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இலங்கை மனித உரிமைகள் ஆணைக்குழு  
**Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka**

# **CODE OF CONDUCT**

**May 2026**

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1.** The Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka ('HRCSL') is an independent institution established by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka Act, No.21 of 1996 (the 'Act').
- 1.2.** The HRCSL protects and promotes human rights in Sri Lanka in accordance with the Act and with the provisions of the Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as international human rights treaties to which Sri Lanka is party.
- 1.3.** The HRCSL hereby sets forth its Code of Conduct to be observed by all members, employees, staff, representatives of associations, and any person cooperating and working with the HRCSL. This includes the HRCSL commissioners. All these persons will be referred to in this Code of Conduct as 'members and staff'.
- 1.4.** This Code of Conduct supplements the Establishments Code of the Government of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka (1999), which in the First Schedule and Second Schedule lists offences that may be committed by public officers, and in Appendix 1 contains a non-exhaustive list of offences committed by public officers, including inefficiency, incompetence, negligence, lack of integrity, improper conduct, and indiscipline.
- 1.5.** The highest standards of conduct, competence and performance are expected of all HRCSL members and staff to reflect the HRCSL's ethical principles. All members and staff have a responsibility to contribute to the goals of the HRCSL, and to ensure that their conduct is consistent with the standards of conduct outlined in this Code of Conduct.
- 1.6.** Responsibility for ethical behaviour and professional conduct lies with all members and staff at all levels, and must be taken seriously, as it forms the basis of the reputation of the HRCSL. It is, therefore, crucial that all members and staff are familiar with and understand this Code and utilise it as a guide for their conduct.
- 1.7.** This Code of Conduct does not attempt to list all the ethical challenges HRCSL members and staff may possibly encounter. It serves as a guide with respect to the conduct of members and staff with due consideration given to the possible implications of an action or decision.
- 1.8.** HRCSL members and staff must inform themselves of the provisions of this Code of Conduct. Members and staff are reminded that their conduct may have consequences for

which they are ultimately accountable. It is their responsibility to ensure that they comply with the principles outlined in this Code.

## **2. Ethical Commitments and Principles**

**2.1.** The primary functions and powers of the HRCSL are set out in sections 10 and 11 of the Act. Such functions and powers must be exercised with due consideration given to the ethical commitments and principles specified herein.

### **2.2. Ethical commitments of the HRCSL**

The HRCSL's good name and reputation is a reflection of the collective efforts to maintain ethical and professional conduct. At the organisational level, to protect its name and reputation, the HRCSL shall be committed to:

- (a) Adhering and ensuring adherence to this Code of Conduct in its entirety;
- (b) Setting an example at the most senior level through ethical behavior;
- (c) Recognising the contribution of individual members and staff to the achievement of HRCSL's objectives;
- (d) Publishing, promoting and updating this Code of Conduct, and supporting its members and staff in understanding its applicability, their responsibilities, commitments and rights, and how to obtain support if needed;
- (e) Making available and requiring that all existing HRCSL members and staff undertake training courses on ethical conduct, and briefing all new HRCSL members and staff during induction/orientation sessions;
- (f) Ensuring that all HRCSL collaborators are made aware of this Code of Conduct and their obligations, and are provided copies of this Code of Conduct;
- (g) Providing advice and guidance to individual staff on specific issues pertaining to the mandate of the HRCSL upon their request;
- (h) Providing information to enable members and staff to understand the procedures to follow and expected conduct and response when reporting wrongdoing;
- (i) Responding in a timely manner to alleged breaches of HRCSL's ethical principles;

- (j) Maintaining impartial mechanisms to resolve disputes;
- (k) Ensuring that anyone who reports a suspected wrongdoing in good faith is not subject to retaliation, and treating corroborated cases of dishonest allegations as misconduct;
- (l) Providing a fair opportunity to staff against whom an allegation is made to respond in an open and non-threatening environment; and
- (m) Taking appropriate administrative action, including disciplinary sanctions, in cases of corroborated allegations of misconduct.

