

Educational Achievements Have Not Yielded Many Women in Politics; Sri Lankan Experience

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Sri Lanka has recently passed a new legislation to have 25% quota for females in the lists of candidates of all political parties before the next local government elections. Many have commended this move as female representation in Sri Lankan politics is significantly minute. Even though women in Sri Lanka have been enjoying the voting rights since 1931, and Sri Lanka has produced the first woman prime minister in the world in 1960, the current percentages of female representation—5.8% in Parliament and 2% in municipalities and local government authorities—are amongst the lowest in South Asia.

Sri Lanka, being a country where 52% of its population represents women and females are in par with males in educational achievements, it deserves a steady increase in female participation in politics. In most cases women would never have entered politics if they had not had any connection with politics. Among the eleven women who have entered the present Parliament, nine happen to be wives, daughters or sisters of former politicians. Without such a relationship, women are not encouraged to join politics due to various reasons.



**Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranayake
Kurmaranatunge
(Wife of SWRD Bandaranayake:
the 4th Prime Minister of Ceylon)**



**Mrs. Chandrika Bandaranayake
(Daughter of prime-minister
parents and wife of former
politician Wijaya Kumaranatunge)**

**Mother and Daughter – the first female prime
minister in South Asia and the first female
president in Sri Lanka.**

Ideological and cultural factors mainly constrain women from joining politics. Patriarchal values still remain in Sri Lankan society where women have very weak relationship with politics. Men are considered as leaders and women as care givers. Because of the gender stereotypes, mostly men are privileged to do politics as all other work related to family is taken care of by their women counterparts. Also politics is considered as a dirty game in the present context, as character assassination and many corrupted practices are taking place in the political sphere. Above all, many are of the opinion that women do not have sufficient time to engage in politics due to their role related to reproduction.

In addition, political and economic reasons also prevent women from coming into politics. Although political parties publicly advocate for more female participation, they themselves are reluctant to give nominations to women as they are in doubt about the victory of women in elections. At present a huge amount of money is being spent by the candidates to win elections. Due to the discrepancies prevalent in access to and control over resources, women are in an economically disadvantageous position. Lack of political skills of women further inhibits them from taking part in politics.

Although there are many educated women in Sri Lanka, they are not interested in joining politics mostly due to the above reasons. In rural areas of the country, many women have joined women's societies just to receive a loan to start some kind of self-employed business or to receive any other economic benefits. Only a handful of women leaders have emerged through those societies.

There is another side to this issue too. People are suspicious about the role played by existing women political leaders, because their presence in Parliament has not adequately led to an effective mainstreaming of gender concerns in political decision making. They have not taken efforts to eliminate sexual politics prevalent in government institutions and decision-making processes. Perhaps their voice is not strong enough to make a huge impact over such sexual discriminations which have been occurring over a long period of time.

However, the introduction of a quota system is an encouraging move to increase women's participation in political decision making. Such a mandatory quota can at least improve women's visibility in the political sphere, which is a starting point to dismantle prejudices. If women's presence is increased, they may be able to avoid playing on males' terms. However, only gender quotas may not lead to women's political empowerment. There should be supportive mechanisms and an enabling environment to attract more women to participate in politics.



Workshop for increasing women's political awareness



Women's representation in politics

Women need assistance in campaign funding since they may not have the same access to networks as men. Building women's capacity and public speaking skills, as well as organizing events to motivate women to run their campaigns are also a must. Capacity development of women to engage in politics is also a must. Honesty, compassion, integrity and adherence to moral and ethical principles are also very important requirements to be fulfilled by potential women candidates who are determined to join politics with the commitment to serve the country.