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## An Analysis of Women's Representation in Divisional Political Activism of Sri Lanka

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### ABSTRACT

Women's representation in divisional politics in Sri Lanka can be identified as lacking. In the year 1991 out of 2632 Pradeshiya Sabha members, the women representation was only 42. In 1997 it was 55 women out of 3137 and in 2006, 51 women were chosen out of 3243 Pradeshiya Sabha members. In Sri Lanka drafts have been approved to increase women representation in divisional politics by 25%. But, the women being elected is considerably low in number. This study examines the challenges faced by women in divisional political activism. Accordingly, this study explore the challenges faced by the Sri Lankan women in divisional political arena. What are the reasons for minority of women members in divisional political arena? Research questions are what makes women to have less say in politics in comparison with men? and How does the stereotypical gender roles influence on women political activism? The research field is concerned with Poojapitiya Pradeshiya Sabha. The women who participated in Pradeshiya Sabha elections are considered as the research sample. Interviews were conducted in the data accumulation process. Further, the main informants aided in gathering necessary data. According to the research findings, it was identified that the challenges faced by women in divisional politics are social, economic, political, and cultural factors. As social factors, social attitudes toward women, status, and role within the family, Patriarchal culture which makes women to underestimate themselves, lack of experience and negative attitudes and economic factors are lack of financial and materialistic resources, and political and cultural factors are the informal political culture, lack of practical knowledge, less tactful and over confidence are identified as the reasons which impact the women not to represent themselves in the divisional political arena. The study suggests to abolish the negative opinions and marginalizing women in society. Moreover, raising economic conditions, gender equality, provision of political training and knowledge, financial and materialistic support, involvement of women in decision making, not allowing political frauds and law making can be done. Awareness should be done to avoid being victims of political frauds.

**Key words:** Pradeshiya Sabha elections, Patriarchal culture, Women representation, Political culture and Social attitudes

## INTRODUCTION

The fact that there is a difference in society based on gender: male or female is mainly observed in developing countries. This unequal differentiation is evident in country's political system as well. Sri Lankans were given the voting power by Donoughmore constitution in 1931. Even though Sri Lankans were granted with independence and human rights in 1948 it is not visible in their political system hence is identified as a situation when deficiency in political system is seen. Women involvement in politics is vital. A considerable amount of the country's gross profit is earned by the women who are in apparel industry and foreign employed. Women get the in-charge of household activities, taking care of children, managing work at home and other. Similarly, women's participation in welfare activities like Shramadana programs and village councils is evident. Even though women get involved in such voluntary activities they have not received any recognition or financial value.

It has been a South- Asian concept during the 15<sup>th</sup> century BC to recognize women kind as sacred. According to history, it is recorded that women were worshiped as Earth's mother "Jagath Matha". Later with the spread of Brahmana teachings, these practices faded away. In Sri Lankan society mother is known as the 'Buddha of the home' and the saying 'The hand that swings the cradle rules the world' which emphasize the value of women.

Considering biological features, women have highlighting biological features than men among which the appearance of breast, voice, soft skin, long hair, physical complexion, no beard, modesty and the ability to bear children are exceptional to women. Hence, it helps to identify men and women separately although it does not give a fair judgment as biological factors cannot determine individuals' capabilities at all times.

Females are the majority of Sri Lankan population. In 2018 out of 21,184,824 population female population has been 10,732,579. As a percentage it is 50.7%, male population is 10,452,244 which is 49.3% as a percentage. There are many factors which impact the gender inequality and involvement of women in the development process of Sri Lanka. The negligence of women participation in country's development which holds 50% of the population is a wastage of national labour (Liyanage, 2012).

A country's decision making is depended on the political factor. At present Sri Lankan political system has a considerably low involvement of women. It is evident in National Constitution to Parliamentary system that the women representation is low in number.

**Table 1****Sri Lankan women representation from national constitution to parliamentary system  
1947-2015**

<b>Year</b>	1947	1952	1956	1960 - March	1960 - July	1965	1970	1977	1989	1994	2000	2001	2004	2010	2015
Total Number of elected	<b>101</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>157</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>	<b>225</b>
Total number of elected women	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>13</b>
Percentage (100%)	<b>3.0</b>	<b>2.0</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>1.9</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>6.5</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>4.0</b>	<b>4.4</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.8</b>	<b>5.8</b>

**Sri Lankan Election Commission reports data 1947-2015**

In Provincial Council politics the women representation is recorded as minimal. In the year 1993 except for the Northern and Eastern provinces the total number of members were 380 out of which only 18 were women. It is 4.7% as a percentage of the total number. It was 18 in the year 1999 which is 3.2%. In 2004 it was 19% which is 5.0% and in 2008 including Eastern province, the total number of members elected was 417 out of which 17 were women. As a percentage it was 4.1% of the total.

