

Chapter 07

Impediments to Political Participation and Representation of Women in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Sri Lanka can be considered as one of the most progressive South Asian countries in terms of gender equality, particularly in terms of access to education and healthcare. Over time, women in Sri Lanka (51.9% of the total population), have gained remarkable achievements in terms of literacy rates, maternal and child mortality rates, physical quality of life and average life expectancy. However, despite this significant progress, women continue to be underrepresented in the decision-making positions in the economic, political and social sectors of society.

The 1978 Constitution of Sri Lanka guarantees gender equality as a fundamental right and recognizes affirmative action to bring about positive changes. Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981. Using CEDAW as a model, a Women's Charter was formulated for Sri Lanka, and it was accepted as a state policy in 1993. Further, the National Plan of Action for Women was introduced in 1996. Despite all these efforts, women's representation in political institutions and participation in politics is still as low as 6% in the national and local government. In the South Asian region, Sri Lanka presents the lowest participation of women in politics. Several studies and activists in

women's organizations have recognized this as a serious issue that requires effective policy attention and rectification.

Equal participation of women and men in decision making is important for several reasons. Given that women constitute half the population, their participation is required to strengthen democracy in society and promote its proper functioning. It is unlikely that goals of equality, development and peace and more representative democracies that work for everyone can be achieved. Without incorporating women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, it is unlikely to achieve the goals of equality, development and peace and more representative democracies that work for everyone.

Many factors such as institutional, financial, political, socio-economic and cultural have been identified as common significant challenges that hinder women's political participation. This paper investigates the factors impeding the political participation and representation of women by reviewing existing literature. The paper discusses the conceptual framework for women's political participation, the current situation in the world, South Asia and Sri Lanka, barriers to women participation in politics and the steps to be taken to achieve gender equality in political decision-making processes.

Conceptual Framework

Several scholars and activists working on issues of women's empowerment, political participation and representation have discussed the theoretical background for women's participation and representation in politics through empirical and theoretical studies. According to a group of experts in the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, there are four major, inter-related theoretical concepts which are essential to understanding the concept of equal participation and representation of women and men in decision-making processes (DAW, 2005).

Political Participation

Political participation has been defined in various ways and there is no universally accepted definition for this concept. According to the definition

used in DAW (2005), political participation is a process that allows political agendas to take part in politics through a range of activities such as discussions and dialogue, lobbying and engagement formally or informally. In Verba et al (1995), it is defined as an activity that can influence government actions either by affecting the implementation of public policy or influencing the selection of people who make those policies. However, most of the definitions give the common idea that political participation is the process that allows people to take part in the country's decision-making process directly or indirectly.

According to the Regional Gender Programme in South-East Asia, 2008-2009 (Labani et al., 2009), people can participate in politics institutionally or non-institutionally. Institutional political participation refers to the activities involved in the governance mechanisms for decision-making such as referenda, elections, advisory bodies, etc. Non-institutional political participation includes all the actions that are not part of the official channels for the establishment of policies and those that are aimed at exerting pressure on them such as demonstrations, electoral campaigns, individual or collective requests to public organizations, promotion of certain groups or social classes interests, membership and activities within political parties.

Political Representation

Hanna Pitkin provides one of the most significant definitions in her book, "The Concept of Representation; Make Present Again". According to Pitkin (1967), political representation is the activity that presents the voices, opinions and perspectives of citizens' in the public policymaking process. She identifies four types of representation in politics; authorization representation, descriptive representation, symbolic representation and substantive representation. Under representation, a range of stakeholders can voice various interests of political parties, members of parliament, social movements and groups, and specific state-based agencies promoting particular interests, such as a national machinery for the advancement of women.

Political Leadership

Political leadership is the concept which cuts across both political participation and political representation, by key individuals shaping political agendas, taking the lead in articulating these and participating in their translation into policy.

Political Accountability

Political accountability is the requirement for representatives and representative organizations to be responsible for their decisions and mandates as defined by their positions. It also includes representatives and leaders listening to and, when appropriate, acting upon criticisms, requirements and demands of the public, constituencies or the electorate. Women's participation and representation in the political decision-making process is important to empower women in a country. Women's political leadership allows them to make political agendas and it makes them more responsive to the constituencies and the public. Most scholars emphasize the importance of studying these four concepts.

Political Participation with a Gender Perspective

Historically, politics has always been coupled with men. In the literature of the past, veteran philosophers, thinkers and writers have connected politics as an act related to men, and they mostly used masculine terms to define politics. They have failed to denote gender balancing and the role of women in politics (Yusoff, 2016). In the early years, women in most countries were considered weaker than men as they were less educated, had a low self-reported interest in politics, and had low labour force participation compared to men. They were confined to family and household, and their daily lives had less involvement in both the public and family decision-making process. Initiatives to accommodate women and their rights within the political system and representative democracy was only considered with the mobilization of organized women movements in the latter part of the 19th century in Europe, which later expanded throughout the world (Yusoff, 2016).

At the beginning of the 20th century, the concept of gender equality came into stage and the rights of women were considered for reducing the gender gap in various sectors of society. New Zealand was the first country to grant women the right to vote in 1893 and since then the situation of women's participation in politics has improved with significant differences among countries. At the beginning of the 21st century, over 955 countries granted the two most fundamental democratic rights (for all citizens): the right to vote and the right to stand for election to ensure gender equity in representative democracy (Yusoff, 2016).

Though legal rights for women to participate in politics has been granted, there is a serious lack of women's participation in world politics which has become a concern of several international women organizations. One of the early human rights treaties which addressed this issue was "The Convention on the Political Rights of Women" adopted by the United Nations in 1952, which set international benchmarks for the participation of women in public life¹ (Gomez, M & Gomez, S, 2001). Later, at the fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995 (United Nations & World Conference on Women, 1996), the lack of women in institutions of governance was recognized as a critical concern. This Platform for action recognized that 'empowerment of women and gender are prerequisites for achieving, political, social, economic, cultural and environmental security among all people.

