

## Country Report:

# “Media and Gender in Sri Lanka”

Part of the IFJ Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific Research Project





## Media and Gender in the Asia Pacific Region

### A special report by the International Federation of Journalists (Asia-Pacific)

March 2015

**Project title:** "Research Study on Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific"

**Executing agent:** IFJ Asia-Pacific

**Project locations:** South Asia (India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka); South East Asia (Cambodia, Malaysia); and Pacific (Vanuatu)

#### Acknowledgements

**Editors:** Ammu Joseph, Laxmi Murthy, Jane Worthington

**Research coordinator:** Alexandra Hearne

**Regional report author:** Ammu Joseph

#### Country Researchers:

Cambodia: Chantrea Koeut

India: Sujata Madhok

Malaysia: Wern Jun

Nepal: Anita Bindu

Pakistan: Tasneem Ahmar

Sri Lanka: Dilrukshi Handunnetti

Vanuatu: Cathy Nunn

#### Content Analysis:

Nepal: Subhechhya Bindu

Sri Lanka: Dilrukshi Handunnetti

**Participating Unions:** IFJ affiliate unions in the Asia-Pacific including Cambodian Association for the Protection of Journalists (CAPJ); National Union of Journalists, India (NUJ), Indian Journalists Union (IJU), All India Newspaper Employees Federation, India (AINEF); National Union of Journalists, India (NUJI); National Union of Journalists, Malaysia (NUJM); Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ); Nepal Press Union (NPU); National Union of Journalists, Nepal (NUJN); Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ); Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka (FMM), Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association (SLWJA) and Media Association Vanuatu (MAV).

#### Special contributors:

Hajjah Norila Daud

Lubna Naqvi

Nadia Sabohi

#### With special thanks to:

Ujjwal Acharya

Syed Ahsan

Chhengpor Aun

Kimhorng Chhay

Saniya Jafree

Mohini Mishra

Bishnu Nepal

Arifa Noor

Jennifer O'Brien

SK Pande

Dr Richard Phillips

Schave de Rozario

Um Sarin

Rashme Sehgal

Shaista Yasmeen

Rukmani Anandani

Anjali Deshpande

Sunil

**Images:** Photographs are contributed by the IFJ and affiliates and AFP.

This document has been produced with UNESCO and UN Women support. The views and contents expressed herein are those of the IFJ and can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of UNESCO.

**Published by the International Federation of Journalists**



## Introduction to IFJ gender and media research

This report has been prepared as part of the “Research Study on Media and Gender in Asia-Pacific” undertaken by the International Federation of Journalists, and supported by the UNESCO in partnership with UN Women. In line with UNESCO’s Communication and Information Programme for 2014 to 2017, the project comprises research on gender and media conducted in partnership with national stakeholders in seven countries of the Asia-Pacific region (South Asia, Southeast Asia and the Pacific): Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Vanuatu.

This report offers an overall analysis of gender inclusivity or its lack in the Sri Lankan media.

The study is conducted within the framework of UNESCO’s Gender-Sensitive Indicators for the Media, specifically looking at areas covered under Category A (Gender balance at decision-making level, gender equality in work and working conditions, gender equality in unions, associations, clubs and organisations of journalists, other media professionals and media self-regulatory bodies, media organisations promoting ethical codes and policies in favour of gender equality in media content and gender balance in media education and training) and Category B (Gender portrayal in news and current affairs).

The recommendations of the report also seek to influence systemic changes within the Sri Lankan media industry, both in policy and practice, through effective advocacy and training at different levels, to work towards inclusivity and equity in the island’s media.

## A politicised media on an island of impunity

An island of over 21 million people with the highest literacy rate in South Asia, Sri Lanka over the past five years has been rated by international media rights organisations as one of the most dangerous places for journalists to live and work.

The media came under fire during the war between the rebel Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka which raged in the Sri Lanka’s North, leading to a severe loss of lives, displacement, human rights violations and war crimes. Both male and female journalists faced immense repression and violation of their rights.

During that period, the main concerns for the media were an increasing politicisation of the media landscape and the impact of war on mass media and the physical safety of journalists.

Impunity has reigned in Sri Lanka, with several unresolved murders, abductions and assaults, with the former Rajapaksa regime exerting complete control over not just the state-owned media, but also the privately-owned media. This contributed to the significant convergence of public opinion and shrinking of space for democratic dissent.

Media organisations, including the mainstream private media (barring a few like *Ravaya*, a Sinhala alternative publication and *Uthayan*, a Tamil newspaper published from Jaffna), were placed under strict government control. At the height of the final phase of war, between 2007 and 2008, and in the immediate aftermath of the brutal murder of the founder and editor of *The Sunday Leader*, Lasantha Wickrematunge, a large number of Sri Lankan journalists fled the island fearing for their



safety. At present, the number of journalists, media workers and activists in exile is estimated to be over 40.

As mainstream media was forced to concede space and bow to censorship, there was an increase in the use of new media and digital media migrants who sought the alternative media as a safe space. Curbing online expression was the next step though, and included hacking and blocking of news and critical websites. Leading journalists and media activists who opposed these practices were quickly branded as traitors and the State-owned media machinery and sometimes official government websites, such as [www.defence.lk](http://www.defence.lk), were deployed to defame dissenting journalists and activists.

It was also during this period that hate speech was mainstreamed as a routine journalistic practice using a partisan section of the media and attempts were made to crush media and civil society and deny them legitimate avenues of expression.

The new government voted to power in early January 2015 with an overwhelming popular mandate, has shown some interest in media reforms and has promised to introduce a Right to Information law, to investigate journalist murders and to bring an end to impunity. There have also been public statements urging exiled journalists to return.

The State-run media organisations are currently being reviewed, with a view to converting them into financially viable enterprises, in addition to restructuring institutions in a bid to facilitate professional journalism. For example, as a result of the ongoing restructuring at Associated Newspapers (better known as Lake House), the top slots which were previously offered to politically affiliated persons, are now occupied by professional journalists with no political affiliations. There is also a move to revive its dysfunctional training centre.

The impact of the prolonged ethnic conflict and war cannot be overlooked when describing the Sri Lankan media landscape.

Besides a strong linguistic polarisation between the Sinhala and Tamil media, it is the Tamil media houses, particularly those located in the island's North and the East that have suffered the most. The greatest numbers of journalist and media workers murdered or attacked are from these regions. It is those media houses that were at the receiving end of threats and violence from the armed forces, the LTTE and other Tamil militant groups, posing an immense challenge to independent media houses in ensure the safety of media practitioners. It is noteworthy that despite severe constraints faced by the northern media that M.V. Kaanamylnathan, the editor of the Jaffna-based *Uthayan* newspaper was recognised as a 2014 Information Hero by Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF).

Sri Lankan journalists have extremely vulnerable to physical attacks and have been campaigning for expeditious investigations of the murders and abductions of journalists as one step towards ending impunity. According to media minister, Gayantha Karunathileke, the new administration will investigate all journalists' murders committed since 2005 and create a backdrop conducive for journalism to flourish. "We would like all exiled journalists to come home and practice their craft," he said.

Attacks on women journalists included the assault and housebreaking of former associate editor of *The Sunday Leader*, Mandana Ismail Abeywickrema; threatening of the editor of *Ceylon Today*, Hana Ibrahim by a knife-wielding assailant; and the murder of Melicia Gunasekera, a long-time journalist



whose murder is still shrouded in mystery. Among those who had to flee the island are two women editors of *The Sunday Leader*, Sonali Samarasinghe and Frederica Jansz.

The number of women journalists in Sri Lanka has increased and several women, particularly in the English language media, hold senior positions. Despite their significant presence women still continue to struggle in environments that are either unsafe or not conducive for women media professionals. In addition, problematic working conditions; lack of opportunities for upward mobility; and the strong male bias in the newsroom makes the media industry a challenging workplace for women.

As in the rest of South Asia, Sri Lankan women journalists, too, maintain a stony silence about routine gender discrimination and sexual harassment at the workplace. These incidents, according to journalists who participated in this study, are more prevalent in the Sinhala and Tamil language media as compared with the English language media. Cultural prohibitions and fear of stigma contribute to the culture of silence.

Though there is a general agreement that gender policies and complaint mechanisms could contribute greatly to make newsrooms, unions and professional associations more equitable, the gender equity agenda is not pushed hard enough to achieve tangible results. Most institutions still do not have gender policies or anti-sexual harassment policies in place and, unfortunately, not only men but a sizeable number of women journalists also consider it unnecessary to pursue such goals.

In 2006, five media organisations, Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association (SLWJA), Free Media Movement (FMM), Sri Lanka Tamil Media Alliance (SLTMA), Sri Lanka Muslim Media Forum (SLMMF) and the Federation of Media Employees' Trade Unions (FMETU), came together to promote a Charter for Gender Equality for Media and Journalism in Sri Lanka. This was adopted by the South Asian Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) as a regional charter in July 2014.

Today, despite the war being over, the impact of militarization of the country, particularly in the island's north where the former war zones are located, has also increased women's vulnerability to sexual violence. The impact of war is also visible in the media industry which reflects a strong north-south divide, in terms of resources, opportunities, representation and portrayal of women.

## Demographics of survey respondents

The gender survey in Sri Lanka commenced on 28 August, 2014 and concluded on 23 September, 2014 with responses from 80 journalists. These included 45 women (56.25 percent) and 33 men (41.25 percent). Two respondents identified themselves as 'other.'

The highest proportion of respondents belonged to the 26-35 age group, making up 38.75 percent. A fifth of respondents (21.25 percent) belonged to 18-25 age group. Another 13.75 percent were aged 36-45 and 16.25 percent were aged 46-55. Only 10 percent were 56 years or above.



What is your age?	Total	Female	Male	Other
18 - 25	17	9	8	0
26 - 35	31	24	7	0
36 - 45	11	5	6	0
46 - 55	13	5	8	0
56 and above	8	2	4	2
Grand Total	80	45	33	2

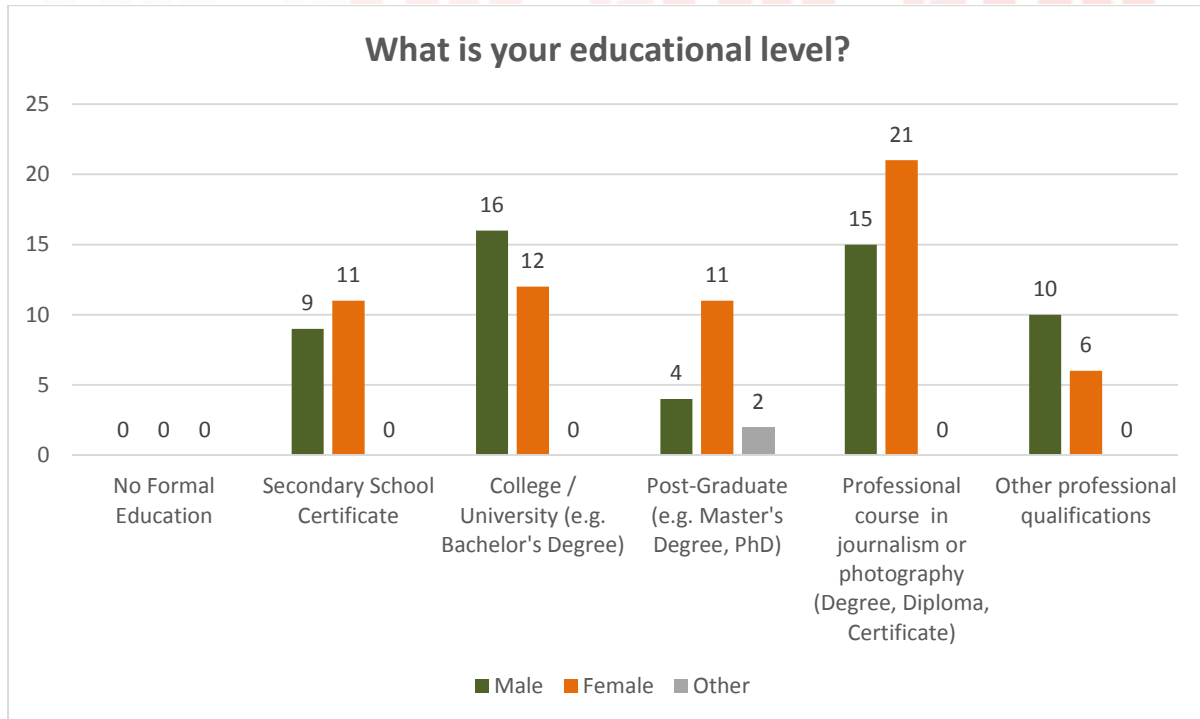
Virtually all respondents (97.5 percent) were Sri Lankan and the highest proportion (75 percent), came from the Western Province, reflecting the island’s media industry being Colombo-centred. Another reason for high participation is access to internet connectivity in the urban centre.