### **2.3. Commitments of all members and staff**

The members and staff of the HRCSL shall, in general:

- (a) Comply and abide by human rights principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights;
- (b) Consider the interests of victims, witnesses, and respondents at all times in such a way that respects their human rights and preserves their dignity;
- (c) Uphold the highest standards of efficiency, competence and integrity;
- (d) Act in an independent manner, and exercise their functions and powers in accordance with their mandate, through a professional, impartial assessment of facts based on internationally recognised human rights standards, and free from any kind of extraneous influence, pressure, threat or interference, either direct or indirect, on the part of any party, whether stakeholder or not, for any reason whatsoever, the notion of independence being linked to the status of such members and staff, and to their freedom to assess the human rights questions that they are called upon to examine under the HRCSL's mandate;
- (e) Focus exclusively on the implementation of the HRCSL's mandate, constantly keeping in mind the fundamental obligations of truthfulness, loyalty and independence pertaining to the HRCSL's mandate;
- (f) Neither seek nor accept instructions from any individual, organisation or pressure group whatsoever when exercising statutory functions and powers;

- (g) Be aware of the importance of their duties and responsibilities, taking the particular nature of the HRCSL's mandate into consideration and behaving in such a way as to maintain and reinforce trust;
- (h) Maintain the highest standards of transparency in their financial and administrative systems, decision-making mechanisms, and the HRCSL's finances;
- (i) Seek guidance from commissioners, managers, or supervisors; and
- (j) Report, without delay, suspected wrongdoing.

#### **2.4. Commitments of commissioners, managers, and supervisors**

HRCSL members and/or staff in supervisory positions and commissioners play an important role in promoting a workplace culture that upholds the HRCSL's ethical principles, and in ensuring a safe and healthy work environment.

They shall take seriously their obligations towards subordinate staff, including by not retaliating against staff who may have reported wrongdoing in good faith or collaborated with an authorised audit or investigation.

HRCSL commissioners, managers and supervisors shall lead by example, and shall:

- (a) At all times abide by the Human Rights Commission of Sri Lanka, Act No. 21 of 1996 and the Paris Principles relating to the Status of National Institutions;
- (b) Respect the principles of equality, non-discrimination, and fairness;
- (c) Serve as models of integrity, and act in accordance with human rights standards;
- (d) Take responsibility for their actions and ensure that their team's objectives are reached;
- (e) Promote and document fair and factual assessments of the performance of the persons under their supervision;
- (f) Make decisions based on fair and factual assessments, regardless of internal or external pressures;

- (g) Be familiar with and understand this Code of Conduct so as to provide guidance to and advise their staff on their rights, responsibilities and obligations;
- (h) Encourage an ongoing dialogue surrounding ethical conduct issues and allowing members and staff to express their concerns and needs;
- (i) Encourage the reporting of instances of wrongdoing such as fraud, negligence, or disrespectful behaviour, and immediately address misconduct once reported or observed;
- (j) Support staff members who raise an ethical concern, and ensure that such staff receive protection against retaliation;
- (k) Foster a healthy team atmosphere and environment based on mutual trust;
- (l) Encourage staff to further their understanding of ethical and professional conduct, including punctuality;
- (m) Care about the wellbeing of staff and listen to staff effectively without prejudice.

## **2.5. No disrespect**

- (a) Disrespectful behaviour that lacks the minimum level of courtesy and dignity in interaction with others, or amounts to inappropriate conduct, comments, or displays that insult, denigrate, disparage, or humiliate someone or depreciate their value, amounts to a breach of the HRCSL's ethical principles. Such breach may lead to disciplinary sanctions.
- (b) Disrespect may also include general statements or attitudes regarding the diversity of human beings and their worth. It also includes disrespect for people's work, or for the HRCSL as an organisation, or the HRCSL's mandate and objectives.

## **2.6. No discrimination and no favouritism**

- (a) The HRCSL shall prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex, gender, race, religion or belief, nationality, ethnic or social origin, age, sexual orientation, marital status, disability or other aspects of personal status. Discrimination includes actions, carried out either directly or indirectly, based on distinctions or prejudice that have the purpose or effect of treating individuals or groups unfairly or unjustly. It may include a series of events or a one-time incident.

- (b) HRCSL members and staff are required to demonstrate respect for diversity. The ethical principles of the HRCSL prevail over their own personal origins, beliefs, opinions, preferences, or habits at all times. Similarly, HRCSL members and staff shall not favour certain groups over others based on a reflection of their personal status or inclinations, particularly in terms of recruitment or hiring of individuals to collaborate with the HRCSL.

## **2.7. No abuse of authority or power**

- (a) The abuse of authority or power is the improper use of a position of influence, power, or authority by an individual towards others. Such abuse is particularly serious when the alleged offender uses his or her influence, power, or authority to negatively influence the career or employment conditions (including, but not limited to, appointment, assignment, contract renewal, performance evaluation or promotion) of other individuals.
- (b) Abuse of authority can include a one-time incident or a series of incidents. It may also consist of conduct that creates a hostile or offensive work environment, which includes, but is not limited to, the use of intimidation, threats, blackmail, or coercion.

