

Proposal for a national media guideline on ethical reporting of women and girl-children

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Executive summary

The National People's Power (NPP) government has a clear mandate and a strategic policy framework to advance ethical, inclusive, and responsible media practices in Sri Lanka. The National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023–2027), the Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka – II (2024–2028) and the Draft National Media Policy (2025) together provide a coherent roadmap to reform media ethics and safeguard the dignity and representation of women and girl-children.

Persistent unethical reporting—sensationalism, trivialisation of trauma, and stigmatising speech—underscores the urgency of such reform. The current formulation of a National Media Policy by the Ministry of Mass Media presents an ideal moment to embed such change, strengthening both ethical standards and institutional accountability in the media sector.

This proposal directly supports:

- Thematic Priority 2, Action 2.14 of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 2023–2027), which calls for introducing a Code of Conduct for Journalists that ensures ethical and respectful reporting on women and ethno-religious minorities, aligned with international standards such as the UN Rabat Plan of Action and Clause 10 of Gazette Extraordinary No. 162/5A (1981).
- The sectoral plans outlined for the Ministry of Mass Media as actioned in the Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka – II (2024–2028) produced by the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment.

It also indirectly supports:

- Thematic Priority 4, Action 6.1 of the NAP 2023–2027, which strengthens protection mechanisms for women and girl-children from violence and stigma – objectives that are reinforced when the media adopts survivor-centred, non-stigmatising, and accurate reporting practices.

Moreover, the proposal advances key objectives of the Draft National Media Policy (2024) – particularly:

- Objective 2: Promoting independent, ethical, and accountable journalism;
- Objective 6: Advancing gender equality and gender sensitivity within media institutions.

Together, these policy pillars underscore that ethical media reform is both a gender justice imperative and a governance priority under the NPP government's agenda.

Key findings: For nearly a decade, *Verité Media and Politics* of Verité Research, through its [Ethics Eye](#) platform, has documented unethical reporting on women and girl-children in the Sinhala

media. Monitoring by *Ethics Eye* consistently reveals harmful reporting patterns in the Sinhala media, with the core issues outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Persistent patterns of problematic reporting

Problem	Patterns of reporting in the Sinhala media on women and girl-children	Impact on women and girl-children
Sensationalised stereotypes	Subjected to negative stereotypes; crimes are sensationalised instead of sensitively and sensibly reported.	Reinforces patriarchal norms, marginalises women's contributions, and undermines their dignity.
Trivialised trauma	Violence against women and girl-children is trivialised.	Normalises violence, silences survivors, deters justice-seeking.
Stigmatising speech	Use of derogatory references, including a problematic term for rape in Sinhala.	Dehumanises survivors, entrenches stigma, and perpetuates negative stereotypes.

Recommendations: To address these critical gaps, and to align with the NPP government's reform agenda and the thematic areas and goals of Sri Lanka's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security and the Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka – II, a comprehensive National Media Guideline is required. Two immediate actions are proposed:

- **Draft and adopt a national media guideline and encourage its uptake:** Develop and promote a survivor-centred, gender-responsive, and rights-based ethical framework. This will operationalise *Thematic Priority 2, Action 2.14* of the NAP; fulfil *Objectives 2 and 6* of the Draft National Media Policy; and strengthen Sri Lanka's compliance with CEDAW. Adoption by print, broadcast, and digital outlets will help restore public trust and elevate professional standards. *Verité Media and Politics* can support the Ministry of Mass Media in drafting and piloting the guideline, leveraging its existing datasets, analytical tools, and experience in evaluating the implementation of media ethics.
- **Implement a training and sensitisation programme:** Institutionalise ethical standards through continuous training, professional development, and integration into journalism curricula. The NPP government could allocate funds in the 2026 Appropriation Bill to support the development of national media guidelines and translate them into capacity-building and training initiatives. *Verité Media and Politics* can also contribute to developing training modules and performance benchmarks that translate the guideline into measurable newsroom practices.

In implementing the above recommendations, the Office of the Prime Minister can serve as the focal point to lead cross-ministerial collaboration. The Prime Minister's leadership can help consolidate inter-ministerial efforts, incorporating key contributions from the mandate of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Mass Media. As an independent knowledge partner, *Verité Media and Politics* can support the Office of the Prime Minister and the Ministry of Mass Media in ensuring that policy design and implementation remain evidence-based and outcomes-focused.

