



Gender Power Dynamics and Sexual Harassment: Specifically for Women Journalists Working in Sri Lankan Newsrooms

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ABSTRACT

Sexual violence in the workplace, which has become a common social phenomenon in every country in the world, has also been reported by media institutions, which are now a driving force for social change. Therefore, this research was conducted to determine the extent to which this situation has affected the media industry in Sri Lanka. In it, an online questionnaire was administered to 100 female journalists working in media institutions in Sri Lanka under the snowball sampling method based on the survey methodology in a way that protects the privacy of female journalists. The data obtained was analyzed through SPSS software. Here, 66% of the participants in the research have experienced various forms of sexual harassment in their profession and are aware of such incidents. This harassment has occurred at all levels of the media organization hierarchy, from ownership to junior staff, and a majority of female journalists have had to pay sexual bribes to secure employment and promotions. Female journalists have also been subjected to pressure from internal parties related to the media organization as well as external parties such as



politicians, businessmen, resource persons and civil servants, and this violence has increased in frequency as verbal (84.9%), followed by psychological (57.5%) and physical (21.9%). Therefore, there is a need for a strong legal mechanism in the media sector in Sri Lanka to ensure that female journalists can work in a safe, respectful and fair professional environment.

1.0 Introduction

Sexual violence has become a common social phenomenon in every country in the world. This cannot be defined as a new situation in society because it is a phenomenon that has existed since ancient times. “Globally, gender discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace have been a growing concern. The problem has a resemblance to the collective outlook towards women” (Kundu & Tabassum, 2023, p1). United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) research suggests one in every three women faces sexual or physical violence in her lifespan (UNFPA, 2013). Therefore, in the past few years, many women have come forward with their experiences of workplace harassment through movements like *#MeToo*.

Women face gender-based discrimination in their homes, at work and in society in general, which results in gross violations of fundamental and human rights. Women journalists working in media institutions also face this, and they face gender-based discrimination and also suffer from violations of the right to freedom of expression in the course of their professional activities.

A media institution is a dominant force in society. The professionalism of the journalist plays an important role in protecting democracy and shaping public discourse. However, physical, psychological and sexual abuse and discrimination have become a daily reality for women in the media. “Women journalists have faced harassment from many sectors including state agents, politicians, news sources, and including male journalists. Worldwide, female journalists are undergoing abuse, violence, and harassment in newsrooms and in the field. Then the impact of violence upon them is manifested directly in their physical and psychological health and influences their work. Currently, social media and the Internet are also tools for violence against female journalists” (Joshi, 2023, p.45).

Paying attention to this matter “In September 2016, the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted resolution 33/2 on the safety of journalists, which condemns unequivocally any specific attacks on women journalists in the exercise of their work, including sexual and gender based discrimination and



violence, intimidation and harassment online and offline, thus highlighting the need to address gender-specific threats faced by women journalists” (Palm, 2024, p1 & United Nations, 2016).

In the socio-cultural context of Sri Lanka, discussions of gender, sexuality and harassment are sensitive and stigmatized, further complicating efforts to address these issues. According to Article 12 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka, “No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds” (Constitution of Sri Lanka, Revised Edition 2015, p4). Despite such legal enforcement, the main objective of this research is to explore the gender power dynamics and the suffering caused by sexual harassment in the work of female journalists working in Sri Lankan newsrooms. It has studied how organizational cultures, social norms, and professional hierarchies intersect to shape these experiences.

1.1 Research Problem

Despite expanding women's involvement in the Sri Lankan media industry, newsrooms still have gendered power relations that often exclude women journalists. Such relations take the form of discriminatory access to opportunities, undercoverage in decision-making roles, and tolerance or normalization of sexual harassment. These situations not only affect women's security and career progress but also set up the overall culture of news production and media ethics in Sri Lanka. The current study tries to examine how the gender power dynamics influence the prevalence, modes of occurrence, and consequences of sexual harassment experienced by women journalists in Sri Lankan newsrooms.

