



A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK RELATED TO RAGGING IN SRI LANKA: CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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Ragging, a form of systemic harassment and abuse within higher educational institutions all over the world, has evolved into a serious social and legal concern. Disguised in the form of familiarisation of new entrants, the severe forms of ragging often involve physical and psychological harm to students, often causing human rights violations to the victim. Despite the wide range of legislative, institutional, and administrative efforts taken by the governments and authorities to eradicate the violent forms of ragging, the practices are still prevalent in many countries, and Sri Lanka is not an exception. This underscores the need for a comprehensive examination of the legal framework related to ragging in Sri Lanka. The main objective of this research is to critically analyse the legal framework related to ragging in Sri Lanka to identify the challenging gaps in the legal framework and enforcement mechanisms and provide recommendations to strengthen the law. Accordingly, the study explores the scope, effectiveness, gaps, and human rights compatibility of Sri Lanka's legal framework on ragging. Additionally, the study focuses on the practical implications of this legislation on individuals and society. This study focuses on the research question of whether prevailing laws related to ragging are effective in combating ragging in Sri Lanka. This research adopts a doctrinal legal research methodology relying on primary sources, including the Prohibition of Ragging Act No. 20 of 1998, the 1978 Constitution, case laws, and international legal instruments, and secondary sources encompassing books and journal articles. Results revealed that while Sri Lanka has a specific legal instrument to address ragging, it remains largely ineffective due to weak enforcement, inadequate victim protection, and the lack of institutional responsiveness. Therefore, the study recommends a multidimensional approach to reform that includes legal amendments, awareness programmes, capacity building for institutional authorities, and the creation of safe and confidential reporting mechanisms. Furthermore, this research contributes to the ongoing legal and policy discussions by offering a human rights-based analysis of ragging and practical reforms to protect students and uphold the rule of law in educational institutions.

Keywords: ragging, law, human rights, university, prohibition of ragging act

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INTRODUCTION

Ragging is a persistent social and legal issue in Sri Lanka, especially within state higher educational institutions, where it has evolved from being an initiation ritual into a practice marked by harassment, intimidation, and abuse. Characterised by a way of ‘familiarization’ and an ‘initiation into the real world’ for young University students, it is a form of systematic abuse and a grave human rights violation. Further, it is a violation of the right to education and right to be free from torture, cruel, inhumane, and degrading treatments enshrined in the fundamental rights chapter of the Sri Lankan Constitution. Regrettably, ragging has evolved into a socially, culturally, and perhaps legally unacceptable practice in various universities. Numerous students have been caught by university authorities and remanded after being arrested for subjecting freshers to torture. This has become an annual ritual. It has caused fatalities over the years and has also increased suicide risks among the student population. Ragging at Universities continues to make news at regular intervals in Sri Lanka. Despite the existence of laws related to the prohibition of ragging for over two decades, ragging continues to persist. It is appropriate to mention a few emblematic barbaric cases, including a recent incident in 2025 of the tragic suicide of Dilshan Maduranga at Sabaragamuwa University. Further, 2022-2023 incidents at the University of Peradeniya, the assault on a freshman at the University of Ruhuna in 2023, and the Kelaniya University hostel-related ragging cases in early 2024 underscore the ongoing nature of this issue in Sri Lanka, exposing the ineffectiveness of both legal and institutional mechanisms. These cases have reignited public discourse surrounding the adequacy of the legal framework and its compatibility with the fundamental rights of students, such as the right to dignity, education, equality, and freedom from cruel or degrading treatment. Former Higher Education Minister, also without specifying the duration, said in Parliament in March 2019, that 1987 students had left Universities due to inhuman ragging in the year 2019. This situation continues every year. Sri Lanka, as a welfare State, has taken legislative, administrative, and institutional measures to prevent ragging in educational institutions and to protect victims of ragging. Ragging was criminalized under the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998. Supplementary regulations were issued through UGC Circulars, outlining prohibited activities and disciplinary measures. Adversely, ragging is still perceived by many senior students. Despite the government’s ban on ragging and imposing rigid punishments, it is still found that a significant number of senior students continue to rag freshers and justify it. After hundreds of unfortunate incidents, including murders and suicides by the students over the ragging, a selection of the University students who are the cream of the student community have not yet realized that the temptation for ragging is nothing other than a psychopathic



