

SRI LANKA

Voluntary Presentation on the Review Theme

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Sixty Second Commission for the Status of Women
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REVIEW THEME: “Participation in and access of women in the media and information and communication technologies and their impact on and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women”

Introduction

Chairperson, Excellences, Distinguished Delegates,

Since 2003 Sri Lanka has made significant progress with regard to the participation of and access of women to media and ICT.

With a national literacy rate of 93 percent, one of the highest in the region, Sri Lanka has a long history of education. Literacy rates and educational attainment levels have risen steadily, after Sri Lanka became an independent nation in 1948, and today, the youth literacy rate, stands at 97 percent. Sri Lanka was one of the first countries in Asia to grant Universal Adult Franchise in 1931. Following this we enacted laws in 1939 and in 1945 to ensure free education for all. This enabled both boys and girls from all walks of life to gain free access to education. The right to a free education is now enshrined in the Sri Lankan Constitution, which also mandates compulsory schooling between the ages of 5 and 16.

As a nation that has suffered a dark period under the yoke of terrorism and an accompanying culture of impunity –especially when it came to journalists and activists - since 2015, Sri Lanka’s administration has been actively conscious of the value of a nation, built on the principles of democracy and the Rule of Law. We believe that the cornerstone of any democracy is freedom of information. Without this there can be no meaningful advancement of peace, development gender equality and human rights. Democratic values translates into wider civic space and opportunities for open conversation and activism.

It is in this backdrop that Sri Lanka welcomed the UN call, to ensure for journalists, the free and effective performance of their professional tasks, and the resolute condemnation of all attacks against journalists. Equally, Sri Lanka welcomed the resolution under the leadership of Greece adopted in 2013, that proclaimed November 2nd as the International Day to End Impunity for

Crimes Against Journalists (IDEI). We commend and support the efforts and leadership of UNESCO in this regard, as well. Sri Lanka was honoured to host the UNESCO regional seminar, on Ending Impunity Against Journalists in December 2017 attended by over 150 participants from the region.

Last November Sri Lanka launched the National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights 2017 -2021 with a special focus on Rights of women and girls.

This National Action Plan reiterates the need to achieve substantial equality particularly in the economic, political and cultural spheres.

Successes and Best Practices

Sri Lanka has been able to widen the reach of information in the three official languages, through different media. This has resulted in building and strengthening a network of information centres and websites that are in turn collaborating with communication partners like the private sector, civil society and academic institutions that already have in place gender sensitive and gender responsive programming.

In Sri Lanka, we have also made great strides in IT literacy. We are pleased to note that IT literacy has grown steadily, and we continue to maintain our position as the foremost among South Asian nations in this field. In terms of affordability, Sri Lanka is within the top ten economies. In this digital age, Sri Lanka believes that access to high quality internet, is a pre-requisite to enabling freedom of expression. Sri Lanka is of the view that access to free wifi is a citizen's right. As a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural society, we have also taken the lead in multi-lingual internet initiatives, and have put in place technical conditions to facilitate the presence of our local languages on the Internet.

Sri Lanka has ranked 66th position in ICT literacy world. This achievement is mainly due to the high ICT literacy among youth of the country. The impact of ICT in our daily lives has been steadily increasing. The vision of e-Sri Lanka is “to take dividends of ICT to every village, to every citizen and to every business and transform the way government thinks and works”.

The Information and Communication Technology Agency was created by an Act of Parliament in 2003 and the agency is responsible for implementation of the e-Sri Lanka Roadmap and e- Sri Lankan initiative, which uses ICT to develop the economy, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of all Sri Lankans. However ICT policy developed in 2009 lacks gender equality perspectives although the e - Sri Lanka programme aims to empower women along with youth through increased and affordable access to information and technology tools.

ICT has the potential to alleviate some of the barriers faced by women of Sri Lanka, including poverty, time scarcity, mobility and cultural taboos. Increased access to information is the greatest benefit that IT could produce for women's empowerment. It can contribute immensely for women's economic development which includes the increased ability for women to work from home, improved employment opportunities for women in the IT sector, improves global market access through e-commerce, access to distance learning and distance work programs. The government of Sri Lanka has recognized ICT as one of the key drivers for economic growth of women and has taken many initiatives to boost ICT for women's empowerment.