Similarly in Pradeshiya Sabha elections the above condition can be seen. There were only 42 women representatives out of 2632 Pradeshiya Sabha members in the year 1991. Only 55 women representation out of 3137 was seen in the year 1997. In 2006 it was 51 women representation out of 3243. In reference to Municipal Councils since the women representation in politics is low, it has been agreed to raise women representation by 30% to provoke women's active participation in politics.

In Sri Lankan divisional politics, the Pradeshiya Sabha member positions are majorly held by men. In 1997, it was 3137 Pradeshiya Sabha members out of which 55 were women. As a percentage 1.7%. In 2006, out of 3243 only 51 were women which is 1.6% as a percentage. Among 4465, only 85 were women which is 1.9% in the year 2016. Even

though women represent themselves in politics, there is a lesser chance of winning the candidacy. Hence highlights the importance of looking for the reasons why women cannot win in a majority of women populated country. Further, the study focuses on the influence of women in politics.

### **Research field**

The research field taken into consideration in this study is Poojapitiya Pradeshiya Sabha, Central Province in Sri Lanka.

### **Research problem**

What are the challenges faced by women in representing themselves to divisional politics, deals as the research problem of this study. It is identified that the lack of women participation in Pradeshiya Sabha Politics has a negative impact on social development. Hence, the importance of identifying the reasons for women not representing themselves in politics is considered in this study. It also identifies the challenges and difficulties faced by women which prevents them in divisional politics.

### **Research questions**

What are the reasons for minority of women members in divisional political arena?

In comparison to men, what makes women to have less say in politics?

How does the stereotypical gender roles influence on women political activism?

## **RESEARCH OBJECTIVES**

### **Main objectives**

To identify the challenges faced by the Sri Lankan women in divisional political arena.

### **Sub-objectives**

To identify the social, economic and political cultural challenges faced by the women in Sri Lanka.

### **Research sample**

The research sample of the study is selected in relevance to research objectives. As per the sample, 10 women are selected, who represented themselves in Poojapitiya Pradeshiya Sabha election candidacy. Whereas, the main information providers have been two men who are recognized in the area as political activists.

## **Research Plan**

Since this study reveals the challenges faced by women in provincial politics, qualitative method was used. When discussing the reason which impact the women representation in politics, it associates with people's personal opinions, social attitudes, emotions and feelings, hence qualitative research method fits the best to this study.

## **Data accumulation method**

In relevance to the study, there are two main divisions in data accumulation; Primary data and secondary data. In order to gather primary data, interviews were conducted. Preliminary data was provided by some women who were represented for election candidacy and two men who were recognized as political activists in the area helped to gather main information. It was done through interviews and telephone conversations. Secondary data was gathered through research articles, books and web page articles. In addition, numerical data was gathered through Pradeshiya Sabha reports and Election Commission reports.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

### **Social factors**

Being male or female cannot be refrained by anyone. Gender is an ascribed status and the social construction based on it has created discrimination, especially in cultures with patriarchal hegemony. There are certain perspectives regarding women among various social groups. This situation is contradictory to the men. Society has the notion that men take the lead and women are second to them. Such attitudes have made it difficult for women to win in the political arena thus is proved by the below situation.

“People think women cannot do anything...”

Even in a reality programme, voting for women is not a common thing. This means that men are capable enough to do anything. That even is the reason for women to not be able to win in elections.”

(Interview 02)

Comparatively it is a negative idea to regard women are with less capacity in the society. This makes women to lose certain opportunities in a society. The above interview explains that it is not limited only to politics. In this country man receives the highest status. Therefore, it has become something difficult to avoid the notions of people regarding men and women. Society accepts the fact that a family with many children requires more of

being responsible. It is believed that until the daughters get married, they should be protected and properly taken care of. This is regarded as difficult. It is a common saying in Sri Lankan context to say “When would we get relieved of these children” with regard to the daughter related responsibilities. Provision of a dowry from woman’s family in a marriage emphasises the fact that there are differences between men and women. In a marriage she is released from her home to her husband’s family. Then the man becomes the ownership of their family. Children get their father’s family name as their surname. It demonstrates the differences between men and women. Such unequal behaviours have also impacted on women to not represent for election candidacies.

The manner in which a girl should behave is taught to her by the adults. Seemingly her mother and family members. Since childhood girls are protected. She has been taught how to do household clean and tidy, cookery and the way of leading a marriage life. This background makes the women to perform a major role after getting married. Hence with such roles in life how would it be possible for women to engage in politics is stated here.

