

## **Unmuting the Muted: An Exploration of Possibilities towards A Women's Alternative Radio Channel in Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract:** Like many other South Asian countries, in Sri Lanka too, women have been treated in a subordinate way within the family itself, and they rarely find a form to speak up for themselves and about their real-life issues. As radio is very much intimate to women, it is significant to study the role of radio in bringing muted voices of women to the front-line and opening an avenue for women to discuss their issues, find solutions for them, empower themselves, and take part in the decision-making process in the country. It is a timely need as already her voice has been suppressed in domestic and socio-political arenas for decades. Hence, a study was carried out to find reasons for not having a women's alternative radio channel so far in Sri Lanka, the potential to establish a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka, and the possible initiatives to be taken to establish a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka. An audience survey was done using 100 female students from the Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Trincomalee Campus of Eastern University, Sri Lanka. With reference to the primary data collected through survey method it was found that, there are enough reasons for establishing a separate radio station for women in Sri Lanka, because women need a separate space to discuss their issues in a female public sphere and in the male-dominated working environment. Male supremacy in the Sri Lankan media industry and the need for a separate radio for women was not identified by the society are the major reasons for not having a separate radio station for women in Sri Lanka so far. The possible initiatives can be taken by the societal members, the government and the politicians, and by the academia to promote women's alternative radio station in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords:** Gender equality, South Asian region, Women's alternative radio

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### **1. Introduction**

'Radio is the most widespread electronic communication device in the world' (Jayarathne, 2012), and using radio as a mass medium runs back to the late 1800s. Radio is effective when compared with other mass media not only in informing the people but also in creating awareness regarding social issues, the need for social reformation, developing interest, and initiating actions.

Radio is the oldest form of audio mass medium in Sri Lanka. Radio broadcasting in Sri Lanka commenced in 1925, and at the very beginning, it broadcasted recorded music only. Earlier, it was named Radio South East Asia Command (SEAC) and later renamed as Radio Ceylon in 1949, and it was immensely popular not only in Sri Lanka but also in other parts of Asia as well (Nawagamuwa, 2021).

By now, more than 50 radio channels function in Sri Lanka most of which are owned by private companies (Sri Lankan FM Radio Frequency List, 2021). However, government radio channels such as ITN Lakhanda cover 99% of the geographic area in Sri Lanka (Independent Television Network, 2022). There are separate radio channels function in three languages, for instance, in Sinhala language (Swadesheeya Sewayaya, Hiru FM, FM Derana, Siyatha FM), in Tamil language (SLBC Thesiya Sevai, Shakthi FM, Vasantham FM, Varnam FM, Sooriyan FM) and, in English language (Gold FM, Lite FM). Moreover, a few radio channels specifically communicate to a target audience, such as 'Y FM', 'Yes FM', 'City FM' for youth, 'Vidula FM' for children, and 'the Buddhist radio' for Buddhists. Although Sri Lanka is a geographically small country, number of radio channels are relatively high. However, it is revealed that the national radio channels have failed to fulfill the needs of the listeners in the entire country (Rajapaksha and Nandasiri, 2016).

#### **1.1 Absence of a radio channel for women**

According to the gender statistics, out of the total population in Sri Lanka, 52% of citizens are female (UNDP Sri Lanka, 2023). However, when considering the contribution to the economy of the country, 73.9% of

females are economically inactive (Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin, 2020). Most of them stay at home as the homemakers and that is how women's fates have been decided in many South Asian countries.

Women have been treated in a subordinate way within the family itself, and they rarely find a form to speak up for themselves and about their issues. As in many other South Asian countries, in Sri Lanka too, women's representation in governing bodies and administrative positions is considerably low. That is not because women's potentiality is low in handling white-collar jobs, but because they have been muted and suppressed within the social system. Women have been isolated in homes as homemakers, or some of them as small-scale entrepreneurs, caretakers, and doing different professions in society.

Women do not have a platform where they can talk about themselves, and it is very rare to hear their voices in mainstream media beyond the male discourse. "In the mainstream media, women are marginalised to the extreme" (Pavlidis and Fullagar, 2014, p.2). As radio is very much intimate to women, the researchers believe that radio has its role in bringing muted voices to the frontline and opening an avenue for women to discuss their issues, find solutions for them, empower themselves, and take part in the decision-making process in the country. It is a timely need as already her voice has been suppressed in domestic and socio-political arenas for decades.

### **1.2 Why radio, and not any other mass medium?**

Radio has unique characteristics that listeners attract which other mass media do not have. Radio can be listened to by the majority of people in the country. Radio sets can be seen in almost every household. It is an inexpensive medium when compared to other mass media. It is portable and can listen to the radio while engaging in any other activities. Literacy is not required to consume radio, and it is an intimate medium than other mass media. Therefore, having a separate radio channel for women would be much more beneficial socially, economically, and politically.

Although radio covers an extensive range of geographical areas in Sri Lanka and takes multiple topics into the discussion, it seems that the radio has paid less attention to producing women-oriented programmes and there is a controversy about the quality and the quantity of these radio programmes. It indirectly causes those channels to lose their listenership of women and at the same time, women too lose a valuable opportunity to learn something new, to empower themselves, and to improve their standard of living.

The history of the radio is about all-male affairs. Radio inventors, producers, presenters, and policymakers are all male, and they dominate radio broadcasting in the same way they dominate domestic, socio-economic, and political affairs. Therefore, it is imperative to change the stereotypical identities of women in society and create new identities for them to bring their deserved personalities out.

## **2. Literature Review**

When referring to the available literature related to the study, it is apparent that a need for a women's radio has been a social necessity for many countries. It shows that many European countries have been very positive on women's radio channels.

Lacey (2006) mentions in an article written on 'Continuities and change in women's radio' that, 'Women's radio, such as BBC Radio 4 (Women's Hour), has played an important role in changing the lives of women. There are other types of women's radio as well, including women's music radio and women's business radio, that showcase music produced by women and interviews of successful women, respectively'.

Mitchell (2008), expresses very similar idea to Lacey writing in her article on 'Dangerously feminine?: Theory and praxis of women's alternative radio', that 'women's alternative radio, which involves participatory practices and alternative representations to the mainstream media, and infers that women have a right to broadcast in their own terms, own voices, articulate their concerns, and tell their own stories in order to represent their struggles and achievements. Women's radio is used as a major tool for women's self-development'.

Among these optimistic viewpoints on women's radio, Rodero et al. (2012) describe in their article that how hard it was for a women broadcaster to survive in a radio station where domination overflowed. For an example in radio advertising, 'there is a strong tendency to employ male voices more often than female voices in the belief that male voices sound more convincing. As a result, a gender stereotype is established which would appear to be upheld more by tradition than actual advertising effectiveness'. The article explains how male domination in media platforms suppresses women's voices and how gender discrimination happens.

Being the pioneer of radio broadcasting in the South Asian region, it is pathetic not having a single radio station for women in Sri Lanka to speak up on their issues as they have a right to be heard. It was identified that none of the studies have been conducted on the same within the Sri Lankan context, hence, filling that information gap is one of the intentions of the researchers.

### **3. Problem Statement**

According to the annual report of the Sri Lanka Labour Force Statistics Quarterly Bulletin (2020), women represent 34.3% of the labour force in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the economically inactive female population is 73.1%, and men's economically inactive percentage is 26.1% which indicates a very small number when compared with women. Then in Sri Lanka, it is obvious that although women population is high (52%), it is been difficult to utilize their capacity for the betterment of women and also for the betterment of the country. Women are forcefully muted within the family and also in the society.

Radio has been passing more than nine decades of its history in Sri Lanka, and radio can be identified as the most intimate companion of women. Radio bridged, connected, and blurred the boundaries between the private and public spheres and by doing so, spoke to women as housewives, workers, consumers and citizens (Skoog, 2020). Listenership to radio appears to be lower than the viewership of TV but, many informants assert that radio remains the primary media for rural households and the poor and 80% of the population lives in rural areas in Sri Lanka (ADB, 2024), then of course, radio can play a significant role among rural.