Briefing Note: Proposal for a National Media Guideline on Ethical Reporting of Women and Girl-children

The NPP government has a unique opportunity to position Sri Lanka as a South Asian leader in ethical media standards that protect and empower women and girl-children. Persistent unethical reporting that reinforces negative stereotypes and downplays violence underscores the urgency for reform. The government's mandate to reform media ethics presents a timely opportunity to establish a National Media Guideline, supported by expert review, clear standards aligned with international best practices, and sustained journalist sensitisation, ensuring a safer and more equitable society.

Background: What is the problem?

The media plays a critical role in shaping public perception, influencing societal attitudes, and promoting the rights of all citizens, especially women and children in vulnerable situations.¹ In Sri Lanka, however, unethical and harmful reporting on women and girl-children remains a significant challenge, violating their rights, reinforcing damaging social norms and perpetuating negative stereotypes. This culture of reporting normalises violence against women and girl-children, reinforces stigma, and discourages survivors of sex crimes from seeking justice.²

This issue is situated within a broader context of gender inequality in Sri Lanka. While women constitute 52% of Sri Lanka's population, they are severely underrepresented in key decision-making spheres, holding only 9.7% of parliamentary seats and 8.8% of senior management roles in the corporate sector.³ Sri Lankan female labour force participation also remains critically low at 31.3% in 2023 compared with 68.6% for men.⁴

A significant contributing factor to the poor state of reporting is the weakness of Sri Lanka's self-regulatory framework for media, anchored in outdated and poorly enforced codes that fall short of international standards. A recent gap analysis by *Verité Media and Politics* reveals that local guidelines remain largely reactive, focusing on harm avoidance through restrictions on prejudice, sensationalism, and disclosure of personal details.

By contrast, international standards advocate proactive measures such as gender-sensitive language, equal representation, survivor-centred reporting, and accountability of perpetrators—areas that are largely unaddressed within Sri Lanka's existing media codes. This gap underscores how Sri Lanka's ethical frameworks fail to promote gender equality and dignity in reporting on women and girl-children, leaving media practice outdated and reactive rather than inclusive and rights-based.

¹ Happer, Catherine, and Greg Philo. "The Role of the Media in the Construction of Public Belief and Social Change." *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, vol. 1, no. 1, 16 December 2013, pp. 321-36, <https://jspp.psychopen.eu/index.php/jspp/article/view/4761/4761.html>; "The crucial role of media in achieving gender equality." *International Media Support*, February 2020, <https://www.mediasupport.org/the-crucial-role-of-media-in-achieving-gender-equality/>.

² "Blaming and Shaming Survivors of Gender Based Violence in the Media Must End!" *Centre for Rights Education and Awareness*, April 2021, <https://home.creaw.org/2021/04/07/blaming-and-shaming-survivors-of-gender-based-violence-in-the-media-must-end/>; "Harmful Media Narratives an impediment to SGBV survivors' access to justice." *Witness*, September 2022, <https://www.witness.org/launch-sgbv-reporting-guide-africa/>.

³ "Then & Now: Women's Representation in Parliament." *Manthri.lk*, April 2025, <https://manthri.lk/en/blog/posts/then-now-women-s-representation-in-parliament>; and "Sri Lanka's Economic Crisis: An Opportunity to Advance Gender Equality." *Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka*, Policy Insights, 2022, <https://www.ips.lk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/SRI-LANKAS-ECONOMIC-CRISIS-AN-OPPORTUNITY-TO-ADVANCE-GENDER-PARITY.pdf>.

⁴ "Labour Force Survey - Annual Report 2023." *Department of Census and Statistics*, 2024, <https://www.statistics.gov.lk/LabourForce/StaticallInformation/AnnualReports/2023>.

For nearly a decade, Verité Media and Politics of Verité Research, through its [Ethics Eye](#) platform, has flagged and challenged the persistent issue of unethical reporting on women and girl-children in the Sinhala media. Recently, it partnered with the Embassy of France in Sri Lanka and the Maldives to promote ethical media standards concerning women and girl-children.

With the NPP government's strong mandate and pledges to reform media ethics and empower women and girl-children, this is a pivotal moment for change. This briefing note outlines key findings from our monitoring and the urgent need for a national guideline to safeguard their rights.

Findings: What does the data tell us?

