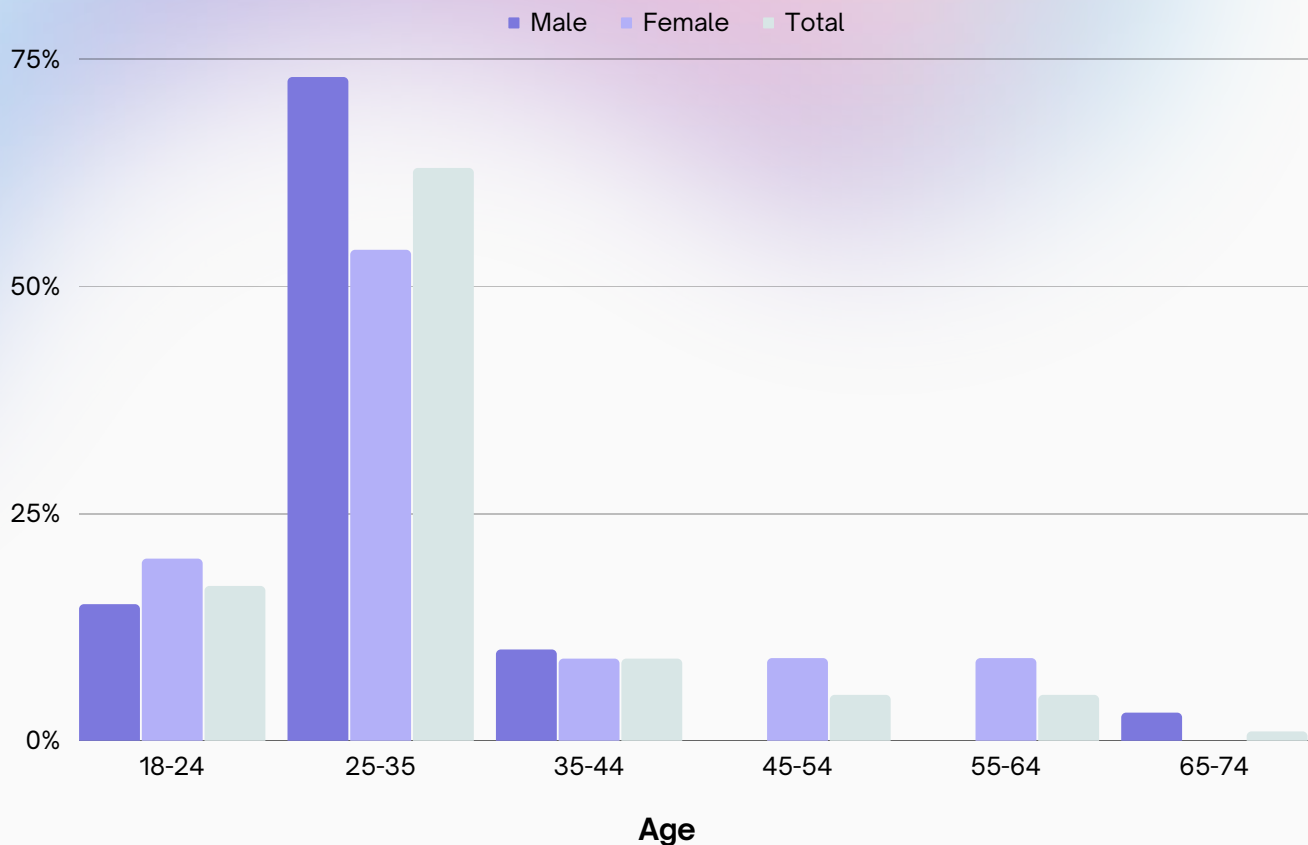
The sample of this study consists of various professionals from the print and digital media sectors who participated in the DEI survey conducted by IREX with 12 media outlets in Sri Lanka.

The survey was implemented across a wide range of media publications including mainstream print publications, niche digital media platforms and news websites. The study was not limited to journalists but also studied the responses and experiences of members from the print and digital production teams, administrative staff, and individuals in managerial and executive positions.

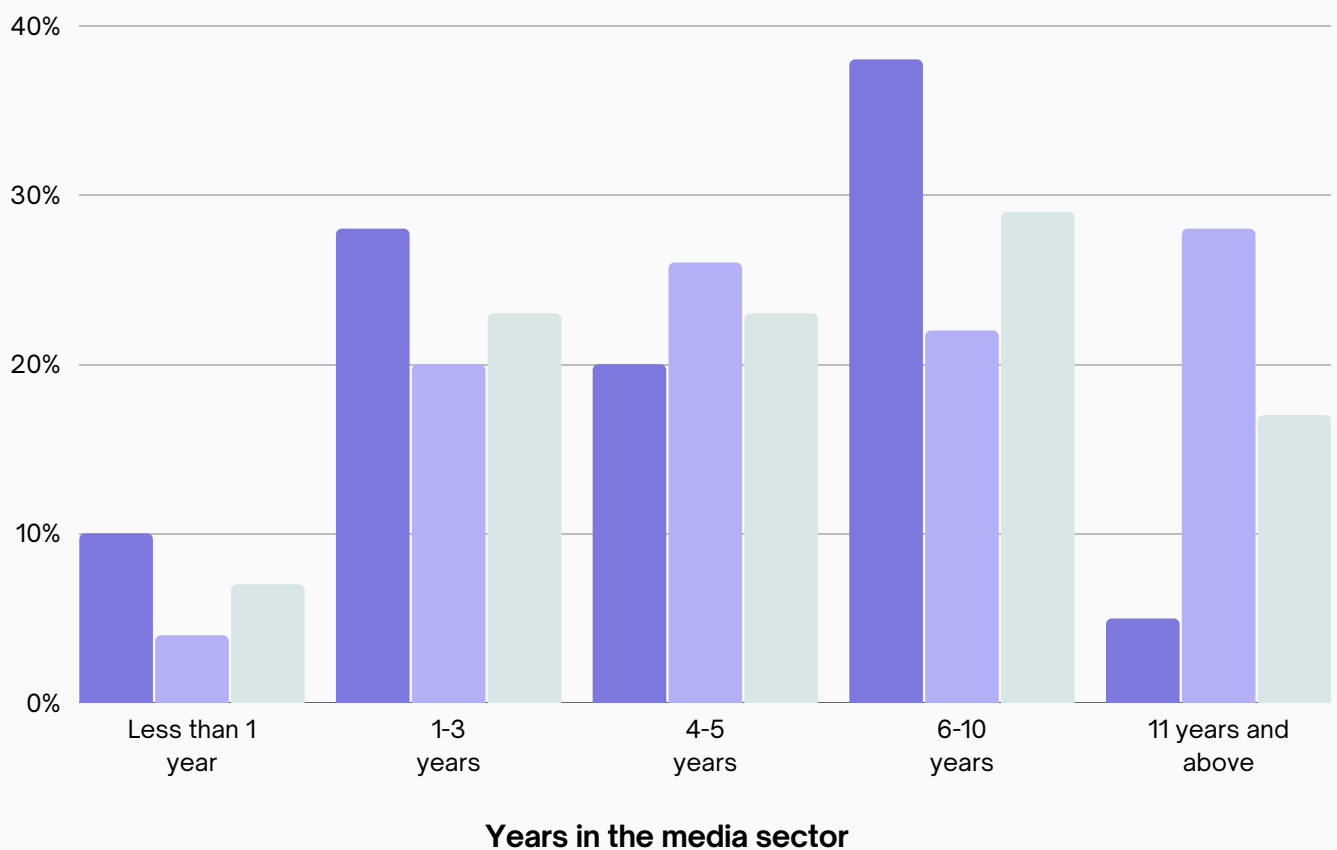
The DEI process utilized three different samples for the three tools described in the above methodology.

