

Sri Lanka's Women Journalists: Fighting the Good Fight

Namini Wijedasa

In this article, Namini Wijedasa writes on the contribution that women make to journalism and the media in Sri Lanka and the particular difficulties that they face in the profession. She concludes that while there are still fewer women in journalism than men, women are gradually taking on more influential roles in the media. Women journalists face many of the same constraints as their male counterparts, though there are additional issues of sexual harassment in the work place. But she says the breakdown of law and order in Sri Lanka is all-encompassing; and the control or suppression of rights is not restricted to the media industry.

Namini Wijedasa entered journalism in 1994 and has worked for several mainstream newspapers in Sri Lanka. She has also freelanced for radio as a news reporter and presenter. She is currently the assistant editor of Lakkimanews, an English weekly published by Lakkima Newspapers Ltd. She writes for The Economist and works for NHK Japan TV. She has received national and international awards for journalism, including the Lorenzo Natali Journalism Prize. She has served as a board member of the Sri Lanka Press Complaints Commission.

The story of women in Sri Lankan journalism is broadly a positive one. There are admittedly fewer practising female journalists or editors today than there are male ones. But the story extends beyond simple numbers. Sri Lankan women journalists have overcome social, cultural and workplace barriers to break significant ground in media.

One of the most difficult challenges remains that of balancing work and family. Journalism can offer flexibility that women in other professions do not have. But the very fact that it is 'unstructured' can also complicate family life. Developing stories cannot be put on hold while the needs of a child are met. And when deadlines loom—this can happen on an hourly, daily, weekly or monthly basis—great sacrifice in time, energy and focus is required. Compiling news reports or features also necessitates travel, a difficult prerequisite for women with young offspring.

Scientifically gathered information about the contribution of women journalists through the years is scarce, if not completely unavailable. The most reliable recent research conducted on this subject is a rapid assessment by Social Indicator (SI), the survey research unit of the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA). Commissioned by the Sri Lanka Press Institute (SLPI), it seeks to understand female participation in mainstream print and electronic media.

The resultant report, released in July 2011, observes that: "As there is no data available regarding the number of journalists in Sri Lanka over the years it is difficult to trace the progress or lack of participation of female journalists in the media industry. Looking at what they have observed over

the years in the industry, the journalists interviewed are of the opinion that the number of female journalists entering the media industry in Sri Lanka has significantly increased over the years.”¹

This paper is not a study on the numerical strength of female involvement in Sri Lankan media. Instead, it aspires to provide a snapshot of the challenges faced by women in print media in the conduct of their profession. In doing so, it will elaborate on some central themes from the SI-CPA survey which is the most current resource available. It will also draw from conversations I have conducted with colleagues and from my own experiences as a woman journalist.

1. The pioneers

It is a known fact that Sri Lanka gave the world its first female prime minister in 1960. It is a lesser known detail that at least 15 years before Sirimavo Bandaranaike assumed this mantle Anne Abayasekara became the first ever female Sri Lankan staff journalist². Women who worked in media before her—there were reportedly only a handful, although statistics are not available—were expatriates living in Sri Lanka. Among them was Leela Shukla, an Indian whose husband was posted in Colombo.

Anne was 17 years old when D.R. Wijewardene, chairman and managing director of Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd (ANCL), or Lake House, interviewed her for a position. It was wartime, he warned her, and they had temporarily suspended the women’s pages because of newsprint rationing. Not only were female journalists rare. It was an age during which newspaper bosses could still not envisage women taking on anything more than the women’s or children’s pages. Anne agreed to a clerical position on the premise that she could join the editorial staff when things returned to normal.

Anne joined Lake House in February 1943, working first in the General Office and then in the Secretary’s Department. In 1947, Lake House resumed the women’s pages in their newspapers and Leela Shukla was made editor. When she returned to India a few months later, Anne became editor of the women’s pages of the *Ceylon Daily News* (CDN) and *Sunday Observer*. The 22-year-old was the first Sri Lankan woman to head these pages and the only woman in the editorial at the time. She was assigned to fill three pages in the CDN, a page in the *Sunday Observer* and the twice-weekly women’s sections in the *Evening Observer*.³

¹ An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media
<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

² Anne Abayasekara interview conducted by this writer on February 20, 2012

³ Anne Abayasekara Interview conducted by this writer on February 20, 2012. Anne recalled the names of other women of her era who worked in mainstream English newspapers: Sita Jayawardena, who in 1948 became editor of the women’s pages of the *Sunday Observer*; Jean Pinto; Maureen Milhuisen Seneviratne; and Charmaine Poulter Solomon. In 1951, Ranji Handy from Malaysia joined Lake House as the first female general news reporter. Anne remembers her as “a forthright person who spoke her mind in a very nice way”. She took on parliamentary reporting before any other woman journalist and later married politician Maithripala Senanayake.

Throughout the 50s and 60s, more women started joining the industry but the numbers were still very small.⁴ The first Sri Lankan woman editor of a newspaper was Rita Sebastian. She rose to that rank in the former *The Sunday Times* which was published by the now defunct Times of Ceylon Group. I remember a conversation I had with Rita as we sat watching the launch of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party's National Workers' Charter at the Old Parliament in 1995. I had joined the media as a trainee journalist only the previous year but Rita, already a heavyweight in the industry, spent the prelude to the ceremony strongly encouraging me to stay on in journalism. As a trailblazer, she clearly felt it her duty to see that women's participation in media continued to increase.⁵

Rita died the following year, in March 1996. In a tribute, *Sunday Times* (published by Wijeya Newspapers Ltd) described her as "a pioneer woman journalist who broke several male bastions in the profession". Rita was a correspondent for the *Indian Express*, *Interpress Service*, *Kyodo News Agency* and others. She wrote regularly for the new *Sunday Times* and her investigative, in-depth and on the spot reports, especially on ethnic issues, were widely read and appreciated. She also founded the Foreign Media Journalists Organisation.⁶

Rita was a trendsetter in other ways. She was one of the first women to undertake war reporting and repeatedly travelled to the conflict zone.⁷ She often risked her life to go across enemy lines into territory controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.⁸

It was not common then for women to cover the war from the frontlines. One reason might have been the reluctance of media institutions to shoulder the liability, responsibility or, indeed, the "embarrassment" of having deployed a member of the "weaker sex" on dangerous assignments. (Rita was at the time a freelancer). Not only was the warfront male-dominated, it was exceedingly

⁴ The earliest records I could find of women's participation in journalism go back to the 40s and 50s. Roshan Peiris was another pioneer who started at Lake House in 1953. Writing on occasion of her death in 2008 (<http://sundaytimes.lk/080518/News/news0033.html>), Rajitha Weerakoon, herself a senior features editor, described Roshan as being "amongst a handful of women-journalists of the so called 'Golden Age' of Lake House in the early 1950s who braved the citadel to work with the impregnable bastion of male journalists such as Tarzie Vittachchi, Denzil Peiris and Mervyn De Silva". "It was a difficult task but Roshan, just as the rest of the determined and committed women-journalists at the time such as Ranji Handy, Jean Pinto, Vijitha Fernando, Malini Balasingham, Sumana Saparamadu, Hema Gunawardene and Mallika Wanigasundera, took them on and set trends of the highest order," Rajitha observed. Roshan wrote on a range of topics including politics, arts, fashions, health and human interest. She rose to the position of features editor and acting editor of the *Sunday Observer* in the 1970s, an opportunity which Rajitha notes, "perhaps did not come in the way of other women-journalists at the time".