## **2.8. No harassment**

- (a) Harassment is unwanted behaviour directed at another identified person, which has the purpose or effect of violating an individual's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment for that person. It interferes with the recipient's ability to carry out their functions, and often creates an intimidating or hostile work environment.
- (b) Harassment may:
  - (i) Involve a single incident, or continuous, pervasive treatment;
  - (ii) Occur between a group and an individual;
  - (iii) Take the form of words, gestures, or other actions that alarm, threaten, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, or cause personal humiliation, embarrassment or emotional distress to another person;
  - (iv) Take place face to face, or through written communications, email, phone, and supervision methods; and
  - (v) Take the form of bullying, which is characterised by the underlying perception of an imbalance of power, and by the repeated or habitual use of force, physical and/or emotional aggression or coercion to intimidate or dominate others.

## **2.9. No sexual harassment, exploitation, or abuse**

- (a) Sexual harassment is a particularly severe form of harassment. Sexual harassment is understood as any unwelcome, unsolicited, and unreciprocated, sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature (including pornography and sexual remarks) that has or that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to offend, humiliate, or intimidate another person.
- (b) Sexual harassment can involve a series of incidents or a one-time incident. It may occur between persons of different or same sex and may extend to outside of working hours and outside of the workplace.
- (c) Sexual exploitation means any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially, or politically from the sexual exploitation of another. The term ‘sexual abuse’ refers to the actual or threatened physical intrusion of a sexual nature, whether by force or under unequal or coercive conditions.’<sup>1</sup>
- (d) Sexual exploitation and abuse violate universally recognised international legal norms and standards, and the HRCSL considers such acts as serious misconduct that may constitute grounds for disciplinary measures, including summary dismissal and criminal prosecution.

## **2.10. Child protection**

- (a) According to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a ‘child’ is defined as any person under the age of eighteen years. Section 5(2) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Act, No. 56 of 2007 provides: ‘In all matters concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interest of the child shall be of paramount importance.’
- (a) The HRCSL accordingly has a fundamental statutory obligation to ensure the safety and well-being of children. In all decisions and actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration. This duty of care includes protecting children from intentional and unintentional harm.

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, ‘Glossary’ in *Conduct in Field Missions*, <https://conduct.unmissions.org/glossary>.

## **2.11. Gender equality**

- (a) The HRCSL is committed to gender equality and to the fair treatment of persons of all genders, according to their respective needs.
- (b) Gender equality means that the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of persons of all genders are considered, valued, and favoured equally, and that they are treated equally in respect of their rights, responsibilities and opportunities.
- (c) Substantive gender equality may also include treatment that is different but considered necessary to enable equal participation of persons of all genders in terms of rights, benefits, obligations, and professional opportunities.

## **2.12. Conduct of research**

HRCSL is committed to research integrity, and promotes high quality research that is ethical, expert-reviewed, efficient, accessible, transparent, carefully monitored, and rigorously evaluated.

# **3. Working Protocols**

## **3.1. Diligence**

The members and staff of the HRCSL shall:

- (a) Always seek to establish the facts, based on objective, reliable information emanating from relevant credible sources that they have duly cross-checked to the best extent possible;
- (b) Follow standard operating procedures that the Board of the HRCSL may approve from time to time;
- (c) Take into account in a comprehensive and timely manner, all information pertaining to the HRCSL's mandate; and
- (d) Evaluate all information in the light of internationally recognised human rights standards and of international conventions to which Sri Lanka is a party.

### **3.2. Sources of information**

In their information-gathering activities the members and staff of the HRCSL shall:

- (a) Be guided by the principles of accessibility, effectiveness, efficiency, impartiality and openness;
- (b) Preserve the confidentiality of sources of testimonies if their disclosure could cause harm to individuals involved; and
- (c) Rely on objective and dependable facts based on evidentiary standards that are appropriate to the non-judicial character of the reports and conclusions they are called upon to formulate.

### **3.3. Fair and transparent procurement**

- (a) The overall guiding objective for all HRCSL procurement is to obtain the best value for money, i.e., the most advantageous bid based on a combination of factors related to price, quality, timely delivery, environmental performance, and compliance with social and labour norms.
- (b) To ensure that best value for money is obtained, the process of soliciting offers and selecting a contractor shall:
  - (i) Encourage competition;
  - (ii) Ensure impartial and comprehensive evaluation of proposals; and
  - (iii) Ensure selection of the offer that is the most practical and expected to best meet the HRCSL's requirements stated in the request for proposals or invitation.

