

American Institute of Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS)
Best Practices for Foreign Researchers
January 2023

This statement provides affiliated researchers with the American Institute for Sri Lankan Studies (AISLS) guidance on ethical issues in conducting research in or on Sri Lanka. This is a working document based on a series of conversations held among researchers and staff affiliated with the AISLS Colombo Center and also in conjunction with Sri Lankan faculty, students and independent researchers. These conversations culminated with a one-day workshop in Colombo which was funded by the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. The following provides general guidance on research ethics for researchers and scholars. To serve a broad base of researchers using AISLS resources in Colombo, this document is intended to be general and non-specific to disciplines across the humanities and social sciences.

Research Preparation and Support

- Before planning and designing your research plan, do your homework about the local context and history. Avoid making broad generalizations about political, religious, historical and socioeconomic contexts.
- Approach your collaborators and research participants with respect and do not assume that they are there to serve you and your research agenda. In doing research, you are asking people for their time, resources and energy.
- Be transparent about the research protocols that you undertake with individuals and communities affiliated with your research.
- During the planning phase of your research, note and account for the rules of the institutions and organizations with whom you plan to conduct research. Think carefully and well in advance about what visas, permissions, affiliations, and clearances are required for your research. Be respectful, timely, transparent, and clear when asking institutions, individuals and collaborators for guidance, so that they can best decide whether or not they can ethically and logistically support your research.
- Before you begin conducting research, think carefully about the relationships you will have with your participants, research collaborators and those with whom you will interact in Sri Lanka. Make decisions about your research based on principles of mutual respect, gauging if, how and when it is appropriate to ask for assistance and assessing the burdens and costs placed on individuals that you ask for support, assistance and participation. While asking local researchers and collaborators to help you make local contacts may be part of the research process, approach this request as one made between equals rather than the responsibility of on the ground interlocutors.

Privacy and Confidentiality

- When conducting research, ensure that your research design, implementation, and plans for dissemination minimize risks to individuals and communities.
- Practice and obtain informed consent when conducting interviews, carrying out observational research or doing any research involving human participants. Allow your research collaborators, participants, and those you engage in research to revisit and renegotiate the original terms of prior agreements of informed consent, and be mindful of your follow-up interactions and engagements after obtaining informed consent.
- Ensure the privacy and confidentiality of your research participants, collaborators, and contributors. Think carefully about the use of recording devices and other forms of data that you collect in the form of audio or visual recordings and your usage of data on social media, grant reports, conferences and in research to ensure privacy and confidentiality.
- When asking for consent, explain clearly what the audio and video recordings will be used for and who will have access to them.
- Make sure your recording device is visible and remind interlocutors throughout the interview that they can stop the recording at any time without necessarily stopping the interview.
- Be attentive to how the person responds during the consent process. Sometimes an individual might say yes out of politeness but it is clear they are not comfortable with the recording. Use sound judgment even before you ask whether it is okay to record.
- At the end of the conversation or event being recorded, summarize what was discussed and confirm again that the person is comfortable with the recording. If they have doubts, be prepared to redact or even delete the recording.
- As a rule do not publicly display photos (e.g., conference presentation, classroom lectures) where anyone is identifiable without explicit consent from the persons featured in the photo. Alternatively, hide identifiable features like faces or obvious place markers. Do not post on social media about research and details of your informants and research assistants without thinking about the implications for their privacy and safety.

Ethical and Professional Relationships in Research

- Treat your collaborators and the staff of libraries, organizations, museums and archives with respect. Likewise, practice principles of respect with materials and spaces associated with your research such as reference only libraries; sacred or religious objects, spaces, or rituals/experiences; and archives.
- Maintain boundaries between your personal and professional realms. Avoid assuming you can take up and be in personal spaces with individuals with whom you have professional research relationships and avoid asking personal questions of individuals with whom you have professional research relationships.
- Do not engage in professional misconduct, including sexual harassment and assault, wage theft, or underpayment for services, and abuse of time, labor and resources.
- When hiring research assistants, language tutors, or translators, come to a mutually respected and agreed upon form of compensation for services provided.
- Know your positionality and privileges with respect to citizenship, race, ethnicity, gender, class, caste, and resources. Be mindful of how you enter spaces and carry yourself and your body in specific contexts and be mindful of how your privileges and positionality as a researcher and foreigner may impact and interact with local, national, and global power dynamics among people you engage and encounter in research and non-research contexts.

Data Management and Responsible Dissemination

- If conducting research, carefully store your data to ensure the immediate and long-term safety, privacy and confidentiality of your research participants and collaborators. Think carefully about where, how and with what organizations you will store and share your data, and actively collaborate with your research partners and participants to create, revisit, and finalize your plans for dissemination and broader impacts.
- Make concrete plans and conscious efforts to engage scholars and research based in Sri Lanka who have done and published research in your area of study. In your citations and engagements, be mindful of power dynamics and the uneven distribution of resources within your discipline of study.
- When disseminating your research in scholarly and public venues or forums, give explicit and due credit to research assistants, partners, contributors and the respondents (when applicable) in the designated space for acknowledgements.