1.2 Research Objectives

To examine the nature and interrelationships between sexual power relations and sexual harassment experienced by female journalists working in newsrooms in Sri Lanka.

2.0 Literature Review

According to the International Labour Organization, ‘sexual harassment’ is defined as any act that affects the dignity of women and men, is unwanted, unacceptable, inappropriate and offensive to the recipient, and creates an intimidating, hostile, unstable or offensive working environment. There have been several reported incidents of sexual harassment in media workplaces. Sexual harassment is not about sex but rather about the execution of gendered power relations. Feminist theories argue that sexual harassment is the product of an organized gender system by dominant and normative form of masculinity (Uggen et al., 2004). Sexual harassment is the act of an employer, supervisor, manager or close associate influencing



the hiring, promotion, training, discipline, termination, salary increment or other benefits of an existing staff member or job applicant in exchange for sexual favors. This sexual harassment can be divided into 03 main categories as physical, verbal and non-verbal (psychological).

The right to freely engage in employment is an inalienable right of all people. Here, men and women have a legal right to equal treatment in the profession. This is a punishable offense in Sri Lanka under Section 345 of the Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 1995 and under Section 12 of the Constitution of 1978. Without these influences “Safety, protection, and freedom of expression are necessary for journalists to perform their primary responsibilities. But globally, they are being denied to female journalists. According to international feminist media analysts, women professionals face additional stress and dangers” (Kundu & Tabassum, 2023, p3). “Not so long ago, journalism was an almost exclusively male profession. Female journalists were the exception and women were discouraged to enter journalism. Today more and more women are employed as journalists. In some countries, women make up the majority of working journalists. Despite the increasing number of women in the profession, there is a long battle ahead for women before their values and voices are equally represented in the media. Around the world, there continues to be a disproportionate number of men in decision-making roles within news organizations. There have been many improvements achieved by and for women in journalism, but many problems remain as yet” (Park, 2006, p4).

Women are severely underrepresented in the news industry in Asia (UNESCO, 2015). A survey of newsrooms in Asia and Oceania found men outnumbered women by a ratio of 4:1 (Byerly, 2011). In Indonesia, women account for less than 10% of the journalism workforce (Simorangkir, 2020). “The situation is not any better for women working in the journalism industries. One in every two women journalists have gone through different forms of sexual harassment, emotional abuse, online nuisances, and other forms of gender-based violence during their work in a developed country like the USA” (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018). This situation has become even more acute in the online age. Harassment and discrimination, both inside and outside the workplace, in both online and offline settings, have created an unfavorable work environment for women in journalism.

“A fresh survey published by the Guardian in the UK showed that out of the 10 most abused writers in the online comments, 8 were women. Three in every four women journalists in the British newsroom are exposed to sexual violence and harassment. Different other studies from USA, Norway, Caribbean Region, and Australia also depicted quite similar pictures (Kundu & Tabassum, 2023, p3). According to the CFWIJ (Coalition for Women in Journalism), there were 348 documented cases of violence and



threats against women journalists worldwide in the first quarter of 2021. This number is a significant increase of 284.8% compared to the first quarter of the previous year. Similarly, 951 violations against women journalists were reported in 2024, which is a 56% increase compared to 2023. “A 2020 survey of journalists in eight African countries found nearly half of women respondents had experienced sexual harassment at work. In the Arab region, among women journalists in Lebanon, 88% identify sexual harassment as a serious problem. They experience sexual harassment from bosses, colleagues, and news sources” (Blumell, Mulupi & Arafat, 2023, p6).

The report of IMS (International Media support) 2019 identifies several core challenges in three categories. These challenges include physical security, where women journalists are at a higher risk of being targeted for sexual violence, compared to their male counterparts. Additionally, women journalists face verbal threats and online abuse, which includes explicit threats of sexual violence and personal insults that have a significant impact on their psychological and emotional well-being. Finally, sexual harassment and gender inequality are also major challenges for women journalists, where they face unequal pay, limited representation in decision-making roles, and a lack of protocols to address sexual harassment within workplaces (Joshi, 2023, p45). Therefore, more attention should be paid to addressing these problems in policy formulation.

