



“Equality for all Sexual
Orientations and
Gender Identities:
Human Rights for
everyone”

2021

ANNUAL
REPORT

EQU  L GROUND

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Letter from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

2021 has been a challenging year for EQUAL GROUND (EG) due to the persistent spread of COVID-19 that demanded the tightening of restrictions and frequent lockdowns. Yet 2021 was a year of transformation that enabled us to successfully face the challenges that the “new normal” brought upon us. The dedication, hard work, and creativity of the staff enabled EG to reach milestones not only at an organisational level but also at a national level.

A few of our noteworthy achievements for 2021 consist of the public statement made by the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists (SLCP) in response to EQUAL GROUND’s letter regarding the erroneous and harmful statements made against the LGBTIQ community by a purported counsellor, during a training program conducted for the Sri Lanka Police in Kandy. The statement made by the SLCP was in support of the LGBTIQ community and condemned the remarks made by the counselor. Furthermore, SLCP also requested the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in Sri Lanka. This was the first time an authoritative body such as the SLCP made a statement in favor of the LGBTIQ community and it was a direct result of the involvement of EG in addressing this issue. Based on the statement made by SLCP, EG took it upon itself to take further action by filing the ongoing fundamental rights case against the Sri Lanka Police and the counselor in question.

Apart from fighting for the rights of the LGBTIQ community at a national level, EG celebrated Colombo PRIDE virtually on a larger scale, by partnering up with other LGBTIQ rights organisations, local businesses, media, and other advocacy organisations around the island. EG also managed to conduct over 25 programs/trainings/workshops amidst the lockdowns and restrictions while adhering to all health guidelines.

2021 was a challenging year for EG, but each challenge was faced with resilience and we shall continue to march forward in the years to come as we strive for equal rights and acceptance for the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka.

“EQUAL GROUND strives to end discrimination against the LGBTIQ community while working tirelessly to decriminalise consenting same-sex relationships, sensitising the masses to accept and understand LGBTIQ persons, building allyship in Sri Lanka.”

Backdrop of our work

Patriarchal gender roles and responsibilities are rigidly followed in Sri Lanka. Much significance is placed on traditional roles and responsibilities of men and women, towards each other and society at large. The heteronormative and binary gender standards that the culture tends to uphold is the root of this problem. Homosexuality and transgenderism are viewed as shameful and abnormal phenomena and is often termed as a psychological disturbance, manifestation of sins from previous lives, and/or a disease.

Advertisements are often placed by 'practitioners' claiming to cure persons of homosexuality as well as the consequences of it, grossly exploiting young persons and their hardships. Families suspecting family members of being queer often force marriages and in extreme cases there is curative rape. Violence in all forms is perpetrated against LGBTIQ persons across the board, by family members and society at large. This behavior is further validated by the behavior of authorities towards LGBTIQ persons who are often blackmailed, ridiculed and in some instances raped. Shame and internalised homophobia remain and cause LGBTIQ persons to go deeper and deeper underground.

Thanks to its colonial legacy, Sri Lanka is one of 72 countries in the world that criminalises same-sex sexual relations among consenting adults. Sections 365 and 365A of Sri Lanka's Penal Code, states that "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" (in other words, any type of sex that is considered unnatural) and "acts of gross indecency" are criminal offences punishable by law, carrying a sentence of up to 10 years. While they do not specify that these offences pertain to same-sex sexual relations, they are most often used against the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, and Queer/Questioning (LGBTIQ) community. In addition, the Vagrancy Law and Section 399 of the Penal Code regarding "cheating by personation" (referring to impersonation) are also used against the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka, particularly against transgender individuals. Further, due to the existing penal code and lack of protectionary measures for LGBTIQ persons, they are afforded little to no recourse to justice. LGBTIQ persons often leave instances of violence unreported due to the fear of their sexuality being discussed as well as the shame associated with it. On rare occasions they do report such instances; authorities have in the past abused confidential information to further victimise the individuals.

The challenges the community faces are numerous, including legal barriers, social stigmatisation and various other kinds of discrimination in all spheres of their lives. As a result, the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka faces all forms of discrimination, marginalisation, and violence inevitably resulting in mental health issues, low self-esteem and internalised homophobia/transphobia.