When carefully examining the radio programmes, it seems that the radio has paid less attention to broadcast women-oriented programmes. When compared to the air time that radio has allocated for news, sports, entertainment, and health programmes, it is evident that the programmes produced catering to women are very low. As Silva (2022) explains in her article that women are aware of that through the present capitalist media, they do not receive the required space women need. For example, "Kaanthawa" radio programme by Swadeshiya Sewaya, SLBC, and "Mahaeshika Waasabhawana" by Rangiri Sri Lanka Radio are a few women-oriented programmes which are unable to create an adequate platform where women can come up with their real-life issues expressing themselves fully.

Throughout the last nine decades of the history of radio in Sri Lanka, no initiatives have been taken to create a media platform for women's feelings and ideas to be expressed and their voices to be heard. Sri Lankans have failed in establishing a separate radio channel for women, although they are the pioneers in the radio broadcasting in South Asia. That drawback is highlighted in this study, and this is an eye-opener for the relevant authorities to think of taking an initiative for women's voices to be aired sooner giving them the right to express, educate, and empower.

### **4. Research Questions**

01. What are the reasons for not having a women's radio channel so far in Sri Lanka?
02. What is the potential to establish a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka?
03. What are the possible initiatives to be taken to establish a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka?

### **5. Methodology**

#### **5.1 Primary Data**

To probe the research areas and to achieve the research objectives, an audience survey was done with a qualitative component. The study on exploration of possibilities towards a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka lies on qualitative setup and survey procedure to gather data from the university students (female) referred to as the audience of radio broadcasting stations and who are underrepresented in mainstream media most of the time. 100 female students were selected from four (4) batches in the Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka, and e-questionnaires were distributed among them to gather data.

#### **5.2 Secondary Data**

Secondary data was collected from books, journals, internet sources, newspapers, and magazines.

### **6. Theoretical Framework**

The "Muted Group theory" was used as the theoretical framework of the study. Muted Group theory was formed by Edwin Ardener and Shirley Ardener and further developed by Cheris Kramarae. It is a critical theory and a sociological tool which chooses to bifurcate the power spectrum into men and women. It emphasizes the men's power over creating male-biased languages, and it leads women to suppress their ideas and emotions as they have no idea about the meanings of male-made language. Therefore women become a muted group.

The muted group theory has been formed on three assumptions (Alchetron, 2021). First, men and women perceive the world differently because they have different perceptions shaping experiences. Those differences are a result of men and women performing different tasks in society. Second, men enact their power politically, perpetuating their power and suppressing women's ideas and meanings from gaining public acceptance. Third, women must convert their unique ideas, experiences and meanings into male language to be heard.

Hence, the researchers believe that to study the domination of men over women in the broadcasting field (producers, presenters and technical crew), muted group theory is the most appropriate theoretical approach.

Furthermore, “feminist theory” was used in this study to identify the attitudinal change of women to invade patriarchal peripheries which have been spread mainly in mass media. The Feminist theory has originated with the beliefs that, society is patriarchal, structured by and favouring men, traditional ways of thinking support the subordination of women and the neglect of trivialization of issues particularly affecting women (Crossman,2020), and this patriarchal order should be overthrown and replaced which stresses equality for both sexes. It is about respecting diverse women’s experiences, knowledge and strengths, identities, and attempting to empower all women to realise their full rights.

### 7. Significance of the Study

In this study, the importance of having a separate alternative radio channel for women was explored, particularly a radio station run by women as producers, presenters and decision-makers because women have the true sense of what they need from a radio channel. If a state radio takes an initiative to launch a separate channel for women that may cause to increase their listenership what they have lost by commercial radio channels.

The researchers believe that the findings of this study pave the path to identify the valid reasons and reasonable factors to bring a developmental approach by educating and empowering women in Sri Lanka through a separate radio channel. If the need for an alternative radio channel for women is realized by Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation, relevant ministries and decision-making bodies, that will lead to letting women’s voice be heard, women’s issues be addressed, while educating and empowering the 73.9% economically inactive women population by increasing their capacity and get them into the workforce.