As the report of Regional Gender Programme in South-East Asia (2008-2009) states, "*To achieve gender equality in all spheres of life, it is necessary to achieve gender equality in the areas of representation, decision-making and political participation.*" Therefore, most of the recent politics and gender-related studies have been focused on the causes of inequalities between women and men and more sustainable ways of eliminating the barriers preventing women's participation and their representation in decision-making areas."

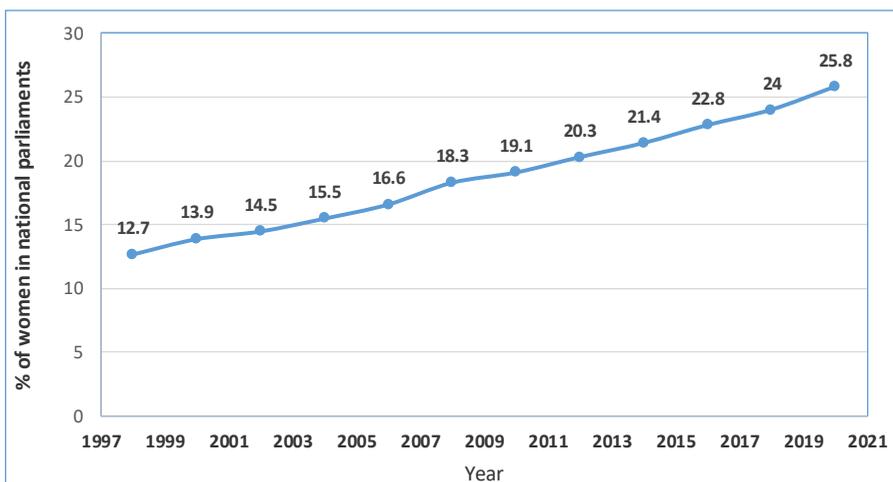
1. The Convention entered into force on 7th July 1954

Recent Trends in Female Participation and Representation in Politics

Although there has been marginal progress in women's political representation during the last few decades around the world, women continue to be underrepresented as political leaders and elected officials at the national level.

Over the last few decades, the proportion of women in parliaments around the world has increased significantly. The overall percentage of women in national parliaments reached 25.4% in 2020, up from 12.7% in 1998 (Figure 1). The greatest progress is seen in four countries: Rwanda, Cuba, Bolivia and the United Arab Emirates, where women held 50% or more of the legislative seats in 2020 (see Table 1). Compared to the situation in 1995, when no parliament had reached gender parity, this can be considered a significant improvement. Another trend that can be seen is the changes in the regional share of women in national parliaments. In 1995, the top ten parliaments with the highest representation of women were from European countries, mostly from the Nordic countries. Ranking in 2020 displays a representation of more regions. Despite these changes, there is still a long way to go to achieve the goal of gender parity in participation in decision making.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women in National Parliaments 1995-2020



Source: <https://www.ipu.org/> accessed: 24/10/2021

There have been many efforts by men and women to increase women participation in politics. Among them, legislative quotas have had a significant impact on the share of women’s political participation all around the world. Out of the top 20 parliaments with the highest representation of women, 16 have used some form of a quota for women. In 68 countries that held parliamentary elections in 2019, women were elected for 30.3 per cent of seats on average in the 40 countries that applied some form of quota. The percentage of women in parliament in the absence of quota is considerably lower. Only 17.9 per cent of seats were won by women in the 28 countries that do not have quota system. As pointed out by IPU (2020), these quotas are “no longer designed as a means to reach a minimum threshold of women candidates or members of parliament, but rather as a strategy to ultimately reach gender parity”.

Table 1: Top 10 Countries for Women’s Participation in Parliament 1995 and 2020

1995		2020	
Country	% women	Country	% women
Sweden	40.4	Rwanda	61.3
Norway	39.4	Cuba	53.2
Denmark	33.5	Bolivia	53.1
Finland	33.5	United Arab Emirates	50.0
Netherlands	32.7	Mexico	48.2
Seychelles	27.3	Nicaragua	47.3
Austria	26.8	Sweden	47.0
Germany	26.3	Grenada	46.7
Iceland	25.4	Andorra	46.4
Argentina	25.3	South Africa	46.4

Source: Reproduced from IPU (2020) <https://www.ipu.org/news/press-releases/2020-03/25-years-after-beijing-ipu-analysis-shows-gender-parity-possible>

The marginal progress made in the share of women participation in politics shows large regional variations. The Americas lead with 32% of women in parliament in 2020 followed by Europe where 30.4% of parliament seats are held by women (see Table 2). Within Europe, the sub-region of the Nordic countries has women holding over 40 per cent of parliamentary seats. Sub-Saharan Africa which is the third region in terms of representation of women in parliament has made an impressive improvement over the years. The regions of Asia, the Middle East and North Africa and the Pacific that hold 4th, 5th and 6th places respectively have made some progress. The high growth displayed in the region of the Middle East and North Africa is due to the removal of restrictions to women's right to vote or stand for elections, and the introduction of quota as part of political reforms after the Arab Spring (IPU, 2020).

Table 2: Regional Share of Women in Parliaments 1997-2020

Region	% women (1997)	% women (2020)
Americas	13.2	32.0
Europe	13.2	30.4
Sub-Saharan Africa	11.0	24.8
Asia	9.7	20.9
The Middle East & North Africa	3.4	19.3
Pacific	12.7	17.7

Source: <https://data.ipu.org/women-averages> Accessed on 7/11/2021

South Asia which has become the fastest-growing region in the world has made progress in closing its gender gap in terms of education and health. Despite being largely patriarchal and male-dominated societies, out of the eight countries in the region, four countries; Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh and Pakistan had women heads of state in the past 50 years. Bangladesh is the only country in the world where the number of years with a woman head, exceeds the number of years with a male head of state. Pakistan elected the first female head of state of a Muslim country. In terms of the share of women in parliament, South Asia's

performance is not different from the other emerging regions. For example, women represent 20% or less of the parliament in six of the eight countries in the region.