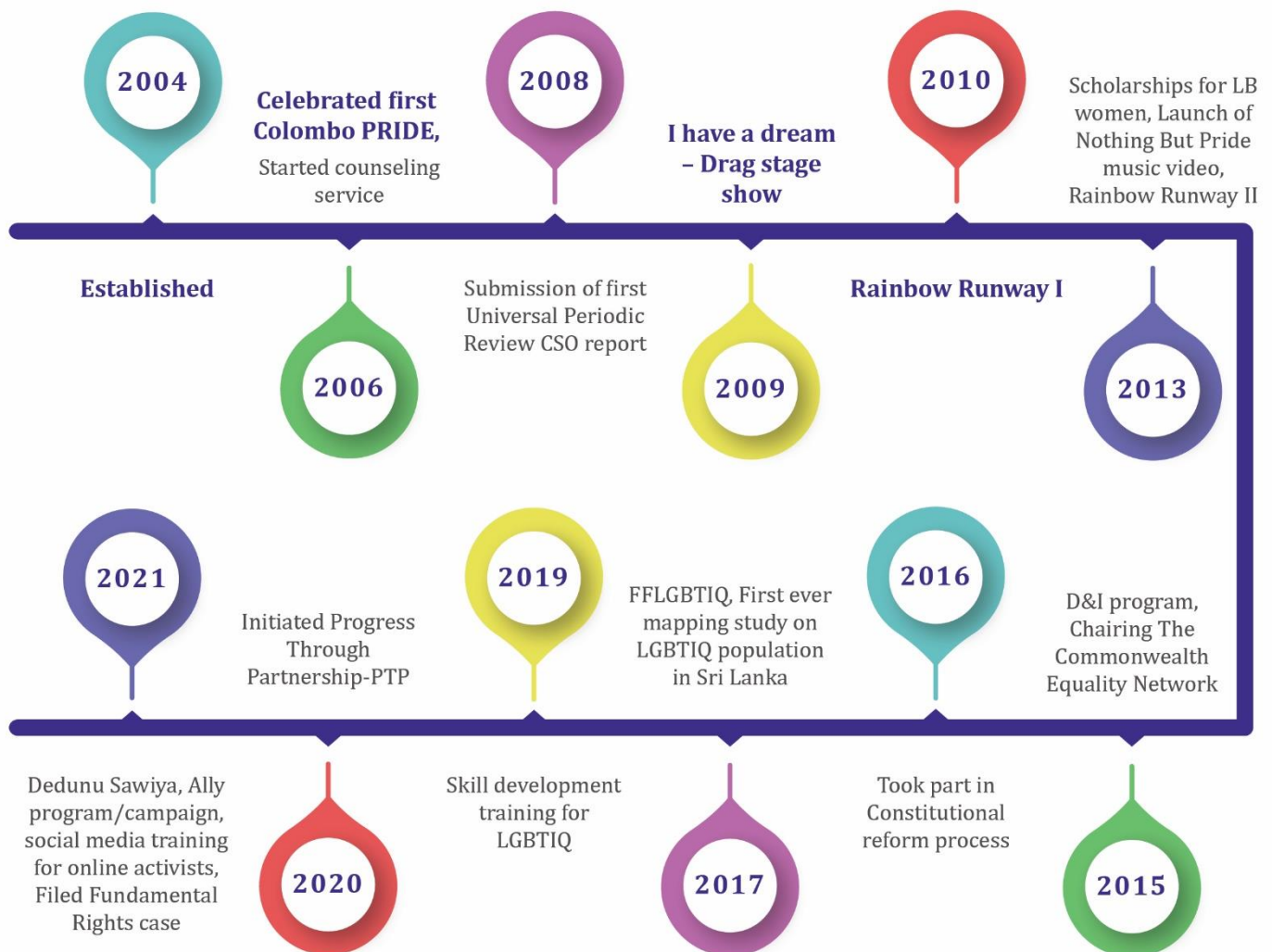


Journey of EQUAL GROUND

Despite all the evident discrimination and stigmatisation of the LGBTIQ community, there was really no advocacy being done around LGBTIQ rights in a way that included the full spectrum of the queer community in Sri Lanka. Considering this phenomenon, Rosanna Flamer-Caldera our Executive Director, formed EQUAL GROUND(EG), brick by brick.

Founded in 2004, EG is the oldest and truly diverse non-profit organisation seeking economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer and Questioning (LGBTIQ) community of Sri Lanka. EG grew from strength to strength due to its continuous hard-work, determination and resilience and the support it received from its heterosexual allies and friends.

