

**(RE-)CONSTRUCTING
PATHWAYS FOR
GRASSROOTS SRI
LANKAN WOMEN'S
POLITICAL
PARTICIPATION:**

TOOLS FOR VALUING
THE 'FEMININE' AND
THE 'LOCAL'

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ABOUT THIS PROJECT

The research project, 'Non-elite pathways to women's political leadership in Sri Lanka and Indonesia' looks at how women involved in grassroots activity can be supported to contest elections. It asks:

- What explains the prevalence of women from elite backgrounds in representative politics?
- How do women politicians conceptualise leadership and representation – and how does this differ according to their background and experience?
- What are the experiences of elected women from diverse backgrounds?
- What role can NGOs, the women's wings of political parties and feminist organisations play in increasing the number and diversity of women elected into parliaments?

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CONTENTS

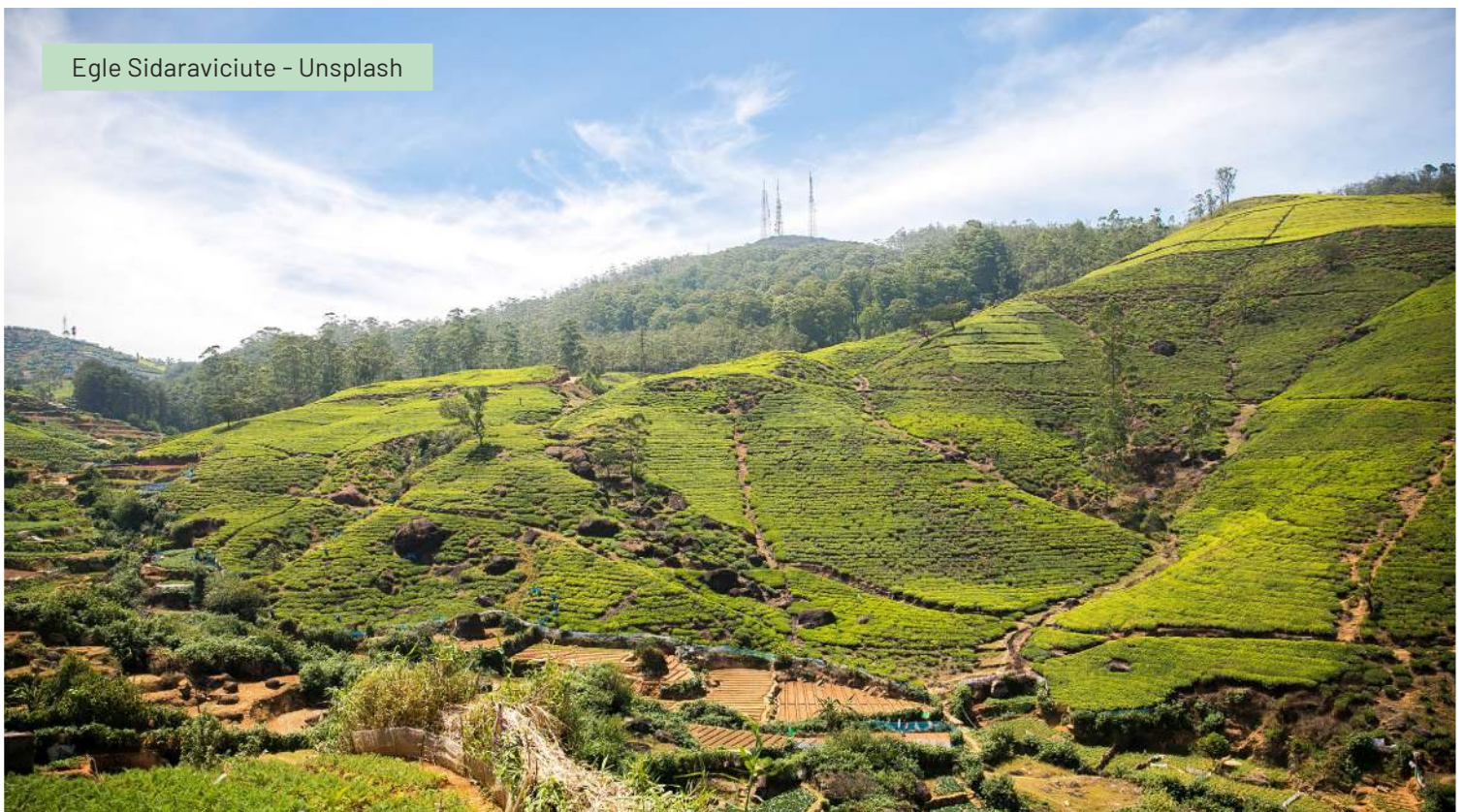
INTRODUCTION	4
Key findings	4
CONTEXT	6
A brief history of women’s political representation in Sri Lanka	6
Opportunities and limitations of the quota system	7
METHOD	8
BREAKING DOWN THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN POLITICAL & SOCIAL	10
Challenging the de-linking of the local and the formal	10
Valuing models of female leadership	11
Politics as social activism	12
RECONSTRUCTING BROKEN PATHWAYS TO POLITICS	14
Tool 1: Quotas as a mechanism to value grassroots participation	14
Tool 2: Women’s self-promotion of life skills, experience, and assets	15
Tool 3: Male counterparts’ valuing of women’s skills, assets, and experience	15
Tool 4: Amplifying apprenticeship through solidarity, mentorship, and networking	17
Tool 5: Making visible grassroots women’s contribution to the Sri Lankan political landscape	18
STRATEGIZING THE WAY FORWARD	20
REFERENCES	21