condition. In this context, it is significant to critically evaluate the effectiveness of legal interventions for combating ragging in Sri Lankan Universities. This research undertakes a critical legal analysis of the existing anti-ragging legal framework in Sri Lanka and examines its compatibility with constitutional and international human rights standards, while identifying practical and legal reforms needed to address the ongoing issue of ragging in universities.

Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to critically analyze the legal framework related to ragging in Sri Lanka, with special emphasis on evaluating the legal interventions existing to curb ragging in Universities in Sri Lanka, to evaluate the extent to which the existing legal interventions have succeeded in its objectives, identifying legal and institutional gaps that allow ragging to persist despite criminalization and proposing practical recommendations to enhance the legal, policy, and institutional response to ragging in Sri Lanka.

Hypothesis

It is postulated that the current legal framework on ragging in Sri Lanka, while providing a statutory basis for punishment, fails to adequately protect students' fundamental rights due to weak enforcement, insufficient victim protection mechanisms, and a lack of institutional responsiveness. This hypothesis is based on the notion that without a comprehensive, rights-based, and enforceable anti-ragging strategy, fundamental liberties, including the right to education, personal security, equality before the law, and protection from inhuman or degrading treatment, will continue to be violated within educational institutions. Additionally, when legal interventions are adequately effective, the tendency of occurrence of incidents of ragging in universities will be less.

Research Questions

To achieve the objectives and test the hypothesis, this research addresses the following key research questions:

What are the prevailing laws related to ragging, and how have they been implemented in practice?

What are the practical and legal challenges in enforcing the anti-ragging framework?

What reforms are necessary to ensure the effectiveness, responsiveness, and human rights compatibility of Sri Lanka's anti-ragging legal regime?

METHODOLOGY

In terms of methodology, this paper strictly adopts a doctrinal legal research methodology comprising an amalgamation of primary sources and secondary sources to investigate the effectiveness and human rights compatibility of the legal framework related to ragging in Sri Lanka. Doctrinal research methodology, which is a systematic analysis and interpretation of legal principles, statutes, doctrines, and jurisprudence relevant to the research topic, is employed since this study proceeds to engage in a critical analysis of the laws related to the prohibition of ragging and the



constitutional safeguards afforded to students. Primary information sources include the Prohibition of Ragging Act No. 20 of 1998, the 1978 Constitution, case laws, and international legal instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). Besides, secondary information sources encompassing related local and foreign books, newspapers, magazines, and credible online resources are utilized to supply additional insight and context. Accordingly, this research adopts critical examination and evaluation of prevailing doctrinal sources, comprising a desk-based research method to understand and analyze the laws related to the current research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The critical analysis of the Sri Lankan legal framework on ragging revealed substantial gaps in its capacity to prevent, address, and eradicate ragging from higher education institutions. Despite the enactment of the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998, along with related constitutional and administrative measures, incidents of ragging continue to surface in universities, highlighting weaknesses in implementation, enforcement, and institutional accountability. This study builds on existing literature on legal interventions for combating ragging in Sri Lankan universities, including Zulfi, A. R. (2020), who explored the legal interventions for combating ragging in Sri Lankan universities, and Neluwapathirana (2022), who comparatively analysed the anti-ragging legislation in the higher education system of Sri Lanka with the Indian legal framework. Additionally, Wickramasinghe et al., (2022) stress the long-term mental health implications for victims and severe adverse consequences increased university dropouts and suicide, emphasizing the necessity for a human rights-based approach in tackling the issue.