### 8. Results and Discussion

To investigate the problem of the study, the researchers have conducted a survey. For this, 100 undergraduate female students who are currently reading their degree at the Department of Languages and Communication Studies, Faculty of Communication and Business Studies, Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University, Sri Lanka were selected as the sample. The age of the respondents ranges from 21 to 26 and they live in different parts of Sri Lanka and thus cover the island. These 100 female students represent four academic batches, namely, 2017/2018, 2018/2019, 2019/2020 and 2020/2021, and their demographic data is as follows,

Table 1: demographic data of the respondents

Academic year	Ethnicity			
	Sinhala	Tamil	Muslim	Burgher
2017/2018	17	-	-	-
2018/2019	26	02	01	-
2019/2020	23	01	-	01
2020/2021	18	05	02	04

When inquiring about their awareness of women’s radio stations in the world, 37% of the respondents stated that they have awareness of women’s radio stations. However, 63% of the respondents stated that they have no awareness about the availability of women’s radio stations. 99% of the respondents said ‘no’ when asked about their awareness of the availability of women’s radio stations in Sri Lanka and only one said ‘yes’. The respondent replied “Hirudaya FM” and “Swarna FM” as women’s radio stations in Sri Lanka. However, there are no such radio stations in Sri Lanka with the above-mentioned names. As such, it is evident from the findings that the majority of the respondents have no awareness of the women’s radio stations in the world as well as in Sri Lanka.

As stated by the respondents, no separate programme aired on Sri Lankan radio about women. Most of the radio programmes focus on current affairs, entertainment, sports, political news stories, gossip, business news, dramas, and musical programmes. News stories about women are aired as one among many other news stories. However, the time allocation for women’s contents is very low when compared to the time allocation of other contents. 28% of the respondents stated that there are few programmes (beauty, fashion, radio drama) in which, content about women is much higher than men, nevertheless, the majority of the radio programmes talk about men (business, sports, current affairs). It is also evident from the findings that, most of the radio programmes which are aired on Sri Lankan radio stations, both state and private have women presenters but the programmes about women are very low.

As per the responses, all the respondents agreed that as females and also as an audience, they accept the need to establish a women's radio station in Sri Lanka which broadcasts only women-centred programmes. The respondents have identified the possible reasons for not having a separate radio station for women in Sri Lanka. Among the 100 female undergraduates, 50 of them have stated that male domination in the Sri Lankan media industry and the need for a separate radio for women were not identified are the major reasons. However, there were many other reasons identified through the study. People have no much awareness about the existence of women's radio stations in other countries (40), there are only very few women radio presenters (37), there is no provision for women-based radio channels in Sri Lanka (29), and women voice up their messages in other media and they do not need a separate radio (24). Hence, the study found that, male domination in the Sri Lankan media industry and the need for a separate radio for women were not identified are the major reasons for not having a separate radio for women in Sri Lanka. The findings goes in line with the ideology explained in the muted group theory that is, men's power over creating male-biased languages, and it leads women to suppress their ideas and emotions as they have no idea about the meanings of male-made language. Therefore women become a muted group.

Among the respondents, 71 of them stated that women need a separate space to discuss their issues in a female public sphere, and 53 of them said, that a separate radio station gives more opportunities for women to get access to information. While 40 of them stated that females are subordinated in the male-dominated working environment and thus they need a separate radio only to talk about them. 36 of the respondents believe that women need a separate radio because they have been marginalized to the extreme by mainstream radio. 16 respondents said that radio is a cost-effective medium to operate and broadcast and therefore establishing a radio station for women will not cost much. Respondents also had the opinion that radio is a common medium and listeners do not need high literacy to listen. As such it is good to establish a women's radio station because when women present their issues in a male-dominated media, men ridicule them and women's voice is suppressed by men. The study found that women need a separate radio station to unmute their voices and to compete in the male-dominated patriarchal system. As such, the finding also has similarities with the theoretical explanation given in feminism, that is society is patriarchal, structured by and favouring men, traditional ways of thinking support the subordination of women and the neglect of trivialization of issues particularly affecting women, and this patriarchal order should be overthrown and replaced which stresses equality for both sexes.

