

A Handbook for Professional Journalism: Reporting on Women, Girl-children, and LGBTQIA+ individuals in Sri Lanka



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Verité Media and Politics is a specialised division of Verité Research, established in 2016 with the vision of improving public understanding and access to reliable information, while professionalising the media industry. The team advances this mandate through a sustained focus on media accountability, ethical journalism, and information integrity. Through its one-of-a-kind public service and education platforms – Ethics Eye, FactCheck.lk, The Divide, and the Media Ownership Monitor-Sri Lanka – Verité Media & Politics works to improve media reporting standards, counter misinformation and disinformation, address language polarisation, and promote transparency in media governance.

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE AND ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Good journalism serves the public interest: it equips people with accurate information to participate in public life, evaluate claims, and hold power to account. UNESCO summarises this democratic function clearly—quality journalism can strengthen government accountability, and civic engagement.¹ This public-service purpose is also reflected in core professional standards such as the Society of Professional Journalists' (SJP) Code of Ethics and the International Federation of Journalists' (IFJ) Global Charter of Ethics. These codes anchor journalism in the public right to know while requiring responsibility, independence, and accountability in how information is gathered and published.²

That role becomes even more important when reporting involves people who are more likely to face public stigma or personal consequences because of how they are portrayed in the media. In Sri Lanka, women, girl-children, and LGBTQIA+ individuals can face harassment, exclusion, community scrutiny, and retaliation if they are reported on without proper care.³ Coverage can widen public understanding and accountability—or it can deepen prejudice and expose them to avoidable harm. This is why “public interest” cannot be reduced to what the public is curious about: it is the editorial judgement to publish what materially helps the public understand an issue, while applying professional duties such as minimising harm and protecting those at risk.⁴

IMPACT OF THE MEDIA

Newsrooms make choices every day about which stories receive attention (agenda-setting) and how those stories are told (framing).⁵ These choices matter: they shape what the public notices, how people think in general, and also how they make sense of specific events and issues.⁶

For the identity groups covered in this handbook, these decisions can have real-life consequences. Women and girl-children, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and survivors/victims of sexual violence in Sri Lanka are often underrepresented, misrepresented, or portrayed through negative stereotypes. When media repeatedly amplify certain narratives (sensationalised news reporting involving women facing violence and stigmatised portrayals of LGBTQIA+ identities) while giving limited space to others (including women's expertise and leadership, LGBTQIA+ individuals' everyday realities, or reporting that examines systemic discrimination), they influence public perceptions of who these communities are, and which issues are treated as legitimate or urgent.

Sri Lanka's media landscape shows these patterns clearly. Women appear frequently in crime and entertainment coverage. They are typically cast as victims, villains, or reduced to negative stereotypes—while remaining far less visible in reporting on politics, science, and business. Those with LGBTQIA+ identities, meanwhile, tend to appear only in stories that sensationalise their identities, mock their expression, or

1 UNESCO, *Strategic Dialogue on Journalism Development Affirms Role of Journalism in Promoting Democracy and Political Participation* (2023) <<https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/strategic-dialogue-journalism-development-affirms-role-journalism-promoting-democracy-political>> accessed 15 February 2026.

2 Society of Professional Journalists, *Code of Ethics* (1973) <<https://www.spj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf>> accessed 19 February 2026

3 British High Commission Colombo and FOKUS WOMEN, *Report: Tackling Stigma of Conflict Related Sexual Violence through the Sri Lanka National Action Plan on Sexual and Gender-Based Violence* (2017) <PSVI report Sri Lanka> accessed 6 April 2026 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/645640/SV_Workshop_Report_-_Sri_Lanka.pdf> accessed 27 February 2026.

4 *ibid.*

5 Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, 'The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media' (1972) 36 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 176.

6 *ibid.*

frame their lives as signs of moral decline or deviance. These portrayals do not reflect the whole reality of either community, but they do influence how the public encounters and understands them.

This handbook exists to support journalists in recognising recurring patterns in coverage and strengthening professional judgment, so reporting is accurate, fair, and respectful of the people whose lives appear in the news. It is grounded in the pressures media professionals face and provides practical tools to help uphold standards consistently and minimise avoidable harm, even under tight deadlines.

WHY THIS HANDBOOK?

This handbook supports professional journalism. It focuses on two identity groups that are repeatedly affected by the way they are covered in Sri Lankan media: **women and girl-children**, and **LGBTQIA+ individuals**. It does not replace existing codes. Instead, it takes the core principles already recognised in Sri Lanka and turns them into practical, day-to-day guidance using real local examples.

Sri Lanka already has several media ethics frameworks, but they are largely broad, dated, and lacking specific guidance on reporting on women or LGBTQIA+ communities. These gaps become especially visible in coverage of gender-based violence, sexual offences, or stories involving gender identity and sexual orientation.

RECURRING PATTERNS IN PROBLEMATIC REPORTING

Monitoring of Sinhala media, particularly through Ethics Eye (an online platform under the Verité Media and Politics of Verité Research that flags and documents unethical and problematic reporting), has revealed three key recurring patterns in reporting that raise ethical concerns and require urgent attention.⁷

a. Negative, harmful, and inaccurate stereotypes

Some coverage relies on negative stereotypes that shape how audiences interpret a person before they encounter the facts. Women are frequently reduced to domestic or "respectable" tropes, particularly in sensationalised crime news.⁸ Meanwhile, LGBTQIA+ individuals are often marginalised by "othering" and derogatory language—such as "unnatural", "abnormal"—and unnecessary focus on their appearance or identity even in news where it is not directly relevant.⁹

b. Trivialising trauma

The local media frequently downplays violence against women and girl-children, especially in incidents involving sexual harassment or abuse.¹⁰ Sexual violence involving girl-children is sometimes described using euphemisms, which can desensitise audiences to the gravity of the act and make it harder for survivors to seek safety, health, and justice services after violence. Blame-shifting framing, particularly of women and underage children, can also be common.

⁷ Verité Media, 'Ethics Eye' < www.facebook.com/ethicseye/?_rdc=1&_rdr# > accessed 17 February 2026

⁸ Verité Media, 'If this news was about you, would you accept this reporting?' (Facebook, 20 March 2024) < www.facebook.com/ethicseye/posts/pfbid0rEQYeBL2QbjUfhdxvRBVShd6S1tsuGVePV81R3gz4Pg2mdrY5WsMYCeKC3868b6MI > accessed 19 February 2026; Verité Media, 'The news of a mother murdering her infant: sensationalist reporting.' (Facebook, 27 September 2024) <

⁹ Verité Media, 'Is the attire of the deceased relevant to the news?' (Instagram, 9 February 2024) < www.instagram.com/p/C3IQs-68BGZ3/ > accessed 19 February 2026; Verité Media, "'Unnatural behaviours" mentioned, statutory sex crime omitted.' (Instagram, 15 February 2024) < www.instagram.com/p/C3XuPEBBk6/ > accessed 19 February 2026; Verité Media, 'What's radical about a girl weightlifting?' (Instagram, 28 March 2024) <

¹⁰ Verité Media, 'Not "strange English" but sexual harassment' (Instagram, 11 December 2023), < www.instagram.com/p/C0ttNySh-fkl/?igsh=MW42cjV0Y3locWs4dA%3D%3D > accessed 19 February 2026; Ethics Eye, 'Stange lesson or sexual harassment?' (Verité Media, Facebook, 12 February 2024) < www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=365741132883822&id=100083438136844&r-did=VGTH3y2gLfIQNcdV > accessed 19 February 2026

c. *Perpetuating stigma through language*

Separate from negative stereotyping, some reporting uses language that invites stigma by marking people as shameful or “less human.” For instance, Sinhala reporting often uses the term *dooshanaya* (දූෂණය translates as pollute) or *keleseema* (කෙලෙසීම translates as defile) to describe an incident of rape or sexual abuse. These words imply that the survivor has been “tainted” or “corrupted,” shifting attention from the crime to the supposed loss of purity of the victim.

Such framing reinforces shame, can discourage survivors from reporting incidents, and risks causing further psychological harm. Similarly, derogatory terms such as *samanalaya* (සමනලයා translates as butterfly are used to mock men in same-sex relationships. Language of this kind does not describe facts; it ridicules identity and signals to audiences that discrimination is acceptable.

These patterns reinforce existing prejudices and can cause real harm—online and offline—including harassment, stigma, reputational damage, and long-term psychological distress. This handbook has been designed to address these gaps directly. The aim is simple: to give reporters, sub-editors, editors, news producers, media trainers, cartoonists, and online desks a set of quick, usable guidelines that help uphold high professional standards—even under tight deadlines. The underlying principle is to minimise harm in reporting.

WHAT THIS HANDBOOK COVERS?

The chapters that follow respond to these patterns by focusing on three thematic reporting areas where professional judgement is most tested—and where poorly judged reporting is most likely to cause harm.

1. **Reporting on gender representation:** How women and girl-children are portrayed in public life, in professional contexts, and in everyday news reporting.
2. **Reporting on sexual orientation and gender identity:** How LGBTQIA+ identities are described, when identity is relevant (and when it is not), and how language and visuals can either inform or stigmatise.
3. **Reporting on sexual violence:** How to report sexual violence responsibly—especially where survivors face intense stigma and where unethical reporting can retraumatise, expose, or obstruct justice. This guidance applies to reporting involving women, girl-children, and LGBTQIA+ individuals, while also recognising that sexual violence affects people of all genders and reporting should avoid harm to any survivor.

