

BEYOND BOUNDARIES

Advancing Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in PRO-INFO

NOVEMBER 2024





EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides an overview of a comprehensive Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) analysis that is designed to inform and enrich the IREX Promoting Positive Information (PRO-INFO) initiative.

The PRO-INFO activity, funded by USAID/Sri Lanka through the Civil Society and Media Strengthening Together and Advancing in New Directions (CSM-STAND) mechanism, is implemented by IREX to support the transition of information and media environment in Sri Lanka to one that is more democratic and responsive to its citizens.

Given the recent inception of PRO-INFO, many of the performance-based insights were derived from a study of the mechanisms that operated with PRO-INFO's predecessor, Media Empowerment for a Democratic Sri Lanka (MEND). Through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), the researchers examined strategies and tactics that work to advance gender equality, as well as those that may have had a less beneficial effect on that program goal.

The analysis delves into best practices identified within the MEND program as well as various identity-related obstacles that at times interfered with women's equal participation in program activities. Key findings reveal pervasive barriers, including but not limited to socio-cultural norms hindering women's access to trainings and other activities; threats posed by online harassment, challenges in translating terms in a gender-sensitive manner and obstacles stemming from the ongoing economic crisis and the digital divide. The report will also examine optimum strategies for language accessibility, social media engagement for inclusive media education, promoting reconciliation through cross-cultural understanding, fostering diversity through decentralization, and prioritizing LGBTIQ+ sensitivity.

To address these challenges and capitalize on best practices, a set of tailored recommendations has been included. Implementing these recommendations will enhance language accessibility, promote online safety for women, improve translation sensitivity, help navigate legislative changes, and empower marginalized communities. The importance of ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and adaptability in the implementation process is emphasized, along with the need for experimentation and learning from both successes and setbacks.

In conclusion, this GESI analysis serves as a roadmap for stakeholders engaged in the PRO-INFO program, offering a comprehensive overview of identified challenges, best practices, and actionable steps to advance GESI within the media landscape.



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INTRODUCTION

The IREX Promoting Positive Information (PRO-INFO) initiative is a pioneering effort in Sri Lanka to empower independent media and information actors as essential agents for advancing information integrity and fostering positive societal change. Anchored in a holistic, systems-based approach, PRO-INFO envisions a media and information ecosystem characterized by diversity, freedom of expression, and professional excellence, serving as a cornerstone for democratic integrity and societal resilience.

The program works towards an enabling environment that safeguards freedom of expression while nurturing independent media entities to deliver fair, relevant, and fact-based content to informed and engaged citizens. By empowering a diverse array of local partners, PRO-INFO seeks to capitalize on positive social and economic developments, countering signs of democratic regression while ensuring that crucial information by media actors reflects and reaches Sri Lanka's diverse communities.

In the media and information landscape, GESI considerations are paramount for ensuring equitable access to information, representation, and participation. PRO-INFO's commitment to amplifying diverse perspectives and fostering critical and responsible media consumption makes a GESI analysis an integral, even crucial component of the process. Understanding the nuanced dynamics of gender and social inclusion within the program's operational framework is essential for:



- Identifying and addressing systemic barriers that may hinder the participation and representation of marginalized groups.



- Ensuring that the benefits and opportunities generated by PRO-INFO are accessible to all segments of society, irrespective of gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.



- Strengthening the program's effectiveness and impact by leveraging insights from a GESI analysis to inform decision-making, program design, and implementation strategies.

By conducting a GESI analysis, PRO-INFO is upholding its commitment to inclusivity, equity, and democratic values, thereby enhancing its capacity to drive positive change within Sri Lanka's media and information landscape.



OBJECTIVES & RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The GESI analysis within the IREX PRO-INFO program is designed to systematically examine and comprehend intricate data and insights pertinent to identity-related considerations. This analysis is aligned with the following objectives and goals:

- **Empower Practitioners:** Provide practitioners with tools to discern obstacles rooted in identity dynamics within the developmental framework.
- **Discern and Replicate Effective Strategies:** Identify MEND's effective strategies in addressing identity dynamics and reinforce them in PRO-INFO.
- **Reduce Identity-Based Disparities:** Contribute to the reduction of identity-based disparities and discriminatory practices within the program's operational landscape.
- **Foster Equitability:** Provide equal opportunities within the PRO-INFO program.
- **Formulate Recommendations:** Provide precise and actionable recommendations based on identified obstacles.

Based on the above objectives, the GESI analysis examines the following four key research questions:

Identification and Reinforcement of Effective Strategies: What strategies employed by MEND effectively addressed identity dynamics, and how can they be replicated/improved and reinforced within the PRO-INFO program?

Impact Assessment of Identity-Based Differences: How do these identity-related differences impact the overall outcomes of the PRO-INFO program, and what is the nature of this impact?

Existence of Identity-Based Obstacles: To what extent do identity-related differences exist within the social, economic, and political contexts relevant to the PRO-INFO program?

Identification of Equitable Solutions: What measures can be recommended to ensure equitable opportunities and mitigate identity-related obstacles within the PRO-INFO program?



METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

The GESI analysis employed a multi-faceted approach to gather and analyze data, consisting of the following key components:

- **Literature Review:** An extensive desk review was conducted to explore existing data and findings on gender and media, focusing on six key themes identified in the USAID inclusion analysis. This included synthesizing information on access to resources, cultural norms, laws and regulations, roles and responsibilities, power dynamics, and personal safety and security. Additionally, Equilo – an online gender analysis tool, was utilized to gather valuable insights for a country context analysis.
- **Document and Policy Review:** Relevant documents associated with the PRO-INFO program, such as work plans, published research, and program documents from previous projects, were critically examined. This allowed for the extraction of pertinent information related to gender considerations within the program, including documented practices, policies, and indicators.
- **Consultations with Key Stakeholders:** Key program staff involved in the PRO-INFO program were consulted through Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). This included conducting four KIIs with senior management, one with the Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning (MEL) officer and engaging with 11 individuals from the PRO-INFO program team across various activities and sub-purposes. Additionally, two KIIs and one FGD were conducted with external stakeholders from the media sector and media outlets IREX has previously collaborated with under the Gender Equality in the Media (GEM) program. In total, 24 individuals were consulted for primary data collection.