INTRODUCTION

Sri Lankan women remain under-represented in the domestic political landscape. Drawing on a life-history approach that sees women's pathways to politics as a longer journey, we revisit commonly held assumptions about the participation of women in Sri Lankan politics. Our study reveals often false distinctions between the social and the political experience women bring and explores how Sri Lankan women can be supported to draw on existing grassroots experiences and resources gained in informal politics to enter formal politics.

KEY FINDINGS

- Well-designed and implemented quotas at all levels of government are key to supporting grassroots participation
- Women's self-promotion of their life skills, experience and assets can help to shift pre-existing political ideologies and challenge gender norms
- Male counterparts need to value and give space for women's skills, assets, and experience
- Solidarity, including among more experienced and less experienced women, mentorship and networking are enabling mechanisms to encourage apprentice women to join politics
- Grassroots women's contributions to the Sri Lankan political landscape should be valued and made visible



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In terms of women's political participation, Sri Lanka is one of the worst performing countries in the world, owing to high measures of social development in areas such as health and education that help it to maintain a 'façade of a progressive nation' (Yatawara 2016: 10). But women's inadequate presence in politics has been a decades-long challenge (Kaviratne 2016: 8; Kodikara 2009).

Following the August 2020 election, only 5.38 per cent of Members of Parliament were women (IPU 2021). Sri Lanka ranks at the very low end of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women's 2020 'Women and Politics: 2020' map: 171 out of 190 countries based on the percentage of women in ministerial positions.¹

In a partial effort to address low representation, Sri Lanka introduced a quota for women at the local government level (LGL) through a series of legislative amendments (2012, 2016 and 2017) (Vijayarasa 2020). Prior to this, only 1.9 per cent of representatives at the local government level were women (Election Commission of Sri Lanka 2019). The quota increased this number to 29 percent in 2020 (Vijayarasa 2020).

Yet the quota has done little to address the lack of diversity among women who are successful in entering politics. This partial but limited success of the quota in particular invites further interrogation of why women who are seemingly fit for and interested in politics face broken pathways to participation.

We draw on Mariz Tadros' life history approach to capture Sri Lanka women's 'entire political pathways, rather than focusing only on the point in this journey they had reached when they assumed office' (Tadros 2014: 2). This longer-term lens that acknowledges multiple pathways challenges a narrow approach to

the political apprenticeship of women; it better enables us to study and understand women's particular understandings of politics, the relationships through which a woman's experiences of politics are mediated and the contexts in which women operate – both the political and non-political (Tadros 2014: 2).

We particularly seek to make visible and valued women's grassroots activities prior to actively seeking an entry into the formal political system – activities that offer experiences that can enable women to arrive at and succeed in a political career. We offer tools to remodel political careers at the grassroots to increase the possibility that they are better valued and can become a route to election (Jakimow et al. 2023: 2).

This research pre-dates the political turmoil that overtook Sri Lanka in 2022, but the most optimistic among us may see the dismantling of the ideological hegemony as paving the way for the implementation of the recommendations offered in this paper (Uyangoda 2022: 6).

1 Spain ranks first with 66.7% of women ministers while Sri Lanka reported 6.3% of women ministers. Comparatively, Sri Lankan women's parliamentary participation is significantly lower than its South Asian counterparts: India (10.9%), Bangladesh (19.8%) or Nepal (33.2%) (Law and Society Trust 2016).

CONTEXT

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WOMEN'S POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN SRI LANKA

Patriarchal and socio-political ideology shape the political journeys of Sri Lankan women. As Naila Kabeer observes, 'the political culture in which parties operate and the extent to which it is conducive to the promotion of women's involvement in politics', in combination with the strength of patriarchal ideologies and degree of religious opposition, together determine how women are welcomed into politics (2010: 21).

Historically, Sri Lankan women's participation in politics outperformed many of its South Asian counterparts. Universal suffrage was granted in 1931. Sri Lanka elected the first female head of government in the world, Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike, in 1960 and her daughter, Chandrika Bandarnaike Kumaratunga, was elected the country's first female president in 1994 and again in 1999 (Vijayarasa 2022).

Nonetheless, the vast majority of Sri Lankan women who have risen to power have done so through elite-driven political connections to a male counterpart (Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003: 24; Kodikara 2009: 15). Of the 12 women parliamentarians currently in office, six entered parliament following the demise of a male relative (Hannan 2020). We challenge the ways in which such a pathway into leadership is too often treated as an exclusively Asian phenomenon (Vijayarasa forthcoming).