HOW THIS HANDBOOK WAS BUILT

The recommendations in this handbook were reached through four areas of work:

- *Identifying patterns of unethical reporting in Sri Lankan media*

Verité Media and Politics’ Ethics Eye platform has documented unethical and problematic reporting in Sinhala media since 2016, revealing recurring harmful patterns in reporting on women and girl-children, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and survivors/victims of sexual violence. Data analysis over a two-year period (2022 to 2023) indicates patterns that include sensationalised crime coverage, negative gender stereotypes, and misrepresentation of LGBTQIA+ individuals. These findings constitute Sri Lanka-specific evidence of what goes wrong in day-to-day reporting and where change is most needed.

- *Reviewing principles of Sri Lankan media ethics standards*

This handbook is grounded in existing local standards, including the Sri Lanka Press Council Code of Ethics (1981), the Editors’ Guild Code of Professional Practice (2000), and other locally developed codes

and charters.¹¹ These codes provide the foundation for a Sri Lanka-specific framework that emphasises non-discrimination, privacy, and sensitivity in reporting. However, they are either outdated, inconsistently implemented, or limited in scope, offering little specific guidance on reporting about women, girl-children, and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

- *Drawing on good practices from international standards*

International norms have also informed the handbook. The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics, for instance, highlights the obligation to "minimise harm" and to treat all people "as human beings deserving of respect."¹² Guidance from UN agencies and global news organisations—especially on survivor-centred reporting and careful language use—has been selectively adapted to align with Sri Lanka's cultural context and legal environment, and to build on existing Sri Lankan media ethics standards.

- *Understanding the perspectives of Sri Lankan media professionals*

The content of this guide has been shaped through discussions with editors, news producers, reporters, activists, academics, and legal and health professionals working daily on gender, sexuality, and violence. Their input sharpened the focus on recurring difficulty areas, including language choices, visual representations, the framing of crime, and differences among print, television, and online content. The handbook, therefore, reflects the concerns practitioners themselves identified as most pressing in current media practice and aims to be useful to them on a day-to-day basis.

MINIMISING HARM: THE GUIDING PRINCIPLE BEHIND THE GUIDELINES

Reporting on women and LGBTQIA+ communities in Sri Lanka often means engaging with subjects marked by stigma, trauma, violence, inequality, and social risk. In this context, the central professional obligation guiding this handbook is the **duty to minimise harm**.

Minimising harm is not about avoiding difficult stories or diluting the news. It is about approaching those affected with care and responsibility, recognising that how a story is framed, written, and illustrated can either offer protection or deepen the harm they face. As the Society of Professional Journalists puts it, "ethical journalism treats people as human beings deserving of respect".¹³

This duty is especially critical in Sri Lanka, where reporting that is done without thinking through its potential impact can expose women and LGBTQIA+ communities to harassment, surveillance, family rejection, loss of employment, or even physical violence when they are named, pictured, or described without sufficient care.

Three linked principles flow from this duty and guide the rest of the handbook.

- *Compassion and empathy as professional judgement, not bias*

Compassion is often misunderstood as a threat to objectivity.¹⁴ However, when grounded in verified facts it strengthens ethical judgment. It helps journalists decide what to include, what to leave out, and how to frame a story without causing unnecessary harm.

11 Sri Lanka Press Council, Code of Ethics for Journalists (1981) < www.mediareform.lk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/20-Sri-Lanka-Press-Council-setting-out-of-Code-of-Ethics-for-Journalists.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026; Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka, Code of Professional Practice (Code of Ethics) of the Editors' Guild of Sri Lanka Adopted by the Press Complaints Commission of Sri Lanka (2000) < www.fmmsrilanka.lk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/2016-Code-of-Professional-Practice_Eng.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

12 Society of Professional Journalists, *Code of Ethics* (1973) < <https://www.spj.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/spj-code-of-ethics.pdf> > accessed 19 February 2026.

13 *ibid.*

14 Centre for Journalism Ethics, 'Practicing Compassion in an Unbiased Journalism' (University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2008) < <https://ethics.journalism.wisc.edu/2019/04/18/practicing-compassion-in-an-unbiased-journalism/> > accessed 19 February 2026.

In practical newsroom terms, compassion can start with a simple question:

If this story were about me or someone I care about, would I still run it this way?

At the same time, compassion also needs to be “informed.”¹⁵ In stories about women or LGBTQIA+ individuals, it is not enough to show a painful image or a dramatic quote; audiences also need to know why something happened, whether it reflects a wider pattern, and what, if anything, can change. Compassion should be anchored in clear, relevant information that helps people understand the problem and consider solutions. Without this grounding, reporting can leave audiences shocked, helpless, or misled.

- *Privacy as a right, not a courtesy*

Privacy is not a courtesy; it is a fundamental ethical expectation. Privacy is essential for survivors of violence and for LGBTQIA+ individuals who may face real harm if identified without consent. The Privacy & Dignity guide by the National Center for Victims of Crime in the United States stresses that careless disclosure can retraumatise individuals and even disrupt legal processes.¹⁶

Ethically, access to information does not automatically justify its publication. Therefore, it is recommended that journalists ask themselves: does the public truly need this information, or would including it simply feed curiosity at someone else’s expense?

- *Dignity in language and visuals as a standard, not a choice*

Language and images can stigmatise or dehumanise individuals. Terms implying impurity, abnormality, or immorality—and visuals that sensationalise bodies or gender expression—can result in “second victimisation,” where people feel harmed again by media portrayals.¹⁷ For this reason, journalists should choose language and visuals that are neutral, relevant, and respectful—so that reporting informs the public without turning people into spectacle or reinforcing stigma.

The chapters that follow apply these principles to three reporting areas that require particular attention in Sri Lanka. Each chapter offers concrete language choices, examples from Sri Lankan media, and practical tools for improving coverage in everyday newsroom conditions.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ National Centre for Victims of Crime, *Privacy and Dignity: A Guide to Interacting with the Media* < https://victimsofcrime.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Privacy_and_Dignity_final.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026

¹⁷ *ibid.*

CHAPTER 1: REPORTING ON GENDER REPRESENTATION

This chapter focuses on gender representation in everyday reporting. It focuses on how news stories portray, especially, women in ways that shape public ideas of credibility, authority, capability, and social value. When reporting uses gender as a shortcut for character, capability, or “respectability,” it does not merely reflect social attitudes; it quietly strengthens them.

In Sri Lanka, long-standing newsroom routines, tight deadlines, inherited storytelling habits—and sometimes unconscious bias—can surface in coverage without journalists realising it. Reporting may slip into familiar patterns: women are described through appearance, domestic roles, or morality rather than expertise; professional achievements are framed as surprising “because she is a woman”; interview questions drift toward marriage, childcare, or “permission” instead of the subject’s work; women are singled out in crime reporting to add drama; and colloquial sayings or labels that perpetuate stigma.¹⁸ These habits are often not intentional, but they matter because they not only shape how audiences view women, but also how women and girl-children view themselves and their place in public and private life.

In this context, minimising harm is not about avoiding difficult stories or softening scrutiny. It means doing the work of accurate reporting with discipline: choosing dignity over ridicule, relevance over distraction, and fairness over double standards. While the examples in this chapter mainly involve women and girl-children because they are disproportionately affected by these patterns, the same principles—relevance, and fairness—should apply to reporting across all genders.



Core principle: Portray women without reinforcing negative gender stereotypes or shifting attention to their gender and social roles.

1.1 AVOID STIGMATISING LANGUAGE THAT UNDERMINES WOMEN’S PROFESSIONAL SUITABILITY OR TECHNICAL COMPETENCE

In Sri Lanka, women are frequently framed through outdated assumptions about what they can or should do.¹⁹ This appears across thematic areas. In political coverage, for example, women may be described as unsuitable because they are “soft-spoken.” In sports coverage, women athletes may be framed as anomalies or as exceptional simply for participating.²⁰ Such framing pushes women’s professional identity into the background and places unnecessary emphasis on their gender. This concern has also been highlighted in the Media Gender Charter for Sri Lanka Media, which notes that women are often described in domestic terms rather than by their professional identity.²¹

¹⁸ Prof Anuruddhi Edirisinghe and others, *Reportage of Unnatural Deaths of Women and Girls in Sri Lankan Newspapers* (UNFPA Sri Lanka, ‘Population Matters’ Policy Issue 07, February 2018) < https://srilanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/6.%20Policy-Brief07_English_0.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026

¹⁹ Do not use language that perpetuates the stereotype of women. Such language is offensive, out of date and often simply inaccurate’ Reuters, *Reuters Handbook of Journalism* (2015), 417 < https://www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Reuters_Handbook_of_Journalism.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026; ‘Avoid gender stereotypes that do not mirror the world and its possibilities and perpetuate a bi-dimensional portray of the society’ *UN Women, Guidelines for Gender and Conflict-sensitive Reporting* (2019) ‘Five Key Principles of Gender-Sensitive Reporting’, 5 < https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20ECA/Attachments/Publications/2019/07/Guidelines%20for%20Media%20and%20Gender%20Ukraine/Guidelines_ENG_prew_40719_compressed.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.


²⁰ UN Women Türkiye, *Gender-Responsive Sports Reporting Handbook* (2025) < gender-responsive-sports-reporting-handbook.pdf > accessed 6 April 2026.