Data collected through literature review, document review, and consultations with the key stakeholders were analyzed comprehensively to address the research questions and achieve the following purposes:

- **Connecting Gender Dynamics and Program Activities:** The analysis examined how gender dynamics intersected with various aspects of the MEND program activities. Insights from data analysis were used to understand the implications of gender-related dynamics on program implementation and outcomes.
- **Recommendations for Equitable Opportunities and Obstacle Mitigation:** Based on the insights gained from data analysis, recommendations were formulated to enhance equitable opportunities within the PRO-INFO program. These recommendations aimed to address identified obstacles and promote inclusivity and equity in program activities and outcomes.



LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender, social inclusion, and media are deeply interconnected subjects that have significant implications for how society perceives and understands gender norms, socially vulnerable groups, societal norms, and attitudes. The media plays a significant role in creating social impact, a role often overlooked when it comes to program implementation.

This section will look at existing literature to help examine and understand the challenges for media in terms of reporting on GESI, as well as issues faced by women journalists, thereby understanding the impact this has on media content and the contribution of women journalists.


By analyzing a range of academic studies, reports, and articles, this review will shed light on the gendered dynamics, professional barriers, and transformative potential in the media landscape of Sri Lanka.

Additionally, this section provides an overview of the sociopolitical and economic context in Sri Lanka. This will help contextualize the broader landscape and challenges that impact media representation and the contribution of women journalists in the country.

Current Country Context

Sri Lanka, having weathered a 30-year ethnic conflict, a constitutional crisis in 2018, Easter Sunday terrorist attacks in 2019, the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, and an economic and political crisis in 2022, continues under the tight grip of elite political entities, supported by a biased legislature, loyal security and civil services.

Despite sustained economic opportunities in Sri Lanka's formal labor market in the post-war period, women's unemployment rates surpass those of men, with higher rates of casualization, indicating a trend towards temporary and precarious employment.

With **33.1%** 

of women in the labor force in 2022, **Sri Lanka ranked 116th out of 156 nations for gender disparities in female labor force participation** (Ibrahim, 2023). Restrictive laws, inflexible job structures, skill gaps, and persistent harassment hinder women's workforce participation (Ibrahim, 2023).





In Sri Lanka, both LGBTIQ+ employees and staff with disabilities face workplace harassment, often ignored by employers. Women belonging to the latter group endure even higher rates of sexual harassment (International Finance Corporation, 2022). Gender inequalities, coupled with limited educational opportunities and cultural barriers, hinder women's access to productive work under conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity, particularly in male-dominated sectors such as the media sector. The promised economic boom in the post-conflict period failed to address structural inequalities and grievances related to ethnicity and gender, fueling a climate of impunity for sexual and gender-based violence (Davies & Tru, 2017).

The economic crisis continues to affect every person in the country, with women particularly vulnerable due to their disadvantaged position in accessing resources and economic opportunities. As primary caregivers, women faced challenges during the crisis that limited their participation in income-generating activities due to the absence of safety net programs (Ruwanpura & Muchhala, 2022). Despite women constituting 52% of Sri Lanka's population and playing a vital role in key economic sectors, working-class women's voices and needs are consistently overlooked in policy pronouncements, especially amid the current response to the country's debt crisis.

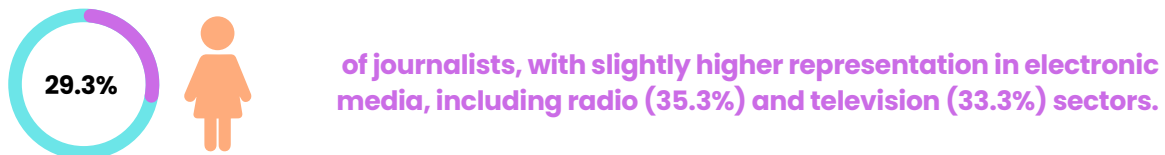
With the ongoing International Monetary Fund (IMF) monetary aid program, labor market reforms prioritize boosting female participation, which suffered during the crisis. The IMF focuses on initiatives that encourage women to join the workforce, pushing the government to reduce gender gaps in the labor market (Ibrahim, 2023). However, constraining factors such as social norms and mobility restrictions hinder women from taking leadership positions in political, economic, and public life (Gunatilaka & Chandrasiri, 2022).

Women's Representation in the Media

According to the 2020 Global Report by the Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), women now represent 25% of those heard, seen, or listened to in the news, marking a marginal 1% increase from the figures reported in the 2015 monitoring report. This persistent underrepresentation is further evident in leadership positions within media organizations, with women holding a mere 27% of top management positions globally, as indicated by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), albeit in a slightly outdated Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media from 2011. Additionally, the GMMP report forecasts that, under current conditions, it will take at least another 67 years to bridge the average gender equality gap in traditional news media.

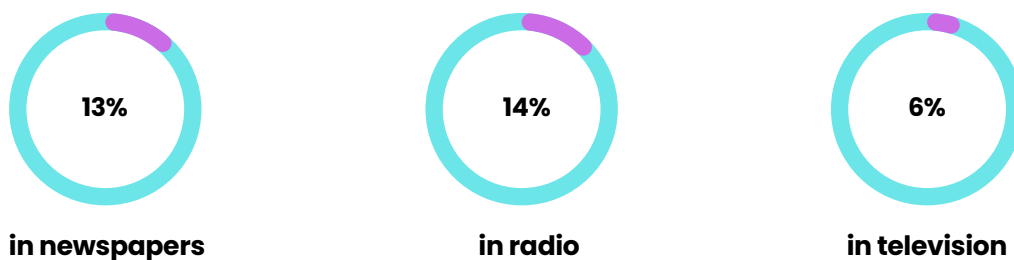
In Sri Lanka, there is a notable absence of updated census data regarding the number of journalists, particularly focusing on women within the media sector. However, the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2023) published by the Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment provides some insights into this area. According to available information cited in the policy, there are about 4,000 journalists working across various media platforms, including full-time and freelance positions. However, specific statistics regarding the participation of women in the mainstream media remain elusive.