“This is a type of society which limits women to the kitchen. There is no other world beyond that. All the activities of children, husband, cooking and laundry have to be done alone at home.”

(Interview 04)

Society decides the gender stereotypes which is not inherited by humans. Therefore, as a daughter, sister, wife, and mother a woman is expected to be more responsible. Hence, this condition also prevents women from politics as such prevailing gender stereotypes keep women involved with family matters. This behaviour is expected from her by her husband, children, and family.

Sri Lanka is highly populated by women. In contrast to this fact, it has been difficult for a woman to win in elections. The reason is that women do not vote for women during elections. This is explained in interview 6.

“Pradeshiya Sabha election means a village election.

Women do not like when another woman in the village get the high positions.

Some others think that this would harm male dominance.

However what happens finally is that women lose in elections.”

(Interview 06)

It is identified that women are not welcoming the other women to reach high positions is one reason for the fact that it has been difficult for women to gain elections' win. This elaborates that there is a certain invisible competence among the women. Similarly, the belief that voting women harms male dominance explains that males are higher than the females in the society. Even though there are many women representing in elections due to these reasons it has been difficult for women to win the elections.

Women themselves stand up to give high positions for men. If the question of what child do you expect to be born is asked from a pregnant mother, majority of them would say it is a boy. This can be seen in the way they caress the other male infants and having images of them in their home. In western countries, the situation is different. They expect a child without the fact of gender.

Due to the social belief that men are better than women has created inequality among the society. This fact is explained in Robert Stoller's research in 1968. This explains that according to the physical features men and women are categorised into genders. The study says that for this, sex organs and hormonal conditions are considered. In women progesterone and estragon hormones and in men testosterone and androgen hormones are produced. This nature impacts the physicality, behaviour, mentality and personality. Also, men and women inherit differences. Women have breast which makes them able to bear and breast feed children, whereas men do not possess this biological feature. These features make it facile to distinguish women from men. Thus these are identified as archived status.

The society has created many distinguishing factors apart from the biological differences of men and women. Thus, man is given a certain kind of dominance within family and society. He is the sole guardian and chief of the family who is also the bread winner. He provides necessary guidance and is considered as the one who has power over the others. Married women who are willing to represent in elections need the consent of husband. Similarly, she also needs his support to reach victory at any instance.

“More than us women, men know more about politics.

Before I come into politics I asked from my husband.

If not working on my will is not easy.

If the husband is not satisfied it is impossible to win in elections”

(Interview 07)

It is clear that, not only doing the household but also in politics she requires her husband's consent. Generally, women in our society ask their husbands before doing anything. In such situations husbands used to respond accordingly as a habit. Therefore, without any burden family matters can be carried out. A woman's main role should be towards her family; looking after children and household. So, she is expected to be obedient to her husband, his family and, her friends. Therefore continues to attend to her roles in the family. As a woman is limited within the home, it shows that she loses the opportunity to participate in welfare and other social activities. (Somaratne 2018/2019).

In Sri Lanka, Pradeshiya Sabha is village centered politics. Hence in villages still male dominance prevails. It has become challenging for women to actively participate in politics. Predominantly it is due to male dominance.

### **Economic factors**

There is a direct connection between political system and economic factor. The main factor which decides political success in Sri Lankan society is money. The political candidates have the belief that they can win elections as per the amount of money that they spend. It is not a secret that people vote the candidates who serve them in whatever the way. Therefore their vote is a symbol of being thankful. According to the study, it reveals this condition impacts women representing in election candidacy.

“Spending money for household is done in a manageable manner.

Expenses for children's education and food, everything is managed by one salary. Politics cannot be done without money. One should be able to throw money. How can we do that like men do.”

(Interview 08)

It is evident that the woman who does household has effective management skills. She has less expenses. She spends money only for the useful things and has no signs of wasting. Through this she expects improvement of her family conditions. This has been critical when the husband is the bread winner of the family. Such background makes it difficult for women to enter into politics. The below statement explains that winning an election is spending money extremely. It shows that the women already have the notion that money decides the win in elections which is a main impact on refraining women from politics.

Hence politics is highly depended on money, it has suppressed the real necessities of people. Honesty and trustworthiness have become effective practices of women. It has



shown that the women attempt in developing a country without frauds, corruption and wastage. But during the discussions in data accumulation it was observed that such statements are only fabricated words and do not pave the way to win in elections.

