IFJ-Union to Union (UTU) Global Union Strengthening

Equipping Young Media Workers in Sri Lanka for Union Leadership in the Digital Economy- 2022

STRENGTHENING THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF JOURNALISTS THROUGH SITUATIONAL MAPPING AND EVIDENCE-BASED DATA
Presentation on Survey conducted by the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions, in collaboration with International federation of Journalists, Asia Pacific, Union to Union Project, 2022

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Introduction

As part of the Equipping Young Media Workers for Union Leadership in the Digital Economy- 2022 project, a survey of 300 journalists on the professional status of the Federation of Media Employees Trade Unions (FMETU) members across Sri Lanka, was conducted in August and September 2022, by FMETU. A representative sample of journalists from all districts, working in mainstream media and also provincial correspondents of all major ethnic and religious groups participated in the survey. The respondents work for print, electronic and digital media. Both males and females are included.

A distinctive feature of this survey is that it focused on the professional issues with special reference to labour issues faced by journalists in Sri Lanka.

The objective of this survey is to strengthen the professional status of journalists through situational mapping and evidence-based data. The survey results are recorded below, and key information is translated into Sinhala and Tamil.

We believe that this information will be useful for FMETU and other journalists bodies, for lobbying with relevant authorities for the fulfillment of professional rights of journalists on par with employees in other sectors and adhering to labour regulations in Sri Lanka.

Methodology

The survey included questions to understand the professional status of the target population on challenges related to their background and professional status. The survey was disseminated through a Google form to 350 journalists, and 318 responses were received. The survey was translated into the Sinhala and Tamil languages.
Findings

Figure 1 – Age Limit

Through the above it is noted that while majority of the participants were between 35 – 45, there is a similar representation of other age groups too in the profession.

Figure 2 – Educational Qualifications

Through figure 2, it is noted that majority of the journalists have only secondary education. However, it was found out that the 28.6% have followed courses leading to Diplomas in Journalism and other related subjects.
Figure 3 – Professional Status

While an overwhelming majority engaged full time in the profession of journalism, 10.5% are engaged in other jobs as well and work part time only as journalists.

Figure 4 – Awards for Journalism

As per the findings, 70.8% have not received any awards, 26.9% have received national awards such as the Editors Guild Awards for excellence in Journalism, which are the most prestigious awards given annually by the industry for the industry,
According to figure 5, majority have followed national level trainings such as short certificate courses and workshops conducted by the Government and Non Governmental organizations engaged in media development. However, a considerable segment (18.7%) have received no formal training at all. This is another indicator of the insufficient support and resources available.

It is noted that the majority of the responders work in Sinhala, with the next largest language being Tamil (34.3%) the national languages. The low level of proficiency in the English language is an impediment for journalists to become exposed to global trends and reach global competitiveness.
Figure 7 – Type of Media Engaged in
Most of the responders are engaged in traditional media, with only 27.5% engaged in digital media. However it is noteworthy that most traditional media channels are available online too and the contributions of journalists are uploaded by IT personnel, on the online platforms of these traditional media channels.
The majority of the organizations that the respondents are attached to have issued employment contracts. However, it is alarming to note that 31.2% of the respondents have been working for lengthy periods for media institutions without receiving any employment contract in written form.

Over half of the respondents work on a freelance basis, and earn a piece rate for work done. Only 26.1% are on fixed term contracts. This means that less than a quarter of respondents have permanent job security and assurance of remuneration at fixed intervals or specified dates.

Only 8.2% of respondents receive any kind of special allowances such as transport allowance, entertainment allowance, per diem for cost of transport, meals and accommodation while on field work.
While stable income is a priority in any profession, 40.5% of the respondents receive payment on an ad-hoc basis. This would result in having a negative impact on their quality of life, and would make basic needs such as the ability to take and pay back loans and pay utilities bills, house rent, and fees a huge challenge.

As per figure 12, there is majority consensus that the remuneration they receive is inadequate in relation to their professional experience, qualifications and skills. To make matters worse, most media
institutions have not raised the quantum of the remuneration package given to journalists in the context of the current economic crisis. Being disgruntled would lead to a drop of quality in work.

![Figure 13 - Media Identity card](image)

21.8% of respondents have no formal media identity card giving them legitimacy to their profession as journalists. In the current political and social environment, Media Institutes provide institutional Identification cards to journalists. The Government Information Department too provides identification based on the recommendation of the employers. This is a key document that is essential for the identity, safety and wellbeing of the journalists. The fact that 21.8% do not have such identification is significant.

![Figure 13 - Media Identity card](image)
Figure 14 – Promotions
Only 14.4% of respondents have a clear path for any form of career progression. With career progression comes career satisfaction. It is evident that the journalists suffer from lack of professional growth, prospects, which has a direct impact on their personal lives.

Figure 15 – Annual Increments
Only 18.1% of respondents are entitled to annual salary increments, which is essential with the sky rocketing inflation and cost of living. Most institutions in other sector, both public, private and non governmental organizations in Sri Lanka have an annual increment scheme.
**Figure 16 – EPF benefits**

Only 17.3% of respondents are entitled to Employee Provident Fund, formal social security benefits. It is mandatory according to the labour Laws in Sri Lanka for employers to provide this benefit. However, as illustrated in this chart, many journalists are victims of observance of this regulation in the breach.

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**Figure 17 – ETF benefits**

Only 18.4% of respondents are entitled to the Employee Trust Fund, social security benefits which again is enshrined in the Labour regulations of Sri Lanka.
Only 18.4% of respondents are entitled to service gratuity after working for several years as a journalist. Gratuity is a benefit that is legally mandatory after completion of 5 years of service by an employee. Many journalists do not enjoy this right too.

Only 13.9% of respondents are entitled to bonus payments. Most private sector and even public sector corporations provide annual or biannual bonus payments for employees. This is another benefit that many journalists do not enjoy.
A majority of respondents have at some point of their career, suffered abuse for being a journalist in Sri Lanka.

16.4% of respondents have at some point faced gender-based abuse while practicing their profession as journalists.
Figure 22 – Safety and security as a journalist
An overwhelming majority of respondents do not feel safe or secure as a journalists in Sri Lanka. The past and current record of cases of journalists being murdered, abducted and assaulted has not provided any lessons nor paved the way for enhanced security and safety measures for journalists in general.

Figure 23 – Organized unions for journalists
Almost all respondents feel it necessary to be a part of an organized and professional journalists trade union to protect their career and life.
Almost all respondents feel it necessary to garner support from international bodies such as International Federation of Journalists which work towards the rights and protection of journalists.

Conclusion

It is evident from the above findings that the professional status and access to rights of journalists in Sri Lanka is far from healthy. Primarily, a number of basic professional needs such as job security, lack of resources, lack of incentives, and lack of career progression and social security are salient issues. Furthermore, lack of formal training and physical danger are just some of the downsides in this field.

From the data gathered, it is evident that journalists in Sri Lanka are grappling with myriad challenges with little prospects for the future, whilst they report from the ground.

These problems may tempt vulnerable journalists to indulge in unethical practices, leading to a low level of professional dignity.

As the Fourth Estate, Sri Lankan journalists and media as a whole, should be provided with even the basic professional rights and incentives for professional growth, in line with international norms, to strengthen democratic values and accelerate national development.

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