Near equal numbers of respondents from the majority community and minority communities completed the survey, including a total of 46.25 percent from the ethnic and religious minorities and 53.75 percent from the main ethnic group, Sinhalese/Buddhist. Respondents who identified as from minority communities included some of the following responses:

- *I am a Tamil Hindu in a majority Sinhala Buddhist country*
- *I belong to an ethnic minority (Malay) and religious minority (Muslim)*
- *I belong to both an ethnic minority, i.e. am mixed Burgher-Sinhala, and a religious minority*
- *I am Tamil*
- *I am a Tamil Hindu in Sri Lanka, where the majority are Sinhala Buddhists*

Although the majority of the Sri Lankan population identify as Buddhist, only 32.5 percent of survey participants identified as such, followed by 30 percent who identified as Muslim. Another 13.75 percent identified as Christian and Hindu respectively.

The survey indicated that journalists in Sri Lanka are well educated. More men had undergraduate degrees (48.48 percent) compared with only 26.66 percent of women. However, more women had postgraduate qualifications (24.44 percent) compared with only 12.12 percent of men. Nearly half of all respondents had professional qualifications, such as diplomas and certificates - 46.66 percent of women and 45.45 percent of men. A quarter of all respondents had attained at least their secondary school certificate as their highest level of education.



Executive director of the Colombo-based Women and Media Collective (WMC), Dr Sepali Kottegoda, said: “More and more women pursue tertiary education today, though as a country, only less than one percent makes it to university. What is important is to find out whether this knowledge is reflected in media decision-making and whether the inclusion of women influences content development in a positive manner,”

The survey largely reflects the views of journalists based in Colombo where the media industry is primarily centred. The sampling cannot be considered representative of a country that is multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, with strong disparities in terms of resources and access between Colombo-based media and the rest.

**A very dangerous profession**

Sri Lanka has the dubious honour of being ranked one of the most dangerous places for journalists in Asia-Pacific. Despite the extreme violence experienced by Sri Lankan media workers in the past decade, it is encouraging to note that many young people are still keen to join the industry

Substantiating this desire for a high-risk and high-reward employment, the majority of the survey respondents said that their decision to become journalists stemmed from a passion for the craft.

Out of 80 respondents, over three quarters of women (77.77 percent) said they entered the industry for their ‘love of journalism’. A further 35.5 percent of women said it was a desire ‘to influence change’ or ‘call the powerful to account’. Likewise, men were also primarily motivated by their ‘love for journalism’ (72.72 percent), though a greater number (45.45 percent) said they had a desire ‘to influence change/call the powerful to account’.

In Sri Lanka, journalism sometimes is also a family tradition, though this was the motivating factor for just 3 percent of men and 6.66 percent of women in the survey.



In a country that has borne witness to 27 years of violent conflict and high risks for journalists, over half of the respondents (51.25 percent) nevertheless stated that their choice of profession was 'supported' by their families. A quarter (26.25 percent) said their families were neutral towards their career choice while only 17.5 percent said they faced a 'negative' reaction. Interestingly, this response revealed a strong gender gap, with women making up 71.43 percent of the group. One respondent described her family's response as changing "from negative to supportive, as they began understanding the social impact journalism could have."

"Many women journalists still find it difficult to convince families that journalism is worth it, mostly because it is an unconventional job. Women also encounter their own problems, and the very nature of the work they do makes families apprehensive," said senior journalist and activist, Seetha Ranjane.

Reflecting Colombo-centred media and the urban English focus, 50 percent of the respondents stated they worked in the English language. The number of respondents working in Sinhala (23.75 percent) and Tamil (26.25 percent) were near equal.

The majority (58.49 percent) of respondents said that they worked in medium sized media organisations employing 100-1500 people, the largest response for both men and women. Only 9.43 percent worked in large media organisations (1500 plus), and men made up 60 percent of this group.

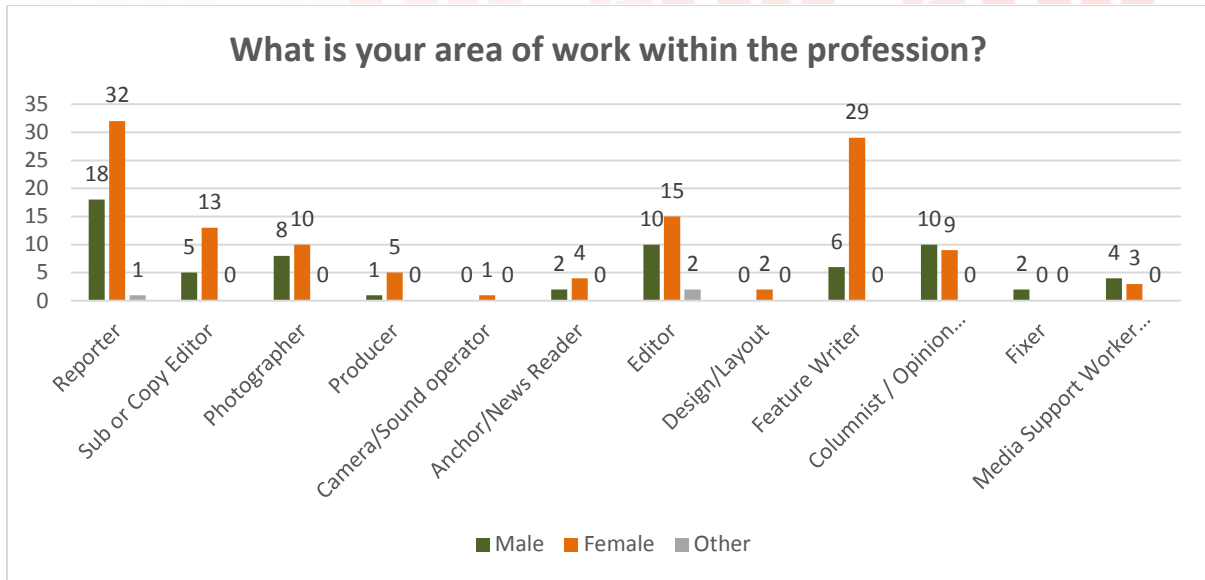
Almost half the respondents (48.75 percent) held full-time regular jobs. A third (30 percent) were working as freelancers. Significantly, of the freelancers, 70.83 percent were women.

In terms of years in the industry, 46.25 percent of respondents had worked for over 10 years in the media. Not surprisingly, more than half of male respondents (54.54 percent) were in this group – compared to 37.77 percent of women. More women are clearly entering the industry and of the 18.75 percent of respondents who had worked for 1-3 years, women outnumbered men, 2 to 1.

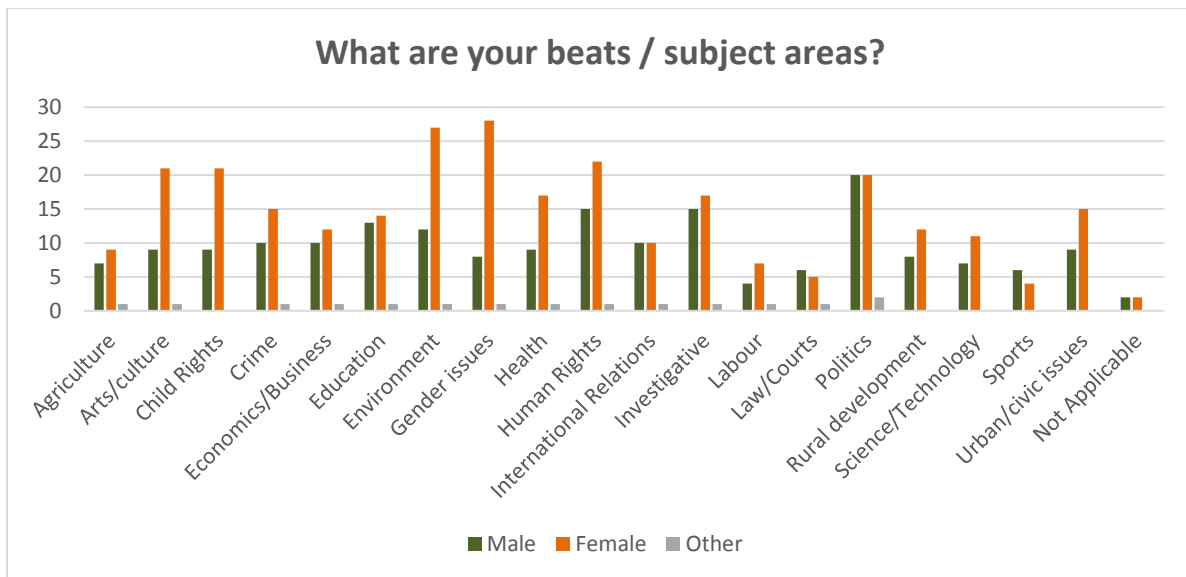
Reflecting a traditional media base, the majority of respondents (77.5 percent) worked in newspapers. This comprised most women (82.22 percent) and nearly three quarter of men (69.69 percent). The second most popular form of media in Sri Lanka was online/digital with 36.25 percent of respondents, 33.33 percent of women and 42.42 percent of men. As respondents were asked to select all options that applied, it is evident that the majority of respondents work across two forms of media.

When asked they identify their area of work within the media, the largest proportion of respondents defined themselves as a 'reporter' (63.75 percent), with 54.54 percent of men and 71.11 percent of women selecting this answer. The second most popular response was 'editor' with 33.75 percent of all respondents.





Women were more strongly represented in feature writing (64.44 percent) than men, and men were more strongly represented in with columnist/feature writing (30.30 percent). It is evident that journalists across Sri Lanka work in more than one area of the media, respondents were able to select a number of options for this question and with double the response rate than the group size it suggests that both men and women taking on two or more roles in their daily duties.



The freedom to choose one’s beats and the opportunity to influence content are strong indicators of best industry practices. Sixty percent of respondents said they were given the opportunity to choose their beats. More men had this opportunity (75.5 percent) compared with just 48.8 percent of women. Only 6.25 percent of respondents said they were not given the opportunity to choose their beat and this was evenly divided between men and women.

The greatest proportion of women (62.22 percent) covered gender issues. The other five areas mostly covered by women were: human rights environment, child rights and arts/culture. The beats



least covered by women were sports and law/courts. The most popular beats covered by men were politics, investigative reporting, human rights, education and the environment.

The above data reflect that women, whether or not they chose their beats, were largely confined to areas considered 'soft' news or areas traditionally assigned to women journalists. However it is worth noting that women on average covered more than six beats while men averaged five.

"Women hardly notice that they are pushed towards 'softer' beats," notes Hana Ibrahim, former Editor of *Ceylon Today*. "Conscious efforts have to be made to prevent this."

The largest proportion of respondents (47.50 percent) said they were able to determine the content of their work 'most of the time' – comprising 53 percent of females and 39 percent of males. Only 2.5 percent of respondents, evenly distributed between men and women said they could never determine the content of their work. 26.25 percent said they could also determine the content of their work, and this included 36.36 percent of men and only 17.77 percent of women.