Nonetheless, this particular and often elite journey into the political arena is an important dimension for understanding women's rise in Sri Lankan politics.

A more recent figure in politics without such political lineage is Rosy Senanayake, the first female mayor of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo (Perry 2018), although she was a public figure before entering politics. Through her position, Senanayake has raised the concerns of fellow women such as calling for a quota for women in political institutions (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara 2012).

Senanayake does not stand alone as a political female advocate for women's interests. Other Sri Lankan women MPs speak against domestic violence and in favour of liberalizing abortion, sex education in school and increasing awareness regarding use of contraception (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara 2012). In 2021, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus collectively supported the first-ever woman nominated for the position of Deputy Inspector General of Police when her appointment was challenged by male counterparts, primarily because of her sex (ColomboPage News Desk 2021).

Unsurprisingly, not all women pursue a position in politics to advocate on behalf of women. The scarcity of women willing and able to push a pro-women agenda is yet another reason to reinterrogate the broken pathways for a greater diversity of female political participants.



OPPORTUNITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF THE QUOTA SYSTEM

A mandatory quota in the local government was a first step in remedying women's low representation. Sri Lanka was among the last Asian nations to introduce such a quota (Jalalzai and Krook 2010; Krook 2009). Introduced in 2016, the Sri Lankan quota is often termed a '25% quota', having reserved seats for women 'as an independent group' through a one-third increase in the total number of seats. Legislative mandates in 2017 instructed parties to nominate women on both First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) and Proportional Representation electoral lists. Following the quota's inaugural implementation in February 2018 at the Local Government election, over 2,526 women obtained a position at the local level (Imtiaz 2018). This is a drastic boost from a mere 2% to roughly 29% of women in local government (Vijayarasa 2020).

However, this system is yet to deliver the promise of agency and an equal playing field for women, including those from the grassroots. Women still have to depend on parties dominated by men for their nominations (Sittampalam 2019), while alleged cases of sexual bribery in exchange for the nomination of women continue (Munasinghe

and Ariyaratne 2019).

A perception persists that 'weaker' women who 'can [be] control[led]' by party members are promoted while women nominees who are well trained and perceived to be more independent remain sidelined (Vijayarasa 2020: 6). The election of ill-equipped women, who fail to achieve the intended expectations that female representation is hoped to deliver, may further discourage other women from entering politics (Vijayarasa 2020). The high incidence in which the female relatives, friends and supporters of elite families or popular political figures were nominated raises doubt as to the quota's potential to diversify the Sri Lankan political landscape (see also Kahandagama 2016; Kodikara 2016).

It is questionable whether the increase in numbers can alone transform into women-centred and gendered concerns being adequately addressed and achieving progressive political and social changes in the country (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara 2012). There is a heightened need to have female politicians who act as role models and to challenge traditional norms, perceptions and stereotypes pertaining to women's roles (Jakimow et al. 2023: 2). This is particularly important because of the weight borne by women who enter politics.

METHOD

The research underpinning this paper views women's engagement in politics not as the final destination but as part of a longer journey – a chosen pathway among many – into politics. Such a pathways approach identifies lessons from women who have successfully entered politics (Spark, Cox, & Corbett 2018) but also shows how a greater diversity of women might walk particular pathways to politics. It allows us to learn from the variety of tools deployed to transfer, amplify, extend and translate valuable and undervalued experience for politics (Jakimow et al. 2023).

A team of two Sri Lankan researchers at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies in Colombo conducted in-depth interviews with 13 women (see Table 1, referred to as informants throughout this paper) from November 2020 to March 2021: seven incumbents or former members of local government, provincial council and national parliament; and six leaders and activists within the community and grassroots organisations, who have contested and not been successful or who have chosen not to contest.

Our selection reflected Sri Lanka's diversity: organisations that span various religious groups, community/ethnic organisations and feminist NGOs, women who advocate for women living with disabilities and for LGBTQI rights. The sample also sought to reflect the different pathways women use to enter politics, including women with and without political family ties and women who entered politics through the quota system. The rationale behind selecting women activists

was to include women who demonstrate a strong political vision, have advocated for women's political participation and perhaps even appear to have access to the material resources necessary to contest. Yet, they have nonetheless chosen not to do so.

TABLE 1: KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

2020	2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informant A: Local government member. • Informant B: Women’s rights activist. • Informant K: Unsuccessful candidate. • Informant I: Women’s rights activist. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Informant C: Provincial council member. • Informant D: Incumbent. • Informant E: “Local government member and aspiring (national) candidate. • Informant F: Aspiring candidate. • Informant G: Incumbent. • Informant H: Local government member. • Informant J: Unsuccessful candidate.

The team conducted interviews in English, Sinhala and Tamil and subsequently developed them into a case study format. All 13 case studies were then coded for key themes using grounded theory. We sought to highlight the devaluing of both the feminine and local that persists in Sri Lanka. Additionally, we conducted six focus group discussions (FGDs) in all three languages with women in office, former Local Government (LG) members,

aspirants, women activists, and former female youth parliamentarians from May to June 2021. In some cases, women activists were also aspirants. As indicated in Table 2, several FGDs brought together a diversity of informants; in other instances, women in office and activists were interviewed separately. The FGDs took place online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All FGDs consisted of between three and nine participants (see Table 2).