As shown in Table 3, women representation in parliament in South Asian countries varies largely. At the end of 2020, women representation in parliament was the highest in Nepal (33.7%, 45th rank), and the lowest in the Maldives (4.6%, 184th).

Table 3: Women’s Political Representation in South Asia 2020

Country	% Women in Parliament
Nepal	32.7%
Afghanistan	27%
Bangladesh	20.9%
Pakistan	20.2%
Bhutan	14.9%
India	14.4%
Sri Lanka	5.4%
Maldives	4.6%

Source: www.ipu.org accessed on 10/04/2021

There are several barriers to women’s political participation and representation in South Asia which makes it extremely challenging. According to Agarwal and Ravishankar (2021), “*These barriers can broadly be categorized under these three categories-Money, Muscle and Misogyny. The 3Ms have percolated deep into the political systems of South Asian countries due to entrenched gender roles privileging men in public roles and boxing women into domesticity*”. South Asian women face multiple forms of deprivation such as poverty and economic insecurity, gender-based division of labour in the households, violence in public and private life, education and lack of awareness regarding political systems and processes, lack of training and capability of women for governance, prevailing norms regarding gender

stereotypes and their mobility are important among them. Almost all women who entered politics have strong political backgrounds that boosted their political careers (Bukhari, 2021).

Women representation in parliament in Sri Lanka, the first country to elect a female head of state in 1965 is as low as 5.4%, ranked 7th in South Asia. Sri Lankan women continue to lag behind men as party members, candidates for elections and their representation in politics has been low. In 2020, only 12 women represent the Sri Lankan parliament which consists of 225 members. Women make up 56 per cent of registered voters.

In Sri Lanka, 51.9% of the total population is represented by women and they largely contribute to the country's economy. Women have gained remarkable achievements in terms of literacy, education, health, quality of life and life expectancy compared to the other South Asian countries. But regarding decision making and political representation, Sri Lanka lags behind the countries which have a lower social status for women.

This disparity between Sri Lankan women's achievements in education, health and political representation raises the fundamental question of social justice, inclusive democracy, good governance and sustainable development of the country. A result of this low participation of women in politics is that women have little input into policies and programmes of which they are often the direct beneficiaries (Liyanage, 2012)

According to Sri Lankan political history, Adeline Molamure who contested the election in 1931 has been recorded as the first woman who represented the national legislature in Sri Lanka. In 1960, Sirimawo Bandaranayaka was elected as the first female prime minister and she made a huge impact on Sri Lankan politics. However, her political leadership and popularity didn't give support much to increase women's involvement in active politics, or their representation in parliament. During her active political career, she was fielding more women in elections but was unable to increase female representatives, even in her cabinet (Yusoff, 2016). In August 1994, Chandrika Bandaranayake was elected as the prime minister and later elected as the executive president. Her mother, Sirimawo Bandaranayake

was re-elected as the prime minister in November 1994. For nearly one-third of the post-independence period, Sri Lanka was governed by female leaders. However, during that whole period, women representation in parliament was as low as 5% which proves that female leadership has not had a positive impact on women's representation in parliament (Kodikara, 2009) (see Table 4).

Table 4: Women Representation in Sri Lankan Legislatures (1931-to date)

Period	Total members	Women Representatives	%
1931-1936	58	02	3.44
1936-1947	58	01	1.72
1947-1952	101	03	2.97
1956-1960 March	101	04	3.96
1960 March -July	157	03	1.91
1960 -1964	157	03	1.91
1965-1970	157	06	3.82
1970-1972/1972-1977	157	06	3.82
1977-1978/1978-1989	168	11	6.54
1989-1994	225	13	5.8
1994-2000	225	12	5.33
2000-2001	225	09	4
2001-2004	225	10	4.44
2004-2010	225	13	5.8
2010-2015	225	13	5.8
2015-2020	225	13	5.8
2015 to date	225	12	5.33

Source: <https://www.parliament.lk/lady-members> accessed on 7/11/2021

From 1947-1972, there were only a few female members (3 elected members and 4 nominated members) in the Upper house. The percentage of female cabinet ministers was very low until 1990 and from 1947-1994, there were only 15 female ministers including 2 district ministers and 3 state ministers. Wimala Wijewardhana, the minister of health from 1956-65 has been recorded as the first female cabinet minister in Sri Lanka (Silva, 1996). Most of the female ministers have been appointed to ministries such as welfare, rural development, women's affairs and small industries which are considered 'not powerful'.

Political history in Sri Lanka demonstrates that women from all ethnic backgrounds have been represented in this meagre number of women parliamentarians. The first Tamil female representative was Neysum Sarawanamuttu who was elected in 1932 (de Silva, 1996) Ranganayaki Padmanathan who was appointed in 1980 has been recorded as the second female Tamil political representative in Sri Lanka. Surprisingly, the Tamil United Liberation Front, a party that originally represented a large number of educated moderate thinking Tamils, has not produced a single female parliamentary member (Liyanaage, 1996). Ayesha Rauff, who came to Sri Lankan politics after her marriage was the first Muslim woman who appeared in Sri Lankan politics and she competed for the 1947 parliamentary election. Even though she lost the parliament election, she was successful in Municipal politics from 1947- 1950 (de Silva, 1996).

Women's entrance into politics via family ties is a common characteristic that can be seen in South Asian politics. In Sri Lanka, with a few exceptions, many women enter national politics through patriarchal social structures as they are connected to political families. Jayawardena & Kodikara (2003) refer to this as the "widows, wives, and daughters syndrome". As they point out, in contrast to women who engaged in politics in the 1930s through the 1950s, whose career in politics was relatively independent of their male family members, current female politicians seem to be "*'proxy' women politicians' with little or no political will of their own*". Most of the women who entered politics recently did so just to embrace their relationship with male politicians in their family and they try to represent their "family-led

constituency” (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012: 778). Others who are not directly connected to political families have some connections to male patrons and support bases, reflecting the patriarchal structures within which women need to receive support for election (Jayawardena & Kodikara, 2003).

Since the late 20th century, several women’s organizations and NGOs have been continuously demanding higher women representation in the main political parties. Though the manifestos of the main parties (UNP and SLFP) carried promises to increase women’s representations mainly in the 2010 and 2015 elections, both parties failed to fulfil those promises (Women and Media Collective, 2010). In both the 2010 and 2015 elections, women have had neither as many nominations nor as much representation in parliament.

The local government has an important role to play in national politics especially as the training ground for future national-level political leaders. The history of the local government in Sri Lanka dates back to 1865 when the first local bodies were introduced by the Municipal Council Ordinance in 1865 (de Silva, 1996). The present local government structure that consists of Provincial Councils, Pradeshiya Sabha, Municipal Council and Urban Councils was established in 1987. Currently, there are 335 local authorities in Sri Lanka consisting of 23 Municipal Councils (MC), 41 Urban Councils (UC), and 271 Pradeshiya Sabha (PS).

Though the local government is where a woman can logically find it easy to contest in elections compared to the provincial and national elections, women have played an even more limited role in local government bodies throughout the entire political history in Sri Lanka (de Silve, 1996). Women representation in local governments has been recorded between 1.7% and 2.01 % (Kodikara, 2012).

While local government bodies serve as a good training field for the upcoming male political leaders, it has not helped much to increase women’s political participation in Sri Lanka. According to Kearney (1981), *“prospect for service in local government bodies are so limited for the women almost to the point of non-existence. The small number of women in local government is a significant impediment to women’s access to national politics.”*

Table 5: Ministers of Provincial Councils by province 1993-2013

Province	1993		2006		2013	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Western	-	5	-	5	-	5
North Central	-	5	-	5	-	5
North Western	1	4	-	5	-	5
Uva	1	4	-	5	-	5
Central	1	4	-	5	-	5
Southern	-	5	-	5	-	5
Sabaragamuwa	-	5	-	5	-	5
Eastern	-	-	-	-	-	5
Nothern	-	-	-	-	-	5
Total No	3	32	-	35	-	45
%	8.6	91.4	-	100	-	100

Source: The Sri Lankan Woman-Partner in Progress Department of Census and Statistics, Sri Lanka, 2014, p.98.

Another fact which can be seen in women participation in local government throughout the political history in Sri Lanka is that women have been often underrepresented in top leadership positions. Women had only 4% of seats in Provincial Councils and 1.9% in local government. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, ranking of women in Parliament in 2017, Sri Lanka was placed 180 out of 190 countries. Table 5 presents the number of female ministers elected for the provincial councils during 1993 – 2013. Except for the 3 female ministers in the provincial councils in 1993, none of the female representatives has been appointed as provincial ministers.

According to Kodikara (2012), the major barrier to women in local politics is the lack of nomination for them within the political party. In addition, women face an extra barrier in converting nominations into seats given to the women candidates compared to male candidates. As a solution

for this issue, Kodikara (2012) suggests that the mandatory quota for women in local government be increased beyond 2%.

During 1998-2000, several proposals on legislative quotas for women were made in Sri Lanka, but none of them was successful. In 2015, under good governance, initiatives were taken to implement a 25% quota for women's participation in local government. The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 1 of 2016 introduced a mandatory quota of 25% for women through a 25% increase of the total number of seats at the local government level, i.e. Pradeshiya Sabhas, Urban Councils and Municipal Councils.

Table 6: Number of Women Councilors Following Last Three Elections

	2008		2011		2018	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Female councilors	64	1.8	85	1.8	2526	29.1
Male councilors	3,558	98.2	4,515	98.2	6,699	77.1
Total councilors	3,622	100	4,600	100	8,690	100
Female PS* councilors	51	1.6	70	1.9	NA	NA
Male PS* councilors	3,292	98.5	3,173	97.8	NA	NA
Total PS* councilors	3,443	100	3,243	100	NA	NA
Female UM** councilors	13	3.4	11	2.6	NA	NA
Male UM** councilors	366	96.6	406	97.4	NA	NA
Total UM** councillors	379	100	417	100	NA	NA

Source: http://www.clgf.org.uk/default/assets/File/Country_profiles/Sri_Lanka.pdf

Accessed: 24/10/2021

Under this new amendment, the number of seats at the local level was increased by 25% from 6,619 to 8,825. The number of increased seats were available for women candidates nominated by political parties on a separate list based on the proportion of votes obtained by each party at the local council elections.

The first local government election under the 2016 Act was held on 10 February 2018. Under the new quota system, 17,128 women contested in the local elections. The impact of the quota for women's political representation was historical, given that women's political representation at the local government had not been above 2%. As a result of the gender quota, over 2,000 women were elected to the local councils in the 2018 elections. Women's political representation thus increased immensely from 2% to 29% (see Table 6).

The Importance of Gender Equality in Political Participation and Representation

The importance of gender equality in the political decision-making process has been critically discussed by several scholars and activists working on issues of women's empowerment and their political participation. According to the UNDP report on "Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership (2005)"², there are six major theoretical arguments that emphasize the importance of women's participation in politics.

- The justice argument-women account for approximately half the population and therefore have the right to be represented as such.
- The experience argument-women's experiences are different from men's and need to be represented in policy-making and implementation.
- The interest's argument-the interests of men and women are different and even conflicting and therefore women are needed in representative institutions to articulate the interests of women.
- The critical mass argument – women can achieve solidarity of purpose to represent women's interests when they achieve certain levels of representation.

2. *Equal Participation of Women and Men in Decision-Making Processes, with Particular Emphasis on Political Participation and Leadership*, Report of the Expert Group Meeting, Ethiopia (2005) <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw>

- The symbolic argument - women are attracted to political life if they have role models in the arena.
- The democracy argument-the equal representation of women and men enhances democratization of governance in both transitional and consolidated democracies

According to these six arguments, women's participation in politics is essential to represent their needs, interests as well as to protect their human rights. As Liyanage & Rajendran (2012) state the lack of women's representation throughout all spheres of influence in public life, represents a significant loss of human resource to the nation. It also raises serious questions about the validity and relevance of the decision-making process itself. The paper also finds some major reasons why a country should give priority to increasing its female political representation and they can be summarized as follows.