⁵ Rita was seated beside this writer at the Old Parliament in 1995. The conversation took place while we were waiting for the then President, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, to arrive for the official launch of the National Workers' Charter. The main architect of the charter, which was never passed into law, was Mahinda Rajapaksa who was elected President in November 2005.

⁶ <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/960331/frontm.html#Pioneer>

⁷ <http://himalmag.com/component/content/article/2801-razia-bhatti-rita-sebastian.html>

⁸ <http://www.island.lk/2001/04/29/editoria.html>

treacherous. There were also many layers of socio-cultural barriers to breach before a woman could take on such assignments.

The status quo two decades on is dramatically different, particularly in the field of English print media. Progress is also observed in Sinhala and, to a lesser extent, in Tamil newspapers. This will be explored in the next section.

2. No Holds Barred

The SI-CPA in the course of their research interviewed women journalists covering a broad range of areas at their institutions. This includes politics, news, entertainment, fashion and social issues. The study holds that: "Contrary to the popular belief outside of the media industry that there are certain sections that are male dominated, such as news and politics, and that entertainment and features sections are female dominated – according to the journalists interviewed, there are no such divisions. The journalists say that they have the freedom to write outside of their assigned beats/ areas and that none of them have been restricted by the institutions that they work for... unless it is an institution policy not to cover particular topics."⁹

This conclusion is an accurate reflection of my own experience. I did initially face some resistance when, in 1997, at the age of 21, I wanted to report from the frontlines. My bosses were afraid for my safety, reluctant to send a young woman to the North, unsure of my ability to handle the task and worried about having to answer to my parents in the event of an accident. The newspaper already had an established, male defence reporter. Once I convinced them to assign me, the defence ministry expressed concern. The job I had argued so hard to do was a three-day tour of the conflict areas—and nobody else had nominated women.¹⁰

After this first hurdle was overcome, however, every institution that I worked for encouraged and, wherever possible, facilitated my travel to the warfront. Several other women—mostly from English media, including electronic—were also reporting from conflict areas at the time. Within a few years, the only obstructions to female journalists covering the war were their own reservations and/or those of their families.

This trepidation extends not just to war reporting but to other fields, depending on the thinking of journalists and their parents/spouses/partners on what is or isn't appropriate. There is a sense—particularly among young journalists who still depend heavily on their parents for resources and guidance— that certain stories are not safe for women to cover. From conversations with trainee female journalists, I have also gathered that, while their parents consent to them entering the

⁹ Pg 36, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media

<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

¹⁰ During this period, even women soldiers were deployed only at brigade headquarters (in areas where there was civilian movement) and not in smaller detachments. This made it difficult for the defence ministry official coordinating the visit to find accommodation or facilities for a female reporter. Consequently, in one 'operational area', arrangements were made for me to sleep in residence of the local post-mistress which doubled up as the sub-post office.

profession, they then demand a degree of control over the stories or assignments they cover. It is not uncommon, however, for some of these journalists to move away from such control as they grow in experience.

The SI-CPA report notes: "Drawing from their observations over the years, some of the senior journalists said that restrictions with regard to covering particular topics, travelling out of town, are usually not imposed on journalists by the institution but by the individual themselves. These self-imposed restrictions sometimes arise due to family or other obligations or even due to cultural and personal beliefs of each individual. 'For some, their hesitancy to work on certain assignments, travel or work late comes not from any personal experience but it is imbedded in them – it is part of culture', said one senior journalist."

According to the testimony of one senior female journalist cited in the *Ceylon Today* newspaper of 8th March 2012,¹¹ it would appear more difficult for women in Tamil media to break through cultural and social norms. This journalist describes how, as a woman, it was hard enough getting a job in a Tamil newspaper, let alone covering the war. Now a well known Tamil blogger and photojournalist, she joined the media in 1993 at the age of 21. But she had to face "exam after exam and several rounds of interviews" before she was hired. "Journalism was considered a dangerous job, so they repeatedly asked if my family was ok with it," she is quoted as saying.

The report adds: "Even so, the management had several stipulations to ensure her safety – she was not to write on controversial issues, she was not to go into the war zone, she had to be accompanied by a male photographer on all assignments, whether one was needed or not, and she was not to work late into the night."

In another blog post,¹² this journalist says gender and ethnicity were often cited to prevent her from doing the stories she wanted to do, predominantly on-the-spot war reporting. She states: "I was told that it was dangerous for me as a woman and a Tamil to do those stories. When I went ahead and did them on my own initiative, it was difficult to get them published, or when published, have my byline credited. Many of my much lauded exclusive stories in my initial days went without a byline and were picked up by other media outlets, again without a byline."

But despite the opposition—and challenges—she reported regularly from the frontlines. Since the war ended, she has moved to covering issues such as the cultural lifestyles of the Tamils and still travels widely throughout former conflict areas. She started a popular blog in 2005.¹³ She shifted from print media to radio, television and finally to the web and uses modern tools for journalism. She is also keen photographer. She tells *Ceylon Today*: "I had to contend with a lot of professional jealousy, especially when I took up my camera and went into the war zone. Senior photojournalists

¹¹ *Fighting the Good Fight for Feminism*, personal story of woman Tamil journalist Dushyanthi Kanagasabapathipillai, <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/35-3226-news-detail-fighting-the-good-fight-for-feminism.html>

¹² *Celebrating Role Models—Day 9* on the Reach Out blog, <http://reachoutlk.wordpress.com/2012/04/03/celebrating-role-models-day-9>

¹³ <http://humanityashore.com/>

who had had no competition from women in their sphere were seriously put off. They had this almost unbelievable attitude of 'Who are you – a woman and a Tamil to come into this?' she recalls."¹⁴ In the end, she says, it was a "burning zeal" for the profession that made her stick to it for 20 years, and counting.