TABLE 2: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS (FGDS) – ALL 2021

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION	PARTICIPANTS
FGD 1	Activists and a scholar in Colombo.
FGD 2	Activists, councillors, and a researcher from Colombo, Kandy, and Nuwara Eliya.
FGD 3	Women elected and activists from Mannar, Puttalam and Jaffna.
FGD 4	Activists, councillors, former LG members from Galle and Matara.
FGD 5	Women elected from Jaffna, Batticaloa and Trincomalee.
FGD 6	Former members of youth parliament from Nuwara Eliya, Kalutara, and Galle.

BREAKING DOWN THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE POLITICAL AND THE SOCIAL

Women's political participation must be understood within Sri Lanka's political-cultural constraints. Cornwall and Goetz (2005) describe the important but neglected nature of political apprenticeship for many women that occurs in non-party settings, including civil society organisations, feminist activism and community welfare groups. Yet a 'hierarchy of political activism' devalues this political activity of women at the grassroots because it is both 'feminine' and 'local' (Devika and Thampi, 2012). This is a challenge that is evident and persistent in Sri Lanka.

Experience in formal politics continues to be highly valued in the Sri Lankan context. These spaces often see a reproduction of power among political elites that is common across South and Southeast Asia and has been the subject of much scholarly debate (see for example Derichs & Thompson 2013; Kurniawati 2018; Labonne, Parsa, & Querubin 2015; Querubin 2011; Thompson 2002).

We acknowledge that women who benefit from known and acknowledged political exposure may face an unsuccessful pathway into politics. Even as bystanders of politically active (male) relatives, there is a continued need for equal access to political opportunities and for greater recognition of these women aspirants' agency.

CHALLENGING THE DE-LINKING OF THE LOCAL AND THE FORMAL

Local and formal politics in Sri Lanka is de-linked and uncoupled. Social norms define women's roles and in turn, define the local and grassroots as the place for women. The distinct lines drawn between social and political roles are even starker for some groups of women, particularly as a result of ingrained cultural norms, reifying a perception that contesting elections is not 'suitable' for Sri Lankan women (Munasinghe & Ariyaratne 2019).

Broken pathways between valuable grassroots activism and experience and formal politics are probably felt most among women from culturally conservative communities. In some circumstances, women's political engagement is perceived as arising to a 'personal insult' and an affront to men living in houses with women who chose to contest (Informant I).

Often women deliberately challenge the suggestion that politics is unsuitable work for women and take steps to 'conform' in these spaces where they are seen as non-conformist. Attire was central to the remarks of almost all informants interviewed in this study. A saree may not only be an advantage but an essential tool for Sri Lankan women to find a place in politics; women shared with us how expectations are high, to not only dress in traditional clothing, but to wear one's saree the

'right' way. While some informants identified these 'requirements' as disconcerting, the reality is that for many, 'a woman's identity seems to come from and is measured through these factors' (Informant K).

These socio-cultural norms exacerbate the gendered insensitivities that inhibit women's political engagement, even after they manage to identify a successful pathway into formal politics. For instance, elected women may not be informed of party meetings or may be informed at the last minute; meetings are held at inconvenient times of day, often night time when women face challenges related to care responsibilities and transport (Informant A; Informant K). The expectation of balancing responsibilities between 'home' and 'public life' may inhibit political participation altogether:

How many sacrifices do we make to come into politics? Sometimes, we have to take permission from the husband, and face many other problems when being involved in politics. The husband expects us to perform our duties as a housewife, like preparing food on time, before we do our duty to the country' (Informant C).

Considering the socio-cultural values at play, the more vocal and skilled women aspirants are quickly undermined:

We do not come into politics to make it our source of income. There is no room in society for those who are really willing to make such a commitment. The reason is that there are many people in our country today who have turned politics into a source of income. Such people have blocked space for those who wish to make a voluntary sacrifice. (FGD 6 2021).

Women engaged in different political roles – not necessarily as an elected official but even as a campaigner – may face criticism for speaking too loudly, attending meetings in the evening, or for allowing a man to garland

her (Informant J). Most women are 'not heard but only seen' (Informant H). Women council members at the local level may be called 'rude nicknames' and are allocated odd hours for their activities (Informant I). Women politicians and candidates face verbal harassment; at other times, women are framed as incapable (Informant H). Harassment through social media is a new form of attack with little or no legal ramifications for those accused of these wrongdoings (Informant K).

Redefining women's place and space is fundamental in re-constructing pathways to politics.

VALUING MODELS OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP

Our research also demonstrates a clear potential for women politicians to bring a different kind of leadership model to this fraught political environment. For women who have come from grassroots activism, there are specific opportunities to create a narrative around what a diversity of women can do to transform how politics is 'done'. For many women engaged in this research, serving one's community is key: constructing roads, distributing rations, conducting group discussions with women who aspire to enter politics and revive village societies and children's clubs at the community level (Informant A).