In terms of been able to influence the coverage of news and views within their organisations, men were marginally more optimistic, with 18.18 percent saying they could 'always' influence news and coverage, compared with only 4.44 percent of women. However, 26.67 percent of women said they were able to influence coverage and news 'most of the time' compared to 24.24 percent of men. For those who said they could 'never' influence coverage and news, 6.67 percent of women and 12.12 percent of men selected this option.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Through a female lens

For senior photojournalist and trainer, Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai, the proverbial glass ceiling was visible from the day she commenced her journalistic career on May 1, 1993. Twenty years on, much to her regret, the only improvement she finds in the Tamil language newsrooms is the availability of technology. "There is no qualitative evolution, in skills or in concepts," she says.

Kanagasabapathipillai entered journalism to do "alternative work" and to cover "sensitive issues that Tamil women were discouraged from touching, even when women were directly and deeply affected." She began her career as a trainee journalist at the Colombo-based Tamil daily, *Virakesari* and since then, her professional journey has often brought her into conflict with the male hierarchy and women who reinforce gender stereotypes.

"I was hired after a series of interviews by all-male interview panels. I was asked about my marital status and whether I would quit upon marriage. They asked me whether my family approved of my career choice," she recalls.

She belonged to a batch of 10, including three men. She was the only woman who wanted to do field reporting but was promptly assigned to translate Reuters copy to Tamil.

"Other women were happy to be desk bound but I was not. So I resisted and wanted to be sent on assignment. Being an open newsroom, there were other problems such as constant bullying of women by men. I was a prime target because I had short hair and constantly wore jeans. It was pointless to complain because this was considered the 'normal' newsroom atmosphere."



When she insisted on being sent out on assignment, her immediate supervisors cautioned that “it was unsafe for Tamil women to do field assignments.” Thanks to her English language skills, she was sent on other assignments such as to cover the visit of Princess Anne, which also earned her male colleagues’ wrath.

On her own, she began compiling articles “of a serious nature.” They appeared in the editorial pages, often sans her by-line. She said: “In that male-dominated newsroom, women were considered subservient to men. The editorial practices were discriminatory.” When she wrote on women in politics and leadership roles, her articles were rejected and she was warned against her alleged efforts to change Tamil culture.

As for her women colleagues, Kanagasabapathipillai says: “Tamil newsrooms have more women. So it is not about representation in terms of numbers. Their impact on content is missing. Women hardly challenge male colleagues or undertake serious work. They also prefer desk jobs but complain about lack of opportunities. For many of them, it is a job – until the next job or until marriage or migration. There is no real interest in pursuing a career in journalism.”

Traditionally, women are put in charge of women’s pages and/or culture/arts, she said. “It is as if we know nothing else and have no other contribution to make. But women accept this without any protest!”

She also claims that there is no “equal pay for equal work” in Tamil newsrooms. Moreover, there are strong prejudices against women and as a result, they are not entrusted with certain types of responsibilities. The stereotypical content offered to women readers/audiences is therefore, generated by women for women, so she thinks they too are not free of this responsibility. “Just like the pages they put together, their discussions are often about recipes, fashion and stuff like, using cucumber packs to look good for a husband.”

Many Tamil women journalists did not report on the impacts of war. Many felt it was an unnecessary risk-taking. “When they did report, they took sides, lacked the professionalism to put things into perspective and to rise above their ethnic angle,” she said. “I often felt that there should have been strong training offered to journalists on conflict reporting, especially for women. That perspective has largely gone missing as a result.”

The risk-taking Kanagasabapathipillai subsequently joined the BBC which gave her greater access to the war zones as well as a new perspective. She moved into complete “male territory” and soon proved resourceful in terms of contacts and access.

Today, the self-starter and self-learner is working as an independent journalist. After two decades of risky journalism, many Tamil women journalists consider her as a role model, a woman whose career is hard-built, without any support from systems and newsroom mentors.

“If there is true admiration, then they must develop strong careers and relentlessly pursue their dreams,” she said.

In 2012, when Kanagasabapathipillai researched on female ex-combatants and their social reintegration, none of the Tamil newspapers were willing to publish her findings. Instead, she was told the reintegration process was correct and that ex-combatants were well-treated.



“During research, I was closely monitored but I was not going to give it up. As someone consistently covering the conflict, I saw post-war stress experienced by women. But our media hardly provided space for that perspective. The war is over. The story is incomplete. There is a missing half,” she insists. “Women often create their own limitations, in addition to socio-cultural limitations. Women themselves reinforce stereotypes. Now that there are fresh openings, they still refuse to explore.”

It is difficult for Tamil women journalists to be organised largely because there is no cultural and institutional support. “An effort was made over a decade ago as women had very unique issues to address. Somehow, we could not make it work,” she admits.

The only media organisation for Tamil journalists at present does not have a constitution, and until recently, did not have a single female in the executive committee. As the current Secretary of South Asian Women in Media (Sri Lanka Chapter), Kanagasabapathipillai feels that for the first time, there is a network for women journalists in the island, able to work in all three languages and ready to take on different issues.

“There are about 200 members and regional co-ordinators. We have pioneered safety and gender training for women. Above all, it is a platform for building skills and concepts,” she said

Meanwhile, Kanagasabapathipillai has moved beyond the printed word to take on other serious tasks – as a blogger and photojournalist, expanding her career, outreach and impact.

There are more women with camera slung across their shoulders today but there are no moving images emerging from those cameras. “Photojournalism is very much a male preserve. I am always in the midst of men, doing what many consider a man’s job.”

“I look through my lens but I clearly see differently. There is essentially a perspective that is female. Sadly, there are no women photojournalists in the north. In Sri Lanka, women journalists still prefer to walk behind their male colleagues and that’s self-defeating.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Gender Equity in Media Organisations**

The contribution of women to Sri Lanka’s workforce has been high, with female migrant workers being the island’s main source of foreign exchange. Likewise, women who account for 51 percent of the island’s 21.5 million population, make a significant contribution to the economy.

Over the years, the island’s media industry – in particular the English language media – has attracted more women. Women are largely found in low and mid-level positions in the industry, mostly working as television anchors, announcers, reporters and desk editors. Those who have reached higher positions are few and most of those are in the English media, both print and broadcast.

Irrespective of the presence of some exceptional women at the executive and senior executive level, decision-making roles in the Sri Lankan media are still dominated by men. In some cases, where women are in leadership positions, they are reduced to rubber stamps, with decisions generally taken by male managers.

More than half eligible respondents (58.92 percent) said women were present at executive level in their organisation. But when asked about the composition of the top level management in their



organisations (including board, executives, chief financial officer, general manager etc), more than half those who answered this question (57.69 percent) said that women comprised less than 10 percent of these positions. Another 23.08 percent said that women made up 10-25 percent .

At a senior editorial (director, editor-in-chief, managing editor, executive producer, bureau chief, photographic editor, digital editor), 55.10 percent of respondents said women made up less than 10 percent of these positions in their organisations. Only 8.16 percent placed the percentage of women above 50 percent.

Sri Lanka has produced six women editors of newspapers, one deceased and two in exile. Rita Sebastian, Champika Liyanaarachchi, Hana Ibrahim, Sonali Samarasinghe, Frederica Jansz and Shakuntala Perera. All of them were from the English language press. In the broadcast sphere, two women: Sunanda Hettiarachchi and Mayuri Abeysinghe have made it to the top executive positions, both working for Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC), the state-run premier television station. But such examples are still rare.

From the survey, it is evident that women are gaining decision-making positions at the middle level of organisations (senior editor, chief of correspondents, design director, features editor, foreign editor etc). While some respondents, 21.5 percent and 29.41 percent put it as high as 10-25 percent and 25-50 percent respectively, more than a third (37.25 percent) said women made up less than 10 percent of these roles.

“Women are considered an insignificant voice,” said a female media worker from SLRC. “It is as if the industry was created for men and they knew it so well, and therefore, making decisions should be their prerogative – and to be better paid.” She said that expressing her candid views on gender-based discrimination within the institution could result in her male superior further penalising her.

According to the former Chairman of the state-owned Independent Television Network (ITN), Rosmond Senaratne, though the institution lacked a gender policy, there had always been merit-based upward mobility for women journalists.

According to Lakshman Gunasekera, there are many reasons for not having women at the top levels. “There is gender insensitivity among men that results in lack of facilitation of women’s participation in the media industry. The industry dynamics therefore are male-centric and do not take into account various other aspects that need addressing to ensure women’s contribution to the media in a substantial manner. Besides an inherent gender bias, women’s talent is not nurtured, nor are they pushed towards assuming leadership roles. It becomes conspicuous in an industry like mass media which is more open to scrutiny.”

When asked about their career level, nearly half (47.5 percent) of all respondents described themselves as ‘senior’. This was evenly spread between women and men. Nearly a quarter (23.75 percent) said they were ‘mid-level’ and 12.5 percent held ‘junior’ positions.

According to the survey data, the largest proportion of respondents (29.41 percent) who answered this question said that women made up between 21-50 percent of the workers in their department. This was followed by 27.45 percent who said women made up between 5-20 percent and less than 5 percent respectively. As a result the overwhelming majority of respondents said that women made up less than 50 percent of the workers in their departments. The largest proportion of women respondents (28 percent) said that women made up less than 5 percent. In contrast the largest



proportion of male respondents (37.5 percent) said that women make up 21-50 percent of workers in their department. Interestingly, of the 15.68 percent of respondents that said women make up more than 50 percent of workers, women made up 76 percent of these respondents.

Survey respondents were asked to give their perspectives on opportunities for recruitment and career advancement. This differed somewhat between male and female respondents. Overall men were more positive of their career progression, with 15.38 percent and 23.07 percent rating their experience as ‘excellent’ and ‘very good’ respectively. On the other hand only 3.57 percent of women rated their opportunities as ‘excellent’ and 17.85 percent as ‘very good’. More women (32.14 percent) rated their opportunities as ‘good’ compared to 19.23 percent of men.

“That is natural. 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,” said freelance journalist, trainer and secretary of the South Asian Women in Media Sri Lanka chapter (SAWM-SL), Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai.

A common experience for women in the newsroom is that while there is a general sense of equality at the start of a career, a few years later, men start taking over and get promoted faster. Some of the interviewees, senior and junior, said that it was at that stage that they realised “being good at what you do” was not enough and experienced what they called “management bias” in favour of male employees. “Industry dynamics cater to male leadership. This is why women also need to take some initiative to push their own interests, and others must facilitate such empowerment,” noted Lakshman Gunasekera.

The perspective from the North is somewhat different. M.V. Kaanamylnathan, editor-in-chief of *Uthayan*, feels that it would take time for some of these deep-rooted biases to change but the facilitation of women to take on newer roles came from the conflict itself as they covered conflict and lived through the violence. “They were pushed to report and analyse. We have had many young women walk into conflict zones to work on stories that were difficult. Sometimes, crisis can offer you the greatest opportunity,” he said.

It is also important to note that while there were more women working as television anchors, reporters and the occasional photographers, this was largely a Southern phenomenon, barring a few exceptions.

Having reached the top job in editorial, Indrani Peiris, the associate editor of the *Lankadipa*, the highest-selling Sinhala daily says: “This is a privilege and an indicator that augurs well for the future.”

While it appears that some Sri Lankan women journalists have made inroads into the decision-making levels, it is important to bear in mind that the majority of the opinion writers and editors represent the English language, Colombo-based media and the impressive indicators are therefore not very representative of the media landscape elsewhere in the country.

Promotions in the media industry tend to differ from place to place, and as some interviewees claimed, were often based on the whims of the news manager or editor. There was general consensus that men had a natural advantage when it came to being promoted.

The survey responses also showed that many women journalists still continue as feature writers, a common trend in South Asia. Over 60 percent women respondents worked as feature writers as



opposed to 18 percent of men. “Being the features editor was the pinnacle of career success for a woman at one point of time. This has changed now, but it needs to change further,” said Ruwanthi Karuyawasam, journalist, media activist turned politician.

Kamalahasini Thangadurai (not her real name) from the Jaffna-based *Uthayan* said: “For Jaffna women journalists, the choice would start and end with the position of sub-editor.”

Lakshman Gunasekera says women are not facilitated socio-culturally to take on certain tasks. “They are oriented to be subservient and supportive rather than take on leadership roles. This is also why women are found in large numbers in the media, not at the decision-making level but at desk-bound jobs,” he said.

