

The logo features the text "Defending Women - Defending Rights.org" in a white, cursive font against a dark red background. The background also contains faint, stylized silhouettes of people's heads and shoulders.

The Women Human Rights Defenders International Coalition (WHRD IC) is deeply concerned about the threats made to Dr. Nimalka Fernando's life during a broadcast on the state-owned radio station, the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) on 4 November.

The radio programme, Rata Yana Atha (The way country is forging ahead) played fragments of an interview that Dr Fernando gave on Hiru TV on 3rd November. The fragments were inserted into a programme called 'Stoning the Sinner Woman' and were edited in a way that portrayed Dr. Fernando in a negative light.

After the broadcast a number of callers to the radio show made abusive and defamatory statements about Dr. Fernando as well as threats to her life. Most of the callers were men and at least three of them identified themselves as people who have served in the armed forces. The defamation and threats were supported and encouraged by the hosts of the radio programme, including Mr Hudson Samarasinghe, the chairman of SLBC who was in the studio during the programme.

Dr. Nimalka Fernando is an attorney-at-law, women's rights activist and President of the International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism (IMADR) in Sri Lanka. Dr Fernando was also a convener of the alternative summit to the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), which is taking place in Sri Lanka from November 10 to 17, 2013 amid strong criticism of the country's human rights abuses.

The smear campaign and threats against Nimalka Fernando started following the interview that she gave to the Island newspaper on 25th October, where she spoke about the need for protection of sex workers from harassment and called for the abolition of abortion laws and promoting a more protective reproductive health approach in Sri Lanka. However Dr. Fernando's statements were deliberately misquoted by The Island and other media as a call for legalizing prostitution which became the center topic for debates in a few newspapers including a public debate. Later on 4th November, the state-owned radio programme, Rata Yana Atha broadcasted her voice cut and targeted Dr. Fernando with derogatory comments and threats such as "we cannot allow persons like Nimalka Fernando to live in this society"¹.

¹ <http://www.omct.org/human-rights-defenders/urgent-interventions/sri-lanka/2013/11/d22439/>

On 8th November 2013, Dr Fernando filed a complaint with the Inspector General of Police (IGP) and the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka (HRCSL). Dr. Fernando has requested that the IGP and HRCSL carry out an inquiry and investigation into defamation, which is a criminal offence in Sri Lanka. She has also requested that recordings of the SLBC radio programme be secured for proof since it will provide information of the callers and their phone numbers.

This is not the first time that Dr. Fernando was targeted by state media. In March 2012, Dr. Fernando, along with three other women human rights defenders were accused of treason and targeted in the smear campaign by state-affiliated media and government websites for participating in the 19th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, where they had been lobbying to expose human rights violations in Sri Lanka. On 23 March 2012, the Minister of Public Relations, Mr Meryn Silva, reportedly threatened Dr. Fernando and other human rights defenders with physical harm if they set foot in Sri Lanka, during a rally against the Human Rights Council Resolution on Sri Lanka. He is reported to have said, "I will publicly break the limbs of people like Sunanda Deshapriya, Nimalka Fernando and Paikiasothy Saravanamuttu"².

The WHRD IC condemns the smear campaign and threats made against Dr. Nimalka Fernando. Dr. Fernando is an active women human rights defender who works tirelessly to support human rights and democracy in Sri Lanka. Her human rights activism and strong critics against those who violate human rights as well as her continuous criticism against the government of Sri Lanka often put her at risk. Despite the risks and death threats, Dr. Fernando continues to fight for human rights and democracy in Sri Lanka.

The WHRD IC stands in solidarity with Dr. Nimalka Fernando in fighting for human rights and justice for all. We remind the Government of Sri Lanka of its duty to protect women human rights defenders from violence, retaliation and intimidation and its obligation to ensure their full enjoyment of their rights, and call for the relevant authorities to:

- take immediate actions to ensure the physical and psychological well-being of Dr. Nimalka Fernando and her family as well as of other women human rights defenders in Sri Lanka.
- carry out an immediate, thorough and transparent investigation to the smear campaign and threats and bring all those responsible to justice.
- Ensure that human rights defenders and all those working to protect human rights in Sri Lanka are able to conduct their legitimate activities without fear of violence or rights violations.

² <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/17868>