The SI-CPA report states: "Explaining why there is a larger concentration of male journalists covering news, politics and crime, a journalist working in a mainstream Sinhala newspaper for the past fifteen years said that it can be attributed to the ease with which men can travel anywhere, at any time and do not require as much protection that a female journalist would require. She says that there is nothing stopping female journalists from covering these areas but looking at it from a practical point of view, it is obvious that these are the areas that more male journalists would be assigned to cover."¹⁵

The associate editor and a long time news editor of the widely-circulated Sinhala language *Lankadeepa* newspaper—a woman—entered journalism in 1980 through the now defunct *Dawasa* newspaper. She remembers there being "one or two" women in the field at the time. "It was not a nine-to-five job and we had to travel around a lot," she said. "Now, most of the work is done out of offices using modern tools but we didn't have fax, email, internet or telephones. We didn't get vehicles from the workplace. We either took public transport or walked everywhere."¹⁶

This editor says that women gradually joined the Sinhala media in greater numbers. And while she admits there were certain social and cultural expectations that they felt constrained to meet, these were not serious challenges if women "knew their limits and behaved accordingly". This might mean that women could not accept every invitation they were tendered, particularly to social events at night. It might also mean that they could not meet with contacts over alcoholic beverages. But she didn't see these as obstructions to carving out a successful career in journalism. In fact, she claimed that her gender sometimes helped her gather information more efficiently and effectively because male officials, of whom there are a great many, were more receptive towards female journalists.¹⁷

Asked how a woman could achieve success in the Sinhala print media, this editor said: "We must show that we can work like men. I didn't wait for anyone to assign me stories. I took the initiative and even did work that was not assigned to me. I did not let my inhibitions or fears prevent me from

¹⁴ *Fighting the Good Fight for Feminism*, personal story of woman Tamil journalist Dushyanthi Kanagasabapathipillai, <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/35-3226-news-detail-fighting-the-good-fight-for-feminism.html>

¹⁵ Pg 38, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media <http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

¹⁶ Indrani Peiris, associate editor and long time news editor of *Lankadeepa*, interviewed by this writer in March 2012.

¹⁷ Indrani said society had transformed considerably since her induction to journalism. Women not only had more freedom now, there were more opportunities for them to circulate and to mingle. It was, therefore, important for them to set limits for themselves in order to preserve their dignity and the dignity of the profession. While it was no different for men, society tended to be more judgemental of women.

going to places that men went to. A good woman journalist will have to sacrifice far more than a male journalist."

That said, there still appears to be numerically more female journalists from the English media covering certain "types" of stories—such as war, politics, crime and business—than there are from Tamil and Sinhala media. It would also seem that fewer women journalists from the Sinhala and Tamil media travel to outstation areas than do women journalists from the English media.

3. Work-Life Balance

One of the most difficult tasks for married women journalists, particularly those with children, remains the management of their multiple roles as career woman, daughter, wife and mother. The SI-CPA study holds that this is largely dependent on the individuals and how they distribute their work and other responsibilities.¹⁸

It must be emphasised at the outset that women journalists all over the world face these dilemmas. One British TV reporter recently described how, two months after giving birth, she was off to a new assignment as the BBC correspondent in Sri Lanka. She initially hid her pregnancy from her managers because she was fearful that she would never get another foreign posting after having a child.¹⁹

Finding suitable childcare remained a pressing concern for this journalist, as did having to travel at short notice. She had a Sri Lankan nanny whom she took on postings and she was sometimes forced to take the baby along on assignments. She relates how, on a trip to Pakistan, she stayed in a communal house for BBC staff: "A female producer staying there went around telling everyone it was ridiculous that I'd brought my baby and nanny—again, I had no choice as my husband was abroad. Female colleagues trying hard to be one of the lads seemed to find a child more outlandish than the Taliban." She says there were many cancelled family outings and holidays cut short because of the BBC.

Juggling family and a career was admittedly more difficult for this journalist because she was a foreign correspondent whose presence was required at hotspots within short notice. But the pressures are high for female journalists across the spectrum. Testimonies from women everywhere show that there is no easy answer. It is an often painful predicament for those who want to give journalism their best but find they cannot do so without demanding considerable sacrifice from their spouses and children.²⁰

¹⁸ Pg 41, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media
<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

¹⁹ *Frances Harrison: My double life as mother and foreign correspondent*, by former BBC foreign correspondent Frances Harrison; <http://www.journalism.co.uk/news-features/frances-harrison-my-double-life-as-mother-and-foreign-correspondent/s5/a548236/>

²⁰ *How can women journalists achieve a healthy work-life balance?*, published on the International Journalists' Network online blog; <http://ijnet.org/community/groups/10189/how-can-women-journalists-achieve-healthy-work-life-balance>

The SI-CPA study concluded that journalists who work at newspapers sometimes found it "a bit difficult" to manage their duties due to their erratic and long working hours. However, journalists have said they did not find their multiple roles to be a barrier to their work; neither have they impeded them from progressing in their career. Some journalists say it is easier to handle work because more women joined over the years and now offer increased support. For some, travelling out of Colombo is not always easy with many responsibilities at home "but they say that they manage somehow."²¹

Not surprisingly, married female journalists said the support of their husbands was crucial and that "without open minded and supportive husbands, journalism is a difficult field to continue to be in". But the study quotes a senior journalist working at a Sinhala paper as saying it's sometimes difficult to continue as a journalist once a woman is married or has children "as their husbands prefer their wives to have more conventional jobs or to stay at home". She feels that the level of acceptance for this kind of work among Sri Lankans is still low.²²

The associate editor of *Lankadeepa* earlier quoted in this paper said women journalists are required to make considerable sacrifices to further their careers. She said she did: "I gave my job priority, the first place. I delegated duties to my husband, my mother, to other relatives and more or less detached myself from home. They, too, understood the nature of my job and tolerated a lot of things that others might find intolerable. My son learnt to do things for himself. My husband and he got used to my job. Sometimes, I was unable to attend meetings in school and the teachers encouraged me to be more involved in my son's activities. But I must say that my son and husband became efficient at everything. A good woman journalist will indeed have to give up much more than a man. That is a challenge and I agree that not everyone is up to this."²³

The editor pointed out that it is much easier now for a woman to balance work and family than it was when she started out. This is due in no small measure to the many technological and communication advances that have made it possible for women to interact speedily and efficiently with contacts, colleagues and managers; to gather information from a variety of sources, including the internet, and to relay the reports to their publishers while sitting at home or at any other location of their choice; to communicate with experts and professionals around the country and the world without having to be in situ; and so on.

The impact of new information technology has had definitive impact on transforming media culture; as observed, 'both the creative and technical aspects of production have long been computerised

²¹ Pg 40, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media

<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

²² Pg 40-41, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media

<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

²³ Indrani Peiris, associate editor and long time news editor of *Lankadeepa*, interviewed by this writer in March 2012.

and all major newspapers in the country have access to the internet.....inevitably, this has made media networking easier with all the added advantages." ²⁴

Journalists who are mothers admit there are times when they feel guilty that they might be neglecting their children, or being unfair by them. As a mother of two young children, I regularly battle these demons. But like many other women journalists, I have made sweeping adjustments to my work routine to enable me to spend a "decent" amount of time with the children. ²⁵

This has limited my scope professionally. For instance, I don't keep after hours and I don't travel as I used to. But it is a personal choice that all institutions I was employed at have supported. Bosses accepted from the outset that family obligations, too, have to be met and I have never been under pressure to give one up for the other. Colleagues, many of whom have children themselves, have been supportive and empathetic. This is also true of male colleagues.

Other women journalists I know have also made changes to their work patterns. Flexibility remains a key attraction, as observed also in the SI-CPA study. But adjustments are not always possible. The researchers interviewed one journalist with twenty years of experience who said after she had her first child, she stopped working and stayed at home. She subsequently had another baby and ended up taking off six years from journalism so that she could be at home with her children. After six years she came back to her old job and has continued since. However, she says that this is not always the case and that she had quite a few colleagues who stopped working completely after they got married or had children. ²⁶

4. More Women in Media

Despite there being considerable equality for women in the workplace, the number of female journalists in employment is small. The SI-CPA study, which is the most recent gauge of women's participation in journalism, found 192 female journalists working in 31 Sinhala, Tamil and English language newspapers as against 464 male journalists. It is difficult to measure the progress or lack of participation of female journalists in the media industry as data was not collected over the years.

²⁴ Kishali Pinto-Jayawardena, *Asian Women in the Information Age—New Communication Technology, Democracy and Women*, edited by Ila Joshi, published by Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, p28.

²⁵ Since my older daughter was born in 2007, I routinely leave my workplace at 4 pm to reach home an hour later. I don't do night shifts and take on assignments after this time only if absolutely necessary. It is a trait of Sri Lankan culture that most people empathise with women who have young children. As a result, I have often experienced officials and other contacts—including ministers and senior politicians—arranging their schedules so that meetings and/or interviews could take place within my preferred time-frame. After the arrival of my second child in 2011, I kept to the same pattern but was able to write more because I acquired reliable help. Although I work set hours in office, I regularly start writing again by 9 pm after the children are asleep. Travel out of Colombo, my home base, has become far less frequent and it is this aspect of my job that I miss the most. It is also the shift that has had the most negative impact on my journalism.

²⁶ Pg 38, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media
<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

However, all the journalists interviewed by the research team said the number of women entering the media industry has increased significantly and that this was a positive development. Still, women who are full time/permanent staff make up of around one-third of the journalists in both the print and electronic media institutions that participated in the SI-CPA study. It concluded, therefore, that despite the rise in female student intake for journalism courses and an increase in the numbers of women journalists, the female participation in media in Sri Lanka is still less than that of their male counterparts.²⁷

In 2010, this writer marked the English language examination papers of print media students of the Sri Lanka College of Journalism. Of the eight students that sat the final exam, there was only one male and he was Maldivian. The majority of female students whose papers I marked showed significant promise but I cannot immediately confirm how many entered or stayed in the field of journalism.

In short, the number of active female journalists is less than the number of active male journalists. But this is gradually changing, with more women entering—and remaining—in the field. Sri Lanka appears to share this characteristic with many other countries, particularly in South Asia. Across the Palk Strait, there is now much talk of the “feminisation” of the Indian media. An article recently published in the *Weekend Leader* states that, “there can be no denying that the presence of women has registered a sharp rise”. It quotes Ammu Joseph, Indian media watcher and member of the Network for Women in Media India, as saying: “If it’s just a question of numbers, one can certainly say that there is some evidence of such a phenomenon (feminisation) in India, especially in big cities and in sections of the English language media.”²⁸

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) in its 2010 report ‘*Who Makes the News?*’ monitored 1,365 newspapers, television and radio stations and Internet news sites all over the world. It found that for stories reported on television, radio and newspapers, “Since the year 2000 the percentage of stories reported by women compared to those reported by men has increased in all major topics except ‘science/health’. Nonetheless, stories by male reporters continue to exceed those by female reporters in all topics.”²⁹

Notwithstanding the rise in female participation, there is still not even a handful of female editors in Sri Lanka. Women are more likely to be found at other levels, such as deputy or assistant editor, news editor, features editor, investigations editor, business editor, and so on. They can also be observed at lower decision-making strata (such as deputy news editor, deputy features editor, and so on). By no means, therefore, is the picture an equal one.

²⁷ Pg. 35, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media
<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

²⁸ <http://www.theweekendleader.com/Success/788/media%E2%80%99s-distaff-side.html>

²⁹ Who Makes the News?, Global Media Monitoring Project,
http://www.whomakesthenews.org/images/stories/restricted/highlights/highlights_en.pdf

The SI-CPA study uses data from *Guide to Media 2011, Department of Government Information, Sri Lanka* to confirm this opinion. It concludes that the disparity in the numbers of males and females in decision making/ managerial positions is quite high in all three media.³⁰

This appears to be a worldwide trend. The Washington-based International Women's Media Foundation's 2011 study *Global Report on the Status Women in the News Media* found that in the Asia and Oceania region (with a few exceptions) there are barely 13 per cent of women in senior management. The report said that in more than 500 companies throughout 60 countries men occupy the vast majority of the management jobs and news-gathering positions in most nations included in the study. Of the top management jobs, 73% are occupied by men compared to 27% by women. Among the ranks of reporters, men hold nearly two-thirds of the jobs, compared to 36% held by women. However, among senior professionals, women are nearing parity with 41% of the newsgathering, editing and writing jobs.