In the North and East, where ethnic Tamils and Muslims are in a majority, cultural prohibitions ensure that women who enter journalism often end their careers upon marriage, or after childbirth. In most cases, they hold desk jobs as sub editors which do not require them to travel or interact with people outside their respective media houses.

Notes Krishni Ifham, an award winning Tamil journalist who works as a freelancer, “It is as if we cannot be entrusted with responsibility. You may struggle and get the beats you desire but heading important desks is still a dream for most women, particularly those working in the Tamil media.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **The leader in active mentoring**

The concept of building the capacities of individual journalists as well as the entire team of journalists was a key focus of *The Sunday Leader*, founded by the late Lasantha Wickrematunge, one of Sri Lanka’s best known journalists murdered in January 2009 en route to work.

The unique editorial team during the founding editor’s time comprised many women journalists, thanks to a conscious decision by Wickrematunge himself to create space for women in journalism and enable them to decide their “beats” according to aptitude.

*The Sunday Leader* instituted woman-friendly working conditions, and many women journalists recall their time during Wickrematunge’s editorship as “empowering”. The editorial culture also had in-house practices that focused on nurturing young talent. It was part of this capacity-building process – a salient feature of the institutional culture – that a few women journalists took the initiative to make other female colleagues feel integrated and comfortable.

“Active mentoring” was a homespun concept introduced by a couple of senior women editors who wished to pass on their knowledge and expertise to younger journalists, women in particular, and to take practical steps to ensure that young women walking into *The Sunday Leader* editorial department had the necessary space, encouragement and opportunity to build their skills.

While never codified or openly referred to as ‘active mentoring,’ the two women journalists who were responsible for introducing this ‘quiet but meaningful practice’ to their editorial practice claim that, as women, they had faced various restrictions in their day, and wished to spare the junior women in their midst, similar negative experiences.



“It was a simple attempt to empower other women journalists through small yet meaningful acts that would help their careers to progress, such as little tips and, often, some encouragement to face various challenges – there are plenty when you are a journalist in Sri Lanka, and for women the challenges can be double,” notes Sonali Samarasinghe, who feels a ‘strong streak of feminism’ can add value to the editorial department.

Many young women needed someone experienced to guide them when confronted with certain professional situations. The seniors extended support to other women staff members to help them handle work pressures and, especially, to improve inter-personal relationships and learn to count on the strength of an “editorial sisterhood”.

“There was an element of trust-building, and even an attempt to defeat certain gender stereotypes, such as women being jealous of each other or unwilling to support each other. We wanted them to believe in their own strength as well as the strength of the collective,” said another woman who contributed to the fostering of a new media culture that positively encouraged women practitioners.

Introduced in 2005, the “active mentoring” project was first a practical method to prevent the formation of small cliques within the editorial department, with women journalists competing against each other. There was, at times, a level of mistrust and a deep-rooted assumption that women would not assist each other.

Women were encouraged to view their career goals with more professionalism, to work as a team to achieve journalistic objectives than as individuals and to discuss career-related concerns as a group. This included working conditions and safety concerns, topics women felt less inclined to discuss with their male counterparts.

There were other add-ons too that made *The Sunday Leader* special in the eyes of its women employees. Its founder editor had banned smoking or drinking (generally male activities in Sri Lanka) inside the editorial premises, largely as a move to create a ‘women-friendly’ atmosphere in the workplace. Women workers were provided with transport after 6pm – not only as a requirement of labour law, but even freelancers, who were not technically covered by law, were provided drops. Although *The Sunday Leader* had a limited number of vehicles, priority was given to women’s transport needs.

Wickrematunge, a believer in “female energy”, insisted that the editorial space be made pleasant and safe for women to work late, when necessary. “For this to happen, the newsroom had to reflect that culture,” he noted in one of his last interviews, speaking on women’s role as newsroom managers. His belief that women made loyal and committed professionals was his justification for appointing women to head four out of seven desks.

Part of the “active mentoring” exercise involved creative and non-confrontational methods to sensitise male colleagues about specific issues that women workers experience in their working life. Among the best editorial practices at *The Sunday Leader* was the deliberate use of gender-neutral language. Certain guidelines for professional news reporting (that required the inclusion of gender perspectives) were regularly followed.

Efforts were made to include women’s voices, both as experts and sources, to provide women space for content of special interest to them, to ensure sensitivity when reporting on victims of sexual crimes, conflict and disasters, etc.





So ultimately, “active mentoring” became a practice in an already fairly inclusive editorial department; to enable women to have a professional dialogue amongst themselves, to choose beats according to aptitude and to become more assertive in their professional outlook.

Although much has changed at *The Sunday Leader* since the murder of Wickrematunge, with the change in ownership and even editorial thrust, another former editor, Shakuntala Perera, too, insists that there is a policy of supporting women journalists. This policy is an acknowledgement of the proverbial glass ceiling that necessitates support systems if women journalists are to get beyond the many restrictions in order to achieve their professional ambitions.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### **A need for policies and practices in the workplace**

According to the survey results, there was clearly some disparity between men and women on the issue of wage equality. More men (65 percent) felt women and men received equal wages, compared to half of the women surveyed. Almost a quarter of respondents (24.07 percent) said that women do not receive equal wages, which included 29 percent women and 19 percent men.

Hence, income disparities remain a key concern for women journalists, with men often drawing higher salaries for the same work. Despite standardised contracts and strong labour laws, women are often placed in the lower grades at times, due to their gender, though this was never openly stated. In the past ten years, with media houses becoming more professional in their observance of duties to staff, salary disparities have been minimised, though it is a continuing phenomenon. Many interviewees claimed that there were carefully built in disparities, particularly in grading of staff where women were placed on lower salary scales despite doing equal work.

While most media companies do have records to prove there is no gender-based discrimination on the payment of salaries as much as recruitment, women journalists complain of the reality being different. “So much so that, just like sexual harassment, here is one issue we do not still wish to discuss. There are standardised contracts etc; but for equal work, men are placed at a higher earning bracket,” a young woman journalist working for a popular Sinhala weekly said.

“Most organisations are structured and there are no disparities in salaries and other benefits. Sri Lankan media institutions reflect our plural culture that does not generally place women in subservient positions but treats them as equals,” he noted.

According to Lasantha Ruhunuge, president of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists’ Association (SLWJA), discrepancies in wage structures largely due to the standardisation of the contracts is a problem that continues to plague media institutions. “It is a key issue in the industry and the unions have tried to address. There are many other contract-related issues to be addressed,” he said.



What is your monthly professional income?	Female	Male	Other	Total
Less than US \$80	10	8	0	18
US \$80 - \$250	10	8	0	18
US \$251 - \$400	14	6	1	21
US \$401 - \$600	6	8	1	15
US \$601 - \$800	0	0	0	0
More than \$800	5	3	0	8
<b>Total</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>80</b>

The largest proportion of respondents (26 percent) earned US\$251-400 per month, with 31 percent of women and 18 percent of men falling into this category. Concerningly, more than one fifth of respondents (23 percent) earned less than \$80 a month. In the pay bracket of \$401-600, the largest gender breakdown was evident with 24 percent of men selecting this option, compared with only 13 percent of women.

Despite the pay issues, when asked about their satisfaction at work, 33.75 percent of respondents surveyed felt that they worked in a ‘challenging atmosphere but the positives outweighed the negatives’. Interestingly, this was the most popular response with female respondents (37.77 percent) while most men (30.30 percent) described their well-being level at work as ‘supportive/a good working atmosphere’. A fifth of respondents (21.25 percent) felt the working environment was ‘satisfactory/room for improvement’, and overall another 21.25 percent stated their workplaces were ‘supportive/a good working atmosphere’. A small proportion (7.5 percent) of respondents said it was ‘frustrating, I feel underappreciated/undervalued’ and 2.5 percent of respondents said they were ‘considering another profession’.

Despite the evident imbalance and elements of discrimination, another skewed area is promotions. Many of the women media workers who attended the SAMSUN Gender Roundtable held in Colombo in June 2013, claimed that losing a good assignment, a work-related overseas trip or a due promotion to a man was ‘almost natural’. Merit-based promotion schemes, when lobbied for and presented to some management for endorsement were accepted on principle, but were practically discarded.

“Besides the management’s lack of interest, there were senior elements within the newspaper that rejected it, in order to promote a handful of people to top editorial positions who did not have the required qualifications,” noted Hana Ibrahim, former editor-in-chief of *Ceylon Today*.

“Men seek no maternity leave and do not require night transport,” said Niranjala Rowland, an active member of SAWM – Sri Lanka and a freelance journalist. “That alone makes them attractive to most managements,” Rowland said. Two areas that women feel they are really not encouraged to step into are photography and sports journalism.

All these disparities should be bridged through mechanisms that apply to all institutions – in short, through the institutionalisation of policies and practices, says Ibrahim. The entitlements such as allowances, employee benefits, leave, medical benefits and other provisions are generally determined by the country’s labour laws but media moguls have found it convenient to find loopholes to avoid payment of entitlements.



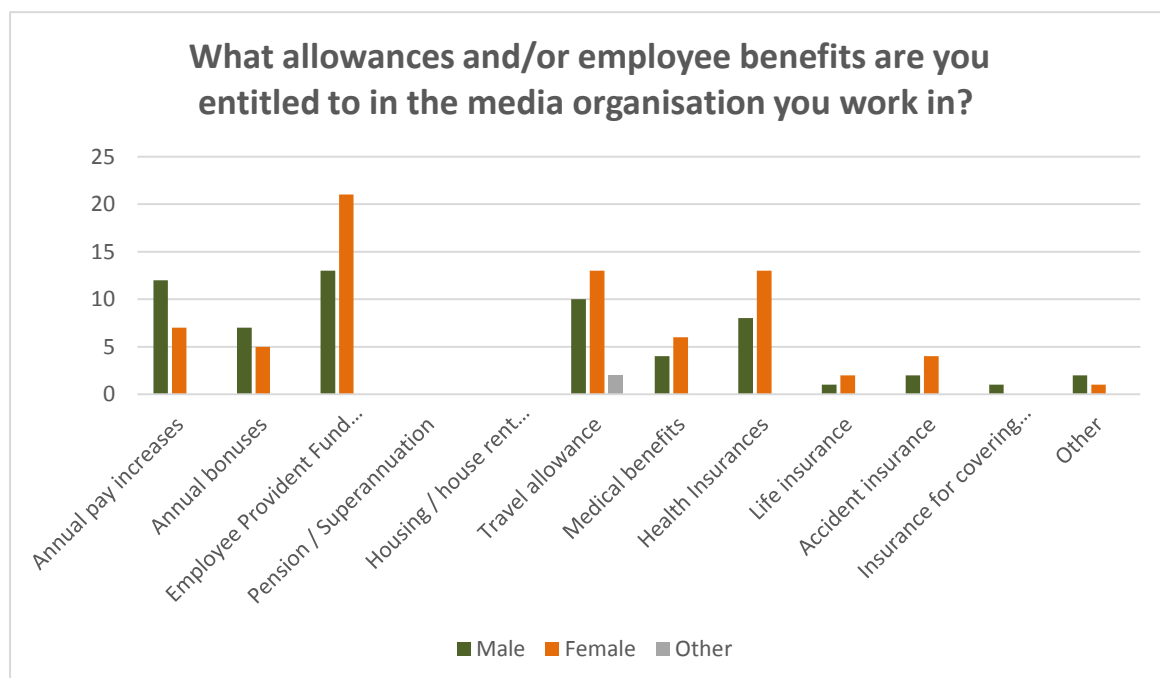
Despite trade unions within media organisations clamouring for the improvement of working conditions in the industry, it is clearly a work in progress. There have been situations where journalists have had to enforce their right to recover entitlements and situations where companies have illegally withheld the transfer of funds for workers’ welfare and entitlements.

In Sri Lanka, as in other countries in the region, the contract system is abused to penalise journalists and to deny them entitlements such as Employees’ Provident Fund (EPF) and Employers’ Trust Fund (ETF). There have also been instances of non-payment of gratuity for those who have completed five years of work at one media organisation as well as ad hoc terminations, again, using the contract system to the owner’s advantage.