- The presence of women in public bodies will promote participatory democracy, democratic political systems, institutions and processes, good governance and peace. It will also ensure gender equality and it will directly help to achieve the fifth sustainable development goal; gender equality and empower all women and girls in a country
- Increasing female representation in politics can be considered as a matter of distributive justice. Women should get high authoritarian power considering their demographic weight and their contribution to society so that it will give them more confidence to work within the society at large.
- The increase in the number of women in the political institution will also contribute to the change in the nature of political institutions and help to create a more women-friendly political environment in the country.
- Increasing women's political participation is vital for achieving newly introduced Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When more women are engaged with the country's decision-making process, it

will empower women's status and reduce the inequalities within and among countries (5th and 10th SDGs). And also, it helps to promote a peaceful and inclusive society for sustainable development, provides justice for all and builds effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels (16th SDG). Therefore, equal participation of males and females in politics and decision-making processes is essential for the sustainable development process in a country.

However, increasing just the "number" of women representatives in the legislative bodies is not sufficient and their presence should be effective in empowering women and sustaining the democracy in a country. Therefore, it is important to look beyond numbers when forming a mechanism to empower women through political participation (DAW, 2005).

Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka

The factors that hinder or facilitate women's political participation may vary from country to country with the different levels of socio-economic development, geography, culture, and the type of political system. In fact, women themselves are also not a homogeneous group as their attitudes, beliefs, characteristics and behaviours are different based on their class, race, ethnicity, cultural background and education level (Ballington & Karam, 2005). However, according to the Caribbean Conference Report on Increasing Women's Political Participation (2015), there are some common impediments to women's political involvement which can be seen in many countries in the world. They are;

- Political party's lack of openness and support for women
- Lack of support-networking
- Lack of skills such as media skills, literacy, and negotiation skills, networking skills, oral and written communication skills, message development, advocacy and lobbying skills and information gathering skills.
- Lack of visibility

- Family responsibilities
- Lack of finance
- Gender insensitive political systems
- Aversion to power over people
- Cultural and religious barriers
- Lack of mentoring
- Security issues and personal safety
- Adverse media exposure
- Women's lack of passion for politics

Ballington and Karam (2014) has also identified some common, significant challenges which hinder women's political participation all over the world and they have grouped them under 3 major categories such as,

- (1) Political obstacles
- (2) Socio-economic obstacles
- (3) Ideological and psychological hindrances.

Furthermore, several authors including Kiribamune, (1994); Liyanage, (2004, 2005); Leitan & Gunasekera, (1998); Kodikara, (2009); Liyanage and Rajendran, (2012), Yusoff, (2016) have studied these barriers empirically in the Sri Lankan context and their major findings have been analyzed in the following sections.

Political and Institutional Barriers

Barriers within the Electoral system

The type of electoral system in a country is very important in ensuring women's representation in parliament and sub legislative bodies. From 1978 onward, Sri Lanka has been practicing a Proportional Representative (PR)

system in electing members to the parliament. The PR system was found successful in increasing female representation in the legislative bodies in the countries that adopted the system. But there is no evidence that it contributed to increasing the female political representation in Sri Lanka.

Several negative factors that hinder political participation and representation of women within the current PR system have been identified. Under the PR system, public representatives are selected from large electoral districts. Therefore, candidates have to extend their political campaign to a large geographical area and it requires a huge allocation of finance as well as the need to travel very long distances to secure votes. From a women's perspective, this could seem a daunting task and it hinders women's participation in politics (National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 2005).

The present electoral system provides for 29 members to be declared elected through the national list to the parliament. The mechanism allows political parties to nominate members based on the total number of votes polled by the respective political party. The members that have been nominated by parties under this system are mostly men. It is evident that in the case of Sri Lanka, the extensive power provided to the party leadership under the PR system remains an obstacle to increasing women representation (National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 2005).

Furthermore, the PR is a very competitive electoral system that creates competition not only between candidates of different parties but also within the same party members leading to unethical political campaigns. Against such an unethically competitive backdrop, the challenge for a woman candidate can be severe.

These factors prove that the way in which Sri Lanka practices the PR system may not allow women to effectively participate in politics and it requires gender-sensitive electoral reforms along with a quota system in an inclusive manner in order to achieve sustainable development goals.

Absence of Quota system

Several studies identify the absence of a gender quota system as a major reason which hinders women's political representation in national and local

government in Sri Lanka (Yusoff, 2016; Kodikara, 2009; Liyanage, 1996). Sri Lanka's position in terms of female political participation and representation in the South Asian region is much lower than the more conservative Islamic nations such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. Women in those countries appear to have overcome various social and religious strictures imposed upon them and were able to raise their representative voices through the introduction of the gender quota system and reserved seats (National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, 2005).

As a result of a mandatory quota of 25% for women through a 25% increase of the total number of seats at the local government level in 2016 in Sri Lanka, the percentage of women in local government increased from 2% to 29%. However, whether these women would be able to change the system is still a question. It will be required to find ways to break other socio-economic and cultural barriers too for them to equally participate in decision making.

Lack of Support from Political Parties

Political parties have an important role in increasing women participation and representation in politics. It is the responsibility of parties to bring women into political processes and mediate their participation and involvement in politics. In Sri Lanka, the major political parties have shown much interest or commitment to increasing women's political representation. While nominations for women from smaller parties and independent groups have been increasing under the PR system, nominations for women by the major parties have remained low.

The structure and organization of political parties can be an obstacle to the participation of women in politics all over the world. Even though women play important roles in campaigning and mobilizing support for their parties, they rarely occupy decision-making positions in the political structures. According to Belington and Karam (2005), fewer than 11% of party leaders worldwide are women.