"The two-year study covering 170,000 people in the news media found a higher representation of women in both governance and top management within both Eastern Europe (33% and 43%, respectively) and Nordic Europe (36% and 37%, respectively), compared to other regions. In the Asia and Oceania region, women are barely 13% of those in senior management, but in some individual nations women exceed men at that level, e.g., in South Africa women are 79.5% of those in senior management. In Lithuania women dominate the reporting ranks of junior and senior professional levels (78.5% and 70.6%, respectively), and their representation is nearing parity in the middle and top management ranks," the report said.³¹

The SI-CPA study quotes journalists as saying that one of the main reasons for low female representation in top positions is that they "do not continue working long enough to reach the decision making/managerial levels". It says this view is strongly held by those in Sinhala media (print and radio) as well as several journalists in English and Tamil media. "As females have other roles to fulfil as mothers and wives, they stop working after a while or make a conscious decision not to progress beyond a certain point and this is seen as one of the main reasons why there are minimal numbers of females at decision making and managerial levels when compared to the male numbers", the report states. It also quotes a female editor as saying that the media industry is "a boys club", with particular reference to the Editors Guild of Sri Lanka.³²

In interviews with this writer, several other senior female journalists confirmed the view that women stopped themselves from taking top positions. Among them was Indrani Peiris, who felt that many women put their family obligations first and this made it difficult for them to take on the high-

³⁰ Pg. 35, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media

<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

³¹ Executive summary of the 2011 *Global Report on the Status Women in the News Media*, International Women's Media Foundation, <http://iwmf.org/pdfs/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>

³² Pg. 36, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media

<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

pressure, intensive role of editor. In this job, she said, “You cannot expect to be home for Sinhala New Year, for Vesak and on Poya holidays. You have to work like a man if you want the positions men rise to.”³³

5. The elephant in the room

Sexual harassment is a sensitive topic. It could also (from this writer’s understanding of discussions with female colleagues) be a subjective matter. That is, the definition of what individuals consider to be harassment could differ. What some categorise as “harmless flirting” could cause serious offence to others. It is also felt that there are different degrees of harassment, ranging from mild to severe. It is arguable whether some forms are more tolerable than others. However, it is clear that reactions to harassment vary greatly. Writing about sexual harassment—generalising it—therefore, is a complicated task.

The SI-CPA study says that, when asked about discrimination and harassment at their workplaces and in the line of their work, some journalists “explained that they have experienced situations where they have been intimidated by men or faced situations where men have tried to take an upper hand in matters”. It has been this writer’s personal experience that men, even within the field of journalism, are uneasy with and around women in leadership positions. There is a tendency, wherever possible, to undermine them, to dismiss their authority or influence and to relegate them to the rank of “designation holder” minus the powers.

These challenges could be direct (like insubordination) or indirect. There could, for instance, be crude, gender-based jokes or comments cast. These could even be made without the knowledge of the woman editor or designation holder concerned. The idea is to make her an object of ridicule, thereby undermining her authority. Often, rumours are propagated about love affairs, unduly close relationships or sexual encounters between women journalists in high positions and various men, including ministers and others in authority. No proof is offered. It seems obvious—at least to me—that the goal of circulating these “stories” is to denigrate the women concerned. This writer remembers a particular instance of one male editor of an English language weekly writing and publishing a snippet about the female editor of a competing newspaper in which he called her a “floozy”. While it was clear that the male editor had differences of opinion with the female editor, his choice of vocabulary was not only sexist, it was irrelevant.

The SI-CPA study quotes a journalist who handles news and politics as saying that it is very common for men in Sri Lanka to “pass remarks and comments at women and it is best to ignore them while working”. Sexual innuendo and gender-based jibes and jokes are observed in varying degrees at many newspaper offices. Here, again, some women handle it better than others.

The SI-CPA research states also: “When asked for their opinions specifically regarding harassment of a sexual nature, none of the journalists interviewed said that they have personally faced such issues.

³³ This is also my experience. As a mother of two young children, despite being senior in the field, I restrict myself from taking on too much at the workplace as I feel I have obligations towards them. Even if I were offered a position that entailed a higher salary and more authority, I would not—at this point—accept it if it also involved more work and more responsibilities since this would hinder me from assisting with schoolwork, shuttling the children between classes, being relaxed enough to deal with their childhood dilemmas, etc.

However, almost every journalist interviewed was of the opinion that sexual harassment is prevalent in the industry. They say that they had heard of instances where female journalists had been sexually harassed, either by male colleagues or by men they had met while on work. Some of them related a few incidents that they have heard of or knew had happened to some female journalist known to them. Except at two media institutions where the interviews took place, the incidents related by those interviewed are said to have taken place at media institutions that were not their own.”

It adds that: “A senior journalist of a mainstream English newspaper said that sexual harassment was prevalent at their newspaper but that no one speaks out about it. Whilst not elaborating on the issues, she said that ‘No one makes a big fuss as it is difficult to work here afterwards. There are enough and more incidents but the most that will happen is that the editor will be notified’. She continued to say that in her capacity as one of the senior female staff members there, she advises the young female journalists on how to handle these situations. An editor of another mainstream English newspaper said that while she has never personally faced sexual harassment, as the editor she has had to deal with her staff on matters relating to sexual harassment, which she says were always unpleasant experiences. She strongly believes that every media institution should have a unit within the organisation to handle complaints from staff and take stern action against the perpetrators.”³⁴

This certainly points to a problem in the industry that has not been tackled. From interviews I did among female colleagues, it was learnt that the harassment could on occasion be serious enough to prompt resignation. One senior woman journalist told this writer that: “It is very much below the surface. And it depends on the place you work and the way you handle things. There are people who would like to help you. But if you take into consideration each and every case, it can become ugly for some people. Even senior reporters will find it hard to cope.”

Another senior journalist told this writer that when a female colleague was “going through a lot of grief” at their newspaper (the latter subsequently resigned), she wrote an article in the newspaper highlighting sexual harassment in the workplace. In it, she interviewed a law lecturer who said the issue was “a silent plague crippling institutions and productivity”.³⁵ Asked whether it led to a change in her organisation’s work ethic, she replied: “There were a lot of comments, but that is all.” Yet another journalist said how she had been pursued “for favours” by men in the media field. “I have had people in the same field coming behind me and then saying I have slept with them,” she related. “My close friends know who I am but others may have thought those claims were true.”³⁶

Pearl Thevanayagam, a senior journalist who emigrated to the United Kingdom, wrote an article for the *Sri Lanka Guardian* website alluding to sexual harassment in the media field. In it, she claims that

³⁴ Pg. 42, An Assessment of Female Participation in Mainstream Media
<http://www.slpi.lk/downloads/documents/An%20Assessment%20of%20Female%20Participation%20in%20Mainstream%20Media.pdf>

³⁵ ‘Sexual harassment in workplace, a serious issue—Senior Law Lecturer’;
<http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2012/06/10/fea03.asp>; link reproduced with permission from author.

³⁶ These journalists did not want their names or organizations revealed.

a male journalist would come near her desk and whisper obscenities in her ear but that the management ignored her complaint. She also says: “Then there was a senior journalist who headed an international news agency (now departed) who when I asked for a reference asked me to have dinner with him. When I declined I also lost an opportunity with a foreign news agency.”³⁷

It is difficult to say how this situation will evolve in future. Some colleagues felt the difference today is that strong women are fighting back and influencing change. As one colleague put it, “I feel the tough women handle it better. The weak ultimately give up.”

