

Chronic Underrepresentation of Women in Sri Lankan Politics

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Political campaign meeting of a female candidate running for a local government office

As a historic kingdom, Sri Lanka has had many women rulers in its illustrious past. In the modern times, as Ceylon, it was one of the first nations to see the establishment of universal adult suffrage (as early as 1931), when women also received the right to vote. Irrespective of such encouraging evidence, women have suffered with a chronic underrepresentation in the country's modern political arena over the decades. Democracy was introduced to the island by the British at a time of Victorian values, where male dominance was part and parcel of it. It is sad to observe that more or less the same value system has been perpetuated well into the 21st century in vain. The golden opportunity that was afforded by independence did not yield conspicuous reformations in Sri Lankan politics, and the feeble political status of women remained unaltered.

This anomaly, in fact, has been a big talking point in Sri Lankan politics recently. Amidst the discussions of promising political reforms recently mediated – in the form of the 20th amendment to the constitution –, increasing the representation of women has been widely discussed. Although the country produced the first ever woman prime minister of the world in the 1960s, and saw a woman executive president in power in the 1990s, as well as some women holding powerful ministerial positions over the years, the number of women in politics has been dismally low. It is also ironic that the salient underlying factor behind the appointment of a bulk of the aforementioned was sympathy – after their husbands or fathers fell victim to political assassinations – other than their own merit.

The progression made by Sri Lankan women in the sphere of education over the decades has made very little positive impact on their political standing. Their 52% population is underrepresented by 6.5% in parliamentary, 6% in provincial council and 2% in local government seats. The gendered politics in Sri Lanka has historically stereotyped women as 'home makers' and men on the contrary, as 'leaders'. The National Human Development Report (NHDR) highlights how the youth of the nation are aware neither of challenges faced by women in leadership positions, nor of how gender shapes identity determining one's ability to perform. In the face of such prejudice, even the most competent women prefer to remain within their culturally-drawn comfort zones, well away from popular politics.

Over the years, *Women and Media Collective* as well as many other women's groups have lobbied for policy recommendations to the 20th amendment with the intention of increasing the gender's parliamentary seats to 25%. The mandatory quota reservation that the aforesaid parties seek to establish has met with wider criticism. The critics postulate that

the number of women experienced enough to make the expected representation is unrealistic, and if this number is to be maintained artificially, it will severely disadvantage more qualified and experienced men. Another point raised is that just because spaces are reserved as electoral seats or on nomination lists, this does not guarantee that women will contest and win. Although sought as a remedial measure to upwardly mobilize women in the political ranks in a situation where a corrupt and gender-biased political culture is prevalent, some women see such a discretionary quota system as insulting. Although it is not a panacea, such a measure will improve the gender's visibility in the political sphere as a starting point at least. An alternative 'non-quota initiative' has been also suggested that entails aspects from funding women (with lesser networks) for their political campaigns, to helping to build their capacity to run campaigns alone, etc.

The chronic political underrepresentation of women has over the years manifested in numerous ways. Women-specific issues have remained painfully unaddressed in Sri Lanka for so long. On one hand, in the aftermath of the civil war that saw traditional gender structures crumble owing to the perishing of hordes of men, women finally have the opportunity to step up. On the other, in an academically-empowered situation as it is currently prevalent – where Sri Lanka's tertiary education sector saw women contributing to 80% and 50% respectively, in the vital fields of law and medicine in the recent years – they are certainly capable.

More representations by women in politics would surely encourage diversity of views in the government that would in turn, result in challenging the *status quo* of gender discrimination in the nation as a whole. Perhaps, increasing the number of women would reflect positively on the notion of 'good governance' that was in fact, the trump card of the current government. Only time can assess how positively women can influence this imperative practice that has eluded politics of Sri Lanka for so long.