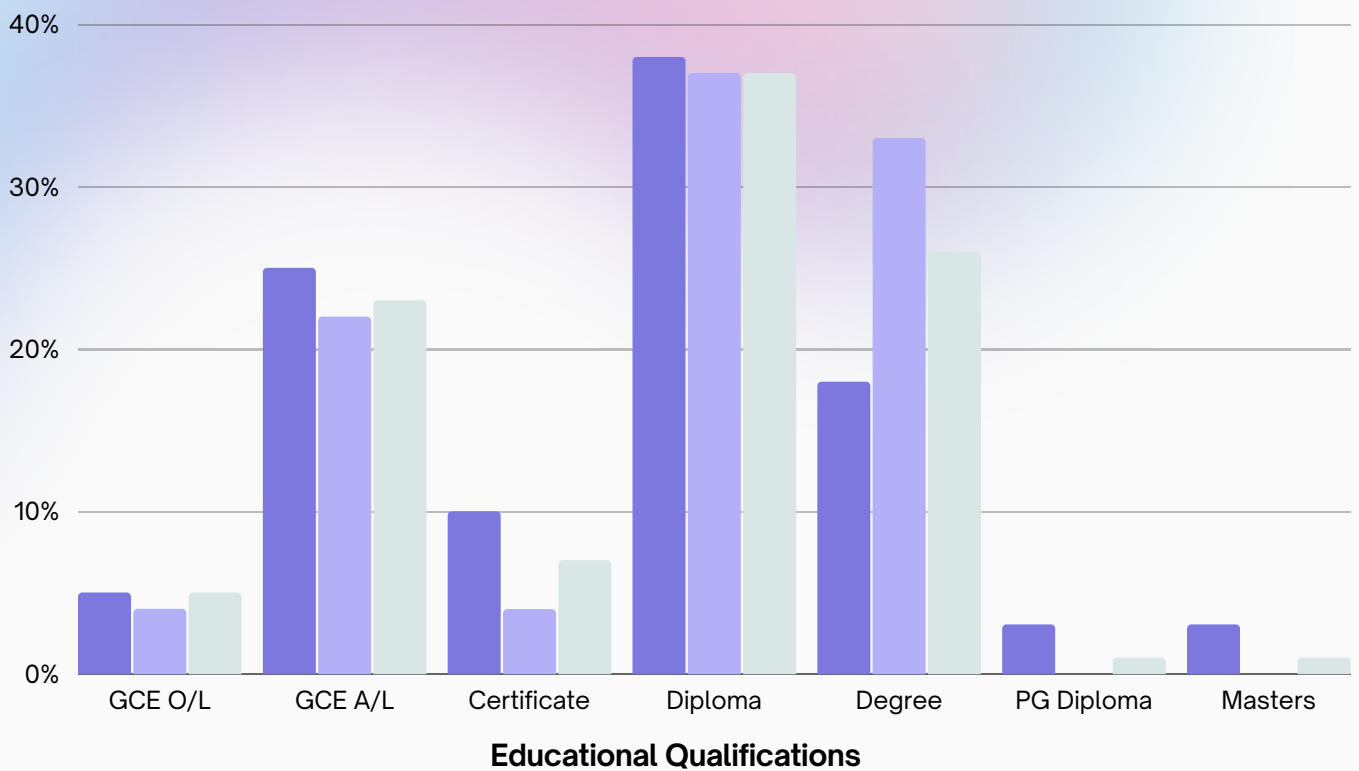
The qualitative data used in this study was gathered through multiple focus group discussions with 120 participants from 12 media outlets, among which 58 were men and 62 were women. In-depth qualitative data was also obtained through 36 key informant interviews conducted with 25 men and 11 women in senior management positions from 12 media outlets.

Out of the 12 media outlets, the quantitative data collected for this study was gathered from findings obtained through seven different media outlets. The quantitative data gathered from the four media outlets during the first phase of the DEI survey is not included in this study since significant changes were made to our methodology and the SSI tool based on our learnings from the first phase. Moreover, the SSI questionnaire was not administered in one media outlet as the sample size was too small for inferential analysis. The total sample for this quantitative analysis was 86 respondents across seven media outlets, among whom 40 were female and 46 were male.



The quantitative data from the seven media outlets showed that the majority of our participants (63%), including 73% of women who completed our SSI tool, were between the ages of 25 and 34. Only 11% of the respondents were over the age of 45.





The sample also has diverse media experience and educational qualifications. Even though the majority of the participants were under the age of 35, 70% had more than four years of media experience. Moreover, while 28% of male participants had worked in the media sector for 11 years or more, only 5% of the female respondents seemed to have a decade-long media experience. In terms of educational qualifications, out of all participants, 28% had obtained secondary-level education, while 37% had a diploma qualification and 26% had an undergraduate degree on various fields of study.

Limitations

Since the SSI tool was revised after the first phase of the DEI process, the quantitative data obtained from four media outlets could not be included in the overall analysis. Furthermore, the media outlets studied during this process, even though they had nationwide readership and reach, were primarily restricted to Colombo-based outlets, except for one

publication from the Northern Province. As such, the study was unable to examine the practice and portrayal of gender in the media among regional publications.

The findings of this study were extrapolated by examining the quantitative and qualitative data obtained through the DEI surveys conducted among 12 diverse media outlets in Sri Lanka. These media outlets varied in terms of various demographic factors including size, age, reach, language, and content style. Even though the findings of this study paint an overview of the gender dimensions of Sri Lankan media, it must be noted that each media outlet studied during the DEI process had its own individual limitations and organization-specific barriers to gender equality within the outlet. The unique gender norms and specific gendered challenges of these individual organizations are not captured in this study as case studies to maintain the anonymity of the media outlets and protect the privacy of the respondents who participated in the DEI process.

Findings and Discussion



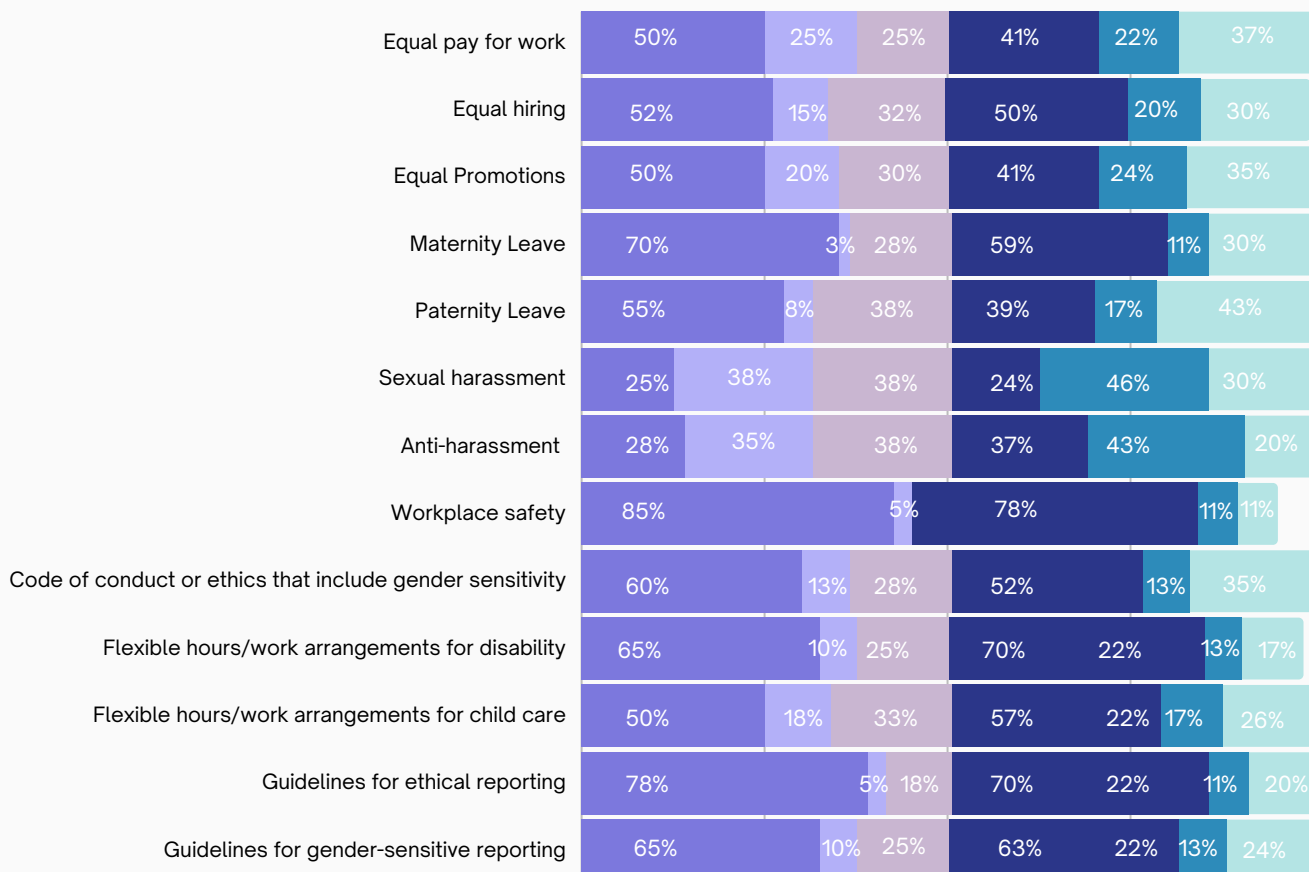
Harassment and Inequality in the Media

The threats to women journalists in Sri Lanka are two-fold: they are vulnerable to the dangers all journalists face (e.g.: imprisonment, censorship, digital attacks) and they are being targeted for the simple fact that they are women taking on a public role. Sexual harassment and gender inequality in the workplace are additional stresses women must contend with as journalists.