The only available study referenced in the policy dates back to 2011, conducted by the Sri Lanka Press Institute. This survey revealed that women accounted for:



However, disparities were observed across language mediums, with the highest representation of women in English-language newspapers (33.4%) compared to Sinhala print and electronic media (25.7%) and Tamil (28.8%).

Despite these figures, women's presence in decision-making positions within media institutions remains low, with only



The portrayal of Men and Women in the Media

Fair gender portrayal in the media is an ethical and professional aspiration yet remains widely unbalanced. Women are often portrayed as victims, identified by family status, and generally underrepresented in news headlines. Conversely, they tend to be disproportionately spotlighted when negative or adverse narratives are at play. Women are rarely used as spokespersons or cited as experts. This underscores the need for diverse voices and perspectives in shaping media content to combat gender biases and promote a more equitable representation of women and men.

Media content, particularly in movies, television, music videos, and advertisements, often reinforces stereotypical images of masculinity, including aggression, physical strength, and dominance. The globalized nature of media content, particularly Western media, specifically Hollywood, tends to homogenize these representations (Kareithi, 2014). The rise of social media and internet-based technologies further amplifies and replicates these stereotypes. However, research shows that stories by female reporters tend to challenge stereotypes more frequently than those by male reporters (White, 2009).

The National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2023), states that portrayals of women continue to reinforce cultural conditioning,

and that the objectification of women for commercial purposes has been a long-discussed issue yet to be addressed and remedied.

State Policies on Gender and Media

International instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Inter-American Convention recognize the media's responsibility, but a formal global and/or national policy on gender and communication is lacking (Montiel, 2014). **The National Media Policy addresses gender only minimally. Out of 26 of its strategies, only two are related to gender.** While it promotes fair and just media practices regarding gender, its strategies mainly focus on training media staff to avoid glorifying crime and violence against women, as well as protecting the rights of women and children.

However, more recent local policies pertaining to women and gender equality have highlighted the role of media in contributing to women's empowerment and safety. Sri Lanka's National Action Plan for the Implementation of the UN Security Council's Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (2023 – 2027) states that the Ministry of Mass Media must introduce a Code of Conduct for journalists with instructions to ensure ethical reporting with a particular focus on respect for women and ethno-religious minorities, in line with international standards such as the UN's Rabat Plan of Action.

Moreover, under the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2023), the media sector is highlighted as a key factor under the thematic priority of 'Social Equality and Empowerment' and commits to 'enable the full participation and access of women to media and information and communication technologies, as well as their impact and use as an instrument for the advancement and empowerment of women, girls and gender minorities.' The policy has listed out 12 key strategies to fulfill the above commitment, among which is the creation of a national policy on women and media.

Women and Leadership in the Media

Globally, there has been an increase in the number of women working in the media; however, men still dominate top positions such as producers, executives, chief editors, and publishers. Cultural norms also pose barriers for women fulfilling journalistic roles. For example, in Africa, women are kept from equal status as media work involves travel, evening work, and covering subjects traditionally associated with masculinity.

The majority of journalists around the globe – and, in particular, owners and those in positions of news leadership and decision-making – are also men, reinforcing gendered power dynamics. Despite making up half of the world’s population, women hold only 26% of media leadership positions and 39% of journalist positions. (Kassova, 2020).

In Sri Lanka, the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (2023) notes that while a few women hold senior decision-making positions in formal media institutions and oversight bodies, they are significantly outnumbered by men. The policy also states that

the education and training aimed at improving women’s participation in media are not strategically linked to women’s career advancement in the media.

Furthermore, the policy acknowledges that the selection of careers in media continues to be negatively impacted by stereotyped gender roles and expectations placed on women who enter the fields of media, especially mainstream media.





Women's Safety in the Media

Women journalists across the world continue to face inequality and harassment, with little or no consequences for the perpetrators. According to a recent UNESCO global survey, an astonishing

73% of women journalists have experienced online violence in the course of their work, including threats of physical and sexual violence, along with digital security attacks (UNESCO, 2023).

A study by International Media Support (2019) shows that women journalists in nine countries across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and South America face common challenges in the workplace, ranging from gender-based unequal opportunities – such as low pay and longer working hours – to severe physical abuse and online harassment (IMS, 2019).

The study also shows that women often remain silent due to social stigma and shame, mostly because the perpetrators may be colleagues and superiors. Some women quit journalism altogether. It also causes self-censoring and psychological, even physical, harm. When women journalists face discrimination and harassment, it contributes to insufficient coverage of women's voices and perspectives.

When reporting on the ground, women journalists face challenges ranging from military attacks to surveillance to systematic gender-based violence (International Federation of Journalists [IFJ], 2023). These barriers are especially harmful, as women's voices from conflict zones are crucial in gaining a full picture of the situation. As the IFJ remarks, "Sometimes being a woman becomes an asset to access certain locations and talk to sources" (IFJ, 2023).

Furthermore, the National Policy on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (2023) notes that women journalists have been the targets of violence and harassment against all media personnel and have been exposed to increasing violence through gender-based harassment and abuse.

Gender Policies in the Media

Globally, the majority of organizations lack even a documented policy to address abuses or a method for reporting them, according to 85% of respondents who claim that no or insufficient action has been taken against the perpetrator. Only 26% of media organizations have a policy covering gender-based violence and sexual harassment, according to the IFJ (IFJ, 2017).