Unethical and problematic reporting, particularly on women and girl-children, remains a significant challenge in Sri Lanka. For nearly a decade, *Ethics Eye* has documented the persistence of such harmful practices, demonstrating that these violations are not isolated incidents but reflect an entrenched culture in the Sinhala media. Key issues frequently flagged by *Ethics Eye* include:

(i) Sensationalised stereotypes

Women are frequently subjected to negative stereotypes and sensationalism in the media, where they are often depicted through sexist and reductionist lenses.⁵ Such coverage marginalises women, reinforcing unfair societal roles and making them feel excluded and invisible, as their broader contributions and identities are sidelined through such reporting.

For instance, *Ethics Eye* flagged a Women's Day report on an all-female flight crew, and noted that the journalist's question reinforced a damaging stereotype by directly questioning whether women are capable of working together harmoniously. *Ethics Eye* used a [reel](#) to problematise this coverage as an example of negative stereotyping of women.

Furthermore, reportage on crimes involving women tends to sensationalise such women and/or negatively highlight women exclusively.⁶ Such reporting, which prioritises sensationalism over sensitivity, reinforces harmful gender stereotypes, exacerbating the existing vulnerabilities faced by women and girl-children in Sri Lanka.

See Annexure-I for more instances where women have been negatively stereotyped and/or subjected to sensationalist coverage.

⁵ "Policewomen are not spared from roadside catcalling, nor from cartoonish objectification." *Ethics Eye*, February 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C3Fttg5h8rd/>; "Avoid singling out women." *Ethics Eye*, August 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/yisAukWJXDvBNLi4/>; "Beautiful suspect?" *Ethics Eye*, April 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C5itd5ChlmL/>; and "Is the external appearance relevant to the news?" *Ethics Eye*, January 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C2e8kE6hpqc/>.

⁶ "Reporting on the murder of a child by their mother." *Ethics Eye*, September 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/posts/pfbid02cSmaH2G3TNyDLPWQEGatMi4qXSSbkcFVuXisSaKyDnMCCAAjFBSS2F3uPDh3JHdrl/>; and "Would you permit if this was you?" *Ethics Eye*, March 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/ethicseye/posts/pfbid0rEQYeBL2QbjUfhdvxRBVShd6S1tsuGvePV81R3gz4Pg2mdrY5WsMYCeKC3868b6MI/>.

(ii) Trivialised trauma

The Sinhala media frequently trivialises violence against women and girl-children, downplaying the seriousness of incidents such as sexual harassment.⁷ Victim-blaming, particularly of women and underage children in cases of sexual abuse, is also common in the Sinhala media. This type of reporting has the potential to not only normalise violence against women and girl-children but also perpetuate a culture of shame and silence, further discouraging survivors from seeking justice.

For instance, *Ethics Eye* flagged newspaper coverage of a sexual harassment case involving a vocalist and a guitarist in a music band: “The guitarist tried to tune the singer inside the bus.” Such phrasing trivialises the offence through euphemism, which can desensitise audiences to the gravity of the act and perpetuate a culture that normalises harassment.

See Annexure-I for more instances where sexual abuse of women has been trivialised in the Sinhala media.

(iii) Stigmatising speech

Sinhala media coverage of gender-based violence often relies on stigmatising language that frames women and girl-children in harmful ways, reinforcing discriminatory stereotypes and deepening their marginalisation in society. Sinhala media outlets often use the term “*dooshanaya*” (pollute) or “*keleseema*” (defile)⁸ for rape, which implies that the survivor/victim is tainted or corrupted. See Annexure-I for instances where stigmatised terminology was used in media coverage of women.

Additionally, the Sinhala media stigmatises women by using derogatory terms such as “*ganika*” (prostitute) to describe sex workers.⁹ By contrast, the English media tends to use ‘sex worker’ (equivalent to *lingika sramikaya* in Sinhala). The use of such stigmatising and derogatory language in the Sinhala media reinforces harmful stereotypes and dehumanises women, contributing to their marginalisation in society.

These problematic patterns of media reporting, identified by *Ethics Eye*, demonstrate the urgent need to address the harmful portrayal of women and girl-children in Sri Lankan media. This continued misrepresentation is profoundly damaging, as it violates their fundamental rights while entrenching destructive societal norms and perceptions that jeopardise their long-term well-being and social standing.

⁷ “Not ‘strange English’ but sexual harassment.” *Ethics Eye*, December 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C0ttNyShfkl/>; and “Strange lesson or sexual harassment.” *Ethics Eye*, February 2024, https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=365741132883822&id=100083438136844&rdid=VGTH3y2qLfIQNcdV#.