Policy Awareness

Female Yes Female No Female Not Aware Male Yes Male No Male Not Aware



More than 75% of the respondents to the survey claimed that their media organization has no formal policies and guidelines regarding workplace safety and ethical reporting. This claim was supported by the focus group discussions where participants from various organizations stated that they are informally briefed, often during employee orientations and staff meetings, about threats and risks associated with field reporting. Participants also mentioned that such briefings were more common during the mass protests in early 2022. Even though more than 70% of men and women claimed their organization follows ethical reporting guidelines, our qualitative findings reveal that this awareness is quite informal and heavily reliant on peer support and supervisor advice, rather than on a formal document on media ethics that journalists are expected to follow and adhere to in their everyday reporting practices.

A study sponsored by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) looked at a mix of print and electronic news companies from across the world where researchers in 59 countries collected data by interviewing representatives from 522 companies. The IWMF report showed that the situation in Sri Lanka is inconsistent with the global standards: even though it was conducted over a decade ago, the IWMF study showed that, globally, more than half of the surveyed companies had formal and established company-wide policies on gender equity (IWMF, 2011). Sri Lanka, therefore, lags behind in this area.

Both male and female respondents said that their organization had policies concerning equal pay, equal hiring, equal

promotions, and flexible hours for childcare. Both female respondents (70%) and male respondents (59%) also claimed that their employers had policies on maternity leave; however, the same could not be said for paternity leave.

The majority of senior management officials in the DEI process, when discussing equal opportunities for men and women in the workplace, stated that they adopt an 'unbiased approach' where employees are treated based on skills and competence regardless of their gender identity. Some senior management officials from media outlets also used this 'neutral' approach as justification for not adopting policies on gender equality, since the organization followed 'basic labour rules that applied to all individuals.

This management style fails to see gender as a key contributor that impacts workplace dynamics, and that the experiences of employees are influenced by existing inequalities associated with their gender identities. This stance, however, is not limited to Sri Lankan media. A report by the European Institute for Gender Equality explains that the low level of policy adoption in the media sector often reflects a "gender-neutral" approach – where the media intend to operate on the basis of merit and do not feel it is necessary to do anything which advantages women.

In other instances, media outlets adopt a "gender-blind" approach – where media outlets argue that they do not have a problem with discrimination and fail to understand the barriers facing women in the sector (EIGE, 2013).

The lowest-scoring area in the policy section of the SSI survey was regarding anti-harassment and sexual harassment in the workplace. Only one-quarter of the male and female samples claimed that their organization has sexual harassment policies, which meant that 75% of staff believed their media outlets did not have policies regarding harassment and misconduct.

Global research suggests that developing and adopting a comprehensive policy on the prevention of sexual harassment is one of the key actions in preventing sexual harassment and promoting a safe working environment. A guide developed in India by the International Labor Organization (ILO, 2013) stated that the aim of such a policy should be to change the behaviour and attitudes of both women and men in the workplace and to provide a workplace environment conducive to both. This guide mentioned that a comprehensive policy on sexual harassment should include: a clear organizational statement on sexual harassment; key definitions and examples; reference to relevant legislation; consequences in case of breach of policy; responsibilities of management and available mechanisms for reporting and redressal (ILO, 2013).

It must be noted, however, that during the qualitative data gathering, it was found that the majority of these 12 media outlets did not have formal policies on any of the above sections. Thus, when respondents claimed that their organizations had policies, they were primarily referring to informal understandings and ad hoc codes of conduct established within the organization. Among the organizations that

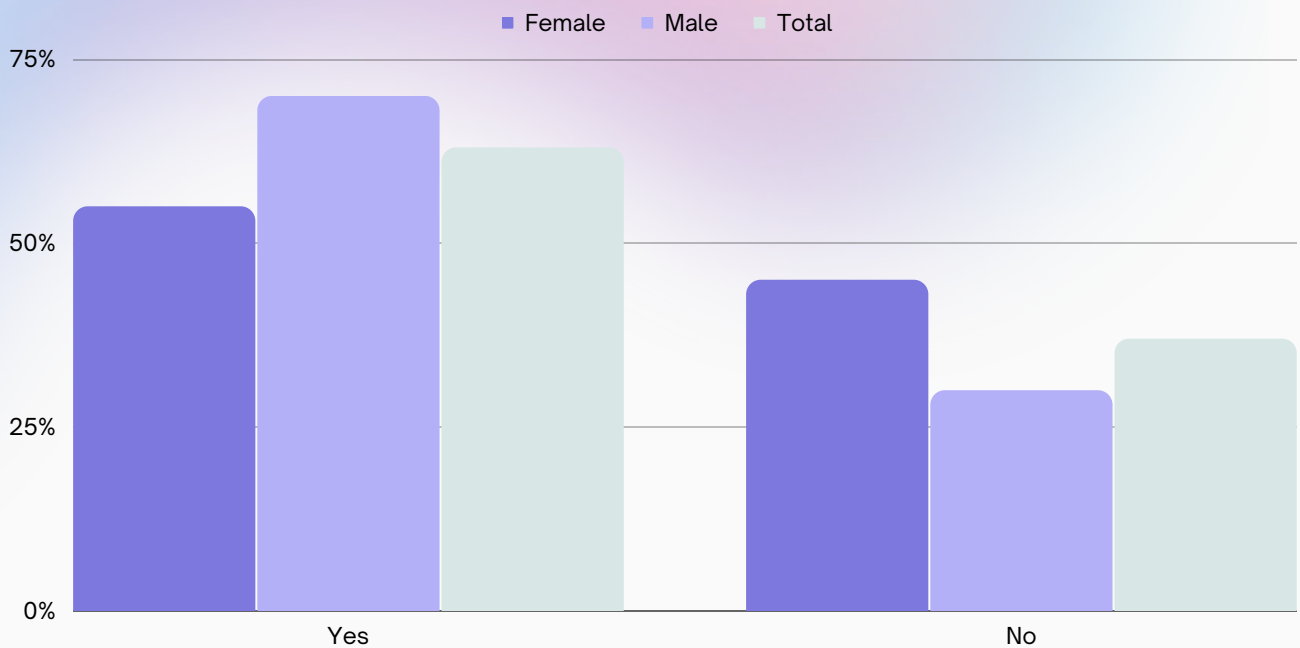
actually had policies on harassment and workplace conduct, the employees did not seem to be aware of the contents of the policy or even where to access it.

Some organizations felt that their policy documents, especially those on harassment and ethical reporting, needed to be updated to meet the current realities of the media sector.

Furthermore, among organizations that had comprehensive policies on sexual harassment, there were issues in accessing these policies – especially in organizations where the policy was not available in the local languages.

We don't allow women to work night shifts because we tell them it's unsafe or unsuitable. But during the election period, when we need more manpower, we ask them to stay back and work at night. It's quite hypocritical.

A senior management official
of a print publication.



Are you aware of internal procedures within your organization for making a complaint?

It was an extensive document. And, it was in English. There was no Tamil translation. Not even a summary.

I understood some things, but not all of them—especially all the new terms. So, I just glanced through it.

A female journalist of a digital publication.

A guide on sexual harassment in the media developed by Women in News suggests that sexual harassment policies in media organizations must be a written document that should be present in plain and user-friendly language. The guide also states that educating and sensitizing managers and senior staff about sexual harassment at work, especially through workshops and training, is a crucial step in tackling the problem. Other than conducting workshops and awareness sessions for employees, the guide also recommends that media organizations display visual materials and aids in communal spaces and include a sexual harassment clause in employee contracts (Women in News, 2018).

The awareness of the respondents regarding internal procedures for making complaints about sexual harassment varied slightly among males and females. While 70% of men claimed to be aware of the internal procedure to make a complaint, only 55% of the women claimed the same.

There is ample research evidence to suggest that the existence of a sexual harassment policy itself is futile unless the necessary actions are taken to ensure the accessibility and dissemination of said policy.