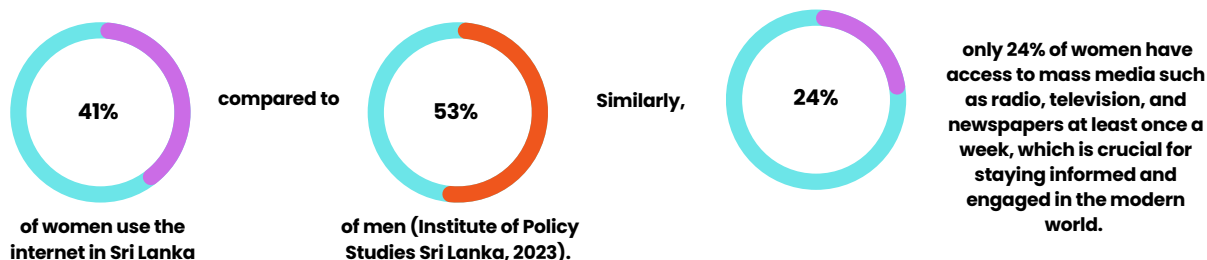
Research conducted by IREX (2023) under MEND established that the majority of Sri Lankan media outlets did not have organizational policies related to gender equality and the prevention of workplace harassment. In most instances, when respondents said that their organizations had policies, they were primarily referring to informal understandings and ad hoc codes of conduct established within the organization. Several women journalists also mentioned that when accusations of sexual harassment were made, management would frequently mediate between the accused and the complainant, with no meaningful action following.

The Digital Landscape

The digital landscape in Sri Lanka is characterized by significant gender disparities in access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Women in Sri Lanka are less likely to own or effectively use digital devices such as smartphones and computers compared to their male counterparts. This gender divide hinders women's access to digital financial services and opportunities for economic empowerment.

The cost of broadband, internet services, and ICT devices remains a major barrier for many, particularly women and low-income groups. In Sri Lanka, women face challenges in accessing and affording these services, compounded by their lower likelihood of being in paid employment and having less financial autonomy. This economic disparity prevents women from enjoying the full benefits of digital inclusion.

Moreover, **only**



Women are also more likely to experience barriers to ICT use due to a lack of digital literacy and skills, which limits their ability to engage fully with online platforms and opportunities.

While 48% of women have made or received digital payments in the last year, compared to 63% of men, the gap persists in terms of economic opportunities and financial inclusion. The digital gender divide restricts women's potential to start businesses, sell products, pursue education, and access financial services.



In Sri Lanka, the digital literacy rate is 57.2%, indicating that three out of five individuals aged 5 to 69 are digitally literate (Census and Statistics Department, 2022). Men have a higher digital literacy rate (62.3%) compared to women (57.9%). However, notable differences emerge when considering the age:

- **Ages 20 to 29: Over 75% are computer literate.**
- **Ages 40 and above: Approximately 33% are computer literate.**

Additionally, urban areas exhibit higher rates of both computer and digital literacy compared to rural or estate sectors.

Regarding social media usage in Sri Lanka, according to data from DataReportal (2024) Sri Lanka had 7.5 million social media users in January 2024, accounting for 34.2% of the total population. The most used platform is Facebook, with 7.5 million users in early 2024. Meta's advertising data indicates that 38.5% of Facebook's ad audience in Sri Lanka was female, while 61.5% were male.

YouTube is the second most popular platform in the country, with 7.23 million users in early 2024. The gender distribution on YouTube is 40.9% female and 59.1% male. Meanwhile, TikTok had 4.44 million users aged 18 and above in Sri Lanka in early 2024, with a gender distribution of 41.1% female and 58.9% male. Social media usage is becoming increasingly prevalent, yet gender disparities persist across platforms.

BEST PRACTICES

This section presents a comprehensive overview of the best practices and key strategies implemented by MEND, which significantly enhanced inclusion and participation of marginalized communities within the program activities. It delves into why these practices were instrumental, highlights their impact on the project, and the compelling rationale for strengthening them further in PRO-INFO. These insights yield valuable guidance on cultivating a more inclusive and engaging environment within media initiatives, setting the stage for broader participation and more meaningful impact in the PRO-INFO program.

Language Accessibility and Inclusive Communication

In both advocacy efforts and awareness work, the MEND program ensured that all information was accessible in local languages – Tamil and Sinhala – as well as in English. This inclusivity extended to resources disseminated both online and offline, as well as workshops, trainings, media events, and panel discussions, where interpretation services were readily available to ensure comprehension in participants' preferred language.



Existing research underscores the critical importance of language accessibility in media initiatives. Local studies (University of Ruhuna, 2023), highlight how language barriers can impede learning outcomes and diminish participant engagement. Language barriers not only result in reduced engagement but also create passive learners within learning environments.

Replicating and enhancing this approach in the PRO-INFO program holds significant importance. By adopting MEND's trilingual content strategy, PRO-INFO can ensure broader accessibility and inclusivity, empowering diverse communities to actively participate in media-related activities. Additionally, PRO-INFO can explore innovative methods to utilize technology for language translation and interpretation, thereby enhancing the scalability and efficiency of language accessibility efforts. This approach aligns with the program's goal of fostering equitable opportunities and promoting community cohesion across linguistic divides.

Social Media as a Tool for Inclusive Media Education

MEND actively engaged in social media advocacy, hosting comprehensive awareness sessions to educate the public on a range of media-related topics, notably including media gender-sensitivity. These online initiatives played a crucial role in making vital information accessible, particularly to those unable to attend traditional workshops, including women and girls.

Research highlights the importance of leveraging social media for literacy and learning initiatives. Local research shows how social media fosters collaborative learning. According to Lakshini (2023), 92.5% of undergraduate students use social media to participate in group activities. This highlights how the internet can support collaborative learning environments, enhancing educational experiences.

Continuing this approach in the PRO-INFO program is imperative as it ensures sustained efforts toward inclusive communication, extending the reach to a diverse audience, including those unable to participate in conventional workshops. Additionally, PRO-INFO must consider establishing an online learning portal that serves as a centralized platform for storing and accessing critical information. This initiative would not only promote transparency but also provide individuals with valuable resources to navigate media landscapes effectively, benefiting both the public and journalists.