One example was when Risidra Mendis, a former *Sunday Leader* journalist successfully sued the owner and publisher for the termination of her services for alleged misconduct. But not every woman journalist is able to take this costly and time-consuming path.

Media workers or journalists who do not have unions within their organisations unfortunately have to act individually as they find no support from the industry. Media owners do not encourage the formation of trade unions or employees taking union membership.

Respondents were asked the types of benefits they were entitled to in their media organisation. Those who were eligible to answer this question gave a variety of responses. Those that garnered the most responses (from highest) were employee provident fund, travel allowance, health insurance and annual pay increases. The three most popular for female respondents were employee provident fund and travel allowance and health insurance. For male respondents, the three most



popular were employee provident fund, annual pay increases and travel allowances. None of the respondents said they had access to pension/superannuation or housing/house rent allowance.



The three key paid leave entitlements mentioned by the respondents were: sick leave (other than maternity), annual leave and casual leave. 23.75 percent of respondents referred to maternity leave while only 1.25 percent mentioned paternity leave, the latter not being a common labour practice in Sri Lanka. Across the paid leave options, there was an even gender breakdown with the large gap only evident for maternity leave. Many journalists who spoke on condition of anonymity, claimed that some of the benefits, specially leave, flew out of the window when it came to the reality within a newsroom.

Have you even been denied a benefit you were entitled to?	Total	Female	Male	Other
Yes	11	3	6	2
No	45	25	20	0
Grand Total	56	28	26	2

Most respondents (80.35 percent) said they had never been denied a benefit they were entitled to, while 19.64 percent said they had. The following responses were derived by those denied benefits:

- *About 20 percent of articles published go unpaid.* - Male
- *Didn't receive annual salary increment* - Female
- *No EPF or ETF at our organisation* - Male
- *There was a mobile package which could've been very helpful in cost cutting in communication. It was given to some, excluding me and some others* - Male
- *We are entitled for annual pay increase. But for the last two years we were denied a salary increase.* - Male

Less respondents had been denied paid leave, with only 9 percent selecting this answer option, had even responses from women and men respondents. Some of those who had been denied gave the following reasons:

- *I was denied to attend education programs with paid leave* – Male
- *Media houses are very exploitative in Sri Lanka! They force us to work overtime and on weekends without pay or very inadequate compensation. They also have various strategies to trick people from taking their paid leave.* – Female
- *Many are expected to work overtime and off days without pay. They are also usually kept on contracts that do allow for paid leave (although this is illegal)!* - Female

Within the workplace, among the facilities available to respondents, more than half (57.5 percent) said they had separate toilets for men and women. Another 52.5 percent said they had security at their workplace and 47.5 percent said they had transport after late shifts. Just over a quarter (27.5 percent) said they were provided with safety equipment. Only 1 respondent said they had access to childcare facilities and that respondent was a female.

The survey also explored leave and re-entry conditions for women after childbirth in their own organisation. The largest proportion of respondents (26.78 percent) rated the leave and re-entry for women after childbirth as 'good', closely followed by 'acceptable' (25 percent). Several women journalists said that sometimes it was their own decision to take a break after child birth but others mentioned significant family pressure to give up work.



“It is as if all the professional growth I have achieved means nothing, after I delivered a baby. I get back to work and find the employer looking at me as if I am unemployable,” Sudhira Piyatissa, a woman journalist from southern Sri Lanka said. In such situations, most women end up becoming freelancers, earning much less than what they were capable of, before childbirth. Some others completely give up their careers. I can’t imagine why women are professionally penalised for a biological process!”

A few urban English language journalists appeared to opt out of full time work for a few years to raise children, and most of them were able to return to their previous or equal posts after a few years. However, for others, particularly in the regions, and in the non-English media, not having a job or holding a position lower than the one held before motherhood is not their choice.

According to Shehan Baranage, director of news and current affairs at the privately-owned Derana TV and Radio, every effort had been made to facilitate the return of women after childbirth. “We have held the positions without filling them even temporarily, to encourage their return. We consider it natural for women to bear children and as an institution, believe in the facilitation of women staff members to have a work-life balance.”

Training is an important component of building professionalism, but in Sri Lanka, media organisations do not have the mechanisms in place for in house training. Some media organisations try to carry out in-house training but these is not necessarily training that reaches high professional standards.

The experience of the majority of journalists is that most organisations do not invest in the capacity building of their staff, and generally don’t value training, even when it is offered by NGOs, media rights organisations or unions, free-of- charge. Only 51 percent of respondents said their workplace offered training or development programs, and not surprisingly 75 percent of men, compared with 39 percent of women choose this answer.

The survey shows that the majority of respondents, 91.25 percent, undertook training through work or other avenues. The largest proportion (61.25 percent) was conducted by NGOs, followed by the IFJ (18.75 percent). Interestingly, more women undertook trainings with their employer than the IFJ, in contrast to the pattern in male respondents.

For those who had undertaken trainings, the following responses were given:

- *I did not get such opportunities*
- *Opportunities were given to others*
- *We never get training opportunities at this office*

According to a senior woman journalist working for several reputed international media outlets, professional growth is important for all journalists but managements often do not concur.

“We have to undergo refresher courses from time to time to update our skills, if we are serious about our profession,” she said. “I was invited by an international agency to attend a high-level training in Jordan on a topic so relevant to Sri Lanka: women migrant workers. But I was prevented from going despite my dedicated service and long years as a rights-focused journalist. I have worked for months without taking a single off day and brought credit to the media institution I work for. Most management teams have no concept of training and do not understand its value.”



Women journalists in general have fewer opportunities for training. According to interviewees, the disparity is more for those who are away from urban centres or working for the vernacular media. They say women journalists have fewer opportunities for training and even when they do come their way, just like the assigned beats, they are sent for ‘soft’ trainings. Survey results tell the story of how priority is accorded when it comes to training.

Percentage of women in the trainings you have attended?	Total	Female	Male	Other
Less than 10%	19	8	9	2
10-25%	24	15	9	0
25-50%	19	7	12	0
More than 50%	7	7	0	0
Don't Know	3	2	1	0
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>2</b>

According to the survey, the participation level of women in trainings is quite limited, with the largest proportion (33.33 percent) putting it between 10-25 percent. The majority of respondents (86.11 percent) put it below 25 percent.

Although gender training in Sri Lanka is a low priority for most media house, respondents reacted positively to the question on gender equity training, identifying it as value addition. Three quarters of respondents (73 percent) agreed gender equity training ‘could improve the working environment for men and women’. It was the most popular response for both men and women, garnering 66 percent and 82 percent respectively from each gender.

Unlike many areas of journalism training, fewer women had the opportunity to receive safety training. Only 45 percent of respondents have been provided with safety training. Of these, there was a clear divide on gender priority - with only 35.5 percent of females compared to more than half of male respondents (54.5 percent). The largest proportion of respondents (55.5 percent) had received safety training with NGOs followed by the IFJ (33.3 percent).

This lack of access to safety training reflects in particular in the media scenario outside of Colombo. Outside the metropolitan area it is not readily available and, out of the few training programs conducted, Colombo-based journalists got the opportunities on safety trainings, including digital safety. As the survey showed, safety training still remains largely a male prerogative and even when trainings were initially conducted for women, the trainers were all men.

As a result of this some women journalists formed a core team of trainers to conduct programs on safety, and they were supported in this initiative by media organisations. “It was embarrassing and sometimes really awkward to have men conduct safety trainings. This was why we pioneered the creation of a core team of women safety trainers,” said journalist cum activist, Seetha Ranjane.

One of the most rewarding aspects of media training was the involvement of the NGO sector in building the capacities of journalists through various training programmes. Local unions/media organisations too have contributed to this process but they complain of inadequate funding. Both



groups have been affected by the oppressive political culture that culminated in a Defence Ministry directive in mid-2013 that prohibited NGOs from delivering media training and seeking to confine their role in society to one of offering humanitarian relief.

There have been instances where media trainings have been disrupted by pro-government goons, in particular training programs organised by Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) on promoting peace and reconciliation. These trainings were to include journalists from the former war zones, including women, as the program planners considered it important to ensure women's perspectives in the writing that was to follow the trainings. The selected lead trainer and the Tamil language trainers were women and the trainings intended to draw, wherever possible, 50 percent or more, of women participants. But the strictures against NGOs served to further shrink the already limited training opportunities available for women – especially Tamil – journalists.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Dawn amidst the Jaffna bunkers**

The Tamil daily and weekly *Uthayan*, meaning “dawn”, is no ordinary newspaper. Lauded by media rights organisations for its sheer ability to survive 27 years of war, suppression by the government and violence at the hands of the military and Tamil armed groups, this publishing house has paid a heavy price for media freedom in Sri Lanka.

*Uthayan* holds the island's record to date of having lost the most journalists and media workers to such violence. “The *Uthayan* deal,” according to its editor-in-chief, M. V. Kaanamylnathan, is to have lived in constant fear of being personally attacked or the fear of having staff or the institution attacked. Over the years, its courageous journalism has been celebrated not only in Sri Lanka but also overseas, with the newspaper winning coveted awards of excellence. *Uthayan's* pride however, is the Sepala Gunasena Award for Defending Press Freedom in Sri Lanka in 2009, the year in which the island's protracted war came to an end.

Housed in an unimpressive building crying for a fresh coat of paint, New *Uthayan* Publications' popular Tamil daily and weekly editions have defiantly continued to be a deeply political voice for the northern Tamil community. Many consider it natural therefore to find the *Uthayan* editor, with a career spanning 50 years of ‘tough Jaffna journalism,’ to be included among 100 journalists honoured by Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF) in 2014 as global information heroes.

The newspaper group was founded in 1985; two years after the war broke out, with the aim of providing a “true Tamil newspaper voice that could stand the test of time.” Kaanamylnathan insists that *Uthayan* has always remained relevant and especially so, after the war. The publication has remained in the forefront of news for two key reasons – its radical news reporting that is feared and feted and the courage and fortitude of its staff which has persevered in the face of extreme adversity.

In conservative Jaffna where the take on news had remained deeply political, mainstreaming gender is perhaps the last thing the institutional policy makers were worried about. “There had never been a quiet moment since we began publishing. Not even the 2002-2004 period, when a truce between the Sri Lankan Government and the Tigers was in force. While we ensure that women have equal opportunity to secure beats and advance their careers, there is no specific gender policy. Our primary focus was to publish critical information without endangering ourselves,” said Kaanamylnathan.



He said their publications came out of a war zone, reflecting the “agony that consumed an entire region”. When violence erupted, it was in the thick of it. “There were no safe houses. We have not even heard of them. Even then, we had a few women journalists with us. Our editorial was never all male,” he said.

*Uthayan* became a direct target of violence and bunkers had to be built within the newspaper premises. Looking back, the staff cannot believe that they survived death on so many occasions.

At present, *Uthayan* has a total of about 50 staff, including freelancers. It has the largest circulation in Jaffna, the northern capital, and is widely distributed in Tamil-speaking areas in the north and the east of Sri Lanka. Both *Uthayan* daily and the weekend edition each have a circulation figure between 18,000- 20,000. The ratio of male to female employment is about 5:1, handling both desk jobs such as sub-editing and field work, including reporting and feature writing. *Uthayan* online has added a new dimension to their work.

At *Uthayan*, there are no rigid demarcations with regard to journalistic functions. Journalists write features, report news and occasionally, even translate. But there is no female representation at the senior level management and women find themselves mostly at the mid-level and general editorial level. *Uthayan* does not claim to have worked towards gender inclusion in the nearly 30 years of its existence. “We barely managed to survive while practicing good journalism,” said Kaanamylnathan plainly.

While formal gender policies are not in place, there is one thing that *Uthayan* is clear about: Its refusal to promote gender stereotypes and restricting women to perform desk jobs. “We encourage them to define their own work. We can only facilitate those who want to break the mould,” says Kaanamylnathan. “It needs stamina, courage and a do-or-die attitude. You will find the *Uthayan* journalist to be different. It’s that attitude of fortitude. If you are a woman and you’ve got all of the above, we would certainly recruit you.”