Employee awareness of reporting mechanisms, as well as the cost and impact of sexual harassment in the workplace, is crucial since global studies show that even though 41% of women media professionals have experienced sexual harassment of some kind in the workplace, only one in five women reported the incident (Women in News, 2022).

Our qualitative data revealed that in a majority of the media outlets, especially media outlets that were small in size and operation, the respondents were referring to informal internal procedures which mostly involved making a complaint to their direct supervisor or manager about the incident.

Research on sexual harassment in the workplace shows that relying on a purely personal process—which can be prone to the cognitive biases of decision-makers—instead of a policy-based approach can often result in minimization or the failure to accord the complaint the necessary importance. For example, organizational representatives could encourage the employee to drop the complaint or could respond that the complaint is not serious enough to warrant an investigation (Siuta & Bergman, 2019). Thus, having a dedicated sexual harassment policy is crucial to ensure that incidents of sexual harassment are reported, documented, and dealt with ethically and efficiently.

Several female employees also noted that in instances where complaints about sexual harassment had been made, the management often mediated between the complainant and the accused, and there

was no real action taken afterwards. Some employees believed that accountability, especially actions such as suspensions and dismissals, were just not realistic in media outlets with small teams, where tight deadlines and meeting daily targets were often a bigger priority.

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We can complain. We're allowed to complain. That's good. But, their solutions are not great.

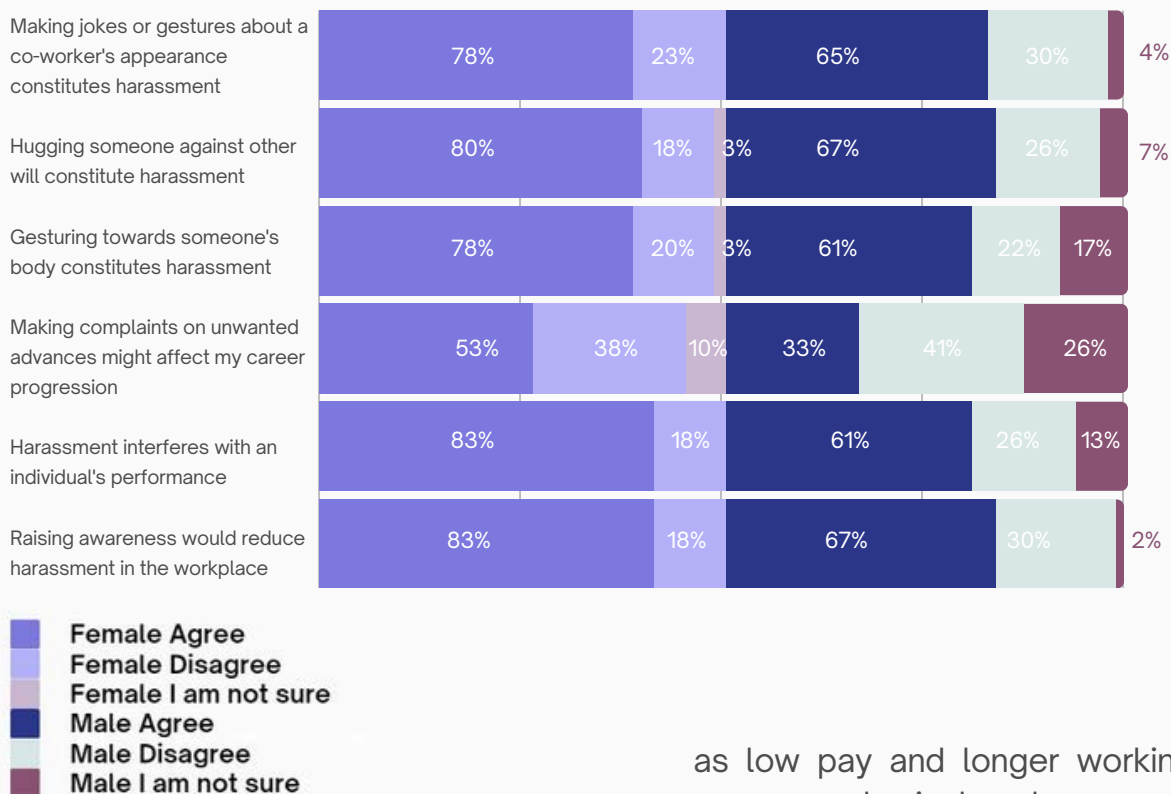
There is an inquiry. But, there is no punishment – no suspension or transfer. They only inquire about what happened and try to settle it between us.

A female journalist
of a print publication.

”

A survey by the International Federation of Journalists with 400 journalists from over 50 countries found that nearly half the female journalists had been subjected to gender-based violence - including sexual harassment, psychological abuse, internet trolls, and other forms. Of the perpetrators, 45% were people outside the workplace - sources, politicians, readers, or listeners, while 38% were bosses or supervisors. Moreover, 85% of female journalists claimed that little or no action had been taken against perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace (IFJ, 2017).

Harassment



The analysis of the awareness levels of the employees of various forms of sexual harassment and its impact in the workplace revealed that the male staff was comparatively less aware than the women. For instance, while 83% of women believed that harassment interferes with an individual's performance, only 61% of men believed the same. The data also revealed that the respondents were not entirely aware of the real-life consequences of sexual harassment in the workplace since only 53% of women and 33% of men believed that making complaints about unwanted sexual advances could affect career progression.

A study by International Media Support shows that women journalists in nine countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America face common challenges in the workplace, ranging from gender-based unequal opportunities, such

as low pay and longer working hours to severe physical abuse and online harassment. The study reveals that women often remain silent due to social stigma and shame, mostly because the perpetrators are often colleagues and superiors. The study emphasizes the impact of gendered harassment in the media - which leads women to abandon their careers in journalism and also causes self-censoring and psychological, or even physical harm (IMS, 2019).

This was, however, reflected in the qualitative findings from a few media outlets where the female journalists shared that there is sometimes a hesitancy in the management and the editorial teams, sometimes even from their own family members, to send female journalists for field work due to concerns about safety and harassment. Female journalists felt that this was unfair, since these reservations, whether valid or not, prevented them from gaining exposure and experience in the media sector.

Even though media organizations did not speak much of sexual harassment within the workplace, employees – especially the female staff – spoke of regular incidents of verbal harassment and the tendency among male colleagues to make unnecessary comments about one's attire and appearance. Furthermore, during qualitative discussions, many journalists also brought up concerns about online harassment, especially when publishing content about socio-political issues. It was particularly concerning to note that the majority of these journalists did not have the adequate digital literacy to handle complaints of this nature on their own, nor were they provided any sort of digital safety training by their news outlet.

“

People take everything personally online. There is so much retaliation from readers. We don't read most of them because our admins delete these comments and ask us not to look at them.

A female journalist
of a digital publication.

”

“

I'm not clear if people are scared to send women to the field or if they actually believe that women can't handle the job.

A female journalist
of a print publication.

”

According to a UNESCO global survey, 73% of women journalists have experienced online violence in the course of their work, including threats of physical and sexual violence, along with digital security attacks; 41% of women journalists also said they had been targeted in online attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns, which are specifically targeted to discredit female journalists and their work (UNESCO, 2020).