These community-driven and localised priorities for women aspirants may reflect an essentialist idea of womanhood. Nonetheless, our informants indicated a desire for and ability to help foster an alternative political culture.

There was a definite call to value the women who came to local councils after 'representing women's organizations, sports clubs and youth clubs in the village and doing a lot of work for my village through those organizations' (FGD 4 2021)). Much of this work is performed before

the eyes of ‘the women of the village’ (FGD 4 2021) who are, too often, ignored as voters. Supporting candidates to value and promote this history of community contributions, and making voters aware of the political apprenticeship that many women have undertaken in non-party settings, can bolster women’s political ambitions.

Ethnic-based and religious community-organising can be another enabling pathway for participation. Many women feel empowered by their ethnic identity – be that Tamil, Sinhala, or Muslim – and their ability to represent a particular group of constituents, including in their own party.

One municipal council representative expressed her involvement in human rights work as stemming from her family’s expulsion from Jaffna in the North of Sri Lanka by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1990. She was further motivated by a desire to get involved in the reform of the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act 1975 (Law No. 41/1975) (Informant A) and wanted to understand, from the ‘inside’, the challenges women politicians face.

A woman’s ethnicity may hinder when it reinforces or underpins the patriarchal values that see little place for women in politics. Informants sought to identify ways to support aspirants to use the enabling aspects of one’s ethnic identity, such as a position in a local religious community group, to facilitate an acceptance into formal politics and enhance the impact of door-to-door campaigning at the grassroots level (Informant H).

While some women see caste or ethnic identity as creating division (Informant J), others sought to quantify the benefits that can be gained when one’s social identity is valued as political capital: ‘caste vote has about a 60% effect during an election’ (Informant C). As such, caste, ethnicity and religion may be useful to construct what appears to be

a largely absent pathway to politics, or to reconstruct a fairly limited one, if one journeys alone in politics (Informant J).

POLITICS AS SOCIAL ACTIVISM

Politics can be better understood as the extension of a woman aspirant’s social activism. FGD participants reiterated the importance of being involved in grassroots organising for at least four years as a ‘prerequisite’ for women entering politics.

Concerningly, our research suggests that demonstrated community engagement is an additional and distinct ‘expectation’ on women aspirants when compared to men. One informant described a pathway to politics from years of working on child protection, the rights of people with mental health issues, gender-based discrimination, education, and trade union activity.

While in this study we seek to value this grassroots work, we do not want to reinforce an expectation that places greater burden on female aspirants than males. Nonetheless, important examples offer lessons for future aspirants. One informant spoke of the value of forming a women’s movement (a Women’s Committee) within the party (Informant D) as part of the process of valuing and revaluing the contribution of women with a history of grassroots activism.

Moreover, resources and infrastructure can be gained through social activism that goes beyond money and party politics, such as networks, recognition, and opportunities to develop one’s skills. Women can develop and expand relationships and a voter base by being part of the grassroots without spending money on publicity.

Skills such as leadership, public speaking, mobilizing people, and knowledge on social issues, political mechanisms and managing finances can be enhanced by being practically engaged in social activities.

One such activist, who set up a foundation in the Galle District, uses that organisation as a platform to get women involved in politics and initiatives to strengthen the economy: 'When I was contesting the election, these things that I did at the village level were a great strength to me and because of that I had some recognition in the society' (FGD 4 2021).

Skills acquired through community activism may be particularly essential as many women identified politics as a space into which women would not otherwise be invited. Rather, women can use the skills and experiences gained in the informal spaces to challenge the existing party structure and hierarchy: 'Nobody will welcome you with open arms. You must know to work your way through' (Informant H). While engaging in community activism may not always form a clear pathway to politics, engagement in youth parliament seems to provide additional benefits such

as political networking opportunities and often direct invitations to contest in local government elections representing their political parties (FGD 6 2021).

Yet social and community networks are too often seen as distinct from politics, which may sustain male dominance of politics. There is comparatively less recognition and respect accorded to women who enter politics in contrast to the value and honour carried by women engaged in activism.

While these women envision a different type of leadership and political ethos, they do not always see these aspirations as having a space in formal politics. Some potential aspirants share the view that there is much to lose. The activist woman may not want to be tainted by party politics: 'I was a little scared that I would lose the image I had created through the Youth Parliament if I contest for the Pradeshiya Sabha' (FGD 6 2021). A deeper understanding of the ideological work and practices that go into the maintenance and reproduction of these boundaries is needed in order to challenge them.



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RECONSTRUCTING BROKEN PATHWAYS TO POLITICS

We offer five ways to bridge the divides highlighted in the previous section and begin to (re-)construct the broken pathways to politics in Sri Lanka. Our goal is to consider how existing interventions can be better exploited and/or reconceived to promote greater valuation of the political apprenticeship many women have undergone through their life histories.

1: QUOTAS AS A MECHANISM TO VALUE GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION

Quotas have been used as a correctional measure in response to underrepresentation since the 1970s (Krook 2006).