“When women speak on election stages it makes us laugh,  
They imagine a materialistic world and talk,  
People do not care these, they like when they gain anything from anywhere”

There is no use talking about politics, the one who holds on to it will not release it out. We also do this, but to win what they say are not useful

In reality, to talk lies it requires a lot of servings; food and drinks

The poster campaigns should be continuous

Till the end of elections, it needs to be awake day and night

Is it possible with women? Definitely no.”

(Interview 10)

The above interview highlights that politics is cheating people. Through political factors it is expected to be truthful and righteous toward the people. But it has been limited to certain ways of conduct. In Sri Lankan political culture it is observed that the one who cheats more has the best chances of winning the elections. When compared to men, women have less chances of winning because they do not practise cheating.

Hence, the above statement explains winning in elections is not something easy. Until the end of the election, the supporters should be served and treated with food and drinks; which is liquor. The expenses for this cannot be decided. In reality the village men consider the election season as the period when they enjoy by consuming liquor as per their wish. The person who get drunk takes the whole responsibility of the votes of his family. He has no failure in accomplishing this task. It can be seen this condition has become normal among village political arena. Such treatments of liquor cannot be made by women candidates. They speak against the consumption of liquor. As well they detest the fact of her husband having liquor. Through this women has a negative impact which leads them to lose in elections. Hence it can be noted that political change cannot be done overnight.

The competition of pasting posters is a cold war among political candidates. It requires more money. It should be a continuous process. For those who engage in political campaigns, they are treated with food, liquor and daily wages and transport expenses on daily basis. These kinds of practices are even unthinkable by the women because she has no

possibility to spend large amount of money. The village women who are with economic instabilities, spending money in election campaigns is not easy. Therefore this condition has an influence to prevent her participation in election candidacy.

The following statement explains a situation when the men use different tactful ways to earn money. Whereas women cannot follow such ways.

“Men do whatever the thing to win in elections,

Either they sell a land or sell some possession.

Or get some money on interest or from acquaintances.

Us women cannot do as we do not own lands. Anyway there is no use of selling what we possess to win elections. Doing whatever suits our level us better”

(Interview 09)

Finding financial support for election canvassing is a main challenge faced by the women. Many women are not financially stable. They have no land ownership and many of them are unemployed. The above interview show their lack of expectation to win in elections. By selling her lands and using that money to spend in elections is a waste according to the women as stated above. It is also said that male candidates do not practise this. Women have the expectation of winning elections though her talents. On the other men have the aim of winning it in whatever the way possible. The objectives and behaviour of the women involved in politics are seen as backward in comparison to men.

### **Political Cultural factors**

Party politics is essential in order to have an established political system. Still in Sri Lankan political culture is within a frame. Which mean, politics is related with families, relatives, castes and friendships. This is a special characteristic seen in Sri Lankan politics. Being in this kind of political culture, women becoming a political candidate is undoubtedly challenging.

“This country’s politics move generation to generation

Getting nomination for new candidates is a wonder.

It is easy for women now because 25% is given by a quota.

Even though, it is hard to win the elections.

People are used to vote for the families who usually become candidates. It is due to the 25% bonus women get the chance of entering to political candidacy”

(Interview 04)

There are separate divisions as families in which political candidacy usually take part and the families who do not engage in politics. Hence it has blocked the path for the people who are not from political families to become candidates. It harms democracy when politics is limited to a family or generation. The candidates from a political family win is a belief in the society. It is another copy of family political culture. The loss of votes of the candidate who are not from political families is prejudged by the society. “Even though they fight for candidacy, it is hard to win”, this explains the situation very well. The spread of social opinions based on wealth and power disturbs the genuine candidates representing in politics. Any person should have the freedom of right to actively take part in politics. Through electing candidates based on political authoritarian members and their recommendations, it makes the candidates perform in a family biased manner. Hence, it harms political transparency.

There is a high competition among the political parties in Sri Lanka. Different media is being used during political campaigns: Television, Radio, Internet, Mobile and telecommunication, Hand bills, Posters, Newspapers, and Notices, addressing the public on stage can be seen. This competition is another challenge for the women. People who were involved in politics overtime have earned a considerable amount of money. The media showcase the political frauds and corruption time to time in Sri Lanka. It has disclosed some information about illegal money gained by Sri Lankan politicians through Pandora papers. It is said that this illegal money can make generations flourish with money. Therefore, it is common to see that the new candidates are being pushed out of the election field. There is a majority who wins the elections in whatever the way possible for them. In order to exclude political violence, the women representation is identified as important. To change the fraudulent, corrupted and violent Sri Lankan political system, women can be considered as essential. To accomplish democracy, good governance and sustainable development, women’s participation in decision- making is a necessity (Liyanage, 2012).