The political party structure and system in Sri Lanka is still mainly dominated by men and gender discrimination within the political parties is

a serious obstacle faced by female political representatives (DAW, 2005). Most of the party's supreme body in Sri Lanka has been filled with male members and women have little voice within the party structure. The best example is that, at the end of 2015, according to the Election Commission, no party is headed by women among the 63 recognized political parties in Sri Lanka. And also, out of 49 ministries in the national government, only 3 are led by women. The following table shows the low number of women in the central, working committee of 3 major political parties in Sri Lanka.

Table 7: Women's Participation in Main Political Parties, 2015

	Male	Female	Total
SLFP central committee	66	3	69
UNP working committee	60	10	70
Muslim Congress central committee	192	0	192

Source: Information from the party offices.

According to the election committee statistics, there are 63 registered national political parties in Sri Lanka and among them, only two parties; Sri Lanka Labor Party and the New Democratic Front have female secretaries. Therefore, it clearly shows that women have been given fewer opportunities and have been discriminated against within the party structure.

Moreover, most political parties are unwilling to give nominations to females as they feel it would be a waste to nominate a candidate who may not win (UNDP, 2004). This in turn impacts the perception of women as viable candidates on the part of those who provide money for election campaigns. In most cases, women are often placed in the party lists in the positions with the least possibility to win.

As Kearney (1981) and Liyanage (1999) indicate, all major political parties in Sri Lanka have been maintaining women's sections or fronts for years, but the power and effectiveness of these sections have been questioned. These sections are only active during the election period and are not much

effective for acting as instruments to enhance women's position within the parties and the legislative bodies. All parties use the women sections only to get more votes in the election. In addition, party leaders also tend to treat their female members instrumentally, to secure women's votes and to involve them in the party's lobbying and organizational activities, rather than seeing women as decision-makers and leaders (DAW, 2005).

Political parties usually possess resources for conducting election campaigns but women rarely benefit from these resources as many parties do not provide sufficient financial support for women candidates. In such cases, political campaigns of women have to be financed with their own funds, thus they need to have significant financial resources to get involved in politics. It discourages the women who are interested in participating in politics but do not have sufficient funds for political campaigns.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

The social and economic status of women in society have a direct influence on their participation in political institutions and elected bodies (Matland, 1998). According to some studies, socio-economic conditions take second place in electoral systems in women's legislative recruitment within established democracies (Belington et al, 2005).

Patriarchal System

Among all cultural factors, the patriarchal system in society is found to be the major factor that restricts women's political participation (Bari, 2005). In Sri Lankan society, men are considered the best for politics as they have unrestricted mobility, more resources and have power in decision making compared to women. As Samarasinghe & Liyanage (2015) state, even though women are willing to participate in politics, they are pushed away by the powerful patriarchal system in the political system. Oakley (2011) also agrees with this and says "*Women's participation within the highest to the lowest level in politics is delayed by the patriarchal culture in the political and social system in Sri Lanka.*"

Traditions, Norms, Myths and Beliefs in Different Ethnic Groups

In many countries, traditions continue to emphasize women's primary roles as mothers and housewives and restrict them to those roles. Patriarchal value systems favour gender roles, and traditional cultural values and act against the advancement, progress and participation of women in any political process. Societies all over the world are dominated by an ideology of "a woman's place". Under this ideology, women are supposed only to play the role of 'working mother', which is generally low-paid and apolitical. In addition, in some countries, women are advised by men on how to vote (Balington et al, 2005).

Gender Role within the Household

With their primary roles within the households as mothers and wives and competing domestic responsibilities and care work, women are left with little or no time to participate in politics (Adamu & Mekonnen, 2009). The burden of household responsibilities discourages women from participating in politics. Some studies repeatedly emphasize that women pay a "motherhood penalty," relating not just to the time, and effort, but to the far greater maternal involvement necessary for breastfeeding, and to the persistent tendency of women to do a larger share of childcare as the child grows (Rosenbluth, Kalla & Teele, 2015). These barriers make it hard for women to participate in political discussions and decisions. According to the World Bank (2015), even if women enter politics, because of their huge family roles, they tend to start their careers late, have fewer children, spend more time on family care. It appears that only females with supportive families run for office, whereas men are more likely to run despite discouragement from their families.

As Anna Balletbo, former MP, Spain once stated "*Women believe that entering parliament means choosing between a private life or a public life. This is not the case. Instead, women should view their life as a continuum. They should decide what they want to achieve in life and prioritize these goals in chronological order. There is a certain right time to achieve each of these goals, whether it is becoming a wife, mother, professional or a parliamentarian.*"

However, women who come from strong political families may have more opportunities to engage in the political process as they get more support from the men in their families. But women from poor, minority ethnic communities and low cast families are not always welcomed to join the civic and political process.

Political Violence and Character Assassination

Political violence and character assassination are other social barriers faced by women who enter politics in Sri Lanka (National Peace Council, 2005). This especially impacts negatively on women in a country such as Sri Lanka which places much importance on the untarnished maternal image. Hence, character assassination becomes an easy but deadly weapon against women with high political aspirations which can destroy the chances of women gaining political representation in the country. The harassment of women does not end with character assassination; men even practice violence to deter politically active women who remain in the political arena (National Peace Council, 2005). There are many instances when violence and organized crime have scared women and provoked their fears of losing members of their families which hinders women from entering active politics.

Lack of Media Support

In politics, media is used to cultivate gender biases and promote a stereotype about ‘a woman’s place’, and to reinforce the idea that women are responsible for social problems, such as divorce and minor crime. In the mainstream media, women are depicted as beautiful objects: women are identified and objectified according to their sex, and are made to internalize certain notions of beauty and attractiveness which relate more to a woman’s physical capacities than to her intellectual and mental capacities. In Sri Lanka, the media does not recognize the low rate of women participation in politics as a serious issue and does not give much priority to promoting female political participation (Kiribamune, 1994; Liyanage 2004, 2005). During the past years, there were two popular television programs; “Yeheliya” and “Kedapatha” which conducted discussions mainly on gender issues, but

even in these programmes there was not much interest paid in addressing the political perspective of gender issues (Liyanage, 2004).

Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence is another reason for women's under-representation in formal political institutions, whether in the parliament, ministries or political parties. This can be considered as a psychological factor that hinders women's participation in politics. In Sri Lankan culture, generally, women play a supportive role to men and their self-esteem is consequently low. Women's traditional role hinders them from taking part in discussions and expressing their positions. As such, women neither exert their political views nor make their self-assertion during political meetings and discussions.

Economic Barriers

Lack of Financial Resources

In many contexts, electoral campaigns are privately financed. Under the PR system, elections are very competitive and requires spending on publicity and campaigning to ensure a degree of influential power that is required in securing votes (Ballington & Karam, 2005). Women from poor economic backgrounds not able to afford these large expenses, give up their interest in politics.

Many developed countries with advanced democracies have introduced several financial and non-financial assistance for women candidates to encourage their political participation. For example, Canada, Australia, Japan, France and Portugal use strategies such as giving public funds to the parties and female candidates, allowing free subsidized media access during the election period and giving tax reliefs for female candidates to give more opportunities for women in politics (Shames, 2015) But the non-existence of such assistance to female candidates in countries like Sri Lanka discourages women who are interested in politics but face financial constraints.

Existing Strategies for Improving Women's Political Participation and Representation

Training and Capacity Building for Female Political Leadership and Raising Awareness of Political Participation.

In Sri Lanka, the majority of women who have entered politics have not had any formal political training before entering politics. Several studies have identified the lack of formal political training for women as a major barrier in empowering them (Kiribamune, 1994; Leitan & Gunasekara, 1998; Liyanage 1992). During the past two decades, some action has been taken by the government and non-government organizations to raise awareness of female political participation and provide training for female political leaders.

As the Center for women's Research (CENWOR, 2015) states, awareness-raising on the issue of underrepresentation of women has been done since 1995 and these awareness-raising programs were mainly done by non-government organizations. According to the survey done by Kodikara (2009), more than 5000 women appear to have been trained since 1995. From the mid-1990s, several organizations such as CENWOR, Women's Alliance for Peace and Democracy, Center for Society and Religion Agromat Foundation, Women's education and Research Centre (WERC), South Asia Partnership – Sri Lanka (SAPSRI), Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (SLILG) have paid some attention to leadership training and awareness-raising programs for women (CENWOR, 2014).

The impact of the above programmes has not been identified. Kodikara (2004) states that the organizations which conduct such training programs have not collected the information of how many trained women received nominations, contested elections and had been elected as a direct result of training because none of them had evaluated these training programs. By surveying some of the training programs conducted in 2004, Liyanage (2009) identified the criteria used in selecting participants for the programs and the lack of follow up measures as major limitations of most of the training programs for female political leadership. She states that the selection of the participants for these programs was not based on specified criteria and many

young women who did not have any interest in politics had participated in these programs just to obtain the certificate. She further says that *“The usual practice of NGO is once they get the fund, they conduct the program and once the funds are over they don’t have any opportunity to concentrate on any follow-up plans. Also, some NGOs just conduct training programmes without having any need assessment or systematic preparation of curriculum.”* Therefore, it shows that the training programs conducted by non-government organizations have not effectively contributed to enhancing the political participation of women in Sri Lanka.

Several previous studies (Liyanage, 2004; Kodikara, 2009) have identified that training programs were not successful in increasing the representation of women. The new knowledge and skills that are acquired by women through these programs are not necessarily the knowledge and skills that political parties are looking for in potential candidates which means there’s a considerable gap between what women’s organizations think as the training requirement for political leadership and the reality of what is needed to compete in party politics. According to (Kodikara, 2009) these leadership training and political awareness-raising programs should therefore be well planned and well designed to increase female political participation in Sri Lanka.

Quota System

One of the major strategies used by many developed and developing countries to increase female representation in national and local political bodies is, using mandatory gender quota systems. Generally, quota laws establish minimum percentage shares for targeted groups and are considered part of a large program of affirmative action. These laws can be applied to the political parties and government institutions with the objective of permitting women to overcome the barriers of under-representation in the political decision-making process.

However, according to Mrs. Bachelet, former head of UN women, half of all countries in the world have implemented some form of electoral quota during the past 20 years. International IDEA has found nearly 100 countries

that had either implemented quotas, had previously used quotas or were considering implementing quotas. Of these, 10 countries had adopted reserved seat guarantees and 30 countries had adopted legislation mandating quotas. In addition, 130 political parties in 61 countries had voluntarily adopted quotas³.

Many countries provide evidence that quotas have had an immediate and direct effect on women's participation. In general, among the 33 countries that have achieved 30% of women's representation, 28% have achieved that success by implementing gender quotas (Yusoff, 2016). In Argentina, women's participation has increased from 5% to 25% and then to 30% after they introduced the quota system. By 2005, Rwanda was able to elect 48.8% of women to the Parliament and that was also a result of adopting an effective gender quota system (DAW, 2005).

The recent world statistics also prove that gender quota has a great impact on women's political participation as women's political representation in countries that used gender quota was 28.35% in 2015 while only 13.5% of women were elected to parliament in countries which didn't use quota (Inter Parliament Union Review, 2016).

Activism and Advocacy of Women's Organizations

Activism and advocacy about increasing women's participation in politics is another strategy used in many countries. Especially, women's organizations and NGOs are largely involved in this matter. In Sri Lanka, activism and advocacy regarding women's political participation can be traced to the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) in 1995. Many of these advocacy campaigns have been led largely by NGOs and the National Committee on women and the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment (Jayasundara & Amarasuriya, 2015). Also, numerous women's groups have lobbied political parties to address the under-representation of women in political institutions in Sri Lanka through media campaigns, press conferences, one to one meetings and direct correspondence with political

3. The most up to date information is made widely accessible through International IDEA/Stockholm University Global Database on Electoral Quotas for Women website (www.quotaproject.org)

party leaders. (Kodikara, 2009). The main campaign led by them was the call for a quota system. In 2000, the International Center for Ethnic Studies initiated a discussion among grass-root level women activists on women's political participation and representation in Sri Lanka, particularly on the implementation of quota as a strategy to increase women's participation in local government. Between 2002-2004, the North Illinois University (USA) cooperated with four local NGOs and conducted a program on "Capacity Building and Advocacy for women in Grassroots Democracy in Sri Lanka". Targeting the 2006 parliamentary election, the National Committee for Women (NCW) also implemented an advocacy program and it took initiatives to train women and raise awareness on this issue (Kodikara, 2009).