In response to the rising number of incidents and public outrage, various legislative, institutional, and administrative efforts have been taken by the governments and authorities to eradicate the violent forms of ragging. Sri Lankan legislature enacted the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998 (The Anti-Ragging Act), aiming to criminalize ragging and ensure student safety (Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act, No. 20 of 1998). The Act attempts to deter violent and degrading acts in educational settings by establishing criminal liability for perpetrators and providing a legal basis for institutional intervention. While the Act serves as an important legislative response, its practical impact remains questionable, particularly in the context of enforcement, victim protection, and institutional accountability. Results reveal a significant disconnect between legislative intent and practical outcomes. Several activities associated with ragging have been prohibited, with corresponding punishments outlined in the University Grants Commission (UGC) Circular Nos. 919, dated 15.01.2010, and 946, dated 10.02.2011, which provide Common Guidelines on Student Discipline. In addition, the UGC has established a special office, the Center for Gender Equity and Equality, with powers to deal with ragging-related complaints and to aid students who have been victims of ragging in universities and other Higher Educational Institutions HEIs. The UGC operates a



hotline and has established a complaint portal at the UGC to report ragging threats or harassment.

Further, the Ministry of Higher Education has introduced a mobile application (App) specifically designed for State University students to immediately notify authorities of ragging incidents, thereby contributing to efforts aimed at eradicating ragging from universities. Both students and staff members can report such incidents through the App. Ragging has become a national cost. Moreover, recognising the broader socio-economic implications of ragging, in 2017, the Government of Sri Lanka allocated 10 million rupees for the elimination of ragging in Sri Lankan Universities (Mohamed Zulfi, 2020). Previous academic and policy literature has also explored the intersection of student safety and legal protection in Sri Lanka and South Asia. Wickramaratne (2006) highlights the constitutional guarantee under Article 11 of the 1978 Constitution, which assures freedom from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment. Ragging, when violent or humiliating, can constitute a violation of this right. Gunatilaka (2019) further discusses the reluctance of victims to report due to institutional culture and peer pressure, thus contributing to the cycle of silence and impunity. The role of university administration has also come under scrutiny, with several scholars arguing that the lack of proactive monitoring, weak reporting systems, and political interference has further weakened the legal regime (Wickramasinghe et al., 2022).

Critical analysis of the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act, No. 20 of 1998, reveals several critical weaknesses that undermine its effectiveness. The Act lacks a clear and comprehensive definition of ragging that encompasses modern dimensions such as psychological, emotional, and digital abuse. While Section 2 defines ragging primarily in terms of physical or mental harassment, it fails to address emerging forms like cyber-ragging, online humiliation, and institutional coercion. Although the Act prescribes severe punishments for offences including sexual harassment and grievous hurt (Section 2(2)), wrongful restraint and confinement (Sections 4–6), and property damage (Section 7(2)), it is notably deficient in providing complementary legal safeguards for victims. There are no express provisions to ensure access to psychosocial support, legal aid, or academic accommodation, nor does the Act mandate the creation of internal institutional mechanisms such as inquiry panels or complaint units. While Section 8 empowers courts to expel or dismiss convicted students or staff, there is no legal duty placed on institutions to maintain independent investigations or transparently report ragging cases. Furthermore, despite all offences being deemed cognizable under Section 11, enforcement is weak due to poor coordination among universities, police, and the legal system. Institutions frequently suppress complaints to protect their reputation, resulting in widespread underreporting and non-prosecution. The lack of a central oversight body and the absence of any statutory obligation to implement preventive education or awareness programs further contribute to the Act's limited practical impact. The legal framework also does not provide robust protection mechanisms for victims. Although the Act prescribes criminal sanctions, it falls short in offering institutional support such as access to legal aid, psychological counselling, and academic safeguards for victims. This legal



vacuum often leads to secondary victimisation, deterring students from seeking justice. Moreover, the absence of a national anti-ragging policy or oversight body has led to inconsistent enforcement across institutions. By contrast, India's anti-ragging regime—governed by UGC Regulations of 2009—mandates strict institutional compliance, anonymous complaint systems, and monitoring through a central authority, offering a comparative model worth adopting in Sri Lanka (Neluwapathirana, 2022).