²¹ Sri Lanka Development Journalists’ Forum, *Media Gender Charter for Sri Lanka* (2020) < <https://ldjf.org/assets/downloads/publications/mgc-sri-lanka.pdf> > accessed 19 February 2026.

How to put this into practice



- Treat women’s participation in politics, science, business, sports, and technical fields as ordinary and legitimate—not unusual or surprising.
- Avoid irrelevant references to stereotypically feminine qualities in professional contexts—for example terms such as සුමුදු (translates as delicate) or සියුමැලි දැන් (translates as soft hands). Such language can imply that women do not naturally belong in the field, reinforcing the perception that professional competence in certain fields is inherently masculine and that women are exceptions rather than the norm.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>"කතාවට කියන්නේ පිරිමින්ගේ හොර වැඩ අල්ලන්නට කාන්තාවන් තරම් දක්ෂයන් මිනිසිට නැති බවය. අපේ කල්පනාවේ හැටියට ඒ සහජ හැකියාවට දැන් ලොකුම වටිනාකම දී ඇත්තේ වැඩ බලන පොලිස්පති..... ඒ දැන් රටේම හොර වැඩ අල්ලන්න කාන්තාවකට භාර දී තිබීම නිසාය."</p> <p>(Translates as "As the saying goes, no one on earth is better at uncovering men's misdeeds than women... In our view, this natural talent has now been given its greatest recognition by the Acting Inspector General of Police... for the task of uncovering the entire country’s malpractice has now been entrusted to a woman").²²</p>	<p>"ජ්‍යෙෂ්ඨ පොලිස් නිලධාරී <නම> අපරාධ පරීක්ෂණ දෙපාර්තමේන්තුවේ අධ්‍යක්ෂ ධුරයට පත් කර ඇත. එම පත් කිරීම සිදු කර ඇත්තේ ඇයගේ සේවා වාර්තාව, විමර්ශන පළපුරුද්ද සහ ආයතනික රෙගුලාසි පදනම් කරගෙනය."</p> <p>(Translates as "Senior police officer <name> has been appointed as Director of the Criminal Investigation Department. The appointment was made based on her service record, investigative experience, and institutional requirements.")</p>
<p>"සුමුදු අතින් යකඩ නවන සුන්දරියෝ"</p> <p>(Translates as "Beauties who bend iron with tender hands").²³</p>	<p>"ඇය ගොඩනැගිලි ද්‍රව්‍ය අලෙවිසැල / හාඩ්වෙයාර් වෙළඳසැල විශ්වාසයෙන් සහ කාර්යක්ෂමව මෙහෙයව තිබේ."</p> <p>(Translates as "She manages the hardware store confidently and efficiently.")</p>

22 Ethics Eye, 'Is catching secret acts of men an innate ability of women?' (Verité Media, Facebook, 17 December 2024) < <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/19jmBRw7Xi/> > accessed 19 February 2026.

23 Ethics Eye, 'Occupations that are stereotyped based on gender?' (Verité Media, Facebook, 16 March 2023) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1G7fjYCdbU/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“ගිනි නියන හමුදාවේ හිටියට ගිනි නිවන හමුදාව කතුන්ට අකැප ද?”</p> <p>(Translates as “‘They are in the ‘brigade that kindles the fires’, but why is the fire brigade off-limits for women?’”).²⁴</p> <p>NB: Women are stereotypically viewed at times as “ගිනි නියනවා” (setting fire), which implies they exacerbate a situation by spreading gossip or indiscriminately sharing information.</p>	<p>“හැම තැනකම කරට කර සිටියත්, ගිනි නිවන හමුදාව තවමත් කාන්තාවන්ට අකැප ද?”</p> <p>(Translates as “Although they are on par [with men] in every area, is the fire brigade still off limits for women?”).</p>
<p>“වළලු දැමූ සිනිඳු අත්වල වළලු වෙනුවට ටිකට් පොතක් අතට දුන්නේ ගිය සතියේය.”</p> <p>(Translates as “It was just last week that, instead of bangles, ticket books were placed in those soft hands, adorned with bangles”)</p> <p>NB: Culturally, women are equated with beauty and softness, rather than professional competence. Hence, the term “වළලු දැමූ අත” (translating to “a hand adorned with bangles”) is used in language to indicate the involvement of women.</p>	<p>“ශ්‍රී ලාංකේය කාන්තාවන් මෙතෙක් කාලයක් නියැලී නොසිටි බස් කොන්දොස්තර වෘත්තියට නව පණක් එක් කරමින්, පසුගිය සතියේ සිට කාන්තාවන් බස් කොන්දොස්තරවරයන් ලෙස සේවය කිරීම ආරම්භ කළහ..”</p> <p>(Translates as “Women commenced serving as bus conductors last week, breathing new life into the profession of bus conductors, which has long been role Sri Lankan women were not part of”).</p>



Why this matters: Framing women through negative stereotypes rather than professional ability shifts attention away from their skills, qualifications, and achievements. It also reinforces the idea that women do not naturally belong in certain professions or technical fields, and that their presence must be explained, qualified, or treated as exceptional.²⁵

1.2 DO NOT REINFORCE GENDER STEREOTYPES BY ASKING MEN AND WOMEN DIFFERENT QUESTIONS IN SIMILAR SITUATIONS

In interviews, men are more often asked about their professional trajectory, expertise, and contributions to the issue at hand. At the same time, women are more likely to be questioned about marriage, childcare, “permission” to be employed or “balancing” multiple roles—even when these topics have no bearing on the story. This shifts the frame from professional credibility to private life.

²⁴ Ethics Eye, ‘Is this reporting appropriate?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 23 February 2026) < <https://web.facebook.com/ethicseye/posts/pfbid0adzsdE6Mwz1h8tWMtR26c7BxxbU4GfMikzHYyd3W1U257sAjDfDfUuRQNJ54twTl> > accessed 27February 2026.

²⁵ UN Women Türkiye, Gender-Responsive Sports Reporting Handbook (2025) < [gender_responsive_sports_reporting_handbook.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/04/gender-responsive-sports-reporting-handbook) > accessed 6 April 2026.

How to put this into practice

- Use a reversibility test: ask whether the same question would be put to a man in the same role, in the same type of story, and for the same editorial purpose.²⁶ If not, the question may reflect gender bias rather than genuine relevance.
- Keep the focus on the subject's work, decisions, and expertise unless family context is genuinely relevant to the public-interest purpose of the report.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>"ඔබ කාර්යබහුල වෙතකොට සැමියා කියන්නේ නැද්ද රඟපාන්න එපා කියලා?"</p> <p>(Translates as "'When you get busy, does your husband ask you to stop acting?").²⁷</p>	<p>"මේ වගේ කාර්යබහුල වෘත්තීයක නියැලෙන්න ඔබේ පවුලෙන් ලැබෙන සහයෝගය ඔබට කොඳිතරම් වැදගත්ද?"</p> <p>(Translates as "How important has your family's support been in allowing you to pursue such a demanding career?")</p>
<p>"කාන්තාවෝ පිරිසකට එකට එකතු වෙලා වැඩක් කරන්න බැයි කියනවනේ, මේ... රංචු කරගත් නැනුව?"</p> <p>(Translates as "'It is said that a group of women cannot work together without fighting...").²⁸</p>	<p>"වෘත්තීයවේදීන් පිරිසක් ලෙස, ඔබ හැමෝම එකම අරමුණක් වෙනුවෙන් මේ තරම් කැපවීමෙන් වැඩ කරන්නේ කොහොමද?"</p> <p>(Translates as "As a group of professionals, how do you work effectively towards collective goals?")</p>



Why this matters: Interview framing signals credibility. Consistent standards ensure women are treated as professionals first, not as exceptions whose legitimacy depends on their arrangements in their private life.

1.3 AVOID USING DEROGATORY EXPRESSIONS THAT PORTRAY WOMEN AS IRRATIONAL, INFERIOR OR INCOMPETENT

Reporting should avoid language that uses "woman" or feminine traits as shorthand for weakness, foolishness, poor judgement, or inferiority. In Sri Lankan media and everyday speech, some expressions portray women as naturally less intelligent, less capable, or suited only for domestic work.

For example, phrases such as *ganu wadak karala* (ගැනු වැඩක් කරලා translates as doing something "like a woman") or *ganunge mole handimite* (ගැනුන්ගේ මොළේ හැඳි මිටේ translates as women's brains are on the end of a spoon-handle), which suggest women are intellectually inferior, reinforce harmful stereotypes about women's competence and social role. Similarly, the idiom ***cheettha wada karanna epa*** (චීන්න වැඩ

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ Ethics Eye, 'The reinforcement of gender disparities in newspaper supplement interviews and associated concerns' (Verité Media, Facebook, 8 February 2017) < www.facebook.com/share/1Dz62Zzh65/ > accessed 19 February 2026; Ethics Eye, 'Restrictions imposed only on women?' (Verité Media, Facebook, 8 May 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/16x3naVis5/ > accessed 19 February 2026.



²⁸ Ethics Eye, An excerpt of an interview with the manager of a Sri Lankan Airlines flight featuring an all-female crew that flew to Bangkok in March 2025; (Verité Media, Facebook, March 2025) < www.facebook.com/share/r/17KB9YjVYw/ > accessed 19 February 2026.


කරන්න එපා—don't do 'cheettha' work) uses a traditional female garment as a pejorative. By equating the cheettha with cowardice, deceit, or pettiness, the expression reduces womanhood to a set of inferior traits. Even when used casually, such expressions normalise contempt for women and shape how audiences perceive their credibility and ability.