Timeline (highlights)



Vision
 “Equality for all sexual orientations and gender identities; human rights for everyone.”

Geographic reach: 18 districts out of 25, and more than 50 villages and towns across the island

Scope of work: National (training, awareness and sensitisation, counseling, community welfare, networking, advocacy initiatives) and International (International reporting mechanisms, collaborations)

Beneficiaries: (LGBTIQ and non-LGBTIQ)

Publications: Booklets (11), Magazine (40), Research (7)

Mission
 “Our mission is to make the lives of LGBTIQ persons in Sri Lanka meaningful and free from stigma and discrimination, to decriminalise consenting adult same sex sexual relationships and put in place policies of non-discrimination to protect and safeguard LGBTIQ lives in our country.”



EG and its operating environment during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented challenge that affected EQUAL GROUND's work. The Sri Lankan government imposed several Island-wide curfews on multiple occasions throughout the year that severely restricted movement.

Even once curfews were lifted, there were restrictions on gatherings, crossing districts and provincial borders, etc. to contain the spread of the pandemic. These restrictions meant that there were periods when the staff were forced to work from home or on a roster basis. PRIDE events had to be virtual, and workshops and meetings needed to be rescheduled. Some of the planned work was also cancelled due to the nature of the restrictions and were replaced by other, more digitally-friendly events.

That said, through all these challenges EQUAL GROUND has continued its efforts and grown from strength to strength.

2021 at a glance

Community Welfare and Service	Awareness and Sensitisation	Policy and Advocacy Initiatives
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Trainings (7) - Counseling (online) - Dedunu Sawiya (job portal) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - D&I (3) - FFLGBTIQ (8) - Other workshops (9, including Progress through Partnerships) - Social media campaigns (4) - International Day Observations - Virtual celebrations (Colombo PRIDE) - Publications (2 research studies, 1 booklet) 	<p>National level</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Allies - Collaboration with other like-minded organisations - With government representative (meeting with Justice Minister) <p>Legal empowerment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fundamental Rights case <p>International</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ongoing work on UPR submission for 2022 - The Commonwealth Equality Network (our ED was the co-founder and Chair (2015-2021))

Activity rationale and details



Community welfare and service

EG is committed to empowering and creating a safe space for all LGBTIQ individuals. Therefore, EG always attempts to provide opportunities for self-help including mental wellbeing, economic, social and political empowerment, access to health, education, housing and legal protection for the LGBTIQ community.

Training: In 2021, LGBTIQ community members received 7 trainings which include: skills development program (1), fund raising and proposal writing (1), social media activist training (1), introduction to counseling (1), My Rights, My Responsibility workshops (3).

Skill development training: the training contents include developing innovative curriculum vitae and cover letters, preparing the community members for competitive job market, how to cope with non-LGBTIQ friendly workplaces, overall career guidance, improve communications skills etc.

Training for social media activists: 17 districts/towns have been covered under this training. The objective was to provide aspirant community online activists with proper knowledge which will assist them to utilise digital/virtual platforms in an appropriate and effective way.

Fund Raising and Proposal Writing: In Sri Lanka, currently many non-profit organisations are working on LGBTIQ issues. In order to keep everything going smoothly and to get financial assistance, writing fundraising proposals, applying to international donor bodies, understanding funders and their motivations, making innovative activity charts, budget planning etc. play a vital role. Considering this, EG arranged this training with the support of MDF Asia, Training and Consultancy for those working in LGBTIQ organisations islandwide.

My Rights, My Responsibility: EG believes 'Voices are the best tool for effective and progressive change.' Keeping this in mind, EG developed this publication which focuses on the rights and laws that affect the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka. It provides information on how to protect oneself when faced with rights violations of any type. Using the contents and information from this trilingual book, EG conducted several trainings for the LGBTIQ community.

Introduction to Mental Health: Many LGBTIQ people experience mental health struggles, however, if they get proper support and counseling LGBTIQ people of all age groups can thrive in the face of adversity as well. Therefore, EG initiated this training with likeminded organisations and/or their representatives, LGBTIQ individuals who are interested in providing counseling service for the community, so that they can get the proper knowledge and tools to counsel others.