### **3.4. Use of official time and office property**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff are responsible for ensuring that the resources of the HRCSL, including computers, telephone equipment and vehicles, are used for official business. Members and staff shall not engage in extraneous activities when required to focus on official activities of the HRCSL.
- (b) Any personal use of office equipment, in particular Internet, e-mail, and telephone, shall be kept to a minimum, and shall not conflict with the interests of the HRCSL.

### **3.5. Accuracy of records**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff shall record all activities and prepare accurate and complete records, in accordance with established procedures.
- (b) HRCSL members and staff shall not inaccurately record time and date, provide false or intentionally misleading information, submit false or misleading claims, or falsify any official HRCSL documents.

### **3.6. Use of information, publications, and media**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff have a responsibility to protect the security of any confidential information provided to or generated by the HRCSL. To avoid any unauthorised disclosure, members and staff must exercise caution in their handling of confidential information.
- (b) HRCSL members and staff must not use information known to them because of their official duties for their private advantage. Members and staff who become aware of other members and staff members' personal information, due to their functions, have a duty to respect their privacy and handle personal data with care and discretion.

### **3.7. Intellectual property and publications**

- (a) All intellectual property rights in any work produced or developed by HRCSL members or staff as part of their official duties shall remain the property of the HRCSL.
- (b) The HRCSL has the right to use such work in any manner it deems appropriate, including by choosing to publish or not to publish the work, to make changes to the work or to use the work in a different way than originally intended.

## **4. Personal Conduct**

- 4.1.** The private lives of HRCSL members and staff are their own concern. However, there may be situations where their personal conduct and activities outside the workplace, even if unrelated to official duties, may reflect upon the HRCSL. HRCSL members and staff should accordingly be aware of the potential impact of their private behaviour upon the image and interests of the HRCSL and their own reputation and are urged to act in a manner that is consistent with the HRCSL's ethical commitments and principles.

#### **4.2. Respect for national laws**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff are required to observe local laws at all times, and to avoid any action that could be perceived as an abuse of the privileges and immunities conferred on HRCSL members and staff.
- (b) HRCSL members and staff shall:
  - 1) Meet their private legal obligations;
  - 2) Pay particular attention to and comply with relevant laws and standards governing bank accounts, currency dealings, taxes, purchase and disposal of motor vehicles; and traffic violations, import/export and employment of domestic employees.

#### **4.3. Violence in the workplace, and drug and alcohol use**

- (a) The HRCSL strives to provide a safe work environment for all its members and staff and does not tolerate any level of violence or threat of violence in any form, whether committed on office premises or elsewhere. Any violence or threat of violence shall be cause for disciplinary action.
- (b) The HRCSL is a workplace that aims to be free from illegal drugs and alcohol.
- (c) HRCSL members and staff are expected to exercise good judgement and not engage in any behaviour that may adversely affect performance or may be harmful to them or fellow colleagues.
- (d) The Head Office and Regional Offices of the HRCSL should be maintained as a zone free from violence, alcohol, and drugs.

#### **4.4. Personal relationships in the workplace**

The HRCSL recognises that a personal or intimate relationship may exist or develop between two people employed by the HRCSL. The fact that a relative, spouse or significant other or close friend is working at HRCSL does not automatically mean there is a conflict of interest. However, personal and intimate relationships between colleagues should not interfere with work or create an environment where other colleagues might feel uncomfortable or professionally disadvantaged because of the relationship.

#### **4.5. Domestic abuse and intimate partner violence**

- (a) Domestic abuse and violence are not private concerns. They are actions contrary to the HRCSL's ethical principles, and adversely affect the image and interest of the HRCSL and undermine its commitment to a respectful and healthy environment.
- (b) The HRCSL views domestic abuse and violence seriously and will not tolerate such conduct by its members and staff.
- (c) Domestic abuse and violence occurring between family or household members, or between persons involved in a significant relationship, include but is not limited to:
  - (i) Statements or actions that reasonably could be perceived as demonstrating an intent to cause physical or emotional harm to another (regardless of gender);
  - (ii) Any act or threat of physical or sexual aggression that causes physical harm to another person;
  - (iii) Sexual abuse;
  - (iv) Intimidation or verbal harassment, emotional and verbal abuse, or threats; and
  - (v) Destroying property.