In the case of Sri Lanka, the local government-level (LGL) quota has seen women previously not involved in politics invited into the political space. Even by starting its electoral law reforms at the local level, the LGL quota offered the prospects of longer-term change. After all, many women who seek to rise to formal national level politics could benefit from this more recognised local experience.

Indeed, while previously women were seen as 'vote generating machines', with the onset of the quota, women from the 'outside' were invited in (Informant E). The quota, while flawed for its complexity and for creating a sense that women were a political 'add-on' (Vijayarasa 2020: 5), presented a significant opportunity. If replicated at the provincial and national levels, it is a notable means to (re-)construct one pathway that could lead to a dramatic reversal of the extremely low numbers of women in politics at these levels

of government. Even for some women who had been involved in politics since their school days, it was only after the introduction of the quota that they legitimately saw a pathway for their entry into local government (Informant H).

This potential success must be combined with valuing women who have a life history of activism and engagement as suitable to contest. The 2018 LGL quota resulted in many women being 'thrust into the system who were intellectually and materially unprepared' (Informant A).

Recalling women's political apprenticeship outside of formal politics, questions remain as to what is meant by 'preparedness'. Research participants were particularly critical of the excess power that lies in the hands of (male) party leaders to determine the nomination of women on the First-Past-The-Post and Proportional Representation lists. Quotas can still be an avenue to shine light on the apprenticeship women have gained at the grassroots and a good base for better representation of women in politics, even in the context of their limitations and perceptions of women holding 'free', 'bonus' or 'sympathy' seats (Informant B).

2: WOMEN'S SELF-PROMOTION OF LIFE SKILLS, EXPERIENCE, AND ASSETS

The media is essential to counter the devaluing of both the 'feminine' and the 'local'. Yet too often, women aspirants lack adequate exposure from the media (Informant H) to gain publicity, promote their political ideologies, tackle injustices and to convince people of their successes once they are politicians.

Despite its usefulness, there are many challenges that women aspirants face due to media dynamics. Media rarely promotes grassroots level women's activism and those who are new to politics. Media is often quick to publicize women's 'faults' and outward appearances, undermining the value of the 'feminine' and hindering the reconceptualization of formal politics in which women can and must be present.

The media coverage women receive is mostly under limited conditions. For example, due to a cancellation of another politician, or broadcasting at a time when people do not usually watch television (FGD 2 2021). The 'feminist' is treated as a secondary add-on. Money, or the lack thereof, also influences women's access to publicity in both mainstream and social media.

Research participants shared that women need better exposure on engaging with media, how to deal with gender-based abuse and training to navigate these challenges. Opportunities need to be given to women to ensure that their leadership is a positive point of discussion in public forums (FGD 4 2021). Here, the contrast to community activism becomes stark: engagement in community organizations or social activity does not usually require a large amount of money. The media proves to be an important aspect of reconstructing broken pathways and offering society an alternative perspective on women's political apprenticeship. New narratives need

to be created, to present a greater diversity of grassroots women, and help to shift low numbers of women willing to contest. Women may also need support to identify issues and carve out a particular political position and vision which they are then able to communicate (Informant D), creating a need for training on speaking, presentation and lobbying skills (Lakmali 2020) to best communicate these unique capacities and skillsets. Training is a tool to amplify existing assets, skills, and experience rather than to fill gaps.

3: MALE COUNTERPARTS' VALUING OF WOMEN'S SKILLS, ASSETS, AND EXPERIENCE

Parties have a pivotal role to play in increasing women's participation and success as candidates. Yet patriarchal norms have infiltrated the practice of many parties, where women are not able to make party lists, get cut off during nominations, and do not have the same access to campaign financing as men (FGD 4 2021; Informant F).

Male politicians seem to use women's support to further their political power, but do not necessarily believe nor see the need for women to contest or be elected. According to one respondent, the parties 'keep women as foot-soldiers instead of giving them leadership or decision-making roles' (FGD 1 2021), believing politics to be 'men's property'. Such practices undermine the value attributed to women's historical contributions to the community. In turn, one provincial-level respondent raised the question, 'Where is the acknowledgement of our sacrifices to politics?' (Informant C). Such concentration of power renders the women 'helpless' in supporting the community (Informant C).

The disbursement of funds further shows the unequal treatment between male and female party members. One informant felt that they



must 'beg' to even receive smaller funds than male counterparts:

I cried and told my friend, "I don't even ask my husband for money. Now I have to ask some unknown man for money on behalf of these women! It is like begging' (Informant A).

Even many of those who are successful shared that there is discrimination and discrepancy in how councils and parties allocate funds for female councillors to implement projects. Women face challenges in proposing new initiatives and are met with opposition from male party members:

We will go and speak eloquently with regards to our new proposals and seek advice ...Then, they [male councillors] will shout at us. They will hit the table. There'll be a schedule there to vote for the proposal. There'll be a majority vote to obstruct women or to bring them down (FGD 5 2021).

The outcomes lead to a dual devaluing of both women and what they bring to the political table. Moreover, vocal opposition to such

discrimination creates a real risk for women of being assigned a ward unreceptive to them as a politician, inhibiting their chances of success at the next election (Informant A). Lack of transparency, consistency and communication around nomination to party lists further exacerbates barriers to the place of women (Informant K).