⁸ “Reporting highlighting *dooshanaya*.” *Ethics Eye*, September 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/yYqMbklhwQTENvKx>; and “Sexual harassment or *keleseema*/ *dooshanaya*?” *Ethics Eye*, August 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/tNfvnBm4ceG1K4uz/>.

⁹ “Prostitute or sex worker?” *Ethics Eye*, November 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/COMViWhByFI/>; “Not a spa girl, but a massage therapist.” *Ethics Eye*, March 2024, <https://www.instagram.com/p/C4zgfdehk61/>; and “Servant or domestic worker.” *Ethics Eye*, October 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CyyCcWuBFW1/>.

Next steps: What can be done?

The current socio-political environment presents a pivotal opportunity to address the long-standing issue of unethical media reporting concerning women and girl-children in Sri Lanka. The NPP government has a clear and public mandate for reform, having [promised](#) before the 2024 election to ‘introduce a code of ethics for media institutions and journalists that aligns with international standards’ and to promote ‘a safer world for children’ and ‘gender equality in social-life.’

This commitment was formally actioned post-election, with the revision of media ethics included as a core function of the new Minister of Health and Mass Media.¹⁰ The government has also begun formulating a National Media Policy by gathering inputs from various stakeholders, including from the *Verité Media and Politics* team.¹¹ These initiatives align with the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2023-2027) and the Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka – II (2024-2028). This convergence of political will and urgent public need, as evidenced by *Ethics Eye*’s findings, creates a rare window to enact meaningful and lasting change.

As such, this proposal directly supports:

- Thematic Priority 2, Action 2.14 of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP 2023-2027), which calls for introducing a Code of Conduct for Journalists that ensures ethical and respectful reporting on women and ethno-religious minorities, aligned with international standards such as the UN Rabat Plan of Action and Clause 10 of Gazette Extraordinary No. 162/5A (1981).
- The sectoral plans outlined for the Ministry of Mass Media as actioned in the Multi-Sectoral National Action Plan to Address Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV) in Sri Lanka – II (2024-2028) produced by the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment.

It also indirectly supports:

- Thematic Priority 4, Action 6.1 of the NAP 2023-2027, which strengthens protection mechanisms for women and girl-children from violence and stigma – objectives that are reinforced when the media adopts survivor-centred, non-stigmatising, and accurate reporting practices.

Moreover, the proposal advances key objectives of the Draft National Media Policy (2024) – particularly:

- Objective 2: Promoting *independent, ethical, and accountable journalism*;
- Objective 6: Advancing *gender equality and gender sensitivity* within media institutions.

¹⁰ “The Gazette of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka – Extraordinary: No.2412/08.” Department of Government Printing, November 25, 2024, pp.34A, http://documents.gov.lk/files/egz/2024/11/2412-08_E.pdf.

¹¹ Arachchi, Ishanka Singha. “Creating an effective national media policy.” *Groundviews*, June 2025, <https://groundviews.org/2025/08/06/creating-an-effective-national-media-policy/>.

To translate this commitment into effective policy, a structured, expert-led approach is essential. A simple revision of existing codes is insufficient; a new, comprehensive national media guideline for reporting on women and girl-children is required, as current guidelines are outdated and lack specificity. The ongoing formulation of a National Media Policy and preparations for the 2026 Appropriation Bill provide immediate avenues to implement meaningful change.

Building on the NPP government's own commitments, we propose the following strategic interventions:

- **Draft and adopt a national media guideline and encourage its uptake:** Develop and promote a survivor-centred, gender-responsive, and rights-based ethical framework. This will operationalise *Thematic Priority 2, Action 2.14* of the NAP; fulfil *Objectives 2 and 6* of the Draft National Media Policy; and strengthen Sri Lanka's compliance with CEDAW. Adoption by print, broadcast, and digital outlets will help restore public trust and elevate professional standards. *Verité Media and Politics* can support the Ministry of Mass Media in drafting and piloting the guideline, leveraging its existing datasets, analytical tools, and experience in evaluating the implementation of media ethics.
- **Implement a training and sensitisation programme:** Institutionalise ethical standards through continuous training, professional development, and integration into journalism curricula. The NPP government could allocate funds in the 2026 Appropriation Bill to support the development of national media guidelines and translate them into capacity-building and training initiatives. *Verité Media and Politics* can also contribute to developing training modules and performance benchmarks that translate the guideline into measurable newsroom practices.