Promoting Reconciliation through Cross-Cultural Understanding

The MEND program's commitment to Peace Journalism holds profound significance, especially in the context of Sri Lanka, a nation still on the path to healing from three decades of war and prolonged conflict. Through initiatives like the MediaCorps Fellowship program, which empowered over 260 young journalists, MEND sought to cultivate meaningful dialogue among youth from diverse backgrounds. This program provided a platform not only for sharing the grievances of their communities but also for celebrating the richness of their cultures and traditions, raising awareness among a wider audience. Equipped with essential skills in mobile journalism, participants actively engaged in exchanges aimed at nurturing cross-cultural understanding.

Storytelling emerges as a pivotal tool for reconciliation. Media serves as a potent medium for this endeavor, offering avenues for communities to voice their narratives, confront past traumas, and envision shared futures. Research underscores the importance of trauma-informed approaches in addressing the complex needs of conflict-affected communities (USAID, 2021). Such approaches are instrumental in addressing intergenerational trauma and bolstering efforts to foster social cohesion and peacebuilding.

Carrying forward this ethos in the PRO-INFO program holds significant promise. By continuing to prioritize initiatives that promote cross-cultural understanding and amplify marginalized voices, PRO-INFO can serve as a catalyst for reconciliation and peacebuilding. Additionally, PRO-INFO can explore innovative storytelling techniques and platforms to ensure diverse narratives are heard and valued, further reinforcing efforts to foster social cohesion and healing in post-conflict societies. Moreover, organizing trilingual or bilingual events and programs can broaden community awareness and facilitate cross-cultural dialogues. This approach ensures that community issues are not confined within specific demographics but are shared and understood by a wider audience, promoting empathy and solidarity across diverse communities.

Fostering Diversity Through Decentralization

The MEND program distinguished itself by not confining its advocacy and awareness efforts solely to urban hubs like Colombo, a common limitation in many learning initiatives in Sri Lanka. This approach acknowledges the barriers, particularly travel restrictions, that often deter people, especially women, from participating in such programs. Instead, MEND extended its reach across various regions of the country, prioritizing accessibility by bringing programs directly to communities. This decentralized approach is vital for several reasons. Firstly, it ensures inclusivity by reaching populations that may otherwise be overlooked or marginalized. By identifying and collaborating with local community organizations, such as DreamSpace Academy in the Eastern Province, MEND provided support to entities that often lack visibility and recognition, particularly outside urban centers.



Supporting organizations beyond our immediate surroundings is crucial for sustainable inclusion. This practice not only expands opportunities for marginalized groups but also fosters diversity and resilience within communities. Research, such as that from the Centre for Poverty Analysis (2018), highlights that individuals from poorer and rural backgrounds are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to and outcomes from education. Those in rural households are the worst affected, with income inequality contributing to widening educational disparities. Moreover, the concentration of opportunities in urban-centric areas exacerbates socio-economic disparities, further hindering the participation of marginalized groups in media-related initiatives and capacity-building programs.

Moving forward, PRO-INFO can adopt and enhance this inclusive approach by prioritizing partnerships with local community organizations and extending its reach beyond urban centers. By decentralizing opportunities and resources, PRO-INFO can ensure broader participation and empower marginalized communities to engage meaningfully in media-related initiatives. Additionally, PRO-INFO can explore tailored capacity-building programs and funding mechanisms to address the specific needs of underserved populations, thus fostering equitable access and sustainable development across diverse regions.

Prioritizing LGBTIQ+ Sensitivity

Gender trainings and awareness efforts often lack inclusivity towards the LGBTIQ+ community, particularly within Sri Lanka's media landscape. The MEND program addressed this gap by actively highlighting the challenges faced by this population, both online and offline. This included sensitization trainings for media outlets on reporting LGBTIQ+ issues respectfully and social media campaigns aimed at challenging stereotypes and biases in media portrayals of transgender communities, among others.

This focus on LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in the media is crucial for several reasons. Local research demonstrates that media representation can significantly impact the rights and safety of LGBTIQ+ individuals. For instance, findings from IREX (2023) revealed that local journalists had an interest in writing about topics related to the LGBTIQ+ community and felt that doing so would help legitimize the rights of this community.

Programs such as MEND's Civic Action through Mobile Phones (CAMP) provided training and mentorship to organizations that support gender minorities, enabling them to tell their own stories and advocate more effectively for their own causes.

Moving forward, PRO-INFO can build upon these efforts to advance LGBTIQ+ inclusivity in gender work. By incorporating sensitization trainings and awareness campaigns into its programming, PRO-INFO can empower media professionals to report on LGBTIQ+ issues sensitively and accurately. Furthermore, PRO-INFO can leverage its platform to amplify the voices and stories of LGBTIQ+ individuals, fostering greater visibility and understanding within the broader community.





Inclusion of People with Disabilities

MEND's CAMP program offered mobile journalism training and advocacy mentorship for civil society organizations, accommodating individuals with disabilities in its cohorts. To promote inclusivity, MEND designed workshop materials such as special audio programs for participants with visual impairments and text-based instruction for those with hearing impairments. Additionally, MEND's earlier Vibrant Voices program incorporated sign-language interpreters to facilitate learning for hearing-impaired participants. These measures underscore MEND's dedication to accessibility and its successes, which offer valuable insights for PRO-INFO.

Local media representation of people with disabilities faces several issues. Research by Hettiarachchi et al. (2023) shows that the terms used to describe disabilities are often inconsistent. Some media use outdated or even offensive language, while others adopt more respectful terms suggested by disability rights groups. People with disabilities are often portrayed in limited ways, such as being subjects of humor, victims of discrimination, objects of pity, or sources of inspiration.

Therefore, incorporating individuals with disabilities into media projects is essential for promoting diversity and creating more inclusive narratives. Their participation introduces a range of perspectives and experiences, enriching the media landscape and ensuring fair representation for all members of society. According to a UNESCO report (2023) on building media capacities to establish linkages between diversity, equity, and inclusion for persons with disabilities, media has the potential to shift public perceptions and attitudes toward people with disabilities.