How to put this into practice

- Describe what happened without using gender as an explanation for mistakes, poor judgement, or incompetence.
- Avoid repeating idioms that imply women are “naturally” irrational, foolish, inferior, or suited only for housework.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>"ඔහු එකක් එකටම සිතුවේ භාර්යාව මේ පොත් තොගය ගිනි රකුසාට භාර දෙන්නට ඇති කියාය. ඒ ඇයගේ නුවණ හැඳිමිටේ ඇති බව දන්නා නිසාය"</p> <p>(Translates as "He was certain that his wife must have consigned the stack of books to the flames, knowing that her wisdom was as short as the handle of a spoon").²⁹</p> <p>NB: The phrase "නුවණ හැඳිමිටේ" (wisdom in the spoon-handle) is a traditional Sinhala idiom used to suggest that a person's intelligence or foresight is very limited. In this context, using this idiom—even when quoting a source—validates a derogatory view of women's intellect; here, it characterises the husband's assumption that his wife would act impulsively by burning his books.</p>	<p>"ඉවත දැමූ පොතක් තුළ රුපියල් 5,000ක තෝට්ටුවක් සැඟවූ පුද්ගලයෙකු, පසුව සිය බිරිඳ එම පොත් ගොන්නම පුළුස්සා දමන්නට ඇතැයි සැක කිරීමේ සිදුවීමක් මෙම වාර්තා වේ."</p> <p>(Translates as "A man hid a 5,000 rupee note in a discarded book and was suspicious of his wife having burned the stack of books.")</p>

 **Why this matters:** Gendered ridicule does not add relevant information. It introduces bias and reinforces the idea that women are naturally less capable, less rational, or less credible than men.

1.4 AVOID SEXUALISING WOMEN OR GIVING UNDUE EMPHASIS TO THEIR APPEARANCE

Women are often described through looks, clothing, or suggestive cues, even when those details are irrelevant to the story.³⁰ This shifts the reader's attention from what happened to how a woman looks.

29 Ethics Eye, "Women's wisdom is only as long as a spoon handle" – Is it acceptable for media to promote such views? (Verité Media, Facebook, 1 November 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1EEyusBz4B/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

30 Prof Anuruddhi Edirisinghe and others, *Reportage of Unnatural Deaths of Women and Girls in Sri Lankan Newspapers* (UNFPA Sri Lanka, 'Population Matters' Policy Issue 07, February 2018) < https://sri Lanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/6.%20Policy-Brief07_English_0.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

How to put this into practice

- Do not refer to a woman’s looks, clothing, or hairstyle unless it is essential to the story—and only if similar detail would be included for men.³¹
- Avoid adjectives such as *roomath*, *surupi*, *sundara*, or *lassana* (රුමත්, සුරූපී, සුන්දර, ලස්සන translates as attractive, beautiful), especially in stories about crime, death or accidents, where appearance is almost always irrelevant.
- When choosing visuals, do not use cartoons, illustrations, or images that exaggerate women’s body parts or clothing in a sexualised way.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>ලොවම පුදුම කළ ලක් මව සුරකින රුමතිය. දකුණු ආසියාවේ පළමු ලෝඩ් මාස්ටර් නිලධාරිනිය ඇයයි.</p> <p>(Translates as “The beauty safeguarding Sri Lanka, who astonished the world. She is South Asia’s first woman loadmaster”)³²</p>	<p>ශ්‍රී ලංකා ගුවන් හමුදාවේ ගුවන් කාන්තාවක් ‘ලෝඩ් මාස්ටර්’ නිල ලාංඡනයෙන් පිදුම් ලබා ඇති අතර, ඒ අනුව දකුණු ආසියාවේ ප්‍රථම ලෝඩ් මාස්ටර්වරිය ලෙස ඇය වාර්තාගත වේ.</p> <p>(Translates as “An airwoman of the Sri Lanka Air Force has been awarded the ‘Loadmaster’ badge, making her the first female loadmaster in South Asia.</p>
<p>Context: The report was on the murder of an individual by their partner, and the following was used to describe the deceased individual.</p> <p>උසට සරලන මනා රූසපුවකට හිමිකම් කී [නම], 25 වියේ පසු වූ සුන්දර යුවතියකි.</p> <p>(Translates as “possessing a striking beauty that complemented her height, [name] was a lovely 25-year-old woman.”)³³</p>	<p>25 හැවිරිදි කාන්තාවක් ඇයගේ පෙම්වතා විසින් ඝාතනය කර ඇති බවට වාර්තා වේ.</p> <p>(Translates as “A 25-year-old woman has been reportedly murdered by her boyfriend)</p>



Why this matters: Appearance-led framing trains audiences to evaluate women based on a “standard” of attractiveness rather than credibility or ability. Over time, this affects how women are treated in public life—and how girls learn what matters about them.³⁴ Research in psychology and medicine also links repeated exposure to sexualised and stereotypical portrayals of women to poorer body image, higher risk of eating disorders, and other negative mental health effects.³⁵

31 Reuters, *Handbook of Journalism* (2015) < www.mediareform.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Reuters_Handbook_of_Journalism.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

32 Verité Media, ‘A loadmaster “beauty”?’ (Instagram , 9 April 2025), < www.instagram.com/p/DIOrsoqTQ_K/?igsh=MmRpN2M3a-3MyMmEy > accessed 02 April 2026.

33 Verité Media, ‘Is the individual’ physical appearance relevant to the story’ (Instagram, 20 March 2026) , < www.instagram.com/p/DWG24bLDBRc/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet > accessed 02 April 2026.

34 American Psychological Association, *Report of the APA Task Force on the Sexualization of Girls* (2007) < www.apa.org/pi/women/programs/girls/report-full.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

35 Fabrizio Santoniccolo and others, ‘Gender and Media Representations: A Review of the Literature on Gender Stereotypes, Objectification and Sexualization’ (2023) *20 International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 5770 < <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20105770> > accessed 19 February 2026

1.5 AVOID OUTDATED OR STIGMATISING OCCUPATIONAL TERMS FOR WOMEN AND WOMEN-DOMINATED WORK

Some Sinhala terms used in reporting carry older cultural attitudes that place women in a negative light or treat certain kinds of work as shameful, low-status, or morally suspect.³⁶ Journalists should reconsider such language and, where possible, use more neutral and professional terms. This is similar to shifts already seen in English-language reporting in Sri Lanka, where terms such as “domestic worker” and “sex worker” are increasingly used instead of more stigmatising alternatives. Sinhala reporting can make similar changes by choosing words that describe the work accurately without adding judgement.

How to put this into practice

- Use professional terms that describe the work without stigma or moral judgement.
- Reconsider older Sinhala expressions that reflect unequal or outdated social attitudes toward women.

Following are two areas of work in the local context where this guideline is especially relevant:

a. Domestic work

Sinhala reporting commonly uses *mehekariya* or *wedakaariya* (මෙහෙකාරිය/වැඩකාරිය translates as servant). This term evokes an older master-servant relationship and feels out of place in today’s more professional employer-employee reality. It frames the worker as subordinate rather than recognising domestic work as dignified labour.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“දරුවා බලාගත් මෙහෙකාරිය නිරුවත් කර සමාජ මාධ්‍ය වල දමලා”</p> <p>(Translates as “The servant who looked after the child was stripped naked and posted on social media”).³⁷</p>	<p>“දරුවා බලාගැනීමට සිටි ගෘහ සේවිකාව/ ගෘහ ශ්‍රමිකයා නිරුවත් කොට, වීඩියෝ කිරීමෙන් අනතුරුව සමාජ මාධ්‍ය වෙත මුදා හැරි බවට වාර්තා වේ.”</p> <p>(Translates as “A domestic worker in charge of looking after the child was stripped naked, filmed, and the video was subsequently released onto social media.”)</p>

b. Sex work

Sinhala reporting frequently uses *ganika* (ගනිකා), which translates as “prostitute,” a term that often carries moral judgement and is regularly used in ways that heighten sensationalism—especially in crime stories, where the label becomes shorthand for scandal or “character.” This framing shifts attention away from the facts and invites stigma toward the person.

English-language reporting in Sri Lanka more commonly uses “sex worker” as a neutral descriptor. Sinhala reporting can mirror that approach by using *lingika sramika* (ලිංගික ශ්‍රමික translates as “sex worker”) when the information is genuinely relevant to the story.

³⁶ ‘Balance the presence of women and men in media coverage to mirror the society, human experiences, actions, views, and concerns’ *UN Women, Guidelines for Gender and Conflict-sensitive Reporting* (2019).

³⁷ Ethics Eye, ‘Mehekaariya? [Servant?]’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 21 January 2026) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1Adp3vDDGm/ > accessed 19 February 2026



 Avoid	 Use
<p>ගණිකා සේවයේ යෙදුණු සුරූපී කතුන් දැලේ</p> <p>(Translates as “Beautiful women involved in prostitution arrested.”)³⁸</p>	<p>ලිංගික ශ්‍රමිකයින් ලෙස සේවය කළ කාන්තාවන් අත්අඩංගුවට</p> <p>(Translates as “Women engaged in sex work arrested.”)</p>



Why this matters: Outdated and stigmatising language used especially in sensational contexts does not simply describe work; it also carries social judgment about women and the kinds of labour associated with them. Clear, respectful wording supports accurate reporting and helps journalists avoid causing unintended harm—while treating the people they report on as individuals, not labels.