73%

have
experienced
online violence
in the course of
their work

41%

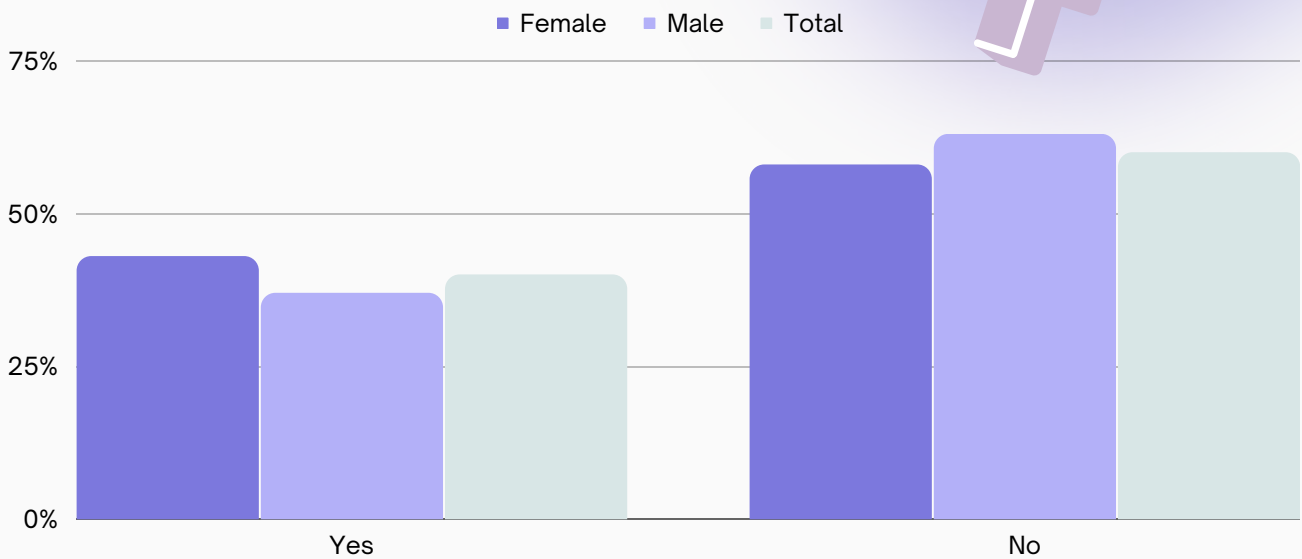
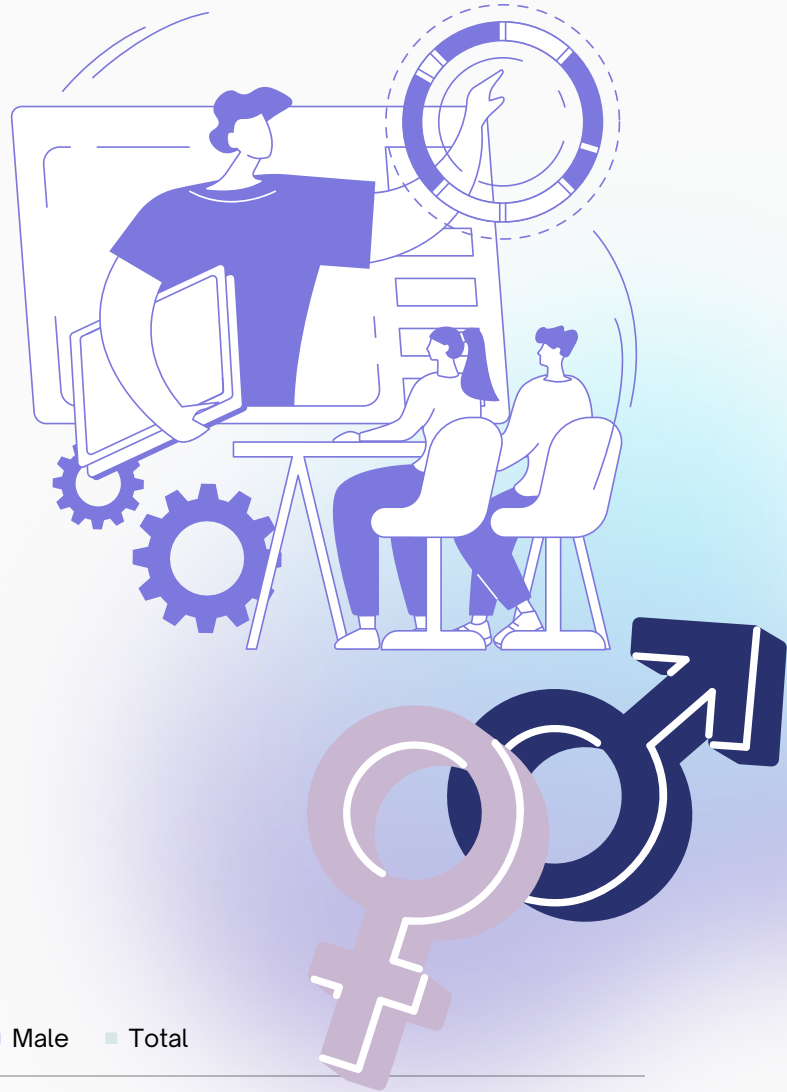
have been
targetted in
online attacks
linked to
disinformation

UNESCO, 2020



Representation and Opportunities in the Media

The absence of women's voices within a media organization means that women's knowledge, experience, and perspectives are not adequately reflected in media content. Women's stories have been considerably underrepresented in the news over the past few decades, and having women in leadership roles in the media can positively impact content by reflecting women's needs, and perspectives, and providing role models for women and girls.



Have you participated in any gender awareness / sensitivity related workshop training?

Both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that employees of media outlets had ample opportunities to participate in various soft skill and capacity-building training and workshops organized either internally or externally. But despite these opportunities, only 40% of the respondents stated that they have taken part in gender-awareness training.

Even though many outlets and management structures did not consider this to be an immediate priority, research suggests otherwise. The UNESCO framework to foster gender equality in media organizations lays out several key objectives, among which are: the adoption of policies, promotion of initiatives to encourage gender-conscious journalists and other technical personnel,

Improvement of access to education and training on gender-related issues (UNESCO, 2012).



We have to remember most of our content is generated by freelancers. They are not full-time writers. They are young people with limited media experience. So, training and awareness are crucial. We need to develop their skills if we want to improve our quality.

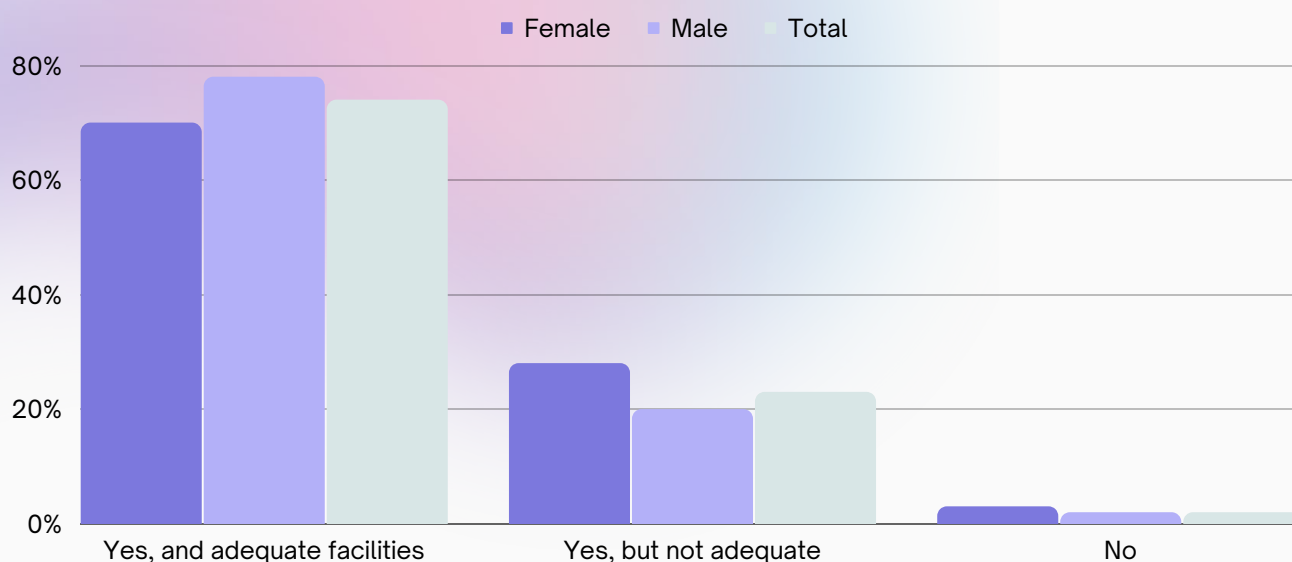
A senior management official
of a digital publication.



The qualitative data revealed that training on gender sensitivity, and media ethics in general, is imperative for journalists – especially since, as indicated in the demographical data of this study, many of the journalists working in print and digital media organizations are young and do not possess any formal educational qualifications on media or journalism.

Our qualitative findings also revealed that these gender trainings were not provided internally, but were external opportunities, often provided by civil society organizations, which were sought out by the journalists. Some employees, especially journalists, also noted that training opportunities created and facilitated for journalists need to be more flexible and accessible.





Statement: There are separate bathrooms for men and women

A best-practices guide created by the European Institute for Gender Equality recommends that training activities should be targeted at media professionals in general, but should also include more

specific sub-sectors, such as current or aspiring journalists, experienced female journalists aiming to move higher up in their career, and female managers in the industry (EIGE, 2014).

“

I think we really need more flexible learning opportunities for journalists. We work a 9-5 job. We travel for work. We hardly have time for ourselves, let alone to study or learn. But, learning is important for our improvement. There are many skills we need to learn. So, we need flexible opportunities, such as self-learning online courses for journalists.