3.0 Research Methodology

The ‘Case Study Methodology’ was used as the main research methodology here.

3.1 Data Collection

This research mainly used the quantitative data analysis method. In it, a formal questionnaire was sent to female journalists working in newsrooms in media institutions in Sri Lanka through an online method. Data were collected from 100 female journalists working in media institutions in the country for this questionnaire. According to the data obtained from the Department of Information of the Government of Sri Lanka through the Right to Information Act, No. 12 of 2016 (RTI), 801 female journalists have obtained a media identity card for the year 2025. Accordingly, data was collected from a sample representing 1/8 of the journalists in the country.

3.2 Sampling

In order to conduct scientific research, a scientific sampling method must be followed. Accordingly, data collection was carried out based on Snowball Sampling. That is, since it was not possible to include every



member of the population (all female journalists in Sri Lanka) in the sample, the questionnaire was sent to a few female journalists who were personally known and contacted them, who were then given the opportunity to contact other female journalists and fill out the questionnaire. The reason for using the 'snowball sampling method' for this research was that sexual harassment and gender power dynamics are sensitive issues. Therefore, many people may be reluctant to participate in the research unless the questionnaire related to data collection is sent by someone they trust.

3.3 Theory and concepts

This research was conducted primarily based on feminist theory. Feminist theory provides a critical foundation for understanding the systemic disadvantages women face in patriarchal societies, including the professional media sector. Feminist theory centers on the idea that gender is a major axis of power and inequality. In the context of this study, feminist theory is used to analyze how social pressures and family ties create structural and cultural barriers that disadvantage women working in newsrooms in Sri Lanka. Feminist theory is used to critique the ways in which male-centric narratives are produced within media institutions, which exclude diverse women's perspectives, and which allow harassment and sexist influences to persist.

3.4 Ethical Considerations

When conducting this research on the topic of sexual harassment in newsrooms, the researcher took steps to protect the privacy of the female journalists who provided information. Efforts were made to avoid obtaining anything that would reveal the identities of the female journalists in the sample.

4.0 Data Analysis

In this research, the data collected using the questionnaire method was analyzed using SPSS 22 software. Accordingly, in the data analysis conducted according to demographic factors in the sample, 30 (30%) female journalists representing state-owned media institutions and 70 (70%) female journalists representing privately owned media institutions were included in the sample. According to the media institutions, 35 of these female journalists represented newspapers, 1 represented magazine, 10 represented radio, 24 represented television and 9 represented web media newsrooms, while another 21 were currently out of the media profession. The sample also includes 38 women aged 20-30, 49 women aged 31-40, 7 women aged 41-50 and 6 women aged 51-60. Of the total sample, 88 women work in Sinhala, 9 in English and 3 in Tamil. The total sample also includes women journalists with less than 1 year of experience to those with more than 20 years of experience.



The results of the data analysis conducted on whether the women journalists representing the total sample faced sexual harassment in their professional activities during their service period are shown in Table 4.1 below.

The nature of sexual harassment	The ownership of the media institution						Final Result	
	State owned		Private owned		Total			
Yes, I have an experience	8	8.0%	17	17.0%	25	25.0%	66	66%
Yes, a colleague/ friend has	8	8.0%	14	14.0%	22	22.0%		
Both myself and a colleague/friend have	4	4.0%	15	15.0%	19	19.0%		
There is no such experience.	8	8.0%	21	21.0%	29	29.0%	29	29%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed	2	2.0%	9	3.0%	5	5.0%	5	5%
Total	30	30.0%	70	70.0%	100	100.0%	100	100%

4.1. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Accordingly, 66% of the total sample has been subjected to any sexual harassment in their professional life and 29% of the total sample has stated that they have not been subjected to such harassment. Also, nearly 5% have responded that they are not aware of whether they have been subjected to such harassment. According to this data analysis, the highest number of sexual harassment cases are faced by female journalists working in privately owned media institutions (46%).