38 Ethics Eye, ‘Prostitution or sex work?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 15 March 2021) < www.facebook.com/share/p/18FHJmQkM9/ > accessed 19 February 2026

SUMMARY – CHECKLIST FOR REPORTING ON GENDER REPRESENTATION

	 Avoid	 Use
1.1	<p>Negative gendered stereotypes that make women’s expertise sound “surprising,” “unusual,” or secondary to gender.</p>	<p>Lead with competence and role. Treat women’s participation in public and professional life as ordinary and legitimate; explain credibility through experience, qualifications, and performance—and not using their gender.</p>
1.2	<p>Asking women different questions from men in similar situations. Especially, questions about marriage, childcare, “permission,” or balancing roles when the story is about professional work.</p>	<p>Use a reversibility test. Ask whether the same question would be put to a man in the same role, story, and editorial context. Keep the focus on work, decisions, and expertise unless family context is genuinely relevant.</p>
1.3	<p>Derogatory expressions that use “woman” or feminine traits as shorthand for irrationality, inferiority, foolishness, or incompetence.</p>	<p>Describe actions and events without using gender as an explanation for mistakes, poor judgment, or incapacity. Avoid repeating sexist idioms, even casually.</p>
1.4	<p>Sexualising women or giving undue emphasis to appearance.</p>	<p>Keep language and visuals strictly relevant. Focus on actions, evidence, and context; mention appearance only when essential—and only when the same would be done for men.</p>
1.5	<p>Outdated or stigmatising occupational terms for women and women-dominated work, especially labels that carry moral judgement, “low status”, or ridicule.</p>	<p>Use role-accurate occupational terms. Describe work without moral judgement (e.g., “domestic worker,” “sex worker”) and mention a profession only when it is directly relevant to the story.</p>

CHAPTER 2: REPORTING ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

This chapter examines how Sri Lankan media reports on sexual orientation and gender identity.³⁹ In practice, coverage often relies on sensationalism, speculation, stereotypes, and derogatory language. Stories relating to LGBTQIA+ individuals often highlight their clothing, or appearance—even when these details are irrelevant to the event being reported. This kind of reporting can demean people or distort LGBTQIA+ identities, and encourage audiences to treat their identity as the story rather than the facts.

In Sri Lanka’s context, the stakes are high. LGBTQIA+ individuals may already face social stigma, possible family rejection, and legal vulnerability. In this context, unethical reporting—even when not intended to harm—can expose individuals to harassment, loss of work, family conflict, and physical risk.

Minimising harm here is therefore not about avoiding coverage; it is about applying professional discipline. This means describing people as individuals rather than stereotypes; protecting identity where disclosure could cause harm; verifying terminology and not relying on assumptions; including only details that help the audience understand the event; and avoiding language or visuals that ridicule, expose, or sensationalise these individuals.

In practice, it requires journalists to pause and ask: Is this detail necessary to explain the story—or does it simply draw attention to identity?



Core principle: Portray LGBTQIA+ individuals with respect and avoid harmful stereotypes or unnecessary exposure.

2.1 AVOID NEGATIVE IDENTITY PROFILING BY HIGHLIGHTING LGBTQIA+ IDENTITY, ESPECIALLY IN NEGATIVE CONTEXTS

In Sri Lankan media, LGBTQIA+ identity is often highlighted selectively—most commonly in stories about crime, accidents, deaths, or other negative events.⁴⁰ At the same time, LGBTQIA+ identities are rarely mentioned in neutral or positive contexts, such as professional achievements, community contributions, or everyday life. This creates an imbalanced pattern of representation.⁴¹

This selective visibility results in negative identity profiling. When identity is repeatedly highlighted only in connection with wrongdoing, scandal, or harm, it can create the impression that LGBTQIA+ people are more likely to be associated with such events.⁴² Over time, this reinforces stereotypes and shapes how audiences interpret unrelated incidents.

A related problem is the use of appearance as a proxy for identity. Clothing, hairstyle, or makeup cannot confirm a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity and presenting such details as though they do — reduces complex identities to visual markers that audiences are invited to read negatively.⁴³

³⁹ Associated Press, *The Associated Press Stylebook* (55th edn, 2020) ‘gender and sexuality’.

⁴⁰ Ethics Eye, ‘Is the attire of the deceased relevant to the news?’ (Verité Media, Instagram, 9 February 2024) , < www.instagram.com/p/C3lQs68BGZ3/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

⁴¹ Agence France-Presse, *Editorial Standards and Best Practices* (February 2025), 12 < www.afp.com/communication/afp_ethic_Feb-ruary_2025.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026; *The BBC’s Editorial Standards* (BBC, June 2019), 83 < <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/bbc-editorial-guidelines-whole-document.pdf> > accessed 19 February 2026. Ethics Eye, ‘Is the “Tomboys” stereotype necessary?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 9 February 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/17wjM1F4Ti/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

⁴² Yvonne Jewkes, *Media and Crime* (3rd edn, SAGE Publications Ltd 2015); Larry Gross, *Up from Invisibility: Lesbians, Gay Men, and the Media in America* (Columbia University Press 2001).

⁴³ Niall Richardson and Adam Locks, *Body Studies: The Basics* (1st edn, Routledge 2014).

How to put this into practice



- Report the facts of the incident without suggesting that a person’s LGBTQIA+ identity caused, contributed to, or helps explain what happened.
- Do not “prove” identity through appearance. Clothing, hairstyle, or makeup cannot confirm identity and should not be presented as evidence.
- Apply a relevance test before mentioning LGBTQIA+ identity. What is relevant should connect to accurate and positive cultural understanding or reference, not to prejudice, shock value, or stigma.
- Where identity is genuinely relevant (for example, in stories about discrimination, policy, or rights), report it accurately and with context.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“නායිලන්ත ලිංගික සංක්‍රාන්තිකයා ළඟ එක් කෝටි 20 ලක්ෂයක “කුෂ්”.</p> <p>(Translates as “Thai transgender caught with £120 million worth of ‘Kush’”).⁴⁴</p>	<p>“රුපියල් කෝටියක් වටිනා කුෂ් මෙරටට ගෙනා නායිලන්ත ජාතික සැකකරුවෙක් අත්අඩංගුවට ගෙන ඇති බව වාර්තා වේ.”</p> <p>(Translates as “A Thai-national suspect has been arrested for smuggling Kush worth 10 million rupees into the country.”)</p>
<p>Context: The report detailed the death of an individual following an assault by the person he had attempted to sexually abuse.</p> <p>සංක්‍රාන්ති ලිංගික තරුණියගෙන් පහර කෑ 62 හැවිරිදි අයෙක් මරුව.</p> <p>(Translates as “A 62-year-old dies after being assaulted by a transgender woman.”)⁴⁵</p>	<p>තරුණියකට සිදු කිරීමට තැත් කළ ලිංගික අතවරයක් අතරතුර ඇති වූ පහරදීමක් හේතුවෙන් 62 හැවිරිදි පුද්ගලයෙකු ජීවිතක්ෂයට පත්ව තිබේ.</p> <p>(Translates as “A 62-year-old man has died following an altercation that occurred during an attempted sexual assault on a woman).</p>

44 Ethics Eye, ‘Let’s compare these headlines. Which reporting style do you choose?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 23 May 2025) < www.facebook.com/share/p/17SbYnNNRp/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

45 Ethics Eye, ‘A sexual abuse and a death? But the focus is on sexuality?’ (Facebook, 18 December 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1CgeKkPgHa/ > accessed 02 April 2026.

 Avoid	 Use
<p>Context: The following example comes from the headline of a news report about the discovery of a dead body by hotel staff in Hikkaduwa. It referred to female undergarments in a sensational manner to imply that the victim belonged to the LGBTQIA+ community. If relevant, such details should be presented later in the report simply as items found at the scene.</p> <p>කාන්තා යට ඇඳුමින් අහිරහස් ලෙස මියගිය තරුණයෙකුගේ මළ සිරුර හික්කඩුවේ හෝටලයක.</p> <p>(Translates as "The body of a young man, who died under suspicious circumstances and was found wearing women's undergarments, was discovered in a hotel in Hikkaduwa").⁴⁶</p>	<p>සැකකටයුතු ලෙස මියගිය අයෙකුගේ මළ සිරුරක් හික්කඩුවේ හෝටලයක තිබී සොයාගෙන ඇත.</p> <p>(Translates as <i>the body of an individual, who died under suspicious circumstances, was discovered in a hotel in Hikkaduwa</i>).</p>



Why this matters: Negative identity profiling can cause real harm even when there is no bad intention. When LGBTQIA+ identity is repeatedly highlighted in negative contexts such as stories about crime, death, or scandal—but not in stories about achievement, community, or everyday life—the media creates a pattern of stigma.⁴⁷ Over time, this pattern can make the group seem deviant, not because of any one statement, but because of the repeated negative association.

2.2 AVOID SLURS, MOCKERY, AND “ABNORMALITY” LANGUAGE

Once a journalist has determined that LGBTQIA+ identity is relevant to a story, the next question is how to describe it.⁴⁸ This is where Sri Lankan reporting frequently causes harm – not necessarily through intent, but through inherited vocabulary.

Sinhala terms such as සමනලයා (*samanalaya*, which translates as butterfly), or framings such as අසාමාන්‍ය (abnormal) and අස්විභවික (unnatural) are not neutral descriptions.⁴⁹ They carry embedded judgements: that LGBTQIA+ identities are defective, comedic, or morally suspect. When journalists use such language – even casually, even quoting others – they reproduce those judgements as though they are fact.