For PRO-INFO, learning from MEND's strategies can guide the program in adopting inclusive practices to ensure that individuals with disabilities can fully participate in its initiatives. This includes developing specialized training tools such as audio materials for participants with visual impairments and text-based content for those with hearing impairments. PRO-INFO can provide its materials and content in accessible formats, offer support services such as sign language interpreters, and actively involve individuals with disabilities in the program design. Additionally, educating staff and forming partnerships with disability advocacy organizations and working with influencers and activists with disabilities for sensitivity training for journalists can promote a supportive environment.



KEY OBSTACLES

In navigating the landscape of identity-related challenges encountered in the MEND program, it becomes evident that numerous obstacles persist, many emerging from the current socio-political and cultural context of the country. This section aims to illuminate these hurdles, underscoring their profound impact on the participation of and the derived benefits for marginalized communities. Addressing these obstacles is paramount, not only to ensure equitable access but also to maximize the effectiveness of media initiatives in fostering inclusivity. This section also explores strategies for PRO-INFO to navigate and mitigate these obstacles, paving the way for a more inclusive and impactful program.

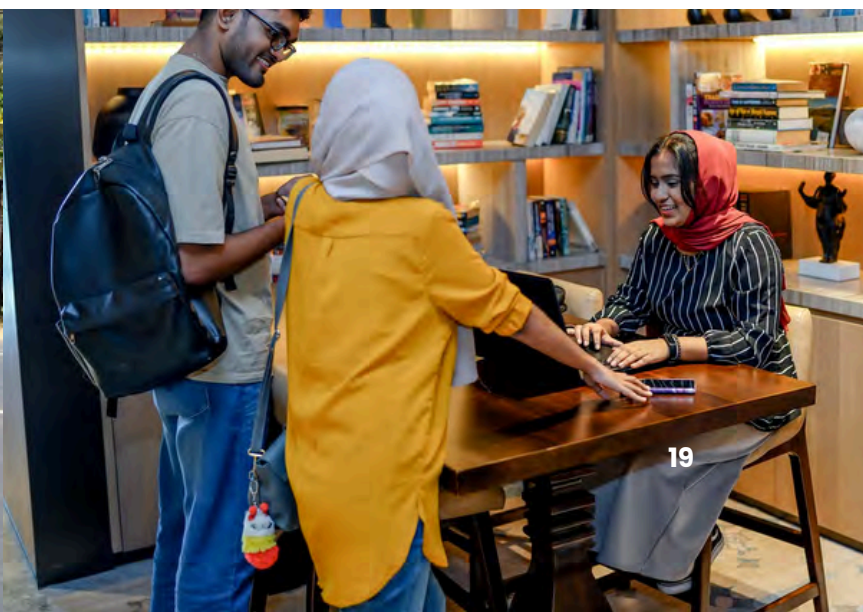
Socio-Cultural Barriers Hindering Women's Access

In Sri Lanka, socio-cultural norms pose significant obstacles for women's participation in capacity-building opportunities within the media sector. Family obligations and unequal caregiving responsibilities often deter women from attending training programs, especially if they are located far from their homes. Additionally, self-censorship and prevailing social biases may lead some women to perceive the media sector as inappropriate or unsafe for them.

These socio-cultural barriers contribute to gender disparities in applications received for and subsequent participation in media-related activities, particularly residencies, thereby limiting PRO-INFO's ability to engage more women. This persistent challenge underscores the importance of addressing gender inclusivity in capacity-building programs.

Research indicates that when women face difficulties accessing workshops or training sessions, there is a direct correlation with decreased representation and contribution in such programs (UNESCO, 2019). This not only results in a loss of diverse perspectives and insights but also hampers the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing gender-related issues in the media sector.

A gender assessment of women migrant workers from Sri Lanka by UN Women (2024) highlights that age and marital status are critical factors influencing women's decisions to participate in skills development programs. Women's participation in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) is notably low, and when they do engage, they often struggle to complete the programs primarily due to family responsibilities. This further illustrates the systemic barriers that hinder women's full involvement in skills development initiatives, perpetuating gender inequality in the media and other sectors.



To navigate this challenge, PRO-INFO can provide more online learning opportunities to accommodate women's schedules and preferences, ensuring accessibility for those unable to attend offline sessions. Developing a checklist for recruiting participants through local partners can help engage a diverse and representative group of women in program activities. Furthermore, highlighting success stories of women who have overcome obstacles to attend training programs can inspire and motivate others, reinforcing the value of gender-inclusive initiatives in the media sector.

Online Harassment Affecting Women's Participation

Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence (TFGBV), including gendered online hate speech, poses a significant threat to women journalists in Sri Lanka. Women often face harassment, doxing, and abuse online, particularly when sharing perspectives on socio-cultural, religious, and political topics. These safety concerns not only deter women and their families from viewing media as a safe workspace but also prevent their active participation in media-related initiatives.

This is concerning as online harassment significantly impacts women's sense of safety and confidence, leading to self-censorship and withdrawal from online spaces (IFJ, 2018). Local news reports (Ceylon Today, 2024) have highlighted that harassment targeting women journalists, politicians, activists, and essentially any woman who voices opinions is alarmingly common in Sri Lankan cyberspace. Women on social media platforms frequently face hate messages, derogatory posts, rape threats, and online flashing, creating a hostile environment that discourages their active participation and expression. Consequently, the PRO-INFO program may struggle to engage and retain female participants, thus limiting its ability to foster a diverse and inclusive media ecosystem.

To address this challenge, PRO-INFO can prioritize digital safety sessions and mentorship programs for female and gender-diverse journalists. Additionally, implementing monitoring systems to track and address instances of gendered online hate speech, and establishing clear moderation guidelines can equip journalists with the tools and strategies needed to mitigate online harassment and protect their well-being.