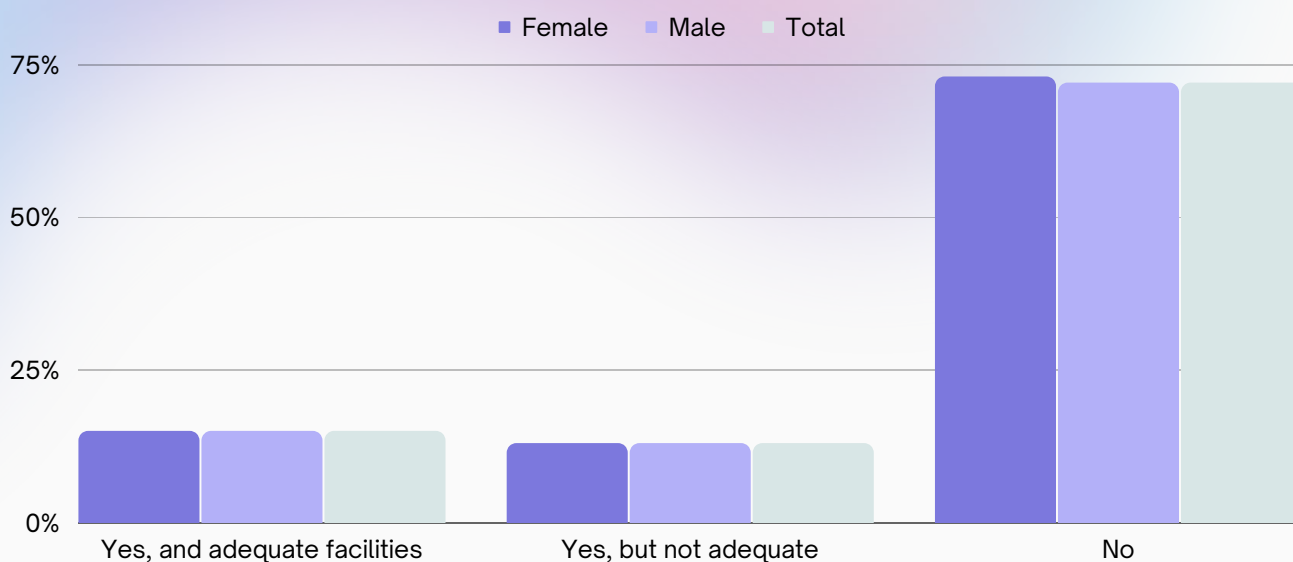
Male journalist of a print publication.

“

Not all of us can attend these trainings at the same time. There is a lot of work to do, and we have a very small staff. So, we only send the people who need the training the most.

A female journalist of a print publication.

”



Statement: There are facilities for breastfeeding or pumping

Although 74% of the respondents shared that their media outlet has separate and adequate bathroom facilities for men and women, 72% of them also said that their organization does not provide adequate facilities for breastfeeding or pumping. Our qualitative findings also noted that some media outlets did not have clear procedures on maternity leave. This was more common among smaller media outlets where the management claimed the need to develop them has not come up so far.



“

***We don't have any policies
on maternity leave.
So far, none of our staff
have gotten pregnant***

A senior management
official of a digital
publication.

”

“

We see more boys working in the production department. Boys are more interested in this field. It's in their nature. If you take the Sri Lankan film industry, you see that production is mostly handled by men. Girls dislike working in the production department.

A male employee
of a digital publication.

”

These gender norms and stereotypes also impact fair gender representation in the media. Women are often portrayed as victims, identified mainly by family status, and underrepresented in news headlines and as spokespersons or experts.

According to the Global Media Monitoring Project, in 1995, just 17% of news sources — people seen, heard, or read about in print and broadcast news media across 71 countries — were female.

A quarter century later, in 2020, this representation had only increased to 25%. In other words, across the 116 countries monitored and 30,172 news stories analyzed, women were consulted as experts in only one out of four.

IData from 2020 also shows that women are more likely to appear in the news as ‘personal experience providers’ and ‘popular opinion givers’ rather than experts and sources. Even though women are most visible in news on social, legal, science and health-related topics, these issues occupy only a small amount of the overall news space. Women were least present in political and economic news, topics that command greater broadcast airtime and print news space (GMMP, 2020).

Qualitative discussions also took place about women and leadership in the media sector. Participants spoke about the various reasons given for women to be excluded from leadership positions in the media. Many participants, regardless of their gender identity, felt that climbing the ladder is more challenging for women as they have more domestic responsibilities to fulfil – which they believe is not always the case for men.

“

I think some women push through these boundaries and climb up the ladder. But, some women drop out of the race. It's too much for some people; especially women who don't have a support system to manage their family.

A female employee of a
digital publication.

”

“

A tube light cannot shine if you hang it in multiple places. It has a limited capacity. In the same way – when women are expected to work above their capacity, they will not be able to do a good job.

A male employee of
of a print publication.

”



The situation, globally, is not appreciably different. Despite making up half of the world's population, women comprise only 26% of media leadership positions (Kassova, 2020). According to research by Reuters Institute, only 21% of the 179 top editors across the 240 brands covered are women, despite the fact that, on average, 40% of journalists in the 12 markets are women (Eddy et al., 2022).

This gap in leadership must be addressed and closed, especially since the present study found ample evidence that there are multiple social and structural barriers that prevent women in media from accessing and maintaining leadership positions in the sector. Local research reveals that this challenge of women facing more obstacles in career progression than men is not restricted to the media sector.

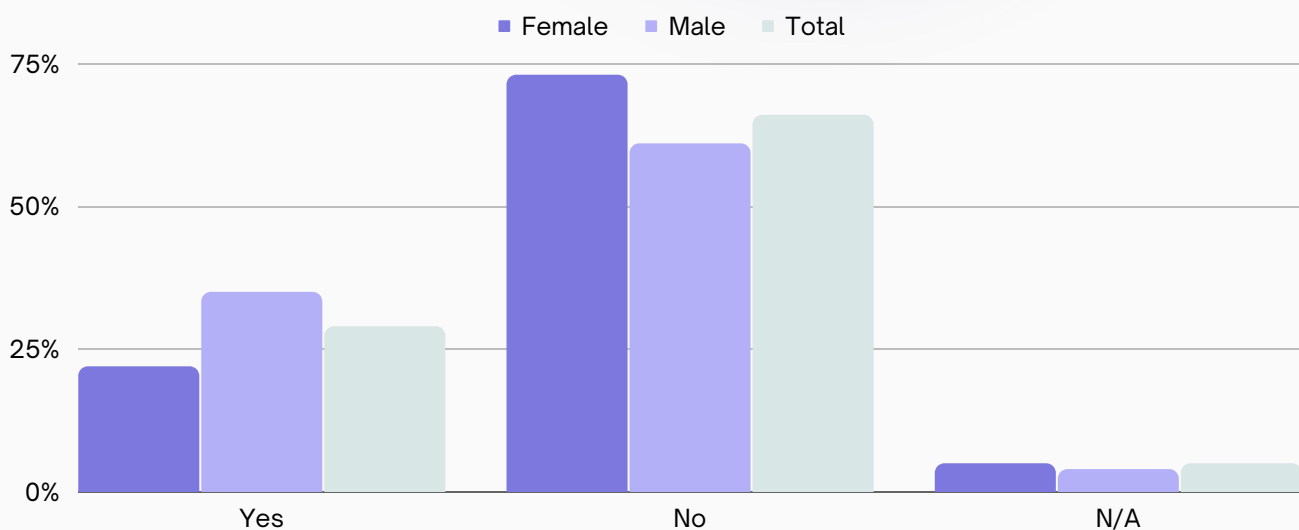
A study by the International Labor Organization on factors that affect women's labour force participation noted a

‘double jeopardy’ for women workers in Sri Lanka. Women workers were not considered for promotion even where they had the required experience and educational qualifications due to a perceived lack of certain personality traits considered desirable. Other factors such as more than one pregnancy, and inability or unwillingness to participate in the organizations’ social activities due to family responsibilities, also played a part in women not progressing on the career path (ILO, 2016). Thus, it is important for media organizations to be mindful of these systemic and inherent struggles within our society – especially by having conversations with female employees to identify, acknowledge and combat these barriers to career progression.



Ethics and Sensitivity in the Media

Gender sensitivity and media ethics are crucial when reporting on various forms of gender-based violence – especially by eliminating the trivialization, commodification and sexualization of women in the media. This includes ensuring that reporting is part of the solution to violence against women and that it does not cause new or additional harm to survivors or reinforce attitudes and behaviours that can support violence.