Ironically, there even exists a ‘Charter of Gender Equality for Media and Journalism in Sri Lanka’ launched in 2006.³⁸ It sets out the minimum standards, principles and actions needed to underpin gender equity in media in Sri Lanka and outlines a practical program of action to support the achievement of equality in media workplaces, journalists’ organisations and the media itself. The document was the outcome of the ‘National Meeting on Gender and Media’ which was attended by around 100 journalists, the majority of them women, from mainstream media organisations. Uvindu Kurukulasuriya, a media activist, attended the conference in his capacity as a representative of the Free Media Movement and as a gender and media trainer. He said that the charter was soon forgotten. “Though it was a good document, nobody cared to implement it,” he told this writer.³⁹

Unfortunately, even this charter does not address the sexual harassment of female journalists in the workplace; that is, by their male colleagues. Despite all the advances women have made in the field of journalism in Sri Lanka, it is questionable whether they would ever achieve their full potential—and in larger numbers—as long as this scourge exists. Here, then, is the glass ceiling.

6. No Bed of Roses

The general situation for journalists—and journalism—in Sri Lanka, however, remains hugely challenging. In some ways, it is reflective of the general malaise that afflicts the country.

Some of these impediments were highlighted by this writer in a keynote speech delivered before the Annual General Meeting of the Citizens’ Movement for Good Governance on 23 May 2012.⁴⁰ I reproduce parts of it here: “It is the practice today that when somebody presents a view contrary to that which is held by the government and its henchmen, that person and his opinions are loudly

³⁷ ‘What is it with South Asian males?’, by Pearl Thevanayagam; Sri Lanka Guardian, 7 June 2012; <http://www.srilankaguardian.org/2012/06/what-is-it-with-south-asian-males.html>

³⁸ ‘2006 CHARTER OF GENDER EQUALITY FOR MEDIA AND JOURNALISM IN SRI LANKA’; <http://www.ifj.org/es/articles/2006-charter-of-gender-equality-for-media-and-journalism-in-sri-lanka>

³⁹ Uvindu Kurukulasuriya, media activist, in a conversation with this writer on 19 September 2012

⁴⁰ <http://cimogg-srilanka.org/2012/05/pre-agm-keynote-address/>, keynote address delivered by Journalist Ms Namini Wijedasa on 23 May 2012 prior to the AGM of the CIMOGG held in the Auditorium of the Organisation of Professional Associations, Colombo.

denigrated. He must have an agenda, they say. And the word 'agenda' is almost always used negatively."⁴¹

It was also observed that: "As journalists, we have to avoid all these labels. And yet, you could still be sold out by colleagues who have aligned themselves so closely with this government that they are irreversibly indebted to them. If there are stooges in all other sectors, so it is also with the media. Carrots are certainly more powerful than the stick."⁴²

In this writer's view, intolerance is the biggest hindrance to the practice of journalism in Sri Lanka under the regime of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. Narrow-mindedness and chauvinism have affected not only members of the government but also media practitioners. The standards set at the top have filtered down and pervaded society at different levels.

In another address, delivered at the launch of Santasilan Kadirgamar's book *Handy Perinbanayagam: A Memorial Volume* on 4 March 2012⁴³, this writer touched on some of these issues: "I cannot tell you how many people I interview every month, every week, that tell me the truth and ask not to be named; that tell me their thoughts, but ask to remain anonymous."⁴⁴

It was also observed that: "This trend has become so widespread that I write regularly in my articles that most people these days do not wish to be quoted. It is shameful for a government that brags

⁴¹ This writer also observed: "If you criticise the way foreign relations are conducted, you're being bribed by the West. If you speak about human rights abuses, you are a grasping NGO agent. Either way, you are embroiled in a certain conspiracy to topple the government. If you oppose the mass ordination of Buddhist children because you think it is not the healthiest way to alleviate poverty or to protect the Buddha Sasana, you're part of an international religious plot to destroy Buddhism in Sri Lanka. If you eat bread or noodles, you're a slave to those evil multinational companies—despite the fact that the person making this claim is a noodle himself. If you criticise your rulers, you're just downright ungrateful because they won the war—and that should suffice for the next several decades. Indeed, 'If you are not with us, you are against us'. Still. Three years after the war ended." It was also observed that: "This bigotry and intolerance is untenable. It is wholly detrimental to the free thought, free speech and the advancement of society. Why in this day and age is a government afraid of a diversity of views? Why do they feel so threatened by detractors and critics that they feel it necessary to classify them as conspirators or traitors?"

⁴² It was also observed that: "This is not a phenomenon unique to the prevailing regime. Ranil Wickremesinghe had media lackeys who treated as heretics those colleagues who did not blindly follow the leader. So did Chandrika Kumaratunga and no doubt those before her. I may be mistaken but it feels so much worse now. If there is one change I would like to see in the media industry, it is that we do not let our political preferences erode relations among ourselves to the extent that we are unable to tolerate each other in a room."

⁴³ *Handy Perinbanayagam : A Memorial Volume : Part 1 : The Jaffna Youth Congress : Part II : Selections from the Writings and Speeches of Handy Perinbanayagam*; Author (Ed) Santasilan Kadirgamar, published by Kumaran Book House, Sri Lanka, in 2012; launch was held on 4 March 2012, speech was not published anywhere.

⁴⁴ It was also observed: "Ministers, MPs, officials, professionals, businesspeople, members of civil society, academics, analysts—I could go on. I take the information and publish some of it. I feel honoured to have earned their confidence. And I know they are grateful for the space. But I agonize that my institution and I are the only ones taking responsibility. I worry that the reader will think I'm just making things up."

about democracy to have to preside over such a phenomenon. It is also shameful of us. Is the truth so frightful now that it must emanate only from the anonymous?”

Reporters without Borders (RSF) in a country update published on 12 March 2012⁴⁵ summarised the status quo in Sri Lanka thus: “2011 was marked by violence, threats and propaganda aimed at journalists and media defenders seen as government critics. Resorting to censorship and disinformation, authorities have blocked access to websites considered unfavourable to the government, claiming legal justifications.”