Vocabulary and Sensitivity Challenges in Translations

In gender advocacy, a significant challenge arises from the limited vocabulary in local languages to discuss gender-related issues in a sensitive manner. Additionally, some translators, interpreters and trainers lack gender sensitivity, leading to the use of outdated terminology or misinterpretation, leading to miscommunication, and misunderstanding.

The absence of gender sensitivity in translation impedes effective communication of project objectives and values to diverse audiences. Inaccurate or insensitive translations can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and misconceptions, particularly among marginalized groups (Transatlantic Translations Group, 2023), resulting in decreased engagement and uptake of key messages by the program's target audience.

While MEND has already made strides in this area by collaborating with local activists for input and reviewing translated content meticulously, PRO-INFO can adopt proactive measures to address this challenge. Training of Trainers sessions for all translators, designers, and trainers on gender sensitivity can enhance their understanding of appropriate language use. Additionally, creating a comprehensive local glossary for all gender-related terms can ensure consistency and accuracy in communication throughout the project.



Threats Posed by Political Shifts and Legislative Changes

Sri Lanka's current political landscape is marked by the constant proposal of new bills aimed at restricting freedoms and rights. For example, legislation such as the Online Safety Act poses a threat to freedom of expression, intimidating journalists and activists from engaging with online media due to fear of legal repercussions. This creates barriers to participation, particularly for those involved in online activism or content creation deemed insensitive or controversial by state authorities.

This intimidation diminishes the diversity of voices contributing to online discourse, thereby undermining PRO-INFO's objectives of promoting a multiplicity of media actors and facilitating diverse perspectives. Research by organizations like Amnesty International (2022) in the Asian region highlights how such legislation can be used to suppress dissenting voices and stifle political participation, particularly among marginalized groups. Additionally, the Freedom on the Net 2023 Country Report for Sri Lanka by Freedom House (2024) indicates that, in the recent past, the government has implemented emergency regulations aimed at restricting purportedly false information. There has been a continued brutal crackdown on online activists and journalists reporting on the Aragalaya movement, along with the introduction of draft laws that threaten online expression and user privacy. These actions further exacerbate the chilling effects on free speech and reinforce an environment where only certain voices are heard, compromising the broader goals of fostering a diverse and inclusive media landscape.

To navigate this challenge, PRO-INFO must stay abreast of legislative developments, particularly those concerning online safety and freedom of expression, while providing participants with guidance and legal advice to navigate these laws effectively. Furthermore, advocating for policies that safeguard freedom of expression and protect online activists and content creators is essential to create a supportive environment for media literacy initiatives and diverse perspectives.





Lack of Enthusiasm from the Senior Management of Media Organizations

In Sri Lanka, while there are numerous media initiatives aimed at journalists, there is a conspicuous absence of programs tailored for senior management, such as editors and directors. This dearth can be ascribed to their limited availability or, in some cases, a lack of interest in participating in such initiatives.

Senior management holds significant influence in shaping organizational culture, policies, and practices within media organizations. Without their support, initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality, diversity, and inclusive media practices may encounter resistance and have limited impact. Local research by IREX (2020) emphasizes the importance of garnering leadership commitment and organizational buy-in for sustainable change in Sri Lanka's media landscape. Failure to effectively engage senior management may impede progress toward program objectives and perpetuate existing gender imbalances within media organizations.



MEND established contact with senior management despite these challenges, especially when collaborating with media outlets holistically. Through PRO-INFO, these relationships should be fortified by implementing targeted capacity-building programs for senior management. Regular learning sessions or online newsletters can update senior management on media development trends, while showcasing MEND success stories can underscore the benefits of integrating media initiatives into organizational strategies.

Absence of Contextual Relevance among International Trainers

When utilizing international trainers, it is crucial for the content to go beyond mere translation and incorporate localization. This entails ensuring that the examples, references, anecdotes, case studies, and resources used by the trainer resonate with the local participants. This is often overlooked, as many international trainers rely on Western examples and references that may not resonate with local audiences. While media outlets and journalists frequently express a desire to learn from international trainers, considering them to be the bearers of world-class expertise, the lack of familiarity with local context can make these imported resources less than maximally effective.

Culturally tailored interventions have been shown to be more successful in eliciting behavioral change and promoting empowerment (Jin, 2017); international trainers must take care to get up to speed on local context, to the extent possible, or to work in tandem with local consultants.

PRO-INFO can take proactive measures to make this a reality. For instance, working closely with international trainers beforehand to share relevant examples and ensuring that moderators or team members are present during training sessions can contribute local insights and enhance contextual relevance. Trainers should also encourage participants to co-facilitate where possible, enabling them to add to the discussion and engage in group activities tailored to their local context. This approach fosters a collaborative learning environment where participants can discuss topics relevant to them and effectively apply the learnings within their own media landscape.



Impact of the Ongoing Economic Crisis

The impact of the economic crisis extends deeply into the media sector, with news reports from Parliament indicating that advertising budgets have plummeted by approximately 70%. This decline is primarily due to rising production costs faced by companies, which has significantly undermined the financial stability of media outlets. Journalists have brought these challenges to the attention of the National Council Sub Committee on Economic Stabilization, highlighting the detrimental effects of reduced advertising revenue on the media landscape. The perception of media—especially print—as a failing sector could diminish public willingness to invest in it or attend professional development workshops, exacerbating the challenges faced by the industry.

Furthermore, the ongoing economic crisis exacerbates financial insecurity, compelling individuals to prioritize immediate income-generating activities over long-term skills-building opportunities, further perpetuating socio-economic disparities and hindering access to educational and professional development opportunities.

Research indicates that economic downturns exacerbate socio-economic disparities, hindering access to educational and professional development opportunities, particularly for marginalized groups (World Bank, 2022). As a result, individuals, especially women and those from low-income backgrounds, may be compelled to forgo participation in workshops or training programs, prioritizing survival needs over skills development.

To address this challenge, PRO-INFO can provide online learning opportunities accessible at any time and location, accommodating participants' schedules and financial constraints. Collaborating with workplaces and educational institutions can integrate training sessions into participants' routines to minimize disruptions and offering weekend workshops can further ensure inclusivity and accessibility.