Counseling: EG's counseling service for LGBTIQ persons was established in 2005. Now it operates a helpline in 3 languages (English, Sinhala and Tamil) and consists of a women only line for LB women and a Trans only line for Transgender persons. The Counseling lines are operated by EG's staff, all of who have been trained in the art of counseling. Currently, the FB counseling page has nearly **1000** followers. The page reach is **1818** (Jan 2021-Dec 2021).

Dedunu Sawiya: Owing to Sri Lanka's legal landscape and social stigmas, the LGBTIQ community faces discrimination daily. As such, one of the biggest challenges LGBTIQ individuals face is finding and retaining employment. On the other hand, finding skilled and talented labor is a common issue many companies in Sri Lanka face as well. Keeping this dual dynamic in mind, in February 2021 EG launched "[Dedunu Sawiya](#)", the first and only LGBTIQ friendly job website in Sri Lanka, offering a safe virtual space for both job seekers and employers to connect.

Awareness and sensitisation



EG believes that sensitisation and awareness programs play a crucial role in curbing the perceived stigma and discrimination of the LGBTIQ community. Including the excluded is a challenging task and to achieve it, apart from enhancing the capacity of the community, EG extended its work with corporates, family and friends of LGBTIQ (FFLGBTIQ), non-LGBTIQ people in general, media, allies, like-minded organisations and so on. Moreover, EG also initiated innovative and impactful social media campaigns and publications as tools for awareness raising and sensitisation.

Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in the workplace: D&I sensitising programs are an integral part of EG's work as they make workplaces safe for LGBTIQ employees, thereby improving their ability to stay employed and become economically independent. Also, promoting diversity and inclusion and having LGBTIQ-friendly workplaces can help businesses avoid costs associated with high labor turnover. In 2021, amidst COVID-19 pandemic EG continued its D&I workshops virtually. Many leading corporates of Sri Lanka namely **Selyn, Capital Alliance, Uber, Hemas PLC and Sysco Labs** (to name a few) were approached under this program and are working with EG to sensitise their staff and work on including and protecting SOGIE in their Human Resources guidelines.

FFLGBTIQ: FFLGBTIQ was formed in December 2017 and is instrumental in assisting parents, families, and friends of LGBTIQ persons to join the efforts to accept, respect, and cherish their LGBTIQ family members and friends. This forum helps educate, guide, provide resources and support family & friends of LGBTIQ persons to come 'out' in support of their LGBTIQ Family members and friends, thus creating a further support mechanism as well as offering security, shelter and acceptance. In 2021 EG was able to conduct **8** FFLGBTIQ programs in **8** districts across the island.

Progress Through Partnership (PTP): The objective of The Progress through Partnership (PTP) initiative is to create a space where ideas and strategies can be nurtured and allowed to flourish, a space where the numerous organisations and individual activists working on LGBTIQ issues in Sri Lanka can link their networks, coordinate, share best practices and experiences, and create a synergy to end discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. The PTP initiative is open to LGBTIQ organisations and LGBTIQ individuals working in the fields of LGBTIQ rights, sexual and reproductive rights, education, art, and theatre. In 2021, EG conducted **6** PTP workshops island wide.

Sensitisation workshops for non-LGBTIQ: The aim of conducting sensitisation workshops is to address the overarching issue of LGBTIQ rights in Sri Lanka by providing accurate knowledge and building awareness amongst the general public, Local Government Authorities (LGA), and other relevant bodies about sexual and gender diversity and the LGBTIQ community. EG's various consultations with LGBTIQ activists and allies have identified a specific issue that transgender people face when they attempt to amend their legal documents via the government-approved Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC). They face difficulties because the LGA are either not aware of the governmental circular on the subject and/or do not understand the process. Thus, EG conducted workshops with the representatives of LGA, CBOs and general public on GRC, discriminatory laws and policies of the country against LGBTIQ people, basic human rights etc. In 2021, **3** such workshops were conducted.

Social media campaigns: EG believes that social media is a great tool for creating awareness and sensitise people about LGBTIQ issues, because it provides a chance to reach larger audiences and highlight the existing issues. Particularly, in 2021, with COVID-19 restrictions in place, EG conducted most of its activities online and received an overwhelmingly positive response. In 2021, EG conducted **4** major social media campaigns namely: **Ally for Equality, Pronouns Matter, Who are We and the 16 Days of Activism.**

Ally for Equality: 100 individuals from around Sri Lanka including actors, entrepreneurs, corporate representatives, FFLGBTIQ, media personnel etc. declared "I am a proud Ally." **The campaign reached over 130,000 social media users.**

Pronouns Matter: This was the first time that Sri Lankan audiences were exposed to the nuances and etiquettes of the usage of proper pronouns. **The campaign reached over 200,000 users on Facebook.**

Who are We: Aimed to dispel some common myths and misconceptions about the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka. **It reached over 140,000 Facebook users.** Apart from the reach and the engagements, the campaign also received overwhelmingly positive feedback on social media.