For this reason, despite operating in the midst of a raging war and being a constant victim of violence, the newspaper has remained an attractive employer. “Young boys and girls are drawn to this place like moths to the *Uthayan* flame. We have lost some of our finest due to the unusual circumstances under which we functioned; there is no denying that element of danger to our journalism. But that never prevented it from attracting youngsters,” said Kaanamylnathan.

*Uthayan* has no stated employment policy that encourages women to apply for jobs. But women do apply, very regularly. Men and women can choose their beats and have similar access to employment, training and facilities, as well as leave. “There is maternity leave and women can return to work if they so wish, after childbirth.” It is little surprise that the bunker-ridden office has not had time to renovate to accommodate childcare facilities.

“Though it had been five years since the war, the situation is too far from normal for us to look at fresh models to evolve. We are also careful to report in a conflict-sensitive manner, and some of our women journalists bring stories that reflect women’s perspectives. That is value addition,” said Kaanamylnathan.

*Uthayan* has been not able to institutionally offer safety training to its journalists but has encouraged all employees to undergo training conducted by SAFMA-SL and FMM and some women





journalists underwent safety training that SAWM SL designed for them. Kaanamylnathan regrets his inability to offer an insurance cover for covering conflict.

While there is no anti-sexual harassment policy or a complaints mechanism, Kaanamylnathan said if a complaint is received, it is supposed to be handled by the human resource department though he does not recall any incidents that had to be inquired into.

Five years after the war, he says *Uthayan* has stood the test of time. “I have spent years worrying about the safety of our journalists and the institution itself. Our journalists have been killed but there has been no justice.”

The North, in his view, is not the run-of-the-mill place and *Uthayan* is not the average media house. “Look at our pock-marked walls with pictures of our murdered colleagues adorning them. This is an unusual newspaper published from an unusual region. We are different and so are the circumstances here. But we thrive on being tested.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Empowering activism beyond cultural restrictions**

In 2014, a newly-formed media alliance called the Action Committee for Media Freedom had some of its affiliates visit one of the leading publication houses in Colombo, only to have the management inform the activists that they were not welcome. The journalists who gave them a cordial welcome were subsequently reprimanded.

The visiting activists were told in no uncertain terms by the Ceylon Newspapers management that they did not wish to encourage any employee to obtain membership. For welcoming the unionists, the editor-in-chief at that time, Hana Ibrahim, was required to apologize to the director editorial, which she refused to do. Meanwhile, those who already had membership with the union were told to quit. The above is only one illustration of industry pressures in the current context.

The 1978 Sri Lankan Constitution recognised the right to organise. Since then, labour rights have been fostered in the island, often through strong union action. Despite this long history, trade unions continue to have limited women’s representation.

Increasingly, Sri Lankan journalists are apprehensive about joining trade unions due to being penalised by managements that consider trade unions as interventionist forces that dilute their control over employees. Even in media organisations and professional bodies, membership among women tends to be somewhat limited. Women journalists also say that there are two taboo words in their respective homes: ‘feminist’ and ‘trade unionist.’

“Those words spell trouble. I have colleagues who say that both references are derogatory, in their own context,” said a participant representing a State-owned media house, at the 2013 Sri Lanka Gender Roundtable.

Women are often under family pressure, not to be associated with unions. “Union action is so often viewed as something not meant for women. There have been women among pioneering trade unionists but the numbers are limited,” said Kamala Ranatunge, a parliamentarian and well-known woman trade unionist.



Representative of this reality, the survey statistics revealed that out of 39.28 percent of respondents who said they held membership with a workers' union in the media organisation they worked at, only 22.73 percent were women. Out of 37.5 percent who said they weren't members, 71.43 percent were women. So clearly women are falling through a big gap when it comes to representation.

According to Sunil Jayasekera, convenor of the Free Media Movement (FMM), mobilisation of women for leadership roles has taken time. He attributes this largely to a restrictive culture that requires women to play a subservient role.

Interestingly, more than half of all respondents (51.25 percent) said they were members of national unions. Women appear to be better represented in national unions, with 42.22 percent having membership with these unions. This compared to 60.60 percent of men.

In terms of decision-making roles in unions, the survey results showed that women were moving into those roles though this might not represent the national picture as many women journalists who answered the questionnaire are actively involved in unions, networks and associations.

Reflective of the above trends, women fare better in national unions in terms of leadership positions than in-house unions. Of the 19 women who were national union members, 57.89 percent also held leadership positions, compared with 15.8 percent in workers' unions. In contrast, 32 percent of men held leadership positions in national unions and 28 percent in workers' unions.

Despite the above indication that women enjoy a fair amount of representation in Sri Lankan media unions/associations, 62.2 percent of women and 51.51 felt women did not have enough representation or visibility in unions. Even though a sizeable percentage of survey respondents were themselves members/affiliates of various media organisations, they opined that the representation of women in unions in general is inadequate. After all, unions are not such a part of women's lives, even for professional and working women. Their lack of involvement cannot be concealed," Rosy Senanayake, women's activist and parliamentarian said.

Adding perspective, a senior woman activist on the basis of anonymity said that women are generally included in unions which are heavily male-dominated unions only as "gender justifications." "They are hardly given substantial responsibilities or visibility. Decisions are often taken by them, and what's more, unions can be very conservative and make women feel useless and intellectually inferior."

According to Lasantha Ruhunuge, there had been concerted efforts to ensure women have equal opportunity to seek office in the SLWJA. "SLWJA has had women holding all offices in the union except the position of president and secretary. At present, five out of 33 executive committee members are women, in the trade union that has a membership of more than 1500,

"There is enough room if women wish to come forward, but often, they appear to be limiting themselves, due to work, home pressures and issues connected to safety which prevents them from attending meetings etc; which are generally held after office hours," he said.

Activist photojournalist Dushiyanthini Kanagasabapathipillai noted that union/association work often tended to be an opportunity for men to gather over a drink, while it is taken for granted that women have to shoulder the major burden of domestic responsibilities, "These meetings are often



held at pubs or other watering holes, and therefore scheduled for late evenings. Women, who have no choice but to take care of their homes and also have to travel far using public transport, find it difficult to attend evening/night meetings. Women are naturally eliminated this way,” she said, adding that even when they were members, the visibility of women was still low.

Women who are currently playing leadership roles also confirm that they are required to strike a fragile balance between work, family and their work as members of various organisations. The pressures appear to be much less on men, who concede that even though many of them assist their wives at home with regard to domestic responsibilities, the pressure is less on men.

“Culturally, the burden is heavier on women and even empowered women with supportive partners, still carry the larger portion of domestic responsibilities. This is not easy and it places women at a disadvantage,” adds Lakshman Gunasekera.

According to Ruhunuge, domestic responsibilities and meetings being scheduled after working hours pose serious problems to women who wish to be active in organisations. “They are under constant pressure. After meetings, they have problems in safely travelling home. They leave their respective places of work often to resume another shift as home maker.”

According to the Convenor of the Free Media Movement (FMM), Sunil Jayasekera, “It is important that women be facilitated to reach the highest positions within media organisations and unions. We still have not got to point of discussing quotas but we have senior women who are office bearers of the organisation. We also support and work with women’s organisations and consider it an important aspect of our work. Admittedly, both inclusion and visibility can be further improved,” Jayasekera added.

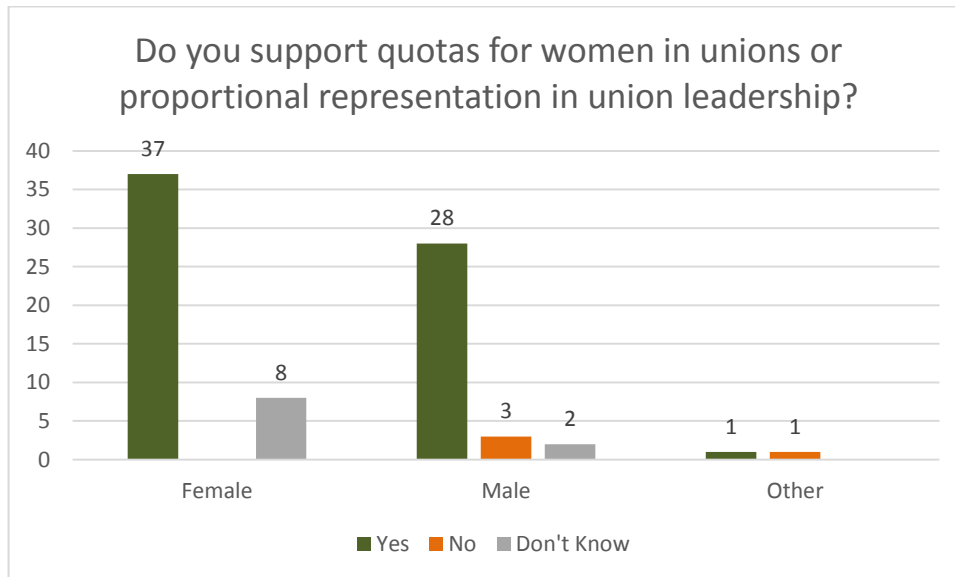
Women, though in smaller numbers, have always played an important role in the FMM not only in promoting gender equity but also in terms of influencing the organisation itself, said Jayasekera. “Women have influenced areas such as ethical journalism, promoting media standardisation and capacity building, not just within the FMM but in the industry. They have also championed within and outside the FMM, reporting with sensitivity when it comes to women, children, vulnerable communities and conflict. The issue is that such women are an absolute minority.”

FMM has played a role in creating gender sensitivity among media practitioners for over 15 years, often collaborating with other organisations. It has undertaken gender surveys, worked on the preparation of a gender charter and has had a compilation of women experts/resource persons. All these initiatives were pioneered by FMM and pushed as collaborative efforts, with other media organisations. FMM is also a leader in delivering gender trainings for journalists, including the training of trainers in collaboration with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), added Jayasekera.

FMM’s capacity building initiatives have led to the training of women as safety trainers who are now Sri Lanka’s leading safety trainers. “We have consistently worked with other media organisations to develop the Gender Charter which is now regionally adopted, among our best practices. We have assisted in convening a gender roundtable in 2013 and assisted South Asian Women in Media-Sri Lanka Chapter (SAWM-SL).”



While there is a general agreement that more women should be represented in the union, the avenues to achieve this differ. Most respondents (82.5 percent) supported quotas or proportional representation in union leadership, a response mirrored almost equally between men and women.



\*\*\*\*\*

**Mobilizing women through affirmative action**

Launched in the year 2000, the newly-formed regional media organisation headquartered in Pakistan – South Asia Free Media Association (SAFMA) – facilitated the formation of national chapters in each of the SARRC countries. The Sri Lankan Chapter played a pioneering role in creating a regional platform for women journalists by advocating its women’s wing, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM), established in 2009.

SAFMA SL is a media organisation for accredited journalists. It enjoys the highest local representation as a media organisation, with over 50 percent of its membership (out of over 100), drawn from districts other than Colombo. Exactly half of its executive committee members – or six of the 12-member committee – are women.

“Among its key attributes is its strong network at the district level. SAFMA SL has facilitated the inclusion of provincial correspondents long before others,” said chapter founder and current president, Lakshman Gunasekera.

Though there is an increase in the number of women employed in the media industry, this does not get reflected at the leadership level, he said. In the print media, it had been documented that women are absorbed in to the industry in large numbers, mostly as sub-editors and newsroom workers. Over 50 percent of women employees are required and encouraged to perform desk-bound functions, while field reporting is undertaken by a minority. Women desk heads are a wafer thin minority, he noted.

A reflection of this is found in SAFMA SL too, with women forming about 20 percent of SAFMA SL membership, though their quality of participation is extremely high and, often above its male



members. Gunasekera noted that executive meetings are often women majority- driven, with organisational decisions and programmes often decided by women.

“There is a reason for the empowered presence of women within SAFMA SL. There had been facilitation of women’s participation and empowerment, enabling women to become active at the leadership level.