Restrictions Imposed by the Digital Divide

The digital infrastructure in Sri Lanka has created a notable digital divide, with urban areas having better internet access and facilities compared to rural regions. This disparity in digital literacy contributes to unequal access to opportunities along socioeconomic, geographical, and gender lines. While the country's overall digital literacy rate is 57.2%, this figure is lower for women, exacerbating existing disparities (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2021; Hashtag Generation, 2023).

Since Facebook served as the primary online outreach platform during the MEND program, it may have inadvertently excluded individuals with limited digital literacy or access to technology as research shows that digital divide disproportionately affects marginalized communities, hindering their participation in online initiatives (UNICEF, 2021).



To address this, PRO-INFO can adopt offline engagement strategies and diversify outreach efforts beyond social media platforms. For instance, by partnering with more host organizations, similar to what the MEND program did during Learn to Discern (L2D), PRO-INFO can broaden its reach among more diverse communities and target audiences. Embracing a multi-channel approach to outreach will facilitate broader participation, regardless of digital literacy or access to technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following section consolidates the key strategies discussed above to improve the best practices and mitigate the key obstacles identified in the MEND program. These strategies are categorized into short-term and long-term initiatives, each aimed at enhancing inclusivity in media-related activities. By delineating actionable recommendations, this section underscores the importance of proactive measures to overcome barriers and foster equitable participation. Through a combination of immediate interventions and sustained efforts, the PRO-INFO program can navigate the identified obstacles, sustain existing best practices, promote diversity, and advance its objectives of empowering marginalized communities in the media landscape.

SHORT-TERM STRATEGIES



- **Language Accessibility and Inclusive Communication:** Implement a trilingual content strategy similar to MEND's approach, ensuring that all program materials and activities are accessible in local languages as well as English. Additionally, provide interpretation services during multilingual workshops and events to cater to participants' language preferences.



- **Social Media Engagement:** Develop an online learning portal to host resources and facilitate discussions, enabling participants to access information and engage with program content at their convenience. Utilize social media platforms beyond Facebook, such as LinkedIn, Instagram, and TikTok, to broaden outreach efforts and reach diverse audiences.



- **LGBTIQ+ Sensitivity:** Incorporate sensitization trainings and awareness campaigns into program activities to promote inclusivity and challenge stereotypes in media portrayals of LGBTIQ+ individuals. Amplify the voices and stories of LGBTIQ+ communities to foster greater visibility and understanding within the broader community.



- **Gender Inclusivity:** Develop a comprehensive checklist for recruiting participants to ensure diversity and representation, particularly among women. Implement mentorship initiatives to address socio-cultural barriers hindering women's access to media-related activities.



- **Translation and Localization:** Conduct training of trainers sessions for translators, interpreters, and trainers on gender sensitivity and inclusive language use. Create a centralized glossary of gender-related terms to ensure consistency and accuracy in communication throughout the program.

LONG-TERM STRATEGIES



- **Advocacy and Policy Support:** Stay informed about legislative developments and advocate for policies that protect freedom of expression and safety of journalists. Collaborate with advocacy organizations to address threats posed by political shifts and legislative changes that may impact media literacy initiatives and diverse perspectives.



- **Senior Management Engagement:** Strengthen partnerships with media organizations and senior management by organizing regular learning sessions and showcasing the benefits of integrating media initiatives into organizational strategies. Provide guidance and support to senior management professionals to foster a culture of inclusivity and diversity within media organizations.



- **Cross-Cultural Understanding:** Organize trilingual or bilingual events and programs that bring together diverse communities for shared learning and cross-cultural dialogues. Showcase success stories and case studies from the MEND program to demonstrate the benefits of promoting cross-cultural understanding and reconciliation through media.



- **Decentralized Outreach:** Strengthen partnerships with local community organizations and extend program activities beyond urban centers to reach marginalized communities. Offer online learning opportunities and weekend workshops to accommodate participants' schedules and geographical constraints.





CONCLUSION

In examining the GESI landscape within the media sector, it becomes evident that while significant strides have been made, numerous challenges persist, hindering the full realization of inclusive and equitable media environments. The MEND program has served as a valuable case study, offering insights into best practices and key obstacles encountered in fostering GESI within media initiatives.

Throughout this analysis, several critical themes have emerged. Language accessibility and inclusive communication have been identified as foundational pillars for promoting GESI, emphasizing the importance of adopting trilingual content strategies and leveraging social media platforms for educational outreach. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at promoting reconciliation through cross-cultural understanding have showcased the transformative power of storytelling in fostering social cohesion and healing in post-conflict societies.

However, the analysis also highlights persistent challenges, including socio-cultural barriers hindering women's access, online harassment affecting women's participation, and vocabulary and sensitivity challenges in translations. These obstacles underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address gender disparities, mitigate online safety concerns, and enhance cultural sensitivity within media initiatives.

Moving forward, programs like PRO-INFO must adopt a multi-dimensional approach that integrates short-term initiatives with long-term strategies. Short-term initiatives should focus on immediate interventions to address pressing issues such as gender sensitivity and language accessibility, while long-term strategies should prioritize systemic changes aimed at fostering diversity, decentralization, and inclusivity within the media landscape.

It must be noted that not all recommendations need to be implemented simultaneously. Instead, the PRO-INFO team should adopt a flexible approach, experimenting with different options to discern what works best in the context of their specific programmatic goals and target communities. Through ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and iterative adjustments, the team can refine their strategies and interventions, maximizing their impact while remaining responsive to evolving challenges and opportunities.

Ultimately, while the road to achieving GESI in the media sector may have several challenges, the insights gleaned from the MEND program provide a roadmap for progress. By embracing innovative approaches, fostering strategic partnerships, and advocating for policy reforms, programs like PRO-INFO can catalyze transformative change, ultimately creating media environments that reflect and empower diverse voices and perspectives.

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RAPID GESI ANALYSIS