

SDJF Newsletter

Celebrating International Human Rights Day in Sri Lanka under the Pandemic

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Covid 19 Situation in Sri Lanka

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted many aspects of the communities across the world. Sri Lanka in year 2021 alone went for intermittent lockdowns and many long-term lockdowns from July to October. According to Health Promotion Bureau of Sri Lanka it reports average of 750 coronavirus cases each day during the last three months and since the pandemic began there have been 580,922 infections and 14,795 coronavirus-related deaths reported in the country. Sri Lanka has administered at least 30,919,491 doses of COVID vaccines so far. Assuming every person needs 2 doses, that's enough to have vaccinated about 70.9% of the country's population.

Now, the situation is much calmer since the last lockdown and the travel restrictions have been removed. The country is returning to normalcy in the midst of the breakout of the Omicron variant. But, life is returning to normalcy with more organizations starting on-site work while schools are opening for the students. The News report that during the pandemic, social, economic and cultural rights have been forced to restrict as it is far more crucial to uphold the public health during this vicious pandemic. According to Weekly Epidemiological Report of October 2020, the domestic violence and violation of children's rights are some of the major challenges faced by communities across the world and Sri Lanka too reported increased violations against women and children.

Covid and Human rights violations

The Covid pandemic is a new context for Sri Lanka and to the world. The primary focus is given to control the spread of the disease and minimize deaths. Since its becoming important to look at the public health of the country, Human rights in terms of political and civil rights as well as social and economic rights have been violated in the last two years during the pandemic due to various precautions taken for the greater good of protecting the public health rights.

Freedom of expression: In the past year, various incidents of law enforcement visiting human rights organizations were recorded and 13 incidents of intimidation on journalists were reported. During the COVID-19 pandemic, police announced legal action against those who obstruct the duties of the government officers. Several social media commentators were arrested following this, and many practiced self-censorship. However, this led to decrease in social media misinformation and disinformation during the Covid pandemic.



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SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST

- Inter-University Competition for InSPIRE Students
- SLACK Platform Training for InSPIRE Students

Promoting Pluralism and Diversity among University students

After identifying the need to proceed with confidential networking among the university students and to introduce a more user-friendly platform to share material, promote diversity among multiethnic youth, the SDJF and Helvetas decided to introduce SLACK networking platform to university students in the four universities where the InSPIRE project is in implementation. The InSPIRE students will share information, video and audio material and illustrations, etc. through the SLACK platform in a confidential and very easy manner.

SDJF and HELVETAS organized a virtual meeting for the Liaison officers and coordinators of the Universities to introduce the function of the SLACK networking platform which was facilitated by Sivashanthi, Project Officer, HELVETAS.

Liaison officers from the University of Peradeniya and Jaffna, and the student coordinator from South-Eastern university participated in the session. The session focused on the basics of the platform and how the students can use it to share information and collaborate with their peers. The feedback received from the liaison officers and coordinators were positive suggesting that the students would benefit from the platform and would be keen to use it as it also has more privacy than other networking platforms. Similarly, another introductory workshop was conducted by the HELVETAS Project Officer to InSPIRE students from the four universities. About 35 students from the universities participated in the initial introductory session of SLACK platform.

Digital Activism in the Prevention of Online Gender-based Violence

The COVID-19 Pandemic disrupted almost all the day to day activities everywhere in the world. SDJF too was affected by lockdowns and other measures taken by the government to control the spread of the virus. Many project activities were required to be changed into hybrid mode or virtual mode. Considering the limitations, SDJF conducted virtual webinars to keep the momentum of the InSPIRE project going and to gather university students of the four universities, Peradeniya, Jayewardenepura, Jaffna and Southeastern, on a single platform to share their experiences, ideas and learn about new thematic topics.

First of its kind webinar on “Online Misogyny - Limiting, Disempowering or Silencing?” was organized on the September 24, 2021 from 7.30-8.30pm in the virtual platform. This webinar was a collaboration between FACTS, SDJF, CMIL and the InSPIRE project. The webinar was aimed at educating students on Gender-based violence (GBV) on the online sphere and the impact of online GBV and cyber misogyny on youth and vulnerable minority groups. The objective of the webinar was to gather students of all cultures and backgrounds and discuss their experiences in the online sphere and improve their knowledge on identifying online misogyny and GBV, as well as discussing measures to combat digital misogyny. 76 students from University of Peradeniya, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, University of Jaffna and South Eastern University participated in the session. The webinar session was facilitated by Dr. Aparna Sharma, World Arts and Cultures/Dance, UCLA.