Research findings further emphasize that the persistence of ragging is not solely a legal issue but is deeply rooted in institutional culture, political affiliations within student bodies, and societal attitudes that trivialise or romanticise it (Wickramasinghe et al., 2022). Without strong enforcement mechanisms and a shift in institutional ethos, legal reforms alone are unlikely to succeed. Stakeholders, including university officials, student unions, and law enforcement, often lack adequate training on handling ragging cases in a manner that protects the rights and dignity of the victim. Moreover, the compatibility of the current legal framework with human rights obligations is questionable. Although Sri Lanka is a party to international instruments such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Convention Against Torture (CAT), the application of domestic anti-ragging laws frequently fails to uphold the fundamental rights enshrined in the 1978 Constitution—namely, the rights to equality, education, personal liberty, and protection from degrading treatment. Cases such as the tragic suicide of Dilshan Maduranga and recent violent incidents across several universities reflect the systemic failure of legal and institutional safeguards. Cultural norms that portray ragging as a traditional initiation further perpetuate this abusive cycle, making it difficult for reforms to take root without significant attitudinal shifts. The lack of a unified reporting mechanism, inconsistent disciplinary measures, and insufficient psychosocial support for victims compound these challenges.

A series of judicial interventions by the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka has recently reinforced the constitutional and institutional obligations to eradicate ragging in state universities. The Supreme Court of Sri Lanka pronounced a recent landmark judgment relating to ragging on July 9, 2025, in SC/FR/216/2020, arising from a case involving a severe injury caused by ragging in 2020, in which the Court issued comprehensive orders on 9 July 2025 to strengthen protections against ragging in public universities. A three-judge bench directed the University Grants Commission (UGC) to fully implement existing anti-ragging guidelines and instructed the Minister of Education and Higher Education to provide universities with the necessary funding, technical resources, and facilities to ensure effective enforcement. The Court mandated that the UGC, all public universities, the Ministry of Education, and the Police submit periodic progress reports, with the next review scheduled for 2026. These orders took the form of legally binding Guidelines to Combat Ragging in Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), requiring every HEI to establish a multi-stakeholder Victim Support Committee with a 24/7 hotline, rapid response to complaints, safe reporting spaces, monitoring of police investigations, pro bono legal aid, medical and psychological support, and confidentiality safeguards. Universities must strengthen internal disciplinary mechanisms in compliance with UGC Circular