Have you participated in any workshops / trainings on gender sensitive reporting?



We don't really have a policy. We didn't get any training about gender-sensitive language either. But, we know. We know there are words we shouldn't use. We see them in other publications.

A female journalist of
of a print publication.

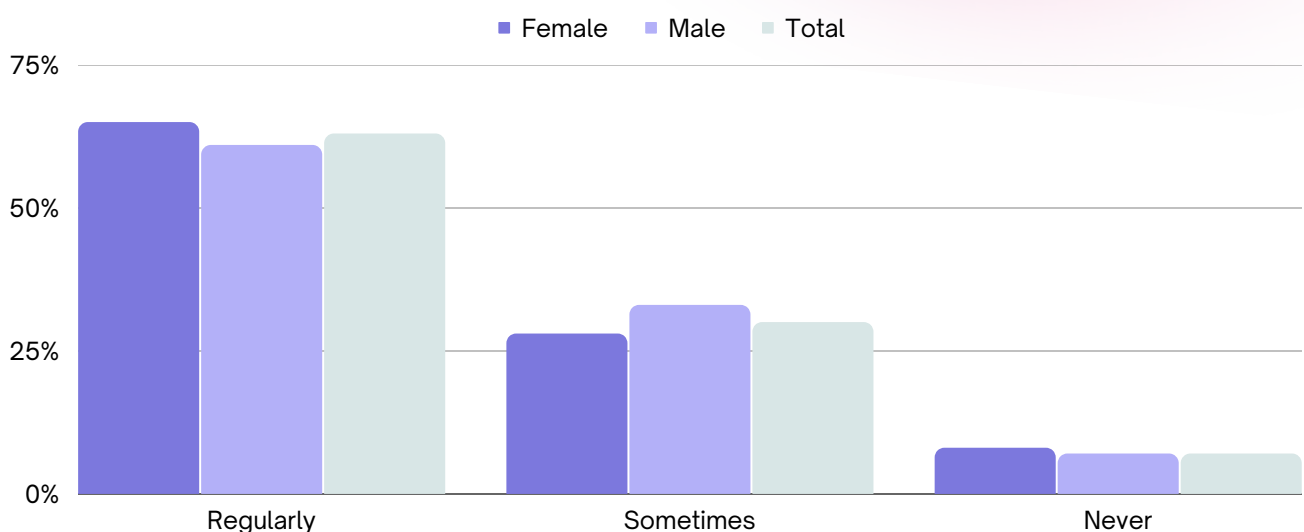


In all, 66% of the respondents stated that they have not participated in any workshops or training on gender-sensitive reporting — despite most of these organizations regularly reporting on incidents of gender-based violence. Even though over 60% of men and women previously claimed that their organization has a policy on gender-sensitive reporting, our qualitative data revealed that the employees were, once again, referring to informal practices rather than written policy documents.

Gender-sensitive reporting in Sri Lanka is necessary to combat gender biases and promote a more equitable representation of women and men. As such, efforts should be made to address these imbalances and promote non-stereotypical portrayals of women across all sectors. For instance, the media often presents negative and minimizing images of women parliamentarians, contributing to their exclusion from the political sphere.

A global study by the Inter-Parliamentary Union on violence against female parliamentarians, which reviewed information gathered on 55 women MPs from 39 countries, found that the media perpetuates rumours and misogynistic behaviour. Out of the women parliamentarians surveyed, 27.3% said that traditional media had shared highly contemptuous or sexually charged images or comments about them. The percentage rose to 41.8% when respondents were asked about photos or comments disseminated through social media (IPU, 2016).

Focus group participants also highlighted the expectations and demands of the general public and the organization's target audience. Both management and employees felt that even when they are interested in producing gender-sensitive content or breaking stereotypes and providing more diverse opportunities for female journalists, the decisions are often not well received by the readers – or even their own peers and family members.



Statement: News and media respect the privacy of victims of sexual violence.

“

I wrote a piece on gender-based violence and I mentioned the name of a politician who was involved in an incident. My male colleagues have written similar articles in the past. But, I received so much criticism from my friends.

They asked why I'm writing about this. 'You're a girl. What if you get attacked? This is not safe. You shouldn't write things like this.'

These were said to me by people who work in the media industry.

A female journalist of
of a print publication.

While 63% of respondents believed that news and media regularly respected the privacy of victims and survivors of sexual violence, 30% also stated that media only did so 'sometimes' and 7% felt that the media 'never' respected the privacy of victims of gender-based violence. Our qualitative findings revealed that the competition among media outlets and the need to get more 'views', especially among digital publications, often influenced journalists to compromise ethical and sensitive reporting practices.

Our qualitative findings revealed that the competition among media outlets and the need to get more 'views', especially among digital publications, often influenced journalists to compromise ethical and sensitive reporting practices.

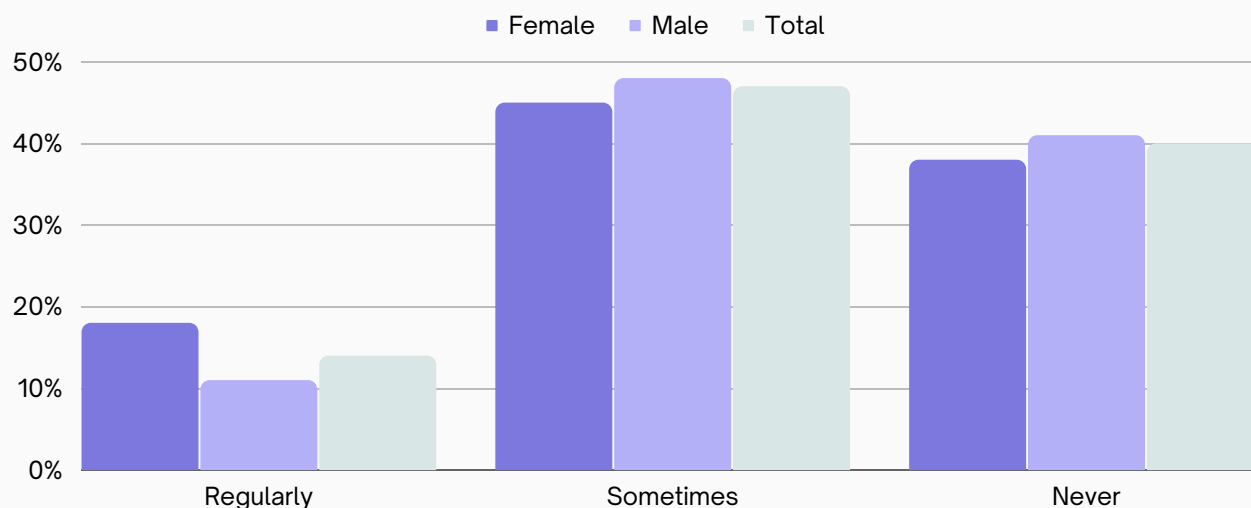


“

Recently, one of the journalists wrote an article in which they disclosed the ward number of the hospital in which a victim of child abuse was being kept. It was highly insensitive and unethical. We received a lot of online backlash for this.

”

A female journalist of a
print publication.



Statement: Men are interviewed / consulted as experts more than women in current affairs

Gender sensitivity is imperative for journalists who report on sexual and gender-based violence. As highlighted in the UNESCO guidelines for journalists, media reporting on sexual violence against women can help readers, listeners and viewers understand how widespread it is, who is affected, what drives it, and how it can be prevented. The media can also shape the way women understand their own experiences of violence and influence decisions on whether to speak out, take action or seek support. Moreover, the media can influence public policy and legislation through its investigation of violence against women. In essence, gender-sensitive reporting guidelines and training are necessary to promote best practices for responsible, ethical, and safe representation and reporting of gender-based violence (UNESCO, 2019).

A total of 47% of respondents felt that men are ‘sometimes’ interviewed and consulted more as experts in current affairs compared to women, while 14% of respondents claimed this happens ‘regularly’ in the media.

According to a 2020 report by the Global Media Monitoring Project covering 116

countries, only 24% of news sources were women. The report also revealed that even among the 24% of women who do make the news, the majority appear to be eyewitnesses or sources based on personal experience, while just 10% were cited as subject-matter experts. In contrast, 80% of the men who appeared as news sources were subject-matter experts. Moreover, the visibility of women as experts in news seems to be layered with stereotypes and discrimination. The report further stated that even when women are cited as experts, they were most likely to be seen in stories regarding science and health, and were least present in political and economic pieces, topics that usually command greater broadcast airtime and print news space (GMMP, 2020).