46 Ethics Eye, 'Your thoughts on this reporting?' (Facebook, 02 February 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/1c68gFEsUg/ > accessed 02 April 2026.



47 Bruce G Link and Jo C Phelan, 'Conceptualizing Stigma' (2001) 27 *Annual Review of Sociology* 363 < [Conceptualizing Stigma | Annual Reviews](#) > accessed 6 April 2026.

48 'Do not use language that perpetuates sexual, racial, religious or other stereotypes. Such language is offensive, out of date and often simply inaccurate' Reuters, *Handbook of Journalism* (2015); *The BBC's Editorial Standards* (BBC, June 2019), 83 < <https://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/bbc-editorial-guidelines-whole-document.pdf> > accessed 19 February 2026.

49 Verité Media, 'Abnormality' (Instagram, 14 October 2025), < <https://www.instagram.com/p/DPyK-q7kYDx/?igsh=MThyZWM2MXy-4andlN0==> > accessed 02 April 2026.

This is directly contradicted by scientific consensus.⁵⁰ The World Health Organisation declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1990.⁵¹ The American Psychiatric Association reached the same conclusion in 1973.⁵² Describing LGBTQIA+ identities through the language of pathology or perversion is therefore not a matter of editorial preference – it is a factual error.⁵³

How to put this into practice

 Terminology to avoid	 Terminology to use⁵⁴
<p>නපුංසක (napunsaka, which in certain contexts translates to an eunuch)⁵⁵</p>	<p>සංක්‍රාන්තික සමාජභාවී පුද්ගලයා (sankrathika samajabhavi pudgalaya – transgender person)</p>
<p>සමනලයා (samanalaya, which translates as butterfly) are commonly used to mock or feminise men in same-sex relationships⁵⁶</p>	<p>සංක්‍රාන්තික කාන්තාව (sankranthika kanthawa – trans woman)</p>
<p>Wording and framing that treats gender/sexual identity as a joke, disguise, or deception (for example, avoid using: “අසාමාන්‍ය” (translates as abnormal) or “අස්චභාවික” (translates as unnatural) to describe LGBTQIA+ individuals and same-sex relationships.⁵⁷</p>	<p>සංක්‍රාන්තික පුරුෂයා (sankranthika purushaya – trans man)</p> <p>සමරසි පුද්ගලයා / සමරසි තැනැත්තා (samarisi pudgalaya / thanaththa – a person in a same-sex relationship)</p>
<p>“විකෘති” (translates to perverted/ degenerate, used in the sense of describing unnatural behaviour)⁵⁸</p>	<p>LGBTQIA+ පුද්ගලයා (person) or simply පුද්ගලයා (person) where orientation is not relevant.</p>

50 Jack Drescher, ‘Out of DSM: Depathologising Homosexuality’ (2015) *Behavioural Sciences* 5(4) 565–575 < www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/5/4/565 > accessed 19 February 2026; Rebeca Robles and others, ‘Removing Transgender Identity from the Classification of Mental Disorders: A Mexican Field Study for ICD-11’ (2016) 3(9) *The Lancet Psychiatry* 850–859 < [www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366\(16\)30165-1/abstract](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpsy/article/PIIS2215-0366(16)30165-1/abstract) > accessed 19 February 2026.

51 World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, ‘Moving One Step Closer to Better Health and Rights for Transgender People’ (News release, 17 May 2019) < www.who.int/europe/news/item/17-05-2019-moving-one-step-closer-to-better-health-and-rights-for-transgender-people > accessed 19 February 2026.

52 Barry Mann, ‘American Psychiatric Association Delists Homosexuality as a Psychiatric Disorder’ (EBSCO Research Starters, 2023) < www.ebsco.com/research-starters/psychology/american-psychiatric-association-delists-homosexuality-psychiatric > accessed 19 February 2026.

53 Jack Drescher, ‘Out of DSM: Depathologising Homosexuality’ (2015) *Behavioural Sciences* 5(4) 565–575 < www.mdpi.com/2076-328X/5/4/565 > accessed 19 February 2026;

54 Équité Sri Lanka, Bridge for Equality, Rajarata Gemi Pahana, *Situation of LGBTI+ persons in Sri Lanka Joint NGO Submission to the Universal Periodic Review* (2025) < <https://equitesrilanka.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Situation-of-LGBTI-persons-in-Sri-Lanka-42nd-session-of-the-Submission-to-the-Universal-Periodic-Review-Sinhala.pdf> > accessed 27 February 2026
DELETE NOTHING, *Glossary Sheet*, < https://mcusercontent.com/a8d8675d007dc3a9d2e17fe38/files/7b9c78e3-24ba-d4bd-15c1-0c3a7c9a2b8d/Delete_Nothing_Glossary_Sheet1.pdf > accessed 27 February 2026.

55 Ethics Eye, ‘Reporting that could lead to transphobia?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 30 May 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1AS-drKZTNM/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

56 Ethics Eye, *Why Are People Engaging in Same-Sex Relationships Labelled “Butterflies”?* 27 September 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CxshqskB6ZL/>.

57 Ethics Eye, ‘Why Are People Engaging in Same-Sex Relationships Labelled “Butterflies”?’ (Verité Media, Instagram, 27 September 2023) < www.instagram.com/p/CxshqskB6ZL/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

58 Ethics Eye, ‘Is homosexuality an unnatural behaviour?’ Verité Media, Facebook, 13 October 2025) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1DPbkf7bPR/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

Why this matters: Language sets the tone for how audiences treat real people. Neutral, accurate terminology reduces avoidable stigma and supports the handbook’s principle of minimising harm—particularly in Sri Lanka, where being publicly labelled can expose LGBTQIA+ individuals to harassment, loss of work, family rejection, and physical risk. Research also links exposure to negative or stereotypical transgender-related media messages with worse mental health outcomes (including higher anxiety and depression) among transgender adults.⁵⁹

2.3 CHOOSE RESPECTFUL VISUALS WHEN PORTRAYING LGBTQIA+ INDIVIDUALS

Visual framing is one of the most common ways LGBTQIA+ individuals are misrepresented. Media frequently use caricatures, suggestive thumbnails (especially online), or images taken from personal social media accounts without consent. These choices sensationalise identity and may publicly “out” individuals, placing them at risk.



How to put this into practice:

- Never use images that expose identity without consent. Including screenshots from personal social media.
- Avoid caricatures or cartoons that mock gender expression. These exaggerations reinforce stereotypes and ridicule.
- Use neutral, context-appropriate visuals. For example: silhouettes, symbolic imagery (e.g., a pride flag), or general location shots.



Why this matters: Visuals reach the audience before the article itself. Respectful imagery prevents unwanted outing, ridicule, or exposure—directly supporting the professional principles outlined in the introduction.

SUMMARY – CHECKLIST FOR REPORTING ON SEXUAL ORIENTATION AND GENDER IDENTITY

	 Avoid	 Use
2.1	Highlighting LGBTQIA + identity only in negative contexts (crime, accidents, deaths, scandal).	Apply a relevance test: mention identity only when it materially helps the audience understand the event and is editorially justified.
2.2	Slurs, mockery, or “abnormality/perversion” labels (e.g., නපුංසක, සමනලයා, අසාමාන්‍ය, අස්වභාවික, විකෘති).	Use accurate identity terms when relevant (e.g., සංක්‍රාන්තික සමාජභාවී පුද්ගලයා/සංක්‍රාන්තික කාන්තාව / සංක්‍රාන්තික පුරුෂයා/සමර්ෂි පුද්ගලයා) or simply පුද්ගලයා when LGBTQIA+ identity is not relevant.
2.3	Caricatures, suggestive thumbnails, or screenshots from private social media that reveal identity without consent.	Use visuals that support the news purpose without exposing identity; avoid ridicule; prefer context-appropriate or general imagery.

59 Jaelyn M W Hughto and others, ‘Negative Transgender-Related Media Messages Are Associated with Adverse Mental Health Outcomes in a Multistate Study of Transgender Adults’ (2021) 8 *LGBT Health* 32 <<https://doi.org/10.1089/lgbt.2020.0279>> accessed 19 February 2026.

CHAPTER 3: REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Reporting on sexual violence is one of the most sensitive areas of journalism. These offences fall within the broader category of gender-based violence (GBV)—forms of violence that disproportionately affect women, girl-children, and gender-diverse individuals, including transgender and intersex people. This disproportion exists because of entrenched gender inequalities, power imbalances, cultural norms, and stigma, which collectively increase the risk of violence and intensify the consequences survivors experience afterward.⁶⁰

In Sri Lanka, survivors/victims of sex crimes often face deep social judgment, harassment, or community scrutiny. This is even more pronounced in cases involving child survivors—especially girl children. The identities and psychological well-being of survivors can be severely harmed by irresponsible reporting. The Reporting on Child Abuse handbook by the National Child Protection Authority highlights that revealing a child’s identity, even indirectly, can “re-abuse” them by inviting stigma, ridicule, or isolation, and can cause severe long-term psychological harm.⁶¹



Core principle: Portray survivors with dignity and respect.