No. 946, enforce no-contact orders during inquiries, and provide counselling for both victims and accused students. Additional directives cover campus safety measures such as adequate staffing, CCTV, access control, substance abuse prevention, compulsory foundation and refresher courses on ragging laws and mental health, prioritised hostel accommodation for first-year students, cyber-ragging monitoring, reforms to student unions, leadership and mentorship programmes, and the formation of Anti-Ragging Committees. The UGC was tasked with creating a central Victim Support Committee, a multi-disciplinary task force, and a Victim Support Fund, while all HEIs must enact by-laws to give effect to the Guidelines, disseminate them to all students, and report compliance every six months. The Court further directed the Police to consult the Attorney General in all ragging-related investigations and emphasised disciplinary action against non-compliant officials, establishing a rights-based, enforceable framework that prevails over inconsistent existing mechanisms. Similarly, in SC/FR/101/2025, a Fundamental Rights petition was filed by the Bar Association of Sri Lanka (BASL) following the suicide of a 23-year-old second-year student of the Faculty of Technology, Sabaragamuwa University, who had allegedly been subjected to sustained ragging by senior students. The petition records that the student was subjected to persistent harassment, intimidation, and humiliation, culminating in a particularly degrading incident on 26 April 2025, after which he died by suicide. The petition alleged that the failure of the Sabaragamuwa University authorities, the University Grants Commission (UGC), the Sri Lanka Police, and other relevant bodies to enforce anti-ragging laws and to ensure adequate protection for students amounted to a violation of Articles 11 and 12(1) of the Constitution, which guarantee the right to be free from torture and the right to equality before the law. It was further contended that such institutional inaction perpetuated a culture of impunity, whereby perpetrators of ragging were able to operate without accountability, and victims were denied access to effective remedies and protection. The BASL sought urgent judicial intervention to hold responsible officials and institutions accountable, ensure the strict enforcement of anti-ragging legislation and university regulations, implement binding institutional guidelines to enhance student safety, and reaffirm the right of all students to pursue their education in an environment that is safe and dignified. The petition thereby extended beyond securing redress for the individual tragedy, seeking to address the systemic and structural deficiencies within higher educational institutions that facilitate the continuation of ragging, and to advocate for comprehensive and sustainable reforms aimed at prevention. These rulings collectively signify a substantive shift towards a rights-based, enforceable legal framework to address ragging, which closely aligns with the policy and legal reforms proposed in this research.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The current legal framework related to ragging in Sri Lanka, particularly the Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act No. 20 of 1998, presents significant gaps when evaluated within the broader context of constitutional protections and international human rights obligations. A critical legal analysis reveals that, despite the Act's aim to deter violence and protect students, it remains largely ineffective due to ambiguous definitions, weak



enforcement, insufficient victim protection, and a lack of institutional accountability. The continuation of ragging, exemplified by high-profile incidents such as the 2024 suicide of Dilshan Maduranga and recurring assaults in several state universities, underscores the systemic shortcomings of the current regime. The findings of this research demonstrate that the legal framework, in both theory and practice, is incompatible with the fundamental rights framework enshrined in the 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka, particularly under Articles 11, 12, and 13, and falls short of the standards set by international instruments such as the ICCPR and CAT. The failure to address psychological abuse, cyber-ragging, and cultural coercion within the law reflects its conceptual limitations. Therefore, urgent legal, institutional, and policy-level reforms are necessary to ensure that the anti-ragging legislation aligns with both domestic and international human rights standards.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this analysis, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen Sri Lanka's legal and institutional response to ragging. The Prohibition of Ragging Act should be amended to provide a comprehensive, updated definition of ragging that explicitly includes modern abuses such as psychological harassment, cyber-ragging, and cultural coercion, with Section 2 revised to mandate institutional cooperation with law enforcement and compulsory reporting by university authorities. Section 17 should be expanded to cover emerging forms of ragging and incorporate provisions for victim rehabilitation and academic support. A new statutory provision must require the establishment of Independent Anti-Ragging Committees in all higher education institutions, vested with investigative and disciplinary powers. Victim-centered safeguards should be embedded as statutory rights, guaranteeing psychosocial support, legal aid, protection from retaliation, and the right to continue education without prejudice. Institutional reform should include the creation of a National Anti-Ragging Regulatory Authority to oversee compliance, collect data, and promote uniform enforcement, thereby addressing underreporting and systemic failures. Preventive legal measures must mandate compulsory awareness programs, orientation modules, and training for university staff and student unions to dismantle the cultural normalization of ragging and foster a rights-based campus environment. Technological solutions, such as expanding anonymous digital reporting tools and integrating them with university and University Grants Commission complaint systems, should be enhanced to enable timely interventions and reliable data collection. Finally, the entire legal framework should be harmonized with international human rights standards, including the ICCPR, CAT, and UDHR to ensure robust protection of students' rights to dignity, equality, and freedom from degrading treatment.

In conclusion, protecting the fundamental rights of university students requires urgent reform of the Prohibition of Ragging Act and associated institutional mechanisms. By adopting the above recommendations, Sri Lanka can bridge the gap between legislative intent and enforcement reality, demonstrating a clear commitment to uphold human rights and ensure safe, inclusive, and respectful learning environments in higher education institutions.



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