The data analysis conducted according to the nature of the media institution is shown in Table 4.2.

Media institutions	Ownership of the media institution			Total	Sexual harassment by nature of the media	
	State owned	Private owned				
Newspaper	26.2%	33.8%	60.0%	Print Media	61.5%	
Magazine	.0%	1.5%	1.5%			
Radio	4.6%	6.2%	10.8%	Electronic Media	32.3%	
TV	1.5%	20.0%	21.5%			



Web Media	3.1%	3.1%	6.2%	New Media	6.2%
Total	35.4%	64.6%	100.0%	Total	100%

4.2. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Accordingly, 61.5% of the reported incidents were reported through print media (newspapers and magazines), 32.3% through electronic media and 6.2% through new media (web media). Of the reported incidents, 71.1% were reported from internal parties of media institutions and 18.4% from external parties associated with media institutions. Table 4.3, which includes the analysis of the data, is shown below.

The person responsible for sexual harassment	Responses	
	N	Percent
From an internal party related to the media organization	54	71.1%
From an external party related to the media institution	14	18.4%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	8	10.5%
Total	76	100.0%

4.3. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

This data analysis also shows that there are 8 (10.5%) people who do not know whether they have been subjected to such sexual harassment.

Also, if sexual harassment has occurred from an internal party of the media institution, the data analysis conducted regarding the positions related to it revealed that the majority of female journalists have to face sexual harassment within media institutions from fellow journalists (24.5%) and lower management (18.6%). Table 4.4 containing data in this regard is shown below.

Identifying Perpetrators of Workplace Sexual Harassment Within Media Organizations	Responses	
	N	Percent
Journalists employed at the media institution	26	24.5%
Technical Personnel in the Media Institution	7	6.6%
Lower management of the media institution (positions such as news editor, feature editor, sports editor, section head, etc.	20	18.9%
Middle level management of the media institution (Editor-in-Chief,	17	16.0%



Deputy Editor, Co-Editor)		
Top level management of the media institution (CEO, Board of Directors)	18	17.0%
Owned by the media institution	5	4.7%
Another service party affiliated with the media institution	3	2.8%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	10	9.4%
Total	106	100.0%

4.4. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

In addition, 16% and 17% responded that sexual harassment had occurred at the hands of middle management and senior management, respectively, while 4.7% and 6.6% responded that sexual harassment had occurred at the hands of media owners and technicians.

The data analysis conducted on whether female journalists had faced sexual harassment from a party external to the media organization is shown in Table 4.5 below.

Identifying External Perpetrators of Sexual Harassment Faced by Women in Media Organizations	Civil States			Total
	Yes	No	Separated from the law	
From Resource person (Interviewees)	11.3%	7.5%	3.8%	22.6%
From a Politician	3.8%	7.5%	3.8%	15.1%
From a Businessman	.0%	.0%	1.9%	1.9%
From a News sources	.0%	.0%	3.8%	3.8%
From a Government officer	3.8%	3.8%	3.8%	11.3%
Prefer not to say	15.1%	13.2%	.0%	28.3%
Others	15.1%	22.6%	3.8%	41.5%
Total	45.3%	45.3%	9.4%	100.0%

4.5. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

According to this data analysis, married journalists have been subjected to more pressure from resource persons (11.3%) and unmarried journalists have been subjected to more pressure from politicians (7.5%). It is also evident from this data analysis that married and legally separated journalists have also been subjected to severe pressure from external parties related to the media institution.



Also, according to the data analysis conducted regarding the nature of sexual harassment against female journalists, it was revealed that the majority of female journalists have been subjected to verbal sexual harassment. This is evident from the data analysis in Table 4.6.