While there are no specific gender-related programs launched by SAFMA SL at present, in the past, there had been several. SAFMA as both policy and practice, according to Gunasekera, promotes women’s leadership and creates space for their participation.

SAFMA SL has made conscious attempts to facilitate women’s participation, taken affirmative action, already have women leaders within the organisation who have nurtured a second tier of young women for leadership and are role models, constantly expanding the space and scope for women. But the key strategy was to enable the creation of a separate woman’ wing for the region, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM), at the regional level – which led to the formation of one of the most successful chapter organisations in the region – SAWM Sri Lanka.

Sharmini Boyle, SAFMA SL Secretary at that time, played a pioneering role, even though many did not see the necessity to promote a separate women journalists’ wing in the region. When this was mooted, even women in the region scoffed at it. In 2004 at a successful networking meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal, it was first proposed by SAFMA SL that there should be a separate women’s media organisation. It took five more years to get there.

SAWM SL is now five years old, and both organisations have a strong relationship and continuous collaborations, drawing strength from each other and positively influencing each other. SAWM SL is the only women journalists’ organisation in the country at present, again, with regional co-ordinators and a strong membership. While SAFMA SL does not have reservation for women journalists in the executive committee, SAWM SL President is an ex officio member of SAFMA SL.

Since its inception, SAFMA SL members had been oriented to be inclusive and gender sensitive. “The increased participation of women and the acceptance of women’s leadership role have become possible because of the evolved gender awareness within SAFMA SL. It was not this strong at the beginning. Male members have been oriented to facilitate women and to accept women’s leadership. Over the years, SAFMA SL had influenced other organisations, by sheer example, to include more women and facilitate greater engagement,” says members.

Gunasekera admits that such evolution for men needs support too. “Within SAFMA SL, men have got used to strong female participation and contributions, women at the helm etc. They have made adjustments and continue to make adjustments as part of their growing sensitization. It’s a process,” he said.

Gunasekera added that the mental orientation of both men and women is important to consider: “Simple things like the timing of meetings can be not supportive of women’s participation. At every turn, women are pulled back and restrained.”

Being highly gender focused, SAFMA SL derives from the SAFMA policy which positively promotes gender equity and it forms a part of the constitution of the national chapter. Indeed, one of SAFMA SL’s best practices remains its continuous facilitation of women.



\*\*\*\*\*

**The silent crime of sexual harassment**

Sexual harassment is one of the most common forms of violence against women and is defined as receiving any unwanted conduct of a sexual nature including sexual comments, fondling, lewd gestures, jokes, emails, text messages, pornographic pictures, coercion and more.

One of the least addressed issues in the working environment of most women; sexual harassment in various forms affects women in multiple ways, even though they hesitate to speak about it. According to the survey, 46.25 percent said they had witnessed workplace sexual harassment. 62.22 percent of women and 27.27 percent of men selected this answer.

Not surprisingly, of the 16.25 percent who said they had experienced workplace sexual harassment all were women. 15 percent other respondents referred to experiencing harassment, again all females, not of a sexual nature.

Witnessing sexual harassment is quite different to experiencing it, and as victims of sexual harassment often say, perpetrators often have their support groups/individuals within the workplace, as in this case: “When I complained to the department head that I was being harassed sexually by the associate editor, there were other men who were old enough to be my father, advising me “not to upset colleagues.”

“When I objected to lack of action by the head, I was offered free advice by other men, who told me to avoid spitting on my own face by raising these issues,” a media worker from a Colombo-based English publication said.

The young woman did not find a sympathetic ear, not even among young female colleagues, who advised her to ignore the incident ‘for the sake of peace’. Suddenly, there were no witnesses, not even those who saw the supervisor come and talk to the young woman in a suggestive manner. The last straw was when her department head asked her to withdraw her complaint and sign a document claiming she had misunderstood the situation.

“Why should I? I get calls in the middle of the night asking what I wear and to report to work early, so that he could ‘make me happy.’ After I officially complained, I was told that I had misunderstood his jokes,” the angry woman complained.

But not everyone in the same editorial was able to react. Three others, including two who were already in supervisory positions, had their buttocks touched by a middle-aged male colleague. Even when prompted to complain, they refused to do so, and did not even warn the man warned by the department head. “So now the men in this office tell me, it’s normal behaviour in a workplace and other women don’t complain. I have overacted, according to them,” she explained.

Except the media worker who is now pressing sexual harassment charges, the three women who refused to comment had their own reason for maintaining silence. It is not difficult to explain when the status of the perpetrators is identified.

In the survey, the top answer selected by respondents indicated that colleagues and superiors were the perpetrators. More than half of the women who had experienced sexual harassment (69.23



percent of women) said it was by a colleague, while 30.77 percent said it was a superior at work. A smaller percentage (15.38 percent) said the harassment came from interview subjects.

Interestingly, in a promising trend that could break the culture of silence around sexual harassment, 84.61 of the female respondents who had been sexually harassed said they shared their experience. Of these, 72.72 percent said that they told a friend, another 63.36 percent said they told a superior and the remaining said they told a colleague. No one reported it to the police.

When asked for reasons for not informing anyone of the incident of harassment, two women respondents mentioned that they 'dealt with it themselves' and the third said she didn't tell anyone because of shame and embarrassment.

In Sri Lanka, the absence of complaints and redress mechanisms contribute to the reluctance on the part of women to complain against incidents of sexual harassment. When asked about the availability of an official complaints cell or sexual harassment policy at workplace, 57.78 percent of women and 42.42 percent of men, mentioned there was no such mechanism. Only 12.5 percent of respondents said they had access to this in their organisation. A significant number, (30 percent) did not know if a complaints cell or harassment policy existed.

During the 2013 SAMSUN Gender Roundtable in Colombo, many who were working in the Tamil language, majority of them from the north and east of Sri Lanka, agreed that cultural prohibitions prevent them from speaking up. "We will be twice victimised, by then perpetrator first and next by the system," one participant said. Another participant noted that some of the best young talent had left the industry as a result, and it was a significant reason for women to leave journalism.

As Hana Ibrahim said, this was the very reason to introduce a national framework within to deal with sexual harassment. "All of us must lobby for an internal gender policy and have complaints and redress mechanism."

President of the South Asia Free Media Association-Sri Lanka Chapter, and editor of *The Sunday Observer*, activist and trainer, Lakshman Gunasekera said: "There is no need to tolerate sexual harassment of any form, whether verbal or physical. People must begin to identify it for what it is, and not consider it a practical problem linked to sharing of newsroom space with men. There should be strong resistance and that should also come from men, as much as women,"

When asked about modes of effectively combating sexual harassment, 41.25 percent of respondents ranked 'stronger laws' as the number one measure, followed by 30 percent who thought 'awareness raising among women' was needed. Women said that 'stronger laws' and 'awareness-raising among women' were the two best measures, while men chose 'stronger laws' and 'awareness-raising among men'.

It is clear that the issue of sexual harassment at the workplace, though highly prevalent in the Sri Lankan society, is one of the ongoing silent crimes as victims fear to break their silence. While women have come forward to support the global campaign against violence against women, Sri Lanka's campaign is yet to innovatively include the vital issue of workplace sexual harassment as one issue that deserves more attention.

**Following the leaders on gender equity**



One of the main difficulties in handling workplace discrimination and sexual harassment stems from the absence of institutional gender policies that also include sexual harassment policies. The Sri Lankan media industry, despite employing significant numbers of women at different levels, has hardly considered the significance of creating a safe environment for women employees, beyond the entitlements that are ensured through their employment contracts.

Does your organisation have a gender policy?	Total	Female	Male	Other
Don't know	14	9	5	
No	28	15	13	
Yes	14	4	8	2
Grand Total	56	28	26	2

Indeed, 50 percent of the respondents mentioned the absence of a gender policy at their workplaces. As one person confided: “For most men, gender is a blurred concept but they think it definitely has nothing to do with them! They also think that women journalists like to include women’s features, pages and programs because we want to stand out, and not because of the fact that women’s issues are hardly ever discussed with the seriousness it deserves by the mainstream media.”

Respondents also showed support for a gender policy within their institutions, with 64.28 percent agreeing that it would contribute to gender equity.

One of the reasons for women’s reluctance or alienation from unions is also that while involved in a range of focused on rights and entitlements of a workforce, gender issues were often brushed aside as not being important. Unions like FMM are trying to change that. While FMM does not have specific campaigns or programs to encourage women’s participation, women have always formed more than 50% of the participant at any event/program.

Sunil Jayasekara said developments of guidelines like the Sri Lanka gender charter should not be underplayed: “It is due to the direct influence of gender sensitive men and empowered women that FMM was able to play a lead role in the development of that charter,” he said.

But according to several women journalists, many of their workplace related issues are linked to their gender, including sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination when it comes to assignments, promotions and even increments.

“Unions have to reflect the views of women too. Generally, issues that particularly affect women journalists are not addressed and this is a problem,” said Ruwanthi Kariyawasam, journalist, activist turned politician. Kariyawasam recalls her own experiences in professional unions and said most media organisations did not pay enough attention to various forms of discrimination women faced and the silent crime that continues within: sexual harassment.

These sentiments were reflected in the responses drawn through the survey with 30 percent of respondents saying unions ‘should work with media employers on joint strategies on gender equity’. Just over a fifth of all respondents (22.5 percent) said unions and journalism organisations needed to ‘improve their work on gender equity’. Only 13.75 percent felt this was already happening.





Unions and journalism organizations in my country: (Please choose only one of the following)	Total	Female	Male	Other	Female	Male	Other	Percentage
Already promote diversity and equity	11	3	7	1	27.27%	63.64%	9.09%	100.00%
Could improve their work on gender equity	18	11	7		61.11%	38.89%	0.00%	100.00%
No fixed view	12	9	3		75.00%	25.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Should adopt a national gender equity policy	10	3	7		30.00%	70.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Should lobby government for stronger gender equity legislation	5	4	1		80.00%	20.00%	0.00%	100.00%
Should work with media employers on joint strategies on gender equity	24	15	8	1	62.50%	33.33%	4.17%	100.00%
<b>Grand Total</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>56.25%</b>	<b>41.25%</b>	<b>2.50%</b>	<b>100.00%</b>

Among the respondents (42.5 percent) showed support for the introduction of an ‘equal opportunity or gender equity policy’ as a strategy to improve gender equality in the workplace. Another strategy strongly supported was a ‘dignity at work policy’ (26.25 percent). ‘Flexible work options’ and ‘sexual harassment policy’ were also flagged.

According to Hana Ibrahim, former editor-in-chief of *Ceylon Today*, it is extremely important to include gender policies to form a part of institutional policies, enabling women through practical measures to further careers. “The inclusion of a woman news editor was a conscious decision aimed at recognising young talent and as a means of empowerment,” she says.

In fact, at one time, barring sports and business, all desk editors were women and they were contributing immensely to the making of the newspaper. They also earned those positions and were promoted to levels of desk and deputy editors based on merit, Ibrahim said.

However, such conscious decision-making is rare. Editor of the *Uthayan*, M. V. Kaanamylnathan said that his newspaper, the highest-selling Tamil publication in the north, had many young female reporters, though not by design. “It wasn’t as if we were mainstreaming gender or attempting to win accolades. It just happened,” he said.

*The Sunday Leader*, another prominent English publication also had an in-house practice though it was not a written policy. A few such examples do exist, but, so far, their influence on the industry has not been significant.

Newsrooms are a cauldron of issues, disparities and contradictions. While there had been some progress made to facilitate women’s leadership, there are various issues that women journalists, both senior and junior, insist as being vital to be addressed.



In suggesting a way forward, respondents (41.25 percent) ranked the need for more ‘family friendly work conditions’ as the strategy that would make a difference to gender equity issues. Just under a third of respondents (30 percent) felt having ‘more women in the media at every level’ would make a difference, while 23.75 percent said have ‘more gender sensitive men in the media at every level’ would assist. The top ranked response from women respondents was evenly split (37.77 percent each) with ‘family friendly work condition’s and having ‘more women in the media at every level’. Interestingly, the two top ranked responses for men were ‘family friendly conditions’ and ‘more gender sensitive men in the media at every level’.