In February 2012, RSF called on members of the Geneva-based United Nations Human Rights Council to pass a resolution condemning the Sri Lankan government’s violations of freedom of information and to demand an end to threats and violence against news media and human rights defenders in Sri Lanka.⁴⁶

The branding of critics, whoever they might be, remains a fundamental concern. Some examples are outlined in the RSF statement.⁴⁷ The oppressiveness of the government—and the modus operandi through which this oppression is exercised—has bred much self-censorship among journalists. The type of self-censorship could differ based on where a particular journalist works, who the owners of his newspaper are, who his editor is, etc. Different institutions require their journalists to lay off “certain politicians” or “certain issues”, “certain organisations” or “certain lines”.⁴⁸

The state media is entirely under the control of the government. There is no vestige of independence left in these institutions. This is largely because this regime (and many regimes before it) operates on the grossly questionable premise that when something is owned by the “state” it is equivalent to being owned by the “party” or “alliance” in power.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ <http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-sri-lanka-12-03-2012,42068.html>, Reporters with Borders. RSF said: “The number of cases of physical attacks, death threats and imprisonment may have fallen in 2010 and 2011, but the authorities continue to prevent the media from enjoying real editorial freedom and many journalists are still in exile.” The organisation called on the government “to accept constructive questions from civil society and to stop branding its critics as ‘conspirators’ and ‘LTTE accomplices’.”

⁴⁶ *With Media Gagged or Threatened, no Progress for Freedom of Information*; <http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-with-media-gagged-or-threatened-no-28-02-2012,41946.html>, Reporters without Borders

⁴⁷ *With Media Gagged or Threatened, no Progress for Freedom of Information*; <http://en.rsf.org/sri-lanka-with-media-gagged-or-threatened-no-28-02-2012,41946.html>, Reporters without Borders

⁴⁸ In Sri Lanka today, the owner of a mainstream newspaper might not only be aligned with a particular political party, he is sometimes a parliamentary member of a political party, or related to a parliamentary member of a political party. The controlling shares of several newspapers are now held by close friends/business associates of the ruling Rajapaksa family. This happened through comparatively speedy takeovers facilitated by the government. Indeed, “buying into” newspaper companies is a favourite tool of the regime as is “buying over” individuals working in them.

⁴⁹ This writer is personally aware that journalists in state media do not all blindly subscribe to the views or endorse the policies of the ruling regime. They are merely not permitted to express opposing or diverse opinions, even under the guise of balanced discussion or reporting. To do so would result in political victimisation, even loss of employment.

Writing in the *Sunday Leader* (its founding editor Lasantha Wickrematunge died in a 2009 daylight assassination that is still being investigated), blogger and commentator Indi Samarajiva summarises the situation in this manner: “There is independent media and the government is quite roundly criticised both online and off...This does not, however, mean that expression is truly free. Sri Lankan repression of speech is more subtle, but still very real. I was recently in the office of the head of a large media company. Quite casually, he mentioned that they screen certain stories for political content and pull them if they think it would jeopardise the company. This essentially, is the nature of censorship in Sri Lanka today.”⁵⁰ In Samarajiva’s words, “The government has made it in the media’s self-interest to practice self-censorship.”⁵¹

Samarajiva makes other observations: “Today the government doesn’t have to openly repress or attack media. The media is effectively tamed by a judicious combination of violence, prosecution, and politics.”⁵²

The picture of media freedom painted by some media activists (particularly those based abroad) is excruciatingly grim. For instance, a movement called ‘Sri Lanka Campaign’ states on its website that

⁵⁰ *Freedom Of Expression In Sri Lanka, Circa 2011*, Indi Samarajiva, *The Sunday Leader*, www.google.lk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=12&ved=0CFEQFjABOAo&url=http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/30/freedom-of-expression-in-sri-lanka-circa-2011/&ei=xfLeT_SPMpGzrAeG2aDKDQ&usg=AFQjCNE9w2Kkct78tR6HuMtmNaRNJ-x1Kg

⁵¹ *Media should exercise self censorship-Lakshman Yapa*, Dinidu de Alwis, *Ceylon Today*, <http://www.ceylontoday.lk/16-3780-news-detail-media-should-exercise-self-censorship-lakshman-yapa.html>. A recent example of this was the pronouncement in March 2012 of Acting Media Minister Lakshman Yapa Abeywardena that “media in Sri Lanka should exercise self censorship, with regard to matters pertaining to the country”. He said at a cabinet briefing that, whilst media freedom exists in the country, media outlets should censor what they report, and media should not report on matters that would damage the integrity of the island. Abeywardena made these remarks when asked by journalists about attacks by state media on human rights and civil society activists. (Mudslinging and character assassination are often used by the Rajapaksa regime to suppress and intimidate critics, political opponents, etc).

⁵² *Freedom Of Expression In Sri Lanka, Circa 2011*, Indi Samarajiva, *The Sunday Leader*, www.google.lk/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=12&ved=0CFEQFjABOAo&url=http://www.thesundayleader.lk/2011/01/30/freedom-of-expression-in-sri-lanka-circa-2011/&ei=xfLeT_SPMpGzrAeG2aDKDQ&usg=AFQjCNE9w2Kkct78tR6HuMtmNaRNJ-x1Kg. He adds: “The threats to freedom of expression in Sri Lanka are much more subtle today than the fist or the gun. Indeed, freedom of expression has suffered so much in Sri Lanka that it’s now bleeding into that other fundamental right, freedom of thought.”

Samarajiva also notes: “What opposition media remains hasn’t done itself any favours by clinging to the losing dialogue of the past, heavily influenced by an anti-war stance now widely discredited and a reliance on Western language and support now widely cast as unpatriotic. Media organisations are also struggling to adapt to a post-war era which requires more than simply reporting bomb blasts and body counts. Many have responded by simply reporting government press releases and versions of events, a strategy that seems to work well enough for the market at a low cost, and also without carrying the risk of being shut down. In that way, self-censorship is also made to pay well, or at least better than the alternative.”

Sri Lanka's media is in crisis.⁵³ It says: "Since 2005, 34 journalists have been murdered, not a single murderer has been sent to prison, and up to 25 journalists a year are fleeing the country."

High figures have often been quoted by international media to support the claim that Sri Lanka is a brutally violent place for journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), however, has taken a more careful, substantiated position. It counts as 19 the number of journalists killed since 1992 for which motive has been confirmed and six for which motive remains unconfirmed.⁵⁴ These statistics are bad enough. In this writer's opinion, however, the problems facing Sri Lankan journalists are wider and deeper than numbers on a slate.⁵⁵ The International Federation for Journalists offers a good look at recent developments in a chapter on Sri Lanka in its report '*Free Speech in Peril: Press Freedom in South Asia 2010-2011*'.⁵⁶

Meanwhile, impunity remains an overriding national problem. The CPJ ranks Sri Lanka fourth in its 2012 'impunity index' with 0.431 unsolved journalist murders per million inhabitants.⁵⁷ A press release states: "In Sri Lanka, ranked fourth worst, authorities have failed to win convictions in the murders of nine journalists—all of whom reported critically about President Mahinda Rajapaksa's administration."⁵⁸

