



# IMAGE BASED SEXUAL ABUSE PERPETRATED AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN SRI LANKA



## CONTEXT

Sri Lankan studies have so far failed to examine the nature, prevalence, or impacts of IBSA. The few existing studies instead focus on the wider category of 'online harassment', which includes non-sexual or non-gender-based harassment. Violence against women and girls has increased alarmingly since the end of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009 and again post-COVID. Over a third (40%) of Sri Lankan women have experienced physical, sexual or emotional intimate partner violence. Although clear policies, interventions and guidance exist for non-cyber-based sexual violence in Sri Lanka, for victims and survivors of IBSA, this is either non-existent or at best inconsistent. There is also a lack of policy awareness and a lack of terminology in the local languages. The shame attached to having shared sexual content of oneself in the first place prevents many victims from seeking support as a result.

## OBJECTIVES

THE MAIN OBJECTIVES ARE:

- 1 To determine the nature of IBSA, including victim characteristics and contexts of vulnerabilities for women and girls in Sri Lanka
- 2 To understand the victimisation impact on mental health and wellbeing, interpersonal relationships with friends, family members, and intimate partners, as well as within wider social contexts such as the employment sphere or housing.
- 3 To understand the barriers to support seeking and accessing justice in the Sri Lankan context.
- 4 To increase public awareness of the nature of the crime and support resources to help mitigate the victim impact and inform authorities and policy makers of the seriousness of the victimisation impact, including implementing more proportionate laws and sentencing.

## METHODS

OUR RESEARCH PROJECT IS:

- Mixed-methods (concurrent), combining qualitative in-depth, semi-structured interviews and a quantitative anonymised online survey
- Targeting victim-survivors of IBSA who identify as women or girls over the age of 16 (surveys) and 18 (interviews)
- Private, confidential environments (physical or remote) for interviews; an online platform for the public survey.
- Crucial focus placed on trauma-informed practice, robust informed consent, and protecting participant confidentiality due to the highly sensitive nature of the topic.

## INTERVENTION

THE PROJECT IS A MIXED-METHOD STUDY CONTAINING:

- 1 An anonymous online scoping survey of female victims of IBSA- The aim is to explore the nature and impact of IBSA victimisation, victim-survivor characteristics, and barriers to disclosure/access of support in Sri Lanka. It will be accessible in all 3 local languages spoken in the country, and open to all Sri Lankan female victim-survivors of IBSA. The survey will be created by the co-investigators of the project from the UK/Sri Lanka and will be open for 12 months, and a minimum of 500 responses from victim-survivors are expected.
- 2 Qualitative interviews with adult female victims- The interviews will take place either in person or online across several geographical locations in Sri Lanka. CEJ has close contacts with local victim-survivor support groups/NGOs across Sri Lanka, and the project team will train staff from these organisations to conduct the interviews. Approximately 75 interviews will be conducted in Sinhala, Tamil and English.
- 3 Creation/maintenance of a project website/page dedicated to Q&As- A large number of victims contact the CEJ social media platforms regularly to seek support and/or advice on their IBSA victimisation experience. The aim of this page is to encourage victims to realise that they are not alone in their experience and to motivate victims to find support resources. Raising awareness of IBSA victimisation through this Q&A page will also help break the stigma around the victimisation of these crimes and challenge societal judgments of victims and the victim-blaming culture.
- 4 Knowledge-sharing initiatives - Findings from the research study will be disseminated through a conference and research launch, district-level workshops, policy briefs, academic papers and other awareness and advocacy material.

## EXPECTED RESULTS

THE RESEARCH IS EXPECTED TO DELIVER FOUR SETS OF RESULTS THAT WILL ADVANCE THE UNDERSTANDING OF IBSA IN SRI LANKA.

- 1 The anonymous online survey will provide the first quantifiable data on the prevalence, common forms, and demographics of IBSA victimization among women and trans women, establishing the specific context of vulnerability in the country.
- 2 The qualitative interviews will provide in-depth narrative evidence detailing the severe psychological and social impacts of the abuse, including effects on mental health and personal and professional relationships.
- 3 The project will map the pervasive barriers victims face, identifying issues such as systemic victim-blaming culture, a lack of accessible and culturally appropriate support, and specific deficiencies in the Sri Lankan legal and justice system.



## NOTABLE IMPACT OF RESEARCH

The impact will move beyond academic findings to catalyze change across legal, social and institutional spheres.

### POLICY AND LEGAL REFORM

Quantifiable and qualitative evidence base on IBSA prevalence and its severe consequences will be established. This data will directly support the initiation of significant legislative and judicial reform. It will provide the facts necessary to advocate for the creation or amendment of specific laws that clearly define, criminalize, and effectively address the full spectrum of IBSA offences. The research is also designed to inform the development of national digital safety, gender-based violence strategies, and guidelines for internet service providers regarding effective content removal.

### JUDICIAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

The findings will be translated into concrete action through knowledge-sharing initiatives such as advocating for mandatory training for criminal justice professionals. This will be essential for improving case reporting, ethical investigation, and ensuring that judicial outcomes prioritize victim-survivor safety. Active engagement with high-level stakeholders is planned to ensure the research directly informs policy development.

### CIVIL SOCIETY AND SUPPORT SERVICES

The data collected will enable civil society partners, NGOs, and counselling services to redesign their support frameworks. These new programs will focus on filling critical gaps in accessible legal assistance, psychosocial support, and secure digital assistance. The study will directly influence partner organizations by providing the evidence required to reallocate their resources toward specialized service delivery, fostering a more coordinated and effective national response network, especially at the grassroots level.

### ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH AND INFLUENCE

Internally, the research will significantly enhance the organization's credibility as a thought leader in digital violence, acting as a multiplier for securing future international research funding, and providing a blueprint for capacity building in ethical digital research methodologies among early-career staff, ultimately boosting the organization's strategic influence.