3.1 AVOID STIGMATISING OR INSULTING TERMS EVEN IF THEY ARE CULTURALLY NORMALISED

Sexual violence is often framed using language that implies the survivor is “impure,” “dishonoured,” or somehow responsible for what happened. These harmful ideas are deeply rooted in social stigma, not fact. Ethical journalism rejects this framing and consciously uses language that maintains dignity and humanity.⁶²

Sinhala reporting often uses terms such as *dooshanaya* (දූෂණය - “polluted”) and *keleseema* (කලෙසීම - “defiled”), which carry stigma and shift attention away from the perpetrator’s criminal and unethical actions.

Although the Penal Code uses the term “*sthree dooshanaya*” to define rape, journalists are not required to repeat stigmatising language in public reporting. The professional approach is to use terminology that clearly and accurately describes the offence, without reinforcing shame.



60 Our Watch, <The Link Between Gender Inequality and Violence Against Women> <<https://www.ourwatch.org.au/link-between-gender-inequality-and-violence>> accessed 27 February 2026.

61 National Child Protection Authority, *Reporting on Child Abuse Handbook for Journalists*, (2012) <https://childprotection.gov.lk/images/news/Reporting_on_Child_Abuse.pdf> accessed 19 February 2026.



62 ‘Never portray individuals who have experienced violence against women or violence against children as helpless victims, including in imagery. Instead, show that they are survivors who decided to speak up’ UNICEF, *Guidelines on Responsible Representation and Reporting of Violence against Women and Violence against Children* (2021) <<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11631/file/Guidelines%20on%20Responsible%20representation%20and%20reporting%20of%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20violence%20against%20children.pdf>> accessed 19 February 2026.

How to put this into practice:

- Use survivor-centred terminology.

 Terminology to avoid	 Terminology to use
<p>දූෂණය / dooshanaya (“polluted”).</p> <p>කෙලෙසීම / keleseema (“defiled”).</p> <p>Any phrasing that implies the survivor has been “tainted,” “spoiled,” or “ruined.”</p>	<p>ලිංගික අපරාධ / lingika aparadha (sex crime) – a neutral, crime-focused umbrella term</p>
	<p>ලිංගික ප්‍රචණ්ඩත්වය / lingika prachandathwaya (sexual violence) – emphasises the coercive nature of the act and power imbalance inherent in sexual offences</p>
	<p>ලිංගික අතවර / lingika athawara (sexual assault/sexual abuse) – widely accepted terminology encompassing a range of non-consensual sexual acts, and survivor-sensitive.</p>
	<p>ලිංගික අධන්තේට්ටම් / lingika adanthettam (sexual molestation/assault) – commonly understood term for serious sexual misconduct or abuse, suitable for a range of non-consensual acts.</p>
	<p>බලහත්කාර ලිංගික සංසර්ගය / balahathkara lingika sansargaya (forced sexual intercourse) – legally descriptive and unambiguous, without implying defilement.</p>

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“අට හැවිරිදි දැරිය දූෂණය කල PCට වසර 14ක සිර දඬුවමක්.”</p> <p>(Translates as “Police Constable sentenced to 14 years of imprisonment for polluting an 8-year-old girl”).⁶³</p>	<p>“බල වයස්කාර දැරියක ලිංගික අපයෝජනයට ලක් කල පොලිස් කොස්තාපල්ට වසර 14ක සිර දඬුවමක් නියම වී ඇති බව වාර්තා වේ.”</p> <p>(Translates as “A Police Constable has been sentenced to 14 years of rigorous imprisonment for the sexual abuse of a minor girl”)</p>

63 Ethics Eye, ‘Sexual abuse instead of defilement’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 2 October 2025) < www.facebook.com/share/p/17vALfciGb/ > accessed 19 February 2026.



Why this matters: Language shapes public perception. Survivor-centred, non-judgmental wording challenges stigma, keeps responsibility with the perpetrator, supports public understanding of the act as a crime and encourages survivors to seek justice without fear of shame.

3.2 AVOID TRIVIALISING OR SENSATIONALISING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Humorous phrasing, wordplay, euphemisms, or dramatic exaggeration can make sexual violence appear less serious than it is.⁶⁴

They also foster doubt about the survivor’s honesty—something the Reporting on Child Abuse guidelines warn strongly against, noting that “tone and framing can itself constitute re-abuse.”⁶⁵

Some local media reports describe sexual offences using wordplay or euphemisms that obscure the seriousness of the act and disguise the fact that a crime has occurred. For example, in a case involving sexual harassment on a bus, a headline referred to the incident as “ඛස් එක ඇතුළතදී ගීටාර් ගීපිල්යා ගායිකාව වීයුන් කරන්න ගිනින්” (translated as the guitarist tried to tune the singer inside the bus).⁶⁶ In another case involving a batik designer and a fashion designing student, the report used the phrase අමුණු මෝස්තරයක් දාලා” (translates as “tried a strange design”) as a substitute for describing sexual touching.⁶⁷

How to put this into practice

- Avoid language that downplays the gravity of a crime.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“ඛස් රඵ තුනකදී තරුණියකට හදි කළ අනංගයා පොලීසිය අසලදීම කොටු කර ගනී.”</p> <p>(Translates as “The cupid who violated a young woman across three buses caught right outside the police station.”⁶⁸)</p>	<p>“ඛස් රඵ තුනකදී තරුණියකට ලිංගික අතවර කළ සැකකරු පොලීසිය අසලදීම කොටු කර ගනී.”</p> <p>(Translates as “Suspect arrested right outside the police station for sexually assaulting a young woman on three different buses.”)</p>



Why this matters: Trivialising language distorts reality and encourages a culture where sexual violence is minimised. Clear, direct wording conveys the seriousness of the crime and respects the lived experience of survivors.

64 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women* (2021) < https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Guidelines_WEB-VERSION-ENG.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026, 14.

65 National Child Protection Authority, *Reporting on Child Abuse Handbook for Journalists*, (2012) < https://childprotection.gov.lk/images/news/Reporting_on_Child_Abuse.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

66 Ethics Eye, ‘The guitarist tried to tune the singer inside the bus. Isn’t the newspaper trivialising sexual harassment & normalising such crimes?’ (Verité Media, X, 2 November 2023) < <https://x.com/EthicsEye/status/1720070789419180524> > accessed 19 February 2026.

67 Ethics Eye, ‘Would you approve of such reporting?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 1 April 2024) < www.facebook.com/share/p/17YnavUyam/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

68 Ethics Eye, ‘Let us not trivialize sexual crimes’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 17 September 2025) < www.facebook.com/share/p/1Czc-M1GKydl/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

3.3 PROTECT THE SURVIVOR'S IDENTITY

Identity protection is both a legal obligation and an ethical necessity. Unintentional exposure can lead to harassment, social isolation, and long-term psychological harm.⁶⁹

Did you know? Revealing the identity of a sex-crime victim is an offence in Sri Lanka

Section 365C of the Penal Code of Sri Lanka states that printing or publishing the name or any matter which reveals the identity of any person against whom offences of sexual harassment, procuration, sexual exploitation of children, rape, incest, unnatural offences, acts of gross indecency between persons or grave sexual abuse is allegedly or found to have been committed, is an offence that is punishable with imprisonment that extends to two years or with fine or with both.

Identity may be revealed only when:



- authorised by a police officer for investigative purposes
- the survivor gives written consent
- the next of kin gives written consent (if the victim is deceased)
- a parent/guardian gives written consent (if the survivor/victim is a child or a person of unsound mind)

Problematic reporting of these offences may even hamper the investigation processes, re-traumatising survivors/victims and delaying justice. The Reporting on Child Abuse handbook clearly warns that indirect details (“jigsaw identification”)—such as school names, villages, family occupations, or neighbourhood descriptions—can also identify a child survivor and expose them to stigma and harm.

How to put this into practice

- Do not publish names, photos, school names, addresses, family occupations or identifiable visuals, especially when reporting involves minors.

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“A father in Medirigiriya abused his 14-year-old daughter.”</p>	<p>“A man in Medirigiriya has been charged with the sexual abuse of a minor.”</p>



Why this matters: Once identity is revealed, the harm cannot be undone. Survivors may face ridicule, stigma, community punishment, or even violence. Maintaining anonymity protects their safety, dignity, and recovery.

⁶⁹ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women* (2021), 10 < https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Guidelines_WEB-VERSION-ENG.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.

3.4 AVOID EXPLICIT DESCRIPTIONS; USE TRIGGER WARNINGS WHERE APPROPRIATE

Graphic details re-traumatise survivors and may emotionally distress audiences, especially children or survivors of past abuse.⁷⁰ The Reporting on Child Abuse handbook warns that such details “exploit the child's trauma and can cause further harm.”⁷¹

How to put this into practice

- Use language adequate to convey the crime without explicit detail.
- Avoid descriptions of body parts, explicit acts, or dramatised witness statements.
- Keep focus on the criminality of the act, not sensational detail.
- Precede reports with a trigger warning so audiences can decide whether to continue reading.