The nature of sexual violence	Media institutions					Total
	Newspaper	Magazine	Radio	TV	Web	
Physical sexual harassment	12.3%	6.8%	9.6%	16.4%	13.7%	21.9%
Verbal sexual harassment	52.1%	28.8%	32.9%	43.8%	41.1%	84.9%
Psychological sexual harassment	31.5%	17.8%	26.0%	31.5%	28.8%	57.5%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	2.7%	2.7%	.0%	2.7%	2.7%	5.5%
Total	60.3%	32.9%	38.4%	47.9%	46.6%	100.0%

4.6. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Accordingly, 16.4% of female journalists working in television newsrooms have experienced physical sexual harassment, which is a high figure compared to other media. The second highest figure was found for journalists working in newspapers (12.3%). Similarly, verbal sexual harassment has occurred mostly in the newspaper media, with 52.1% of the total sample responding to this, while 43.8% and 41.1% of television and web media respectively responded that verbal sexual harassment occurs. 31.5% of the total sample responded to psychological sexual harassment in newspapers and television, while 28.8% responded to web media.

In the overall data analysis, it is reported that 21.9% have experienced physical sexual harassment, 84.9% have experienced verbal sexual harassment and 57.5% have experienced psychological sexual harassment.

Also, the data analysis related to the violence they have suffered under physical sexual harassment is shown in Table 4.7 below.

Nature of physical sexual harassment	Responses
	Percent
Unwanted touching	25.3%



Attempted or actual sexual assault	6.1%
Groping or fondling	19.2%
Forced hugging or kissing	11.1%
Others	26.3%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	12.1%
Total	100.0%

4.7. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

According to this data analysis, the majority of the female journalists in the sample are subjected to unwanted touching, with 25.3% of the total sample responding in this regard. Similarly, 19.2% responded that they were forced to hug, while 11.1% responded that they were forced to kiss. Similarly, 6.1% of the total sample responded that they had been forced to have sex.

Furthermore, according to the data analysis conducted regarding the nature of verbal sexual harassment, it was revealed that 14.9% of the total sample had been made jokes related to sex. Similarly, 10.7% of the total sample responded that they were asked about their personal sexual life and made various comments about the journalists' clothing. It is also noteworthy that 13.1% of the total sample responded that they make obscene jokes. Table 4.8, which contains detailed data on this, is shown below.

Nature of Verbal sexual harassment	Responses
	Percent %
Sexual innuendos or propositions	8.2%
Sexually suggestive comments or jokes	14.9%
Inappropriate questions about personal or sexual life	10.7%
Comments about physical appearance or body in a sexual manner	11.0%
Be specific about your clothing.	10.7%
Using obscene language	10.4%
Making obscene jokes	13.1%
Repeated unwanted flirting or romantic advances	8.2%
Offensive or degrading remarks related to gender or sexuality	6.4%
Others	2.7%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	3.7%



Total	100.0%
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4.8. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Also, according to the data analysis conducted on the nature of psychological sexual harassment, it is evident that the majority of female journalists are severely affected by ‘spreading gossip related to sex’, with 21.3% of the total sample responding. The detailed data analysis in this regard is given in Table 4.9.

Nature of psychological sexual harassment	Responses
	Percent %
Talking about your body with others	18.9%
Taking photos/videos without your permission	6.3%
Sending sexually explicit photos to your phone via social media	9.4%
Intimidation or threats with a sexual context	6.3%
Humiliation or belittling based on gender or sexuality	13.4%
Spreading sexual rumors or gossip	21.3%
Other	17.3%
There is no awareness of whether such violence has been committed.	7.1%
Total	100.0%

4.9. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

This data analysis further reveals that 18.9% of respondents have responded to unwanted comments about female journalists’ bodies, and 13.4% of the total sample have responded to humiliation or demeaning based on gender or sexuality. It is also apparent that 9.4% of the total sample have responded to sending obscene photos to phones via social media.

It was also revealed in this data analysis that sexual bribes have been demanded in the provision of promotions, service confirmations, salary increments, etc. The data analysis in this regard is contained in Table 4.10.