When questioned about the potential benefits that could be received by women by having a separate radio for them, the respondents provided various responses. Among them, 60 of them mentioned that awareness about women-oriented programmes/projects will increase and that will enable the females to gain more from such projects, women will get adequate air time to discuss and find solutions to their problems (59), that will be a good opportunity for women radio journalists to flourish in the field (57), women's engagement in radio journalism will increase (54), and radio advertisement opportunities can be given only to women entrepreneurs to advertise their product on air (27). Thus, it is evident from the findings that there is a strong potential to establish a women's radio station in Sri Lanka which will enhance and empower women.

The study intends to find the possible initiatives to be taken to establish a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka. As per the respondents, the possible initiatives can be taken in three different levels, by the societal members, another by the government and the politicians, and another by the academia.

The community has its responsibilities to establish a women's radio station in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, there is a less potential for women's radio because there are other fields for women, thus we have to educate women about women's radio and conduct awareness campaigns about this. Further, getting opinions from women about it and responsible officers taking action in that regard, discussing about the needs of women in the national and international platforms, educating women and the society about the benefits of establishing women's radio channel and the objectives that can be achieved by that are to be performed by the societal members. Further, the needs of a women's radio should be identified, method of obtaining their opinions should be introduced through community engagement, partnership and collaboration. Female's engagement in radio station should be increased, programmes about women rights and the importance of women's communication to society should be initiated by the community.

At the same time, the government, politicians and the media owners can execute some tasks to establish women's radio in Sri Lanka. Media owners can form partnerships with local women's organizations, secure funding through grants or sponsorships, conduct audience research to understand preferences, recruit and train female broadcasters, and ensure diverse and empowering content and continuously evaluate and adapt programming based on audience feedback for a successful launch. Create engaging and diverse content that addresses the unique perspectives and interests of women in Sri Lanka and fostering inclusivity and empowerment within the programming. Also, the respondents stated that, initiatives can be taken by the government to start women's radio as a subsidiary of a major media organization. Build partnerships with local women's organizations and NGOs to foster community support and conduct outreach programs to raise

awareness and involve the community in content creation. Increasing the number of women in the radio industry and hiring more women in areas such as editing, sound management and recording and providing more opportunities for education in this regard. Giving women a better understanding of media, government can also pass a bill in this regard. Government and private institutions should provide support and awareness of this and can even provide the opportunity to start a women's radio station at the level of universities or other educational institutions.

Furthermore, the respondents also insisted the potential contribution of the academic community to establish a separate radio for women in Sri Lanka. Academicians can conduct scientific research and formulate an effective program for women in radio media, giving a space for women's preferences and also to represent their ideas, issues, and other facts related to them. They can conduct awareness programmes on how to create female-oriented programmes targeting the local communities, and can seek partnerships and sponsorships, provide training for women in radio, establish a digital presence, promote diversity in content, advocate women's issues, ensure legal compliance, research & planning the legal compliance, strengthen the community engagement, and recommend on appropriate technology and infrastructure. Further, conducting a feasibility study to assess the market demand, potential audience, and available resources are also can be done from the academics' end for establishing a women's alternative radio channel in Sri Lanka.

## 9. Conclusion

With reference to the primary data collected through survey method the study found that, there are enough reasons for establishing a separate radio station for women in Sri Lanka, because women need a separate space to discuss their issues in a female public sphere and in the male-dominated working environment. Radio is a cost-effective medium to operate and broadcast therefore, establishing a radio station for women will not cost much. Male domination in the Sri Lankan media industry and the need for a separate radio for women was not identified are the major reasons for not having a separate radio station for women in Sri Lanka so far. The possible initiatives can be taken by the societal members, the government and the politicians, and by the academia to promote women's radio station in Sri Lanka.

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