Networking

According to Kodikara (2009), several women networks focus on increasing women's political participation representation in Sri Lanka. *Mother and Daughters of Sri*, one of the oldest women networks in Sri Lanka has 28 sub-organizations and six individual women. *The Central Province Women's Voice* is another network in which some civic, political and economic activists work together to coordinate women leaders in Central Province.

Apart from that, the University of Peradeniya cooperating with the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Affairs has introduced a Certificate program for women interested in active politics and currently 60 participants are following that course.

Proposal for the Future

Several previous studies have recommended several means/ways to accommodate women within the political system and motivate them to be represented in local representative bodies, including the parliament (Liyanage, 2004; Kodikara, 2009). If Government and political leaders consider the lack of women's representation as a weakness in their parliament democracy and are committed to strengthening it, these recommendations would be more useful to form the guidelines and framework for further action.

Implementing an Effective Gender Quota system

The absence of an effective mandatory gender quota system has been identified as a major barrier to increasing women's political participation in Sri Lanka. The national action plan for the protection and promotion of Human Rights, Section 5(1) also states that the inclusion of a minimum of 30% quota for women in politics will help Sri Lanka to reach international levels, regarding human rights and women empowerment.

However, a quota system should not be the exclusive means to ensure women's representation; it should only be held as a threshold to encourage women's participation in politics and to voice issues of women (Yusoff, 2016). In establishing a quota system, it is essential to look beyond the number of women. As women who lack civil and economic rights are unable to exercise their political rights fully, the gender quotas, need to be linked with the social and economic redistributive justice in the society.

Advocacy within the Two Major Political Parties

If major political parties give nominations to more women in areas where they traditionally win and support those women candidates, more women are likely to be elected to political bodies in Sri Lanka.

Giving Financial Support for Women Candidates

Many studies have pointed out that the accessibility and availability of resources are critical for women in political campaigns and it directly affects getting nomination and getting elected. If the government is serious in addressing the issue of the underrepresentation of women in political institutions, they should give financial support to the potential female candidates. Political parties should also take some action to provide funds for their female candidates. Liyanage (2004) suggests that the Government should establish a common fund without any party affiliation to help the women candidates of any party. Many studies indicate that a large pool of women candidates, combined with sufficient financial resources, can significantly increase the number of women elected (Ballington & Karam, 2005).

Reforming Electoral System

The electoral system also plays a vital role in determining women's representation in Parliament. Based on empirical evidence from the developed countries, PR can be considered as a better electoral system that helps more women to be elected. Many researchers suggest that multi-winner electoral districts or constituencies increase the chance of women being elected (Yusoff, 2016).

Evaluation of Training Programs and Consolidated List of Trained Women.

Even though a few political leadership training programs have been conducted by the government and NGOs during the past two decades, there was no proper analyses or reports on the impact of those training programs. Given that a large cadre of women has already been trained, it would be useful to compile a consolidated database of women who have followed training and capacity building programs with the cooperation of all organizations that have been involved in training and capacity building work.

Another important fact is that most of these political training programs have also been limited to women from the Southern Sinhalese community (Kodikara, 2009). Women from other ethnic communities in Sri Lanka face further obstacles in politics. For instance, the socio-cultural barriers to participating in politics are far more entrenched in the Muslim Community than within the Sinhalese community. According to Liyanage (2004), Training programs should be held before the elections with women candidates and it should be focused on the role of candidates, public speaking, fundraising, campaign management, identifying key national and local issues and developing leadership skills. This implies that more targeted training programs which consider the specific challenges faced by women in different ethnic groups in Sri Lanka are necessary to enhance the political participation and representation of women.

Interventions to Transform the Political Culture

The major barriers to equal representation of women in Sri Lanka are that the current political culture, male domination and the lack of internal

democracy within political parties (Kodikara, 2009). Thus, it is necessary to challenge these ideological and practical obstacles for women and claim politics as a domain where both men and women can equally participate. Kodikara (2009), in her study “The struggle for equal Political Participation of Women in Sri Lanka”, gives some recommendations to change the political culture of Sri Lanka. According to her, some initiatives should be taken to democratize political parties and ensure greater decision-making power for women within the political party. Women in the political field need to create a space where they can challenge the male-dominated structure within the party. For that, women’s leadership and political skills should be well developed.

Furthermore, Liyanage (2004) also suggests some recommendations to improve women’s status in politics through her study “Party Women: Their Role in Sri Lankan Politics”. As she states, women’s groups should make the effort to change the regulations and traditions of the parties to change the provisions of election laws (funding limitations etc.). For that women’s wings of parties should be strengthened. And also, information on potential women candidates should be compiled and maintained on a systematic basis and should be made available when candidacy or appointments are considered. Furthermore, she suggests that the research institutes should undertake more researches which would help to identify the major impediments to women’s participation in politics.

Conclusion is clear that many attempts to adopt gender-equitable measures to increase women participation and representation in politics were not successful. Sri Lanka was the first country to produce the first woman prime minister. Also, it is a country where women enjoy many achievements in the fields of health and education supported by policies and programmes that promote general equality and gender-specific interventions. The question arises as to why these achievements and related gains were not transferred into participation and representation in politics. Overcoming gender inequality in politics requires understanding the need, commitment and dedication to work towards achieving the goal by all involved including the government, political parties and society. Overcoming the challenge will not only help women achieve their fullest potential but contribute largely to achieving the SDGs.

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