16 Days of Activism: A series of animation videos and graphic posts focused on raising awareness on violence against LGBTQ women was created to mark the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Based Violence from 25th November to 10th December 2021. **Over 14,365 individuals were reached through this social media campaign on Facebook.** When monitoring the success of this campaign it was revealed that **Shanthi Maargam¹ received a significantly higher number of callers during the 16 days campaign** (25 November – 10 December) regarding issues relating to LGBTIQ individuals.

Colombo PRIDE (Virtual Celebration 2021): EG is the only organisation in Sri Lanka to hold annual PRIDE celebrations - an important event in the Sri Lankan LGBTIQ calendar. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, EG celebrated Colombo PRIDE 2021 on virtual platforms and expanded its horizons to reach a large-scale audience turning hardship into opportunities. Colombo PRIDE 2021 celebrations centered around the overarching theme of 'Power, Respect, Inclusion, Diversity, Equality. The four virtual activities organised under the Colombo PRIDE 2021 banner were the **Fashion Competition, the Short Film Competition, the Poster Competition, and the Music and Dance Competition.**

Fashion Competition: under the theme 'Show Your True Colours,' provided an opportunity for Queer individuals to express themselves with their fashion sense and embrace their authentic selves. EG received 26 entries for the fashion competition.

Short Film Competition: The theme for the short film competition was 'Love Matters' and participants were encouraged to shoot videos on mobiles, use animations, music, and other creative means to tell impactful and moving stories in the space of five minutes. EG received 63 entries in total.

¹ A registered non-governmental organisation in Sri Lanka, seeking to reduce violence in communities by healing the emotional trauma of vulnerable adolescents and youth

Poster Competition: Under the theme ‘Show Your True Colours’ the poster competition was a way for LGBTIQ community members to showcase their artistic talents in the digital media space. EG received 24 entries altogether.

Music and Dance Competition: This virtual event was organised to encourage Queer culture to flourish and grow in a safe environment. In total EG received 35 entries.

Publications (trilingual): An integral part of EG’s work is designing and publishing educational materials and research. In 2021, EG developed one booklet titled ‘Ally for Equality’ on the basis of which it ran the ‘Ally for Equality’ social media campaign as well. In 2020 EG conducted a mapping study on the LGBTIQ population of Sri Lanka, and the ensuing report was published in 2021. EG conducted a first ever research on workplace discrimination faced by LGBTIQ employees in Sri Lanka in 2020 and published the findings in 2021.

The ‘Mapping LGBTIQ Identities in Sri Lanka’, was the first of its kind in Sri Lanka and showed that **12%** of the adult population (18 - 65 years) identify as LGBTIQ.

The research findings of the workplace discrimination showed that **58%** of LGBTIQ employees stated they experienced verbal harassment and **31%** said they experienced sexual harassment at workplaces. **56%** respondents for the employers’ survey said they do not have any inclusive workplace policies for LGBTIQ employees.

Policy and advocacy initiatives

EG’s policy and advocacy work is both national and global. EG continues to work nationally with grassroots level/local organisations, LGBTIQ community members, government representatives, healthcare workers, law enforcement, media, the business community and so on. EG also consistently worked with UN treaty body reporting mechanisms, internationally renowned forums and platforms.

National Level

Collaborations with media, allies and like-minded organisations: EG always welcomes collaborations with supportive allies, with the help of which it can reach more people and can create impactful events. In 2021, for the first time in 17 years, EG partnered with other LGBTIQ rights organisations, local businesses, media, and other advocacy organisations to celebrate PRIDE on a larger scale.