In implementing the above recommendations, the Office of the Prime Minister can serve as the focal point to lead cross-ministerial collaboration. The Prime Minister's leadership can help consolidate inter-ministerial efforts, incorporating key contributions from the work of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs and the Ministry of Mass Media.

In addition, *Verité Media and Politics* can provide substantial contributions to this effort, drawing on eight years of experience and knowledge gained through regular monitoring of Sri Lankan media.

Implementing these interventions would position Sri Lanka as a South Asian leader in ethical media standards, safeguarding women and girl-children, strengthening democratic values, and fostering a safer society. A National Media Guideline, underpinned by expert review and sustained journalist sensitisation, will ensure these standards are practical, effective, and enduring.

Annexure-I: Selected findings from *Ethics Eye*

Table 2 summarises media reportage of the problems identified by *Ethics Eye*.

Table 2: Summary of findings from *Ethics Eye*

Example	Problem identified	Recommended ethical alternative
Example 1: Singling out only the woman when reporting on a murder that involves seven other male suspects in Uswetakeiyawa	The media outlet disproportionately and negatively highlighted the female suspect.	Report facts without gender bias, focusing on the crime and avoiding singling out only the women unless they are directly relevant to the incident.
Example 2: Reinforcing negative gender stereotypes when reporting on an all-female flight crew	The report reinforced a negative gender stereotype by suggesting that women cannot work together harmoniously and are prone to fighting.	Highlight professional achievement without sexist framing.
Example 3: Trivialising a statutory rape in Negombo	The headline trivialised statutory rape with metaphorical language ("The guitarist tried to tune the singer inside the bus"), sexualised and sensationalised the news by calling the survivor "beautiful"	Use accurate and respectful language that communicates the gravity of the crime. Avoid sensationalising survivors, especially of sex crimes, and focus on the offence.
Example 4: Trivialising the sexual abuse of three schoolgirls	The headline omitted the word "abuse," trivialising the crime and reducing its gravity by focusing on a less severe action ("Brought three schoolgirls home...").	Ensure headings accurately reflect the seriousness of the offence. Use precise language to describe the crime without downplaying its nature.
Example 5: Sensationalised reporting of rape of a school student by the schoolteacher and her husband	The report included graphic and explicit descriptions, which sensationalised the abuse and potentially re-traumatised the survivor.	Avoid graphic detail and focus on the accountability of perpetrators. The goal is to inform the public, not to sensationalise trauma.

Sensationalised stereotypes

Example 1: This post highlights the negative portrayal of women in media coverage, examining reportage on the arrest of eight suspects following a murder in Uswetakeiyawa. Several TV channels emphasised the presence of a female suspect by saying 'a woman and seven others were arrested', casting her in a negative light, while another outlet reported the incident without such focus (eight persons arrested...).



Example 2: This reel highlights the negative stereotyping of women, focusing on coverage of an all-female flight crew on Women's Day. The journalist suggests women cannot work together harmoniously.



Trivialised trauma

Example 3: This post highlights problematic language in reporting sexual harassment, focusing on an incident where the Aruna newspaper reported, “The guitarist tried to tune the vocalist inside the bus.” Such phrasing trivialises the offence through euphemism and risks normalising harassment against survivors of sex crimes. Referring to the survivor as “beautiful” sexualises and sensationalises the incident, instead of communicating the gravity of the crime.



Example 4: This post illustrates how media framing can downplay serious offences. In reporting the arrest of a man accused of sexually abusing three schoolgirls, Aruna's headline (“දැරියන් නිදෙනකු...අනවර කළැයි” / “Allegedly abused three girls...”) highlights the gravity of the crime, whereas Dinamina's (“සිසුවියන් 3ක් ගෙදර ගෙන...” / “Brought 3 schoolgirls home...”) omits any mention of abuse, potentially minimising its seriousness.



Stigmatising speech

Example 5: This post attempts to communicate a key guideline in reporting sexual violence: journalists should avoid graphic or sensationalist descriptions that can further harm survivors. In a recent case where a teacher and her husband were sentenced for sexually abusing a schoolgirl, Divaina and Mawbima included graphic details. By contrast, Dinamina refrained from including such detail, demonstrating a more responsible and ethical approach.