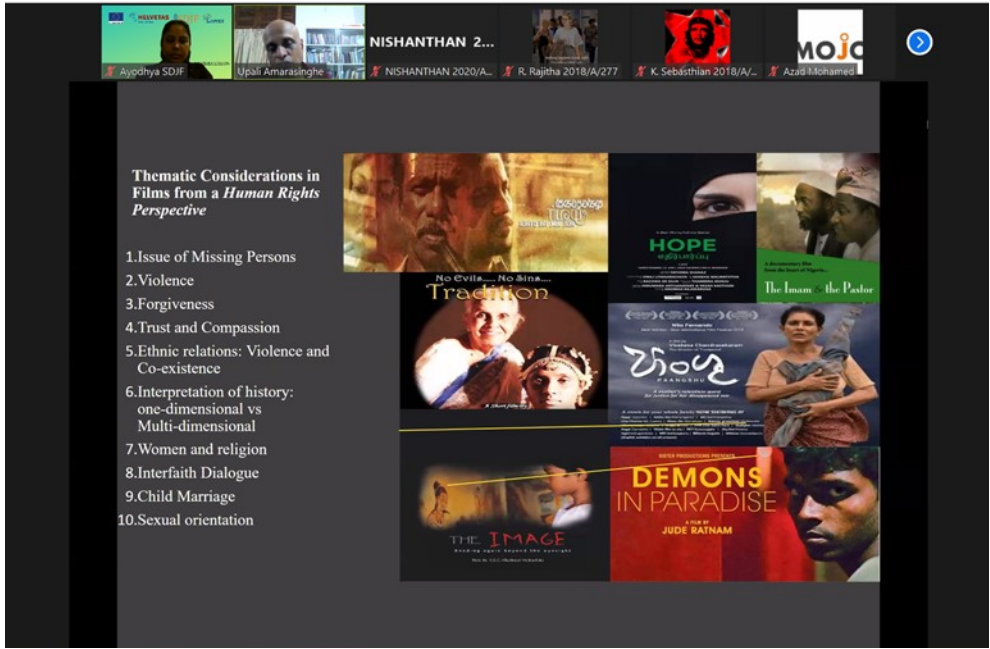


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Information rights: In the meantime, the government does not share correct information about several key infrastructure development projects including port city, Hambantota harbour and power plants. This also include right information about the vaccines. The correct information and the suitability of the vaccines for the coronavirus are not shared with the general public. The general public rely on individuals and unverified information with regard to information on the vaccines.

Freedom of religion: The worst scenario of violation of freedom of religion is when the government cremated the bodies of people of Islamic faith. In Islam only burial is accepted as a ritual of last rites. In that sense, the government violated a fundamental right of the people of Islamic faith.

Freedom of assembly and association: For an example, one of the grave violations of this right is vividly shown in the arrest of 31 persons by the police during a protest done by Ceylon Teachers' Union against a Bill that seeks to "militarize" higher education in Sri Lanka.



Webinar on Human Rights Day—Freedom of Artistic Expression

Webinar on World Human Rights Day on 10th December 2021

SDJF organized a virtual webinar on the 10th December, 2021 celebrating the World Human Rights Day. The webinar was organized by the SDJF’s InSPIRE project team gathering InSPIRE university students to participate on the webinar. More than 40 students participated in the webinar conducted by Mr. Upali Amarasinghe, a Human Rights Advocate and the Technical Advisor – Arts and Culture GIZ Sri Lanka. He discussed the importance of Freedom of Expression, instances of breaching of Freedom of Expression in Sri Lanka and how freedom of artistic expression is important in a country like Sri Lanka.

The short film called ‘Mahasona’ was screened in an effort to promote dialogue among students on the freedom of expression and freedom of artistic expression in Sri Lanka.

Role of Journalists in Preventing Violent Extremism

The initial webinar served as an opportunity for the InSPIRE team to collaborate with other youth initiatives and projects on current topics of issue in the country. Collaboration with AlterHate project was such a pleasure for SDJF as it provided the opportunity to discuss about topics such as racially motivated hate speech and impact of journalism and ethical use of media on youth communities. The topic of the webinar was ‘Contemporary Media and Ethical Journalism in Preventing Violent Extremism’. The content of the webinar includes ethical use of media, contemporary media and violent extremism and how contemporary media can be used ethically and responsibly.

AlterHate, an initiative by HELVETAS Sri Lanka in collaboration with the National Peace Council an in regional partnership with HELVETAS Bangladesh and Rupantar, is focused on fighting against racially motivated hate, discrimination and violence.