Proud Partners of EG for PRIDE celebrations 2021:

Équité Sri Lanka, Jaffna Transgender Network, National Transgender Network, Queer Agenda Sri Lanka, Heart to Heart, and Sri Sathyaguna Sri Lanka Trust were collaboration partners while Selyn was our main local business partner. Yellow Dot, Pulse, and Brunch too joined hands with us as our social media, online media, and Digital media partners. Youth partners such as Young Out Here, Youth Voices Count, and Rotaract Club of Colombo East as well as other partners such as Sunila Women and Children Development Foundation (Polonnaruwa) and the lesbian virtual group Ruby Fruit Collective extended their support to make Colombo PRIDE 2021 an absolute success.

Advocacy with government representatives: Reaching out to the government and pushing for inclusive policy changes have been an integral part of EG's advocacy work. In 2021, EG met the Minister of Justice, Hon. Ali Sabry PC, and the Parliamentary Secretary to the Hon. Minister, at the Ministry office, to discuss the legal constraints and issues faced by the LGBTIQ community with law enforcement and the justice system. EQUAL GROUND presented the Minister with a copy of the Mapping Report published in March 2021.

Visible support from Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists (SLCP): In August 2021, EQUAL GROUND raised concerns on a slew of erroneous and harmful statements made by psychiatrists and mental health professionals in Sri Lanka, regarding the LGBTIQ community. The particular incident in question was the statements made by Ms. Ama Dissanayake, a mental health counselor and therapist, during a training of the Sri Lanka Police Force in Kandy, who claimed that "homosexuals" in Sri Lanka are preying on others, especially the youth, trying to make them a part of the LGBTIQ community. EG immediately wrote to the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists, the premier body of psychiatrists in Sri Lanka. Following this, the Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists made a statement supportive of the LGBTIQ community, condemning her remarks. Later on, SLCP has called on the authorities to decriminalise homosexuality in Sri Lanka and also issued a statement to amend Section 365 of the Penal Code.

Fundamental Rights case: the ultimate goal of EG is to decriminalise homosexuality and create a safe, diverse and inclusive space for the LGBTIQ community in Sri Lanka. With this vision in mind, EG has continued to work for the legal empowerment of the community. Finally, in September 2021, EG, led by Rosanna Flamer-Caldera, Executive Director, 2 trustees of EG, and 7 others filed a petition in the Court of Appeal seeking a mandate in the nature of a Writ of Prohibition against the conducting of a training programme for the police where malicious, erroneous and discriminatory remarks were made about the LGBTIQ community.



When the case was taken up in November 2021, the Court of Appeal granted EG permission to serve notice to the respondents. Subsequently, on 08 December 2021, after the writ petition was supported, the two-judge bench comprising Justices Sobhitha Rajakaruna and Dhammika Ganepola declared that there is a cause of action for the case to be taken to the merit stage and ordered Court to issue notice to the respondents in the petition. The Court of Appeal granted leave to proceed with EG's petition and ordered notice be issued to all parties.

This is the first time in Sri Lanka that a case of this nature has been filed where law enforcement has been challenged by an organisation over alleged discrimination against the LGBTIQ population. Therefore, the Court of Appeal granting leave to proceed with the case is a big win for the LGBTIQ community as it sets a positive precedent in terms of ending discrimination and marginalisation as well as police harassment of minority groups including the LGBTIQ community.

International level

At the UN level, EG has consistently submitted shadow reports to the UPR, CEDAW, ICCPR, CRC, ICESCR since 2008.

UN Treaty Body Reporting Mechanism:

Currently EG is working closely with the Center for International Human Rights (CIHR) of Northwestern Pritzker School of Law on compiling the UPR report for the upcoming session (2022).

Even though the State has failed to implement the relevant recommendations made in the previous sessions with regards to the violations based on SOGIE, EG strongly believes the UPR submissions have provided the opportunity to hold the government of Sri Lanka accountable internationally.

Networking with international forums and platforms: EG's international networking and advocacy work has assisted it to shed a light on the persistent LGBTIQ issues of Sri Lanka globally. For example: in 2021 EG worked with Stonewall where it provided its input with regard to equal workplaces, equal rights advocacy strategies and discussed how businesses and civil society organisations (CSOs) can work hand in hand to promote diversity and inclusion. From 2015 to 2021, EG's Executive chaired the Commonwealth Equality Network challenging inequality based on SOGIESC throughout the Commonwealth.

Achievements of 2021



EQU **L GROUND**

"Equality for all Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities: Human Rights for Everyone"

Tel: +94-11- 4334277/ +94-11- 4334278 / +94-11- 4334279



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+94-11-2075414