What strategies do you think would make a difference to gender equity issues such as portrayal of women, career advancement etc?	Female	Male	Other	Total
Having more women in the media at every level	17	7		24
Having gender sensitive men in the media at every level	7	12		19
Having more women in decision making roles	14	4		18
Affirmative employment strategies	5	2		7
More family friendly work conditions	17	14	2	33
Total	60	39	2	101

Says Anomaa Rajakaruna, Vice President of SAWM – Sri Lanka Chapter and Secretary, SAFMA Sri Lanka, “The birth of SAWM as a regional organisation was a direct result of the pressures, the discrimination and the failure of other organisations to support women in their unaddressed concerns. One strategy that works is to lobby not just within local and national contexts but also at the regional level, to achieve positive changes in the media industry. Women also need to develop collective bargaining skills.”

In the absence of written policies, there have been efforts by women journalists to create institutional cultures that are respectful and receptive to women employees.

“Policies are important; they give one the framework to work within. But practices are equally, if not more, important because people draw inspiration from the industry best practices,” said Sunil Jayasekera, Convenor of the Free Media Movement (FMM).

\*\*\*\*\*

### A strong backdrop for women’s career advancement

*Ceylon Today* is an English daily newspaper published by Ceylon Newspapers (Pvt) Ltd, and is the first and only newspaper in Sri Lanka to simultaneously commence daily and Sunday editions. Right from its launch in 2011, the newspaper was designed to be different.

Three years later, some of the measures undertaken to institutionalise gender equity and newsroom diversity have taken root, says its former editor Hana Ibrahim, who admits to “modest success “in mainstreaming gender, in both editorial practices and newspaper content.

Since its inception, there has been considerable representation of women at the editorial decision-making level. While the Ceylon Newspapers management did not include a woman, a fair number of women were selected for leadership roles in the editorial functions as “desk editors.”



“Their perspectives are different and the inclusion of such diverse perspectives was considered advantageous in many ways. This has content value and provides a competitive edge in the media business,” insists Ibrahim, a firm believer in newsroom diversity.

“Inclusion of women desk heads and reporters/feature writers/sub editors was a conscious decision taken to ensure newsroom diversity and equity. The editorial departments of English publications are more inclusive than others, but the proverbial glass ceiling does exist. This is why those who have reached the top must create space through the introduction of mechanisms that facilitate women to enter the industry and develop strong careers,” notes Ibrahim.

Among the handful of women in Sri Lanka to have reached the top position as editor, Ibrahim insists that while it was a conscious move to create an inclusive editorial, with women being encouraged to join the editorial staff and to take up technical jobs which are generally a male preserve, the senior positions were offered to women based on merit. “These were capable, professional women who deserved the positions,” Ibrahim adds.

This also meant that, except for the newspaper’s sports desk, all other desks had many women staffers. “To have so many young women attached to the business desk and the online team is refreshing,” Ibrahim says.

*Ceylon Today* also wished to ensure women’s contribution to the development of a strong news desk, the core of any newspaper. It was therefore decided to appoint at least one woman as a news editor but the newspaper eventually had two instead of one news editor, both women!

“They are also excellent news hounds,” says Ibrahim, who was instrumental in introducing key measures to create an editorial that supports women professionals. The inclusion of women at all levels and ensuring their representation at the top editorial decision-making level also added meaning to *Ceylon Today*’s “equal opportunity employer” tag. As Ibrahim put it, “It needed to be a policy that is practiced. We achieved that to an extent.”

Beyond creating a strong backdrop for women’s career advancement, several steps were taken to make the editorial women-friendly. This is an area Ibrahim thinks is still work in progress.

“From equal pay for equal work to separate toilets and getting priority in night transport, etc. -- many practical measures were taken to make the working conditions supportive of female staff. However, this is an area that needs constant improvement and there is much more to be done,” she says.

Perhaps the strongest impression *Ceylon Today* initially made and then maintained was its approach to inclusive content. Dedicated space was created for women and a number of other areas, considered significant for the promotion of a plural media, were introduced. “We mainstreamed rights and feminism, areas that were largely ignored by most media houses. We created space for women by having dedicated space.”

*Ceylon Today* also made efforts to maintain high standards in journalism ethics, in both reportage and opinion writing. “In order to promote industry best practices, we voluntarily followed existing codes of conduct, and drafted an in-house code as well as a gender policy.”



*Ceylon Today* also promoted the use of gender-neutral language. An in-house glossary was prepared and there was constant editorial dialogue on the use of ethical language and the use of photographs, especially when reporting on women, children, victims of sexual assault/rape, etc. Efforts were also made to ensure that gender stereotypes and other negative references were avoided.

“We wanted our editorial practices and the content we generated to reflect respect for diversity, including race, religion, culture, gender and sexual orientation,” Ibrahim says.

An important development within the editorial was the level of influence women wielded on the development of content: news, features or opinion. Conscious efforts were made to avoid gender stereotypes in the newspaper’s content. The staff was encouraged to include women in stories as experts and sources, while the newspaper also encouraged women to become opinion writers.

Keen to build a strong team of women journalists, Ibrahim recalls that women were encouraged to be associated with media rights organisations and/or professional bodies. According to her, “They were encouraged to pursue knowledge and to undergo training. That’s value addition to any editorial. Women who wished to work with media rights organisations and other professional bodies were enabled to do so, even though such associations are on the decline due to the strong influence the government wields over media houses at present.”

Ibrahim regrets her inability so far to introduce an Ombudsperson in an editorial space that was initially designed to be both inclusive and ethical. Nevertheless, creating a sound workplace environment in terms of facilities for women did bear fruit.

Ibrahim notes that adherence to industry best practices such as the promotion of gender equity and ethical reporting also meant being open to public criticism. There had been complaints about reportage and occasionally about the portrayal of women and the sensitive subject of religious identities. “At such times, apologies have been offered voluntarily. We took responsibility, voluntarily apologised and followed a process of self-correction,” she says.

*Ceylon Today* also has had other firsts, such as monthly guest lectures, many of them dealing with aspects of ethical reporting, including gender and diversity. “We also introduced something that most Sri Lankan newsrooms did not have and still do not: mentoring sessions. We never referred to them as such but invited guest speakers from around the world to come and speak to the editorial. The staff always appreciated such interactions that helped broaden vistas,” says Ibrahim

“We tried to create a women-friendly newsroom that reported on women with care and responsibility. For this, we had women involved in editorial decision-making, in the development of content for women readers and in practically supporting younger women journalists. Still, much work needs to be done to convert an editorial into a truly inclusive one that celebrates equality and diversity,” notes Ibrahim.

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Getting beyond ‘dark age’ stereotypes**

This one is real. A male editor who walked into a newsroom to conduct an editorial meeting in early 2014, had to deal with his young female colleagues who strongly lodged their opposition to an offensive and insensitive comment he made, in an unguarded moment.



He said: “All feminists are either divorced or lesbian.” He was convinced this was so – a hard fact of life. Such stereotypical approaches daily influence the newsroom culture. It immediately undermines female leadership and casts them in roles from a past that is no longer our collective reality. In addition and much more dangerously, it naturally influences the content generated by such media houses. The result is easy to presume.

“For all the advancement witnessed in the world, when it comes to gender stereotypes, it is as if we live in the dark ages still. Often, attempt is made to perpetuate stereotypes,” said Dr Wijaya Jayathilaka, a gender specialist and a university lecturer.

The portrayal of women as sexist stereotypes continues with the media still treating women as sexual objects and victims. Such trends however, are not only local. A 2012 Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media, the largest gender study launched in 60 countries, specifically dealt with the portrayal of women and identified strong anomalies.

Just as much as any male products (from underwear to perfumes) cannot be marketed without using the image of willowy women in slinky dresses with plunging necklines, women’s tears continue to command significant market value. As such, content ends up reinforcing the gender stereotypes, in print, television and radio, not defying them – all of them ensuing that the typical Sri Lankan woman is portrayed as a home maker, mother, wife and Good Samaritan. They are hardly ever referred to as experts or resource persons, or as heroines, survivors or leaders.

However, some media institutions have made some effort to ensure there is specific content developed for women, often by women. In doing so, they have viewed women as a specific market that should be catered to.

According to Shehan Baranage, director of news and current affairs at the privately-owned Derana TV and Radio, they have made special efforts to break gender stereotypes. For example Derana TV’s flagship programme, the only political programme to be presented by a woman journalist in Sri Lanka, known as *360 Degrees*. A woman journalist was selected to conduct the programme to inject “female perspectives’ into a live political discussion, which quickly became popular. “We broke the myth that women do not understand politics. It was a pioneering effort,” Baranage said. The presenter is currently on maternity leave and the program is on hold, without any substitution, for her to return and reclaim her position.

The channel has a number of day time programs specifically targeting women audiences. “This is along our best institutional practices,” noted Baranage, to ensure 50 percent airtime for women audiences. *Wanitha Waruna* (Legacy of women), is a program by women for women that analyses newspaper content generated for women. “It is a first! There has never been such a program to evaluate content generated for women.”

Baranage added that the show enjoys a specific audience and contrary to popular belief, the audience reactions demonstrate that women are deeply political and socially conscious ... looking well beyond recipes and health tips. “We broke the mould with our content for women,” he added.

Adding to that is the consciousness of a need to balance the inclusion of views, ensure male and female voices to reflect the composition of society. It’s about reporting with gender and conflict sensitivity and due respect for diversity, to dedicate airtime for gender equity issues with large segments already developed and to veer away from reinforcing gender stereotypes.



Although women represent 51 percent of the total population in the island, women's voices are missing in the media. In the absence of gendered reporting, the space allocated for woman's issues is small. News coverage is overwhelmingly male-dominated with issues concerning women hardly finding airtime or given adequate space or exposure.

Some of these dark truths about the women in media and their portrayal were reflected in the responses derived from the respondents. The survey required respondents to analyse depictions of women and mark four top options out of 10. The top four answers reflected the social malady and, sadly, a horribly gender stereotypical media.

According to women, the top four portrayals of women in the media were as 'victims', 'negatively stereotyped', 'weak and timid' and 'survivors'. Men selected different options, ranking them first as 'victims', 'experts/leaders' and 'negatively stereotyped'. The following three choices were equally ranked fourth, 'negatively stereotyped', 'equal citizens' and 'weak and timid'. A confusing mix of dark ages and hope perhaps.

Asked about the proportion of women appearing as sources or experts in the news, nearly 50 percent felt women in these roles were less than 10 percent. Another group (42.50 percent) were of the opinion that women comprised 10-30 percent.

Respondents to the survey throughout the process have indicated their preference for policy measures that promote gender equity. Reflecting this, 47.5 percent of respondents called for the 'enforcement of guidelines on gender equity', followed by 30 percent calling for 'more gender sensitive male journalists and editors'.

## Conclusion

The research findings are reflective of a need to achieve radical reforms in societal values and in the media industry, where women are largely considered as marginal figures, despite their contribution.

Journalists in Sri Lanka face a magnitude of problems working the one of the world's most dangerous countries for their profession. Despite this, it is clear that many young people are still keen to join the industry.

So too, women are working in new frontiers online and working more as freelancers. But those who stick to the traditional route are unfortunately also continuing to face glass ceilings and reinforced stereotypes. In decision-making roles women are largely non-existent and most women remain in low to mid-level positions meaning female voices are only making it to the decision-making levels on rare occasion.

These challenges are culturally intertwined with the patriarchal composition of the journalism industry. In Sri Lankan culture, women are seen as subservient and their voice considered insignificant. They must work to overcome this, as well as break down through the glass ceiling to make significant change.

Nevertheless, across the country some media outlets and women journalists in ethnic-minorities in the North are making changes to gender equity. Some organisations are empowering their female employees, while other female journalists continue to blaze a trail for others.



# International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

The Global Voice of Journalists



Change can be made but policies and mechanisms need to be established to ensure women are paid and promoted fairly and equally.

Unions and media associations need to work to education journalists about gender equity both in terms of their workplace and their reporting. Trainings need to be developed and executed to ensure that across the country there is a shift in how female journalists are valued.