⁵³ Sri Lanka Campaign, <http://www.srilankacampaign.org/media-freedom.htm>

⁵⁴ Committee to Protect Journalists, <http://cpj.org/killed/asia/sri-lanka/>

⁵⁵ I have exercised my profession without serious threat or intimidation. But I will admit that I have always skirted the boundaries, pulling back and curbing my journalistic instincts without going "out of line" or "over the line". There are just some stories you don't touch and personalities you don't expose. Self-censorship is a norm. Journalists, even senior editors, are regularly heard saying that "If we write this, we will be killed," regardless of whether or not there is a real threat of that happening. They also say, "If we write this, the management will be in trouble"; "Don't write that, something might happen to you"; "The white van will get me/you if you expose that"; "You/I will have to flee the country"; and so on. These are regular utterances, even jokes, within editorials. To discover just how dangerous Sri Lanka would be for journalists if there was no self-censoring, the industry would have to collectively push the envelope. There is no sign of that; indeed, the opposite is now evident—and with good reason. In short, everything that a journalist fears might happen will not always happen; but you never know, because everything he fears might happen has done so in the recent past.

⁵⁶ *Free Speech in Peril: Press Freedom in South Asia 2010-2011*, International Federation of Journalists, http://www.jdslanka.org/images/documents/ifj_report_2011_sri_lanka.pdf

⁵⁷ *Getting Away with Murder*, Special Report, Committee to Protect Journalists, <http://cpj.org/reports/2012/04/impunity-index-2012.php#more>. CPJ's annual Impunity Index, first published in 2008, identifies countries where journalists are murdered regularly and governments fail to solve the crimes. For this latest index, CPJ examined journalist murders that occurred from January 1, 2002, through December 31, 2011, and that remain unsolved. Only the 12 nations in the world with five or more unsolved cases are included on the index. Cases are considered unsolved when no convictions have been won.

⁵⁸ *Getting Away with Murder*, Special Report, Committee to Protect Journalists, <http://cpj.org/reports/2012/04/impunity-index-2012.php#more>. It also states: "In recent months, government officials have issued brazen public threats of violence against their critics, an alarming development given that 60 per cent of Sri Lankan victims were known to have received threats before they were killed."

Having said all this, I also feel some media organisations/activists over-dramatise and exaggerate the situation on the ground. I cannot second guess their motives but I do believe this is counter-productive for Sri Lankan journalism in the long-term. For instance, to claim without substantiation or establishment of cause or motive that 37 journalists have died since 2005—and that up to 25 journalists are fleeing the country a year— will play into the hands of detractors who say activists and civil society are misrepresenting facts for monetary and/or other gain.⁵⁹ In my opinion, the breakdown of law and order in Sri Lanka is all-encompassing; intolerance affects everyone; and the control or suppression of rights is not restricted to the media industry.

If this picture seems confusing, even contradictory at times, it's because it is. A western diplomat once commented to this writer that Sri Lanka is a curious and interesting mix when it comes to media. On the one hand, journalists operate under tremendous constraints. On the other hand, many still manage to write. Even without broaching "taboo" issues, there is much critical opinion expressed in the media. The objective of this paper, however, is not to reconcile these contradictions.

6. Conclusion

As is the trend in most countries, the number of female journalists entering and practising the profession in Sri Lanka is rising. The number of female journalists holding the post of editor is markedly low but there is optimism for change as the obstacles in their path are, more often than not, self-created. There is also a higher number of women appointed to other senior editorial positions, who wield considerable influence over the running of these newspapers.

Inability to find equilibrium has caused promising women journalists to opt out or to 'take a break'. Some have stopped field reporting and limited themselves to desk jobs, such as sub-editing. Others depend heavily on the support of their spouses and extended family, with or without success. Women with less personal commitments continue to forge ahead in a manner that often matches or surpasses the performance of male colleagues. Together, they have enriched journalism with perspectives that an exclusively male workforce could never have produced.

Women are today actively working on news, business, political, investigative, human interest and features desks. They have also taken on the defence and crime rounds, although in much smaller numbers. They write editorials and op-eds and are assigned their own columns on topics of their choice. For the most part, there are also no restrictions on assignments. While women did not traditionally cover sports or work in the photography department, even these are no longer the exclusive domains of men. Editors usually (there may be exceptions) entrust work to journalists on the basis of their skills, capabilities and willingness to carry out that task—not on their gender. This is especially so in the English media.

In terms of the overall environment, however, women journalists face many of the same constraints that their male counterparts do. In particular, several female journalists have been threatened or intimidated⁶⁰. Some have had to take special precautions during times of heightened risk.⁶¹

Granted, numerically fewer female journalists have been abducted, assassinated or have had to flee the country. But that is small respite indeed.

⁶⁰ <http://www.amnesty.org/es/library/asset/ASA37/023/2009/es/7d32a357-bc67-41b1-afaa-c442fba98222/asa370232009en.pdf>, Amnesty International, Urgent Action Appeal. In October 2009, two female editors at *The Sunday Leader* newspaper—Frederica Jansz and Munza Mushtaq—received death threats. Written in red ink and sent via post, they related to the coverage by this newspaper of a video broadcast on England’s Channel 4 TV which allegedly showed Sri Lankan soldiers executing Tamil prisoners. The threatening letters were postmarked 21 October, just three days after the newspaper ran its controversial story. Both letters included text saying “if you write anymore, we will kill you, [and] slice you into pieces”. In September, Dileesha Abeysundera, who works for the Sinhala-language edition of *The Sunday Leader* and also campaigns for greater press freedom in Sri Lanka, was threatened (see UA 269/09).

⁶¹ Mandana Ismail, deputy editor of *The Sunday Leader*, interviewed by this writer in June 2012, said she received a death threat by post about a week before the 2010 presidential election. Frederica Jansz, the newspaper’s editor, was sent a similar letter. Mandana said: “It was a two-page letter illustrated with ‘blood splatters’. It did not point to a particular story but said we were traitors. It mentioned me by name and said that, since I was not Sinhalese, I did not “feel for the cause”. It also said this was the “final warning” and that we would have to face “serious consequences” if we did not follow their instructions. But it did not detail any instructions. Just as Frederica and I were about to leave for the Mt. Lavinia police to lodge a complaint that evening, a busload of policeman arrived at our printing press and conducted a raid. We took the situation very seriously since it appeared to be a concerted effort against the newspaper. I felt it was wiser to take precautions and went into hiding for a whole week. I could not even vote at the presidential election. Only my mother had an idea of the location I shifted to but not an address. I told my daughter, who was seven-years-old at the time, that I was going on assignment for a few days. I used a different phone number. When I returned home after a week, my father for the first time ever told me that I needed to think twice about my choice of profession.”