Regarding the request for sexual bribes for promotions and service confirmation		Responses
		Percent %
Valid	Yes	40.0
	No	13.0
	Some what	31.0



Total	84.0
Missing System	16.0
Total	100.0

4.10. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Accordingly, 40% of the female journalists in the sample have requested sexual bribes in order to secure promotions, service confirmations, salary increases, etc., and 31% have responded that they have made such offers on some occasions. The data analysis conducted regarding these instances of requesting sexual bribes is shown in Table 4.11 below.

Instances of Sexual Bribery in Media Workplaces	Responses	
	N	Percent %
Engaged in internship	19	21.6%
Employed on a temporary basis	23	26.1%
Employed on a contract basis	32	36.4%
Employed on a permanent basis	14	15.9%
Total	88	100.0%

4.11. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

Accordingly, 19 (21.6%) female journalists responded that they had requested sexual bribes while they were engaged in internships, 23 (26.1%) female journalists responded that they had requested sexual bribes while they were employed on a temporary basis, 32 (36.4%) female journalists responded that they had requested sexual bribes while they were employed on a contract basis, and 14 (15.9%) female journalists responded that they had requested sexual bribes while they were employed on a permanent basis.

In the data analysis conducted regarding the parties who had requested sexual bribes, the majority of the entire sample responded that the lower management of the media institution had requested such sexual bribes. 22 (27.2%) of the entire sample responded to this. Table 4.12 containing detailed data in this regard is shown below.

Gatekeepers of Promotions and Sexual Exploitation in Media Jobs	Responses	
	N	Percent %
Lower management of the media institution (News editor,	22	27.2%

feature editor, sports editor, section head, etc		
Middle management of the media institution (Editor-in-Chief, Deputy Editor, Co-Editor)	11	13.6%
The top management of the media institution (Chief Executive Officer, Board of Directors)	10	12.3%
Ownership of the media institution	2	2.5%
Political authority or an external party	6	7.4%
Union or workers' representatives	7	8.6%
Other	23	28.4%
Total	81	100.0%

4.12. Table - Field Surveys (2025)

This data analysis further shows that 11 (13.6%) of the total sample responded that middle management requested sexual bribes, 10 (12.3%) responded that upper management requested sexual bribes, and 2 (2.5%) responded that media owners requested sexual bribes. Similarly, 6 (7.4%) responded that political authorities requested sexual bribes, while 7 (8.6%) responded that trade union members requested sexual bribes.

5.0 Conclusions and Suggestions

5.1 Conclusions

This research shows that sexual harassment/violence is a significant and widespread problem affecting female journalists in Sri Lanka. The research data shows that 66% of respondents have experienced some form of harassment or are aware of such an incident. This confirms the systemic nature of the problem. Most incidents occur from internal parties such as fellow journalists, editors and management working within media organizations. The most common forms of this sexual harassment are verbal harassment, which later escalates to psychological and physical harassment.

The research also revealed that there is a trend of sexual bribery within media organizations. Participants reported being asked for sexual bribes in exchange for promotions, job security or professional benefits. This behavior is often targeted at interns, temporary and contract workers, and it demonstrates a power imbalance based on employment status.



5.1 Suggestions

- In Sri Lanka, while preparing/updating the national media policy, editors' association policy, and press ethics code, necessary amendments should be made to prevent such acts of violence against women journalists in the course of their profession.
- Establish a national media ethics code by establishing a state or independent institution in consultation with journalists, trade unions, and civil society to address sexual harassment of women journalists and investigate complaints.
- Conduct gender audits of media institutions to ensure gender equality and safeguards, and publish the results to encourage transparency and accountability.
- Failure to further ensure this accountability should result in legal action, fines, and non-issuance of media identity cards against the relevant institution.
- Establish a formal legal system, including legal aid, to protect the privacy of female journalists who are victims and to ensure justice.
- Introduce transparent, merit-based recruitment and promotion practices in the media sector, regardless of gender, in recruitment/promotion.
- Include mandatory training on equality, workplace rights and prevention of sexual harassment in the journalism education curriculum in Sri Lanka.

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