Male counterparts also appear intimidated by women's involvement in social activities and socio-political knowledge and skills. The close connections women have to the grassroots is a threat to the long-held status-quo, (FGD 3 2021).

Much work needs to be done to challenge this culture within and among parties. Political parties require a specific and separate constitution with regard to women's representation, nominations processes and security. Further, our informants recommended that party organizing committees should have equal members of men and women, with decisions on nominations a collective effort and not based on the sole discretion of the often male leader of the party (FGD 4 2021).

The scope of the problem and investment in gender-sensitive capacity-building differ from party to party. Some parties were known to educate candidates not only on how to campaign, but also 'how to connect what you're saying to your ideology' (Informant F). Such party-driven support enables women candidates to create deep and sustained links between their history of activism and political careers, underpinned by integrity.

4: AMPLIFYING APPRENTICESHIP THROUGH SOLIDARITY, MENTORSHIP, AND NETWORKING

There is a neglected potential to better utilize retired and present women politicians to bolster and amplify the skills, assets and resources new women bring to the political landscape. Newly elected women expressed disappointment that senior women politicians did not reach out to support or congratulate them on their successes (Informant E). Networking and support from senior women politicians for new women politicians and those seeking to contest is inadequate (Lakmali 2020). Party politics may inhibit greater solidarity between women politicians, senior and junior, which prevents them from uniting to promote common causes (Informant A).

There are, however, exceptions: 'She came to me as a 'daughter'. Women leaders are important so that women can approach them' (Informant J). One informant spoke of a senior woman politician, from an opposing party, assisting a newer woman politician to fix her incorrectly draped sari before a press conference with the media (Informant B).

Yet, the comment speaks more to the norms constraining women's participation and the ways in which conformity with social codes may cloud or override work on substantive political issues.

The same informant mentioned a coalition of women politicians in the city of Kurunegala where women politicians of all political parties come together, using this membership not only to debate opposing ideologies but also to share genuine friendships (Informant B). Some of the new cohorts of women politicians who entered through the quota system have formed networks of support and congratulate each other on their achievements in the absence of acknowledgment by others (Informant E).

Such mentoring programmes lack structure, although this is slowly changing now that there are women's organisations within parties. Previously non-existent women's committees are being formed (Informant H). Such solidarity building could aid in advancing Tadros' recommendation that we 'foster confidence' among women that they already know how to engage politically (Tadros 2014: 32).

The Sri Lankan Women Parliamentarians' Caucus is a key avenue for women politicians to band together across party-lines (non-partisan) to raise the visibility of common concerns (e.g. child abuse in children's homes) or to challenge gender bias in politics (e.g. coming together to support the appointment of the first female Deputy Inspector General of Police)(Informant G). However, ideological differences between political parties represented in the Women's Caucus will remain a challenge (Informant D).

A sense of boldness may be required to be an advocate on more controversial issues that advance women's rights, including gender equality, abortion and sex education (Informant K). Networks need to be strengthened and integrated across the local, provincial, and national levels, not only to develop solidarity among women politicians, but also to support the creation of secondary leadership, where a woman in office mentors and publicly advocates for an aspirant to enter politics in the next election. Indeed, cross-

party solidarity is a key 'reason why male politicians are made to turn around and look at women'. With more women supported through cross-party activities, '[h]ereafter, they will become a force' (FGD 5 2021).

5: MAKING VISIBLE GRASSROOTS WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE SRI LANKAN POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

While at times women shun the label of 'woman politician', a unifying theme across conversations with informants was the potential for Sri Lankan women to bring a more transformative leadership style to the political landscape. The desire not to be seen as a woman politician should not be equated with a lack of capacity or willingness to speak on women's issues.

For instance, one informant, who was unsuccessful in her attempts to contest a national-level parliamentary seat, affirmed: 'Women's issues are national issues, and national issues are women's issues' (Informant K). In pushing for women not to be sidelined or ghettoised in the construction of political priorities, she simultaneously wanted to come into a decision-making position to be a voice for women and to change the discriminatory policies.

Women aspirants and politicians identified several strong characteristics of a good leader: a leader is available to her constituents and guides her people with honesty; leadership means not touching public money and building trust (Informant J). It is this contribution of women to politics that informants sought to be more valued.

Informants spoke of women 'doing' politics differently: rather than talking to large gatherings over a microphone on a big stage, women aspirants may 'meet women in small

groups of 20-30 to discuss political issues' (Informant A). In contrast, politics practised by men was seen as 'anarchic' and 'rowdy' – based on threats and the desire to control and rule over a community (Informant A). Unlike men, 'women contribute a lot of energy to the party's success without spending money' (Informant C).

Once women are elected, this culture of masculinity that invades politics inhibits women politicians from delivering change. Informants blame this masculinity for the formation of a society that: (a) does not question politicians; (b) does not reflect upon the future; and (c) expects large returns for minimal contributions (Informant A). The masculine culture of politics may foster a sense that an aggressive approach must be adopted in terms of language, tone and demeanour in order to be successful (Informant D). One has either to conform with these norms or find a way to exploit and use one's own style to be heard.