The system of castes is observed as a main factor which decides who wins in elections in Sri Lankan context. This is a special characteristic in this country’s politics. There can be seen rare situations when the candidates win without any effort in their political campaigns. There is the the factor of caste system behind these instances. It can be identified in the below discussion.

“Village people are very considerate about castes, they think about this when entering into a home, eating or drinking there. Imagine the condition when in

marriage. At the end it is the same in elections. Whatever the stories they say, they vote for their person”

(Interview 03)

It is an unseen factor which influences on Sri Lankan politics. There have been several controversies based on Sri Lankan politics and the relationship it has with caste system. For women, to enter into politics there should be a considerable amount of people in her side representing her caste. It is seen that whoever says whatever caste cannot be let unconsidered. Taking the instance when Jayalalitha in Tamilnadu, India won the election not due to any other reason but the votes of her people representing her caste. This fact is exemplified in the books written about Sri Lankan politics by Janice Jiggins, Victor Ivan and Kalinga Teudor Silva. Some political seats in Sri Lanka are demonstrative of the fact of considering caste in voting among which Rathgama, Beliatta, Mulkirigala, Harispattuwa, Pathadumbara are examples.

It is seen that politics is a kind of a game and the one who knows how to play it, would win mostly. This is the Sri Lankan political culture. Woman is still seen as inexperienced in politics. It is also stated that if even a woman wins in election by competing with the men that could be due to either being sympathized or merits she has gained in her past lives.

“To be honest, politics is a strange system.

Violence, corruption, cheating and show off

The way of eating or drinking

Taking part in funerals, weddings, alms giving and celebrations. Politics is a journey when you carry all these on.

Women think that when they smile, people would vote them. When people say I'll vote you, they believe it. They think of doing politics in a genuine manner.

In which world do we find such kind of politics?”

(Interview 10)

It can be mentioned that for women to enter into politics is not easy. It is applicable for both divisional and national politics. It is thought that if a woman wins in Sri Lankan politics, it is because of sympathized, murder of her husband or else a physical damage made for family or possessions. This could be done by the competitors which has paved the way of gaining sympathy over the public. It has become a highlighting instance when women represent in politics in modern Sri Lanka. However, the elite status they get is due to social

recognition. Relationships and elite family backgrounds, family members or deceased being former politicians are taken in controversy. (Silva. 2005:11)

## CONCLUSION

The factors which influence Sri Lankan women in representing themselves in political candidacy can be identified as the challenges faced by social, economic, and political culture. These socio-economic and political cultures are the major factors that have clear impact on women's political activism. Men have the notion that the women should always be under their dominance. This has become a major social challenge for the women when representing in politics. Women themselves having this notion has paved way for women to not vote women in elections. Hence, it has become a challenge for women election candidacy.

The stereotypical gender roles have also provoked as a disturbance which prevents women in participation of politics. It is a socialized notion that the women should be responsible for their household and family. Generally, everybody believes that when a woman is involved with other tasks except for the family matters, it harms the rapport with the family. This has created a negative impact on women's support to politics.

Women should be on parallel levels is a notion among women. A woman advancing into high positions or being an eye-catching personality makes the other women to develop hatred regarding her. This is psychologically conditioned as jealousy which has prevented women to participate in election candidacy. In village groups this condition is visible.

Women consider men with high status. They identify men with leadership skills, confidence, forwardness, task-oriented nature and being protective. These qualities are focused by women when giving their vote to men. On the other hand, since such qualities are not with women, it has become difficult to get the votes in elections.

Moreover, the existence of male-dominance in the society has become a reason which prevents women from politics. The inability to work without her husband's support has a negative impact on women in politics. The lack of being independent has also influenced on women political representation in Sri Lanka.

A subculture has evoked in Sri Lankan political system which is known as political culture. This makes people become cheated, fraudulent and alcoholics. Since people have become

used to this practice for years, it has made them hard to refrain from this. Even though women put forward their genuine political ideas, people have lack of acceptance. Hence has impacted to reduce women in participating for political candidacies in Sri Lanka.

## **SUGGESTIONS**

1. To take necessary action in order to exclude negative notions regarding women in the society.
2. To reduce occasions when women or men being treated as per gender among the society.
3. To develop women financially
4. To make people aware about politics.
5. To provide gender equality except male dominance.
6. To conduct training programmes for the inexperienced women in politics.
7. To provide financial and materialistic support and resources for the women who attempt to pursue election candidacy.
8. To engage women in political decision-making
9. To setup companies providing household support.
10. To take necessary steps against political violence
11. To regulate new laws which prohibits political frauds.
12. To prohibit the consumption of liquor during political campaigns.

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