

Organising for a Violence-Free World of Work

An impact report on Abhimana Workers Union, 2023–2026

Abhimana Workers Union is a collective of LGBTIQ+ workers who are organising for dignity, safety and fair treatment at work. Since 2023, its members have built a space where workers can share problems, seek support and act together. The collective is still learning how to run a union and put its procedures into practice. At the same time, its growth over three years shows a strong ability to organise.

Abhimana now has 167 members and six district committees. Its members work in both formal and informal jobs, including salon work, sex work, garment work, farming, daily wage work, self-employment and online work. Many do not share one workplace or employer. This makes it harder to organise in the ways that traditional workplace unions do, but it also shows why a collective that reaches across different kinds of work is needed.

What has changed for workers

Workers have a place to turn when they face harm. Abhimana receives complaints about exclusion, stigma, harassment and discrimination based on gender. Members help workers find organisations that can provide labour-related support, including allied unions and civil society organisations. They also make referrals for people experiencing violence or harassment and accompany members to the police when they need assistance. This practical support has become a major part of Abhimana's work.

Members have supported one another through urgent needs. After Cyclone Ditwah, Abhimana provided financial assistance to 74 affected LGBTIQ+ workers for essential food and medicine. It has also supported over 40 trans workers to access hormone therapy. These actions show members that organising can make a difference in their daily lives, especially when a crisis or an immediate health need arises.

Members are beginning to speak publicly about their work.

Abhimana has started using Facebook to make the collective more visible and explain why LGBTIQ+ workers need to organise. Two executive committee members manage this work. Together with the leaflet produced in Sinhala and Tamil, these efforts can help workers learn that the collective exists and that they can seek support. The awareness campaign is still under way, with more activity planned around Human Rights Day on 10 December. Their facebook page is:

<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61590222674279> Having

members lead this communication is an achievement in itself: it builds their skills and lets workers speak about their needs in their own voice.

Planned awareness and advocacy campaign

Abhimana is preparing a social media campaign calling for safe workplaces free from violence and harassment for LGBTIQ+ workers. The campaign will call for Sri Lanka to put ILO Convention 190 into practice through national legislation and for the repeal or amendment of Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, which have been used to criminalise same-sex sexual activity. Sri Lanka ratified C190 in April 2026, so the campaign's focus is now on making its protections effective in national law and in workers' lives. International Labour Organization

To ground these demands in members' experiences, Abhimana's social media team is conducting six focus group discussions with its district committees. The campaign will include an online feature article about the challenges members face and the changes they want to see. Abhimana also plans to work with two allied trade unions active on gender issues and two other LGBTIQ+ organisations to reach more people. On 10 December, Human Rights Day, it plans to publish a demand paper bringing together what members have shared and setting out its calls for change.

This work shows Abhimana moving from responding to individual workers' problems towards speaking publicly about the conditions that cause them.

LGBTIQ+ workers have become more visible as workers.

This year, Abhimana set up stalls at Pride events in Colombo and Jaffna. The stalls gave members opportunities to introduce the collective, speak with other workers and make its work visible in two cities.

Members are building the skills to lead their own organisation. Establishing six district committees and maintaining a membership of 167 people requires members to communicate, bring others together and respond to concerns. At a strategic planning meeting on 24–25 September 2026, the team also discussed how Abhimana could develop a more workable organisational structure. Members agreed to explore registering a company limited by guarantee and then registering Abhimana as its union. This remains a proposed approach and will need proper legal advice before any registration decision is put into effect.



Abhimana pride display in Jaffna. A participant reading the leaflet and two of Abhimana members speaking with them.



Some promotional material and jewellery made by members to fundraise for the union.

What Abhimana's experience reveals

Many of the workers reaching Abhimana experience problems that are often treated as private matters: a coworker's stigma, exclusion from a workplace, harassment, or fear of seeking help. When similar complaints come from different workers and sectors, they point to a wider problem. LGBTIQ+ workers need protection from violence and discrimination wherever they earn a living, including in informal and self-employed work.

The variety of Abhimana's membership also exposes a gap in familiar models of worker organising. A garment worker, a salon worker, a farmer and an online worker may face different working conditions. Some have an employer; others do not. They still have shared concerns about safety, income and dignity. Abhimana is finding ways for these workers to support one another and make their concerns heard together.

Building practical support through allied unions

Abhimana works closely with allied trade unions so members can get help with problems the collective cannot yet resolve on its own. For example, it works with Dabindu, a women-led garment workers' collective, to help members find safe boarding places near the Katunayake Export Processing Zone. When members raise problems with their EPF or ETF contributions, Abhimana refers them to the Jathika Postal and Telecommunication Trade Union for advice and guidance, drawing on that union's experience with labour issues.

These relationships give members practical support while Abhimana continues to build its own knowledge and capacity. They also help bring the concerns of LGBTIQ+ workers into wider trade union conversations.

The impact so far

Abhimana's impact is visible in both its reach and its response to members' needs. In three years, workers have formed six district committees, brought together 167 members, provided emergency and health-related support, responded to complaints, built referral links, and taken their message to public events. Members are learning how to govern the collective while already doing the everyday work of standing beside other workers.

The next stage is to strengthen the district committees, continue responding to complaints, complete the Sinhala and Tamil awareness campaign, and document what happens after members receive support or referrals.

Collecting members' stories with their consent will help show how organising has affected their safety, confidence and working lives. It will also help Abhimana make a stronger case for a world of work free from violence and harassment.