Both quantitative and qualitative findings revealed that journalists had an interest in writing about topics related to the LGBTIQ+ community and felt that doing so would help legitimize the rights of this community. There were no significant gender differences in these perceptions.

However, it is important to note 39% of men and 28% of women felt that it is challenging to write LGBTIQ+ stories due to concerns about privacy and anonymity. Another key challenge that was highlighted during the qualitative data gathering was the concern about the reactions from the readership. Both male and female journalists shared that even though they are personally interested in writing about these topics, the readers are not always supportive. Participants shared that such backlash is more common among digital publications, where readers mock them, harass them, and ask invasive questions.

“
Even if you take the presenters in our videos, people want to see pretty girls. We try to do things differently here. We give opportunities for talent – not appearance or gender. But, the people are not on the same page. It’s a dilemma for us.”

A senior management official of a digital publication.



Females

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

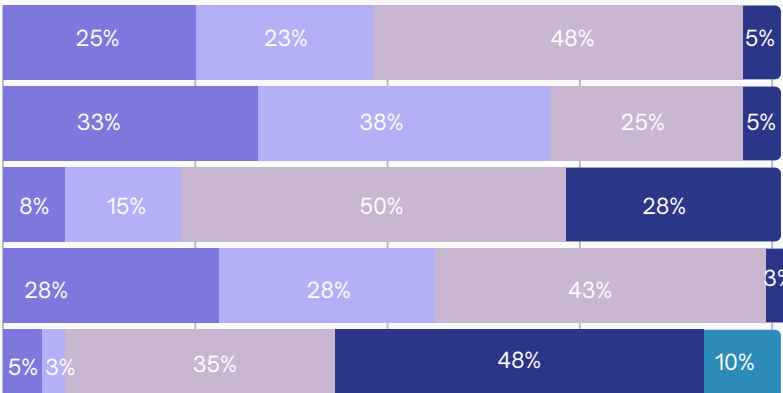
Readers do not have an interest in topics related to the LGBTIQ+ community

Publishing stories relevant to the LGBTIQ+ community can negatively affect our organisation's reputation

It is challenging to write LGBTIQ+ stories because they do not want to publicly reveal their identities

Publishing LGBTIQ+ content would negatively influence people's decisions

Giving priority to LGBTIQ+ content in the media is important to legitimize their rights



Males

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Agree Strongly Agree

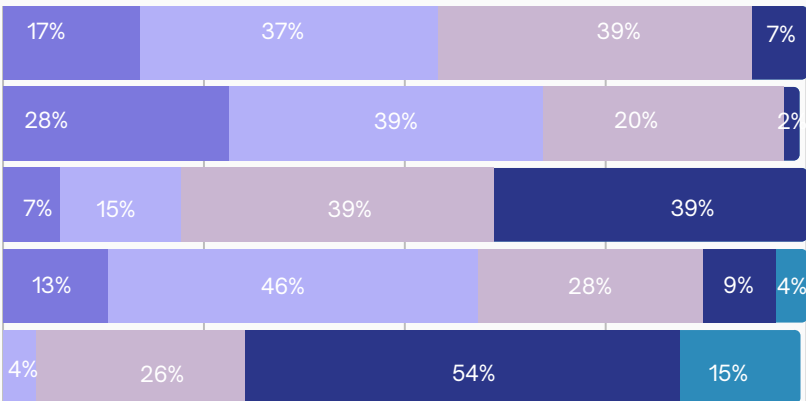
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A recent National LGBTIQ+ Survey conducted in the UK found that there was a generally poor standard of coverage of the LGBTIQ+ community in the media. The respondents of the survey felt that a poor understanding of appropriate language was commonplace in reporting and the underrepresentation and invisibility of LGBTIQ+ role models was considered to have had a negative impact on some respondents' self-esteem and sense of identity (Government Equalities Office, 2018).

A mapping of LGBTIQ+ identities conducted in Sri Lanka stated that one of the main reasons for the lack of LGBTIQ+ role models and key influencers in the country is the very little media attention given to them, especially in the more traditional Sinhala and Tamil media (Equal Ground, 2021). Furthermore, a local research study on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ in digital spaces stated that even though LGBTIQ+ people online are able to access information, art and resources about their community, representations of LGBTIQ+ people in the mainstream media in Sri Lanka continue to be flat and harmfully stereotypical (Women and Media Collective, 2017).

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is currently at a point of significant technological, societal, and political change. Communication, both digital and otherwise, has become a crucial vehicle for conveying revolutionary ideas and initiatives, capable of creating communities that are stronger, better informed, and more engaged than ever before.

The need for ethics has become central to all media outlets and is the cornerstone of news journalism that supports social development. In the wake of these changes, media organizations must come to terms with the fact that the issue of gender is inseparable from progress and ethical journalism.

Media can and must play a key role in achieving gender equality in Sri Lanka by challenging traditional norms and attitudes regarding gender perceptions both in content and in media houses. Most importantly, the media must include women in leadership roles and as experts on a diversity of topics on a daily basis, not as an exception. The media industry in Sri Lanka needs to be encouraged to produce gender-transformative content and to develop self-regulatory equality policies, including access to decision-making positions.

Furthermore, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be set up to assess the progress within the sector. This, we truly believe, will contribute to creating gender equality in content, workplace, management, and our wider society.

I really want to write about transgender people. But, it's not easy. Our readers are more conservative. We have the freedom to write about such issues. But, when we do, we get harassed. 'How can you talk about these things', they ask us, 'are you one of them too?'

A female journalist of
of an digital publication.



Recommendations



1

Address and Eliminate Sexual Harassment and Gender Inequality in the Workplace

- Media organizations must acknowledge the responsibility to provide a safe working environment for all staff and develop comprehensive, formal, and written policies that prevent and address sexual harassment and gender inequality in the workplace.
- Media organizations must provide basic cyber security and digital safety training for journalists and other media professionals to prevent and navigate online harassment and cyberbullying.
- The lived realities of the employees of the media outlet must be captured in these policies to make this document nuanced, contextualized and relevant.
- Employees and their suggestions must be included in the process of developing, reviewing, finalizing, and disseminating these policies.
- Media organizations must ensure these policies are accessible and digestible in diverse formats - including written, visual, and digital – and must guarantee that all policies are available in all local languages.
- Clauses and sections on sexual harassment and misconduct must be included in various management procedures and policies – including employee and contractor interviews, orientations, staff training and annual appraisals.
- Senior management staff, especially those in supervising capacities, must be trained on addressing and responding to sexual harassment in the workplace – including case documentation and survivor support.
- Media organizations must have formal, anonymous, and accessible response mechanisms in place to ensure necessary support for those who have experienced harassment or inequality in the workplace while performing their work outside and/or via digital means.

Recommendations



2

Build and Nourish Inclusive Environments and Diverse Leadership

- Media organizations must conduct consistent and accessible training and mentoring opportunities to enhance the leadership skills of women journalists to increase the inclusion of women in top management.
- Media organizations must form and nurture networks for women journalists to connect with each other and exchange experiences in a male-dominated industry for peer support, collaboration, and mentorship.
- Women journalists must be provided training opportunities and access to resources to practice and learn field reporting, investigative reporting, photojournalism, political reporting, mobile journalism, producing, cinematography, post-production, and other aspects of journalism that women are traditionally not allowed or encouraged to pursue in the media sector.
- Media organizations must address and challenge social and structural barriers such as lack of family support and inflexible work hours through better in-house policies, support, and resources.
- Media organizations must shift the dominant focus from empowering women journalists to competence development, with particular reference to competence in management. Overall, the management must focus on transforming the culture of the media organization rather than simply focusing on conducting capacity building for women.

Recommendations



3

Promote and Practice Gender-Sensitive Reporting

- Media organizations must encourage a diverse and inclusive selection of sources and stories in order to achieve a balanced presence of women and men, reflecting the composition of society and human experiences.
- Media organizations must strive for realistic portrayals of women and men through the elimination of stereotypes and the promotion of multi-dimensional representations.
- Media organizations and journalists must practice gender-sensitive language and constantly evaluate and update their terminology – especially when reporting on violence, conflict, and vulnerable groups.
- Media organizations must actively cover gender-related issues and positively and constructively contribute to public discourse on gender equality.
- Media organizations must provide consistent and comprehensive training for journalists and content creators on practising gender-sensitive reporting when covering various investigative issues.

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