At the same time, one informant cautioned: 'the notion that politics is dirty and everything else is pure and that everything political is tainted is very dangerous' (Informant D). A feminist may make a very good woman leader as she will be more collective, consultative and less hierarchical (Informant D). There is also an evident expectation that women politicians can make a case for fellow women's issues (Informant G). Women seek out women in politics for support on such issues as domestic abuse, abandonment of spouse, employment issues and housing problems.

Other successful incumbents spoke of bringing a gendered perspective to their work at the council level on issues of employment, domestic violence, drug abuse, day-care facilities, provision of food rations to families during the pandemic, and housing projects (Informant H). For advocates of minority issues, it was seen as imperative to have a voice in parliament; at times, the ability to

represent the interests of an excluded group may be the main incentive to contest (Lakmali 2020).

Women voters also need to value the place for women in politics, with lack of support from fellow women a notable problem and tightly linked to the devaluing of the skills, assets and experiences women bring (Lakmali 2020). In this sense, there is an evident need to work with the voter population as well:

What I found when speaking to them was that most women thought that politics only amounted to the day that votes are cast. That too, they voted for the person the breadwinner of the household (either the husband or the son) recommended. They don't seek knowledge on their own. They did not understand the value of voting (Informant I).

Informants expressed a thirst for capacity building on how to cultivate a political vision and purpose, as well as navigating existing structures and new obstacles, such as lack of accountability for harassment through social media. Women in some communities may need training in the basic practicalities around the use of technology and social media (Informant I).

Other informants shared similar sentiments, however, they were unable to identify concrete reasons why women constituents were not voting for fellow women (Informant C), an issue worth interrogating further.

TOOLS TO (RE-) CONSTRUCT PATHWAYS TO POLITICS

Quotas as a pathway to improving the number and diversity of women in politics	Women's self-promotion of life skills, experience and assets	Male counterparts' valuing of women's skills, assets and experience.	Solidarity, mentorship and networks to amplify apprenticeship.	Making visible grassroots women's contribution to the Sri Lankan political landscape.
Legislators back reforms to introduce well-designed quotas at all levels of government.	Aspirants and incumbents to further reflect on how they can balance eschewing and conforming to societal norms for political gain.	Male politicians must support women with the skills and assets to achieve a greater diversity of women in politics. Political parties require specific and separate constitutions to establish targets and guide women's representation, nominations processes and security.	Women in politics, particularly those who are retired and may be unburdened by party strictures, should seek to support initiatives that foster cross-party solidarity among those earlier in their political career.	Media should employ strategies to reduce gender-bias in coverage of women politicians and engage in gender-sensitivity training.

STRATEGIZING THE WAY FORWARD

Too often the burden for challenging structural inequalities rests on the shoulders of women; the tools presented here require government and other stakeholders at all levels to step-up. A quota at all levels of government will require significant legislative reform and therefore the backing of current (female and male) legislators to realise that possibility. Male politicians and party elites must support the entry of a greater diversity of women in politics and those with an applicable skill set to translate this political apprenticeship into a successful run for politics. Retired women politicians who may be less burdened by the strictures of the party, have much to offer aspirants by way of lessons to amplify skills and experience obtained at the grassroots.

When deployed by these actors, the five tools can help to ensure what women bring – the feminine and the local – to politics is better valued. Yet, significant challenges remain to achieving a greater diversity of women politicians. Political violence was identified as ‘one of the biggest obstacles to women’s participation’ that must be removed if changes are to be seen in women’s participation at all levels of politics (Informant C). The media requires training in gender-sensitivity and should employ strategies to ensure it values women incumbents, and giving them space and time in reporting, particularly in the case of grassroots women.

While it may be difficult for senior women active in politics to provide mentorship – due to conflicts in interest – retired women politicians may be able to play this mentorship

role. Currently, mentoring is done through civil society organizations, NGOs, and women’s organizations. They provide training and create opportunities for cross-party interaction and mentoring.

Further reflection is needed, too, on how women politicians in Sri Lanka can find the balance between eschewing societal norms and conforming for political gain. Conformity, at least in the interim, may be the most strategic approach to find the political power to effect change on a deeper and more sustainable level.

Assumptions remain that Sri Lankan politics is restricted to politicians, to big stages, and to ‘two-piece national suits’. This view must change for citizens – and aspirants – to see the value of politics in shifting and improving people’s everyday lives (Informant F).

Politics requires a transformation of thinking to see voting as a duty of a citizen, without an expectation from voters that they will receive a handout from the candidate (Informant E). At the same time, the reality remains that for some Sri Lankan women actively involved in advocacy for ethnic harmony, gender equality, reconciliation and human rights, politics may simply not be a preferred option. Certain women’s issues may, in the views of some, be better addressed through social politics and activism (Informant B). Change takes time, and the increasing presence of women in politics will in and of itself make a notable difference in amplifying what women bring on their political journey.

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