Why this matters: Trauma-informed reporting guidance stresses that careless detail can intensify distress for those directly affected and can also negatively affect the wider public who consume the coverage.⁷² Trigger/content warnings are a practical harm-reduction tool: they do not reduce the seriousness of the story, but signal a professional duty and give audiences control over when and how they engage with potentially distressing material.⁷³

3.5 AVOID BLAME-SHIFTING AND KEEP ACCOUNTABILITY WITH THE PERPETRATOR

Victim-blaming is common in Sri Lankan reporting and can occur subtly—through comments about clothing, behaviour, relationships, or personal history. Blame-shifting not only causes psychological harm to survivors/victims of sexual crimes but also discourages reporting and obstructs justice.⁷⁴

How to put this into practice

- Avoid speculation over attire or “choices” of the survivor that have no relevance to criminal responsibility
- Avoid moralising phrases such as “වැරදි පාඨ ගිහින” (gone down a wrong path) or “නහනම් ගෙජි ගෙවි කන්න ගිහින” (having eaten the forbidden fruit). This framing turns a crime into a story about a person's “character” or “choices,” rather than about the alleged perpetrator's actions and the harm caused.⁷⁵

70 UNICEF, *Guidelines on Responsible Representation and Reporting of Violence against Women and Violence against Children* (2021), 16 <<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11631/file/Guidelines%20on%20Responsible%20representation%20and%20reporting%20of%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20violence%20against%20children.pdf>> accessed 19 February 2026; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women* (2021), 17 <https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Guidelines_WEB-VERSION-ENG.pdf> accessed 19 February 2026.

71 National Child Protection Authority, *Reporting on Child Abuse Handbook for Journalists*, (2012) <https://childprotection.gov.lk/images/news/Reporting_on_Child_Abuse.pdf> accessed 19 February 2026.

72 Mental Health America, *Mental Health and Media: Trauma-Informed Reporting Guide* <<https://mhanational.org/resources/mental-health-and-media-trauma-informed-reporting-guide/>> accessed 27 February 2026. Global Centre for Journalism & Trauma, *GCJT Style Guide for Trauma-Informed Journalism* (22 June 2021) <<https://gcjt.org/resources/gcjt-style-guide-trauma-informed-journalism>> accessed 19 February 2026.



73 University of Michigan, *An Introduction to Content Warnings and Trigger Warnings* (2020) <<https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/equitable-teaching/wp-content/uploads/sites/853/2020/09/An-Introduction-to-Content-Warnings-and-Trigger-Warnings-PDF.pdf>> accessed 27 February 2026.


74 UNICEF, *Guidelines on Responsible Representation and Reporting of Violence against Women and Violence against Children* (2021), 17 <<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11631/file/Guidelines%20on%20Responsible%20representation%20and%20reporting%20of%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20violence%20against%20children.pdf>> accessed 19 February 2026; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women* (2021), 11 <https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Guidelines_WEB-VERSION-ENG.pdf> accessed 19 February 2026.

75 Ethics Eye, ‘Justifying a murder?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 10 October 2023) <<https://web.facebook.com/share/p/18Q3f6wZ8P/>> accessed 19 February 2026; Ethics Eye, ‘Is the fault with the underage minor? Or with the young man?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 24 January 2025), <<https://web.facebook.com/share/p/1FV1YWpoo3/>> accessed 19 February 2026.

- Avoid suggesting prior relationships imply consent. Details such as adultery, divorce, “absent parents,” or marital status should not be used to imply that a survivor “invited” violence.
- Avoid language that creates doubt where coercion is alleged. E.g., “Since they were dating, it is unclear...”
- Emphasise clearly that consent for sexual acts must be voluntary and ongoing.
- Emphasise clearly that minors cannot legally consent to sexual activity. When reporting on minors use legally accurate terminology such as “*wyavasthapitha lingika aparadha*” වියවස්ථාපිත ලිංගික අපරාධ translates as statutory rape. or “*neethiyanukula barakarathwayen apaharanaya kereemak*” (නීත්‍යානුකූල භාරකාරත්වයෙන් අපහරණය කිරීමක් translates as kidnapping from lawful guardianship) to reflect its legal implications.⁷⁶

Examples of reporting

 Avoid	 Use
<p>“අවිවාහක කතක කෙලෙසු PC වසර 7කට නිරෝ”</p> <p>(Translates as “The “PC who defiled an unmarried woman jailed for 7 years.”)⁷⁷</p>	<p>“කාන්තාවක් ලිංගික අපරාධයකට ලක් කළ පොලීස් කොස්තාපල්වරයෙක් අත්අඩංගුවට.”</p> <p>(Translates as “Police constable arrested for sexual crime of a woman”.)</p>
<p>“කතේ අමාරුවක් බව පවසා නිවසේ සිටි දැරිය මව එනවිට වැරදි පාරක ගිහිත්.”</p> <p>(Translates as “The girl, who stayed home complaining of an earache, had gone down the ‘wrong path’ by the time her mother returned.”)⁷⁸</p>	<p>“බාල වයස්කාර දැරියක නීත්‍යානුකූල භාරකාරත්වයෙන් අපහරණය කළ සැකකරුවෙක් පොලීසිය විසින් සොයන බව වාර්තා වේ.”</p> <p>(Translates as “It is reported that police are searching for a suspect who abducted a minor from legal guardianship.”)</p>

 **Why this matters:** Blame-shifting framing is one of the strongest barriers to professional reporting of sexual violence. Ethical journalism removes doubt, stigma, and moral judgment and places responsibility where it belongs – solely with the alleged perpetrator.

⁷⁶ Penal Code Ordinance (Ordinance No 2 of 1883)(Sri Lanka) ss 352, 363(e) http://hrlibrary.umn.edu/research/srilanka/statutes/Penal_Code.pdf accessed 19 February 2026.

⁷⁷ Ethics Eye, ‘Is ‘defiled’ necessary? Is ‘unmarried’ relevant?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 20 February 2024), < www.facebook.com/share/p/16PuJveUZq/ > accessed 19 February 2026.

⁷⁸ Ethics Eye, ‘Is the fault with the underage girl or the young man?’ (Verité Media, Facebook, 24 January 2025), < www.facebook.com/share/p/1Ai1PB9txd/ > accessed 19 February 2026

3.6 AVOID PORTRAYING SURVIVORS AS HELPLESS

Survivors are often depicted as broken, voiceless, or defined solely by the crime. Images of collapse, crying faces, or language that reduces a person to a single traumatic event can strip away agency.

How to put this into practice

- Highlight survivors' decisions to report, seek help, or pursue justice.⁷⁹
- Avoid imagery that reduces them to symbols of despair.



Why this matters: Survivor-centred reporting acknowledges harm without removing agency. It avoids reinforcing narratives of weakness or lifelong damage.

3.7 PROVIDE CONTEXT AND CONNECT READERS TO SUPPORT

Sex crimes rarely occur in isolation. They reflect systemic issues such as poverty, lack of sex education, weak legal protections, patriarchal norms, and impunity.⁸⁰ Journalists play an important role in shaping public attitudes and helping the public understand these larger patterns.

How to put this into practice:

- Highlight systemic factors rather than treating incidents as isolated. For example, instead of "14-year-old becomes pregnant", frame the narrative indicating how teenage pregnancy is a persisting societal phenomenon, its negative effects, and what could be done to prevent it.
- Provide clear calls to action and direct survivors toward available support services.

Support Hotlines

- Ministry of Child Development & Women's Affairs – 1938
- Police Children & Women's Bureau – 011 2826444 / 011 276 8076
- Women In Need (WIN) – 011 471 8585
- Family Planning Association – 011 255 5455
- Ma-Sevana (Sarvodaya) – 011 265 5577





Why this matters: Contextualised reporting improves public understanding, challenges stigma, and directs survivors toward the support they need to heal and seek justice.

⁷⁹ UNICEF, *Guidelines on Responsible Representation and Reporting of Violence against Women and Violence against Children* (2021), 17 <<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/11631/file/Guidelines%20on%20Responsible%20representation%20and%20reporting%20of%20violence%20against%20women%20and%20violence%20against%20children.pdf>> accessed 19 February 2026.

⁸⁰ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women* (2021), 10 <https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Guidelines_WEB-VERSION-ENG.pdf> accessed 19 February 2026.

SUMMARY – CHECKLIST FOR REPORTING ON SEXUAL VIOLENCE

	 Avoid	 Use
3.1	Using stigmatising terms such as dooshanaya (polluted) or keleseema (defiled) that imply survivors are “impure” or “contaminated.”	Use crime-focused and legally accurate terminology for rape or sexual abuse, such as lingika aparadha (sex crime).
3.2	Using euphemisms, humorous phrasing or vague language that minimises sex crimes, such as amuthu padamak (“a strange lesson”) or amuthu saththuwak (“strange treatment”).	Use clear, direct language that reflects the seriousness of the offence.
3.3	Publishing names, photos, school names, addresses, family relationships, or combinations of details that could lead to “jigsaw” identification. ⁸¹	Protect anonymity fully: remove or generalise any identifying details, especially in cases involving children or incest.
3.4	Including graphic details of the assault, explicit descriptions of body parts, or dramatised witness statements.	Use clear but non-explicit language, focusing on the criminal act; include trigger warnings when discussing sexual violence.
3.5	Blaming or judging the survivor based on clothing, behaviour, relationships, or personal history.	Keep responsibility on the perpetrator; distinguish clearly between consent and coercion, and emphasise that minors cannot legally consent.
3.6	Portraying survivors as helpless, broken, or defined solely by the crime (including images showing them crying or collapsed).	Portray survivors as individuals with agency—showing strength, voice, and resilience rather than helplessness.
3.7	Treating the incident as isolated or ending coverage without offering pathways for support.	Provide a wider social context where relevant and include helplines or support services for survivors.

⁸¹ Jigsaw identification occurs when different pieces of information appear in a publication or different publications, which allows readers who have seen the reports to work out who the victim is’ Independent Press Standards Organisation, *Sexual offences: Guidance for journalists and editors* (July 2023) < www.ipso.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/sexual-offences-guidance-2023.pdf > accessed 19 February 2026.



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