#### **4.6. Conflict of interest**

- (a) A conflict of interest occurs when private interests interfere, or appear to interfere, with the ability of an HRCSL member or staff member to act impartially, to discharge their duties and functions, and to regulate their conduct with respect to the interests and mandate of the HRCSL.
- (b) A conflict of interest does not mean that the individual involved is actually conflicted; the perception of a conflict of interest alone may create a negative image. Promptly disclosing and managing the conflict is essential to avoiding potentially damaging consequences.
- (c) In addition to the eligibility requirements of section 3(1) of the Act, HRCSL members may not hold incompatible offices such as head or member of a ministry, member of parliament, member of a local authority or provincial council, a leadership position in a political party, or member of the Constitutional Council.
- (d) HRCSL members should not run as candidates in parliamentary, provincial council, or local authority elections and should not hold any political position prior to the passage of one year after the end of their tenure.

#### **4.7. Relations with local government and political activity**

- (a) Subject to the provisions of the Act, HRCSL members and staff must not seek or obtain, under any circumstances, instructions, or assistance from any government official or from any other authority external to HRCSL, particularly in an attempt to:
  - (i) Interfere with the internal deliberations or policy direction of the HRCSL;
  - (ii) Change a favourable or unfavourable action or decision; or
  - (iii) Obtain a promotion, benefit, or any other type of advantage.
  
- (b) HRCSL members and staff shall refrain from the glorification of violence, or the advocacy of hatred against specific groups of society on the basis of their ethnicity, caste, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, political opinion, or any similar basis.

#### **4.8. Relations with nongovernmental actors**

In addition to working with state institutions, the HRCSL also engages nongovernmental actors, i.e., nongovernmental organisations, private sector entities, philanthropic foundations, and academic institutions. In developing relationships with such nongovernmental actors, the HRCSL's integrity, independence, credibility, and reputation must be ensured at all times.

#### **4.9. The freedom of association**

HRCSL members and staff shall have the right to associate themselves together in a formal organisation for the purpose of developing staff activities and making proposals and representations to HRCSL concerning policy and conditions of service.

HRCSL members and staff shall not be active members of any political group or political party locally, regionally or internationally. If they were already part of a group or party before joining the HRCSL, they should freeze their membership during the length of their association with the HRCSL.

#### **4.10. Acceptance of gifts, decorations, and honours**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff should never solicit gifts or favours in connection with their official duties. Gifts that are offered should not be accepted if such gifts would give the appearance of impropriety or bias or would appear to call into question the independence and reputation of the HRCSL.

- (b) A symbolic gift may be accepted when it could cause embarrassment to refuse it, particularly where the gift is inexpensive and custom made.

#### **4.11. Media relations and public statements**

- (a) HRCSL members and staff shall bear in mind the need to ensure that their personal political opinions are without prejudice to the execution of their duties and base their conclusions and recommendations on objective assessments of human rights situations.
- (b) HRCSL members or staff speaking to the media on subjects within their area of responsibility and expertise should bear in mind that they speak for the HRCSL, and not as an individual, an academic or an independent expert in their field.
- (c) The HRCSL frequently deals with sensitive and confidential information that impacts the rights of victims, witnesses, and respondents. Staff of the HRCSL shall not provide any information pertaining to the HRCSL to the media without consulting the Board of the HRCSL.
- (d) Only the Chairperson of the HRCSL and the HRCSL's Media Spokesperson should engage the media. Any other media engagement including statements to the media shall require the prior approval of the Chairperson.

#### **4.12. Post-membership and employment obligations**

Upon separating from membership or service at the HRCSL, a member or staff's obligation to maintain discretion and confidentiality with regard to official matters does not cease. In particular, members and staff shall not communicate to any person any information known by them by reason of their former position, nor shall they in any way use such information to their private advantage.

#### **4.13. Emails and social media**

- (a) Emails and social media (including, for example, blogs, and social media platforms) should be used to facilitate engagement and enable interactive communication and collaboration.

- (b) Inappropriate use of emailing and social media both privately and professionally exposes the HRCSL to risks, including but not limited to:
  - (i) Spreading disinformation;
  - (ii) Infringing on the intellectual property of others; and
  - (iii) Compromising the HRCSL's reputation, independence, and credibility.
  
- (c) HRCSL members and staff shall:
  - (i) Anticipate the potential impact that their emails or social media engagement could have on the HRCSL's objectives;
  - (ii) Refrain from causing offense or revealing confidential, unpublished, or embargoed information via email or social media; and
  - (iii) Refrain from misleading or deceiving HRCSL colleagues, partners and the wider public in any way.