Some of the programs are:

- Programs in schools and universities encouraging youth to use ICT facilities to build networks, share information and update their knowledge on any subject they desire. All universities receive grants to conduct ICT skills development training at least for six months for the first year students.
- WIFI Suhuruliya programme promoting women's entrepreneurship in Sri Lanka through ICT capacity development.
- The Smart circle initiative which has been implemented in 5 districts with engagement of the members of community organizations, school children, youth, and house wives small and medium term entrepreneurs.
- Nanesala online TV channel for school children
- Establishment of 1000 Nenasala centers to empower citizens through ICT
- Establishment of Vidatha centers in all divisional secretariats
- Developed computer centres in secondary and senior schools to have equal access to IT skills irrespective of sex
- Unicode and fonts in Sinhala and Tamil are being developed to overcome the barriers of lack of English proficiency in rural, plantation and low income urban areas.

ICT has been identified as one of the tools for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women by the Government of Sri Lanka. However a gender divide has been identified reflecting lower numbers of women accessing and using ICT compared to men. Male ICT literacy is comparatively higher than female literacy. According to a national survey conducted by the Department of Census and Statistics, the overall computer literacy rate reported in 2016 was 27.5%. Computer literacy rate among males was 29.3%, whereas it is 26% for women.

Less than a fifth of Sri Lankan's use the internet and only 10% of the households have direct access.

Female internet users are said to be limited to a small group of educated urban elite. The urban rural divide and gender digital divide in access to ICT still persists, services are not uniformly available across the country. It reveals that social and cultural factors contribute significantly towards shaping women's participation in the information economy. The potential for Information communication technology to facilitate women's economic empowerment needs to be explored. The technology also enables the dominance and exploitation of women and girls especially through the internet which needs to be addressed by the law enforcement authorities.

This shows that policy interventions are needed to include women and girls in Information Technology and work to bridge fundamental disparities in accessing technology. With all these interventions the government is committed to achieve the target given under Goal 5 which indicates "enhancing the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communication technology to promote and empowerment of women".

Women's access to media

The Media landscape in Sri Lanka has seen significant changes since 1995 with the advent of new information and communication technology. It has a greater potential in contributing to the advancement of women through positive portrayal of women leading to eliminate gender stereotyping. Media also could contribute to eliminate gender based violence through sensitive reporting of incidences and making the public to realize their role in contributing to eradicate violence.

The number of women journalists in Sri Lanka has increased over several years. Some of them are holding senior positions in the media. Women journalists in Sri Lanka are well educated and more women had post graduate qualifications compared with men. The Code of Ethics drafted by the Ministry of Media address the issues of gender discrimination in media institutions. The Sri Lanka Television Act and the Code of Conduct emphasizes the need to take precautionary measures to safeguard and respect the interest of women in accordance with Sri Lankan values and customs. Net -working among media organizations locally and internationally has been developed to facilitate eradication of gender issues through information sharing.

Despite the advances made in empowering women in media the main challenge been the usage of women's image for commercial purposes with a view to maximize profits by media organizations. The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs is currently engaged in developing a media policy with the participation of experts in the field of Media and Communication to create a rights based approach in all media activities.

One of the remarkable milestone in the area of media is the introduction of the Right to Information Act No. 12 of 2016 which is now completely operationalized. The Act brings with it a promise of open government, citizen's active participation in governance and accountability to the people of the country. A Commission has been established which is vested with wide powers such as to hear appeals, institute action against alleged offenders and prescribe guidelines on record management and proactive disclosure. The Commission is responsible for ensuring that the Right to Information can be enjoyed by any citizen without any hindrances.

Madam Chair,

The Government of Sri Lanka has realized the importance of media and Information Technology for the advancement of women and endeavors to create a media culture conducive to them.

I thank you,

Hon Chandrani Bandara,
Minister of Women and Child Affairs
Sri Lanka

QUESTION ONE- NEPAL

Can you speak to how Sri Lanka has taken steps to improve rural women's access to information and communication technology

QUESTION TWO – UNESCO

Has there been an improvement of equal access to quality education for rural girls and young women and measures to eliminate gender stereotypes in education, including information and communication technology education, particularly with reference to rural girls and young women.

QUESTION 3 – INDONESIA

When you talk about Access to media and ICT we would imagine that the conflict impacted women and girl's disproportionately. How is the government addressing issues of financial identity for women and war widows. Could you speak about women entrepreneurs and empowering Women's Economic Leadership in Sri Lanka in this context.