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இலங்கை மனித உரிமைகள் ஆணைக்குழு
Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka

Statement on Abuse and Harassment of Women on Social Media

The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL) notes that Sri Lanka is currently being reviewed by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. On 6 January 2025, the Commission submitted its Parallel Report to the Committee, focusing on the list of issues raised with respect to Sri Lanka's National Report to the Committee.

Sri Lanka is a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which obliges the state to protect women from all forms of violence, including online harassment and to uphold the principles of equality and non-discrimination.

In its Parallel Report, the Commission observed that 'women politicians and political activists continue to face verbal abuse and harassment both by members of the public and their peers'. The Commission wishes to expand on this observation and express its grave concern with respect to the alarming number of incidents of abuse, harassment, and defamation directed at women on social media platforms. This trend of targeting women, including those in the public sphere, threatens their safety, dignity, and rights to privacy and equality. The Commission notes that the freedom of expression of any person must be respected by the state. But such freedom may be legitimately restricted for the purpose of protecting the rights and freedoms of others.

Online harassment, ranging from cyberbullying and 'doxing' (i.e., publishing private and personally identifying information about a particular person on the internet) to non-consensual sharing of personal content, has created a hostile digital environment for women. These acts not only violate human rights but also perpetuate gender inequality, discouraging women's active participation in the public, professional, and personal spheres.

Recently, two women parliamentarians, Hon. Nilanthi Kottahachchi and Hon. Kaushalya Ariyaratne, faced severe online harassment, where disinformation intended to harm their personal and professional lives was disseminated and amplified. These are the most recent incidents of harassment of women in public office referencing their personal lives.

The Commission condemns these acts and calls attention to the fact that such online behavior is both ethically reprehensible and, in certain cases, punishable under Sri Lanka's criminal law. For instance, section 345 of the Penal Code provides that causing sexual annoyance or harassment

through words or actions amounts to an offence. Law enforcement authorities are dutybound to impartially investigate complaints made with respect to such incidents.

The Commission notes that the principles and goals set out in CEDAW are now part of Sri Lanka's domestic law through the enactment of the Women Empowerment Act, No. 37 of 2024, which aims to strengthen legal protections and institutional support for women. The Commission urges the Government of Sri Lanka to expedite operationalising this Act and take measures to address online harassment of women and gender-based cybercrimes.

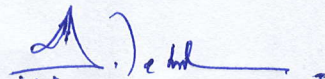
The Commission emphasises that women, regardless of their position in society, have the right to live free from harassment, discrimination, and fear. Social media platforms must be spaces where individuals can express their views without subjecting others to cruelty, humiliation, or defamation. In this context, the Commission calls upon social media platforms to implement decisive and sustainable measures to protect users from harassment, as they have a responsibility to maintain a safe and respectful online environment.

The Commission also reminds the public that these harmful online actions are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader pattern of systemic gender-based violence. Addressing this issue requires not only legal accountability but also a culture of greater respect for women's rights and dignity in all spheres of life.

The HRCSL recommends the following measures:

1. **Law enforcement authorities:** To prioritise the impartial investigation of online harassment cases, ensuring justice for victims.
2. **Social media platforms:** To enhance mechanisms for reporting and removing harmful content, ensuring timely responses to complaints.
3. **Civil society and educational institutions:** To promote awareness on digital safety and gender equality, fostering a culture of respect and accountability in online spaces.
4. **The Government of Sri Lanka:** To allocate adequate resources for the effective implementation of the Women Empowerment Act, and the establishment of the Women's Commission.

The Commission reaffirms its commitment to safeguarding the rights and dignity of all individuals, particularly women, in both physical and digital spaces.



Chairman

Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka