

# Solidarity among Women in Politics in Sri Lanka: Potentials and Challenges<sup>1</sup>

*Nadine Vanniasinkam and Viyanga Gunasekera*

## Introduction

Women politicians and political aspirants in Sri Lanka share certain patterns of marginalisation within patriarchal party and political structures which prevent them from entering and engaging in agentive politics. Women encounter barriers to party nominations and access to campaign finance when contesting and, if elected, freedom to address councils and submit proposals without being harassed. They also face challenges in access to infrastructure to carry out their political mandates. These barriers are framed by cultural and religious ideals about gender, sexuality, and the family that shape the national consciousness (Steans 2007) as well as entrenched patriarchal standards about political engagement and what it means to be a political leader.

Given these shared challenges, in this article, we ask whether the quota for women in local government can foster solidarity among women within parties and across party lines to address gender discrimination and increase women's representation and participation beyond local politics. Or is the idea of solidarity among women politicians to further their shared interests far removed from the reality of their concerns? What would solidarity among women politicians at local level look like and [how] can this result in positive results for other women in politics and women in general? We attempt to unpack uniting and dividing factors through an analysis of women's wings in political parties.

Unsurprisingly, not all women pursue a position in politics to advocate on behalf of women. Therefore, it is important to interrogate the ways in which a greater diversity of participants can negotiate their identities and come together towards a common goal or set of principles if not to push for a pro-woman agenda. In

this sense, solidarity among women is important as a means to challenge historical and patriarchal forms of marginalisation and perceptions that restrict women's effective political navigation. The common issues women encounter in the political sphere can form the basis for women's solidarity not only within political parties, but across parties as well. Solidarity can also contribute to identifying women's interests and concerns that tend to be neglected in a patriarchal political space and has the potential to provide opportunities not only to debate and negotiate opposing ideologies but also to share genuine friendships, celebrate success, mentor each other, and stand together to address common concerns.

We distinguish between 'solidarity' and 'support' (hooks 1986: 138), and understand solidarity as the presence of a "community of interests, shared beliefs and goals around which to unite ... Solidarity requires sustained, ongoing commitment" (ibid) as well as "mutual recognition of each other's specificity" (Dean 1998). Building solidarity would involve "understanding the historical and experiential specificities and differences of women's lives as well as the historical and experiential connections between women from different national, racial, and cultural communities" (Mohanty 2003: 522). Thus, as hooks (1986) argues, "unless we can show that barriers separating women can be eliminated, that solidarity can exist, we cannot hope to change and transform society as a whole" (127).

For our analysis, we draw from 13 case studies<sup>2</sup> of women who contested either the parliamentary or local government elections - including women who are considered ideal candidates<sup>3</sup> but chose not to contest - and six focus group discussions with women in local government and civil society activists. The aim of the study was to build on existing work on barriers to political participation faced by women, focusing

on their life trajectories and journeys into politics, particularly their experience with the mandatory quota system of representation in local authorities.

### **A Quota for Women in Local Government**

Despite comprising more than 50% of Sri Lanka's population, statistically, women represent only 5.38% of elected members in Parliament (holding 12 seats out of 225), and currently hold no positions in Provincial Councils<sup>4</sup> in Sri Lanka (Election Commission of Sri Lanka 2022). Unsurprisingly, therefore, Sri Lanka ranks 177 out of 190 countries in terms of the percentage of women in ministerial positions in the IPU and UN Women's 'Women and Politics: 2021' map, with women's parliamentary participation significantly lower than its South Asian counterparts: India (14.4%), Bangladesh (20.9%), Pakistan (20.2%), and Nepal (32.7%) (IPU and UN Women 2021).

The mandatory quota, operationalised in the local government elections of 2018, reserved 25% seats for women through a one-third increase in the total number of seats reserved for women "as an independent group" and instructed parties to nominate women on both First-Past-the-Post and Proportional Representation electoral lists. The implementation of this mandatory quota increased women's representation in local government from 1.9% to approximately 29% (Vijeyarasa 2020) with over 2,526 getting elected following the 2018 elections (Imtiaz 2018). The process of lobbying for the quota was mainly the work of CSOs and NGOs. It did not lead to the strengthening of women's wings within political parties and the formation of cross-party spaces and networks of women politicians and political aspirants. But, given the substantial numbers of women entering local government, as well as the potential to organise as women within their own parties, we consider whether the possibility of building leadership and solidarity now exists in the wake of the quota and initiatives towards grooming potential women candidates for local government.

### **Intra Party Women's Solidarity**

The introduction of the quota system at the local government level raised the need for parties to select and nominate women for the reserved seats. Before the quota system was in force, political parties were able to dismiss women under the (false) pretext that there are no suitable women for nominations (FGD 4 2021)<sup>5</sup>. However, the quota has forced parties to identify and give nominations for women either within their parties or outside. The high incidence of female relatives, friends, and supporters of elite families or

popular political figures being nominated was raised by respondents (FGD 6 2021)<sup>6</sup>, and also the fact that despite the quota, women still have to depend on male dominated parties to give them nominations. In such a context, mentoring, solidarity, and advocacy by senior women politicians in the parties seem more important than ever to create a space for aspiring and qualified women to enter these spaces more easily. If senior women politicians can advocate for new women politicians actively and openly, that has the potential to encourage aspirants to enter these spaces with a firm backing.

Thus, the quota has raised the need for intra party vertical networks and mentoring between senior and retired women politicians and new or aspirant women politicians to share their political experiences, ordeals, as well as strategies used to navigate the political sphere. Sharing such lived experiences may help newcomers in terms of anticipating and facing challenges more effectively and practically and these collaborations can naturally pave way for deeper solidarity as well.

In our study, respondents recognised the need for better integration of local and national networks by political parties (FGD 2 2021)<sup>7</sup>, not only to develop solidarity among women politicians, but also to support the creation of a secondary level leadership. Such a mentorship model would enable a woman in office to mentor and publicly advocate for an aspirant to enter politics in the next election. One woman interviewed stated:

Women politicians also require mentorship from other women in order to give women courage, power, and energy. Mostly women hear about challenges and that is scary. So, it is important to listen to success stories of women politicians. While it might be difficult to engage senior women who are active in politics due to the nature of party politics, there is a possibility of engaging retired women politicians such as Ferial Ashraff (Sharifa, women's rights activist, Batticaloa).

However, this form of support and advocacy is a rare occurrence in practice. Newly elected women expressed disappointment that senior women politicians did not reach out to support or even congratulate them on their successes (Chithrakala, local government member and national level candidate, Jaffna). There is also a lack of networking and support from senior women politicians for new women politicians and those seeking to contest (Lakmali, candidate who contested but lost, Colombo). This also underscores the fact that "the struggles for the quota for women in local government was in fact driven by NGOs primarily, with very little support from women within political parties and then we need to understand what is going on here." (FGD 1 2021)<sup>8</sup>

Party politics and loyalties, indifference to the need for women's representation in politics, as well as competitiveness over the same constituency may inhibit greater solidarity between women politicians, senior and junior, which prevents them from uniting to promote common causes (Ameena, local government member, Puttalam) in spite of the presence of formal structures such as women's coalitions and wings within some political parties. "They really don't have peer support, so at the local level it looks like they are standing alone." (FGD 2 2021); "If you look as to why women politicians don't take on such a huge mentoring role, an idealistic mentoring role that we see as what a mentor should be, is probably because one, they don't know; two, they are in competition; three, they have other things to do to protect their own place." (FGD 1 2021)

The opportunity afforded by the quota system, however, has created the potential for strengthening women's committees/coalitions or wings within some political parties.

Now there are women's organisations within parties. There are women's committees that are being formed. So little by little, it is getting formed, but when I entered politics, it was not there. [Now] it is there, but you know, it is not operating the way it should operate. They should have proper structures where politicians are taken, groomed, educated, and guided, sort of like more mentorship, more support. Even financially, you know. That whole camaraderie building is not there (Nilanthi, local government member, Colombo)<sup>9</sup>.

Most notably, the Progressive Women's Collective (PWC) of the National People's Power (NPP) has successfully lobbied for the nomination of women candidates at parliamentary elections. Thus, it appears that a structural and ideological environment conducive to women's agentic engagement within parties is essential for intra-party solidarity among women politicians.

### Inter-Party Solidarity

Inter-party solidarity among women is important to strengthen a unified voice to advocate for and address common issues of local and national concern. This remains a challenge due to the party system, but also due to a lack of awareness of gendered concerns, recently exemplified by the lack of support shown to Harini Amarasuriya, when she raised the issue of sanitary napkin disposal in Parliament.

However, at local government level, some of the new cohorts of women politicians who entered through the quota system have formed networks of support across parties. These networks are largely informal and vary in

scope of engagement. For instance, one group formed to simply congratulate each other on their achievements in the absence of acknowledgment by senior women politicians (Chithrakala, local government member and national level candidate, Jaffna). One 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 (Bhagya, women's activist, Kurunegala). However, Sharifa (Women's rights activist, Batticaloa), speaking about local government in the Eastern province observed that there is no coordination among women of the same council, let alone between different councils, and it is mostly training programmes conducted by NGOs that have managed to establish amicable relationships between women from different parties to a certain extent. This highlights the important role played by intermediaries such as NGOs and activists in not only lobbying for the quota, but also grooming women to enter through the quota and participate. It also shows that women politicians base solidarity on foundations of friendship and camaraderie. Therefore, activities that provide opportunities to build genuine friendships can incentivise women politicians to collaborate.

Another significant challenge in inter-party solidarity building at the local and national levels is ethno-religious difference which is further entrenched by populist nationalism. "There are divisions among women based on ethnicity. Muslims stick together and Sinhalese keep to themselves – these divisions are there among women." (FGD 3 2021)<sup>10</sup>

Despite the existing limitations, it is clear that the quota expands the potential for horizontal solidarity building to 'foster confidence' among women. Women politicians who participated in the FGDs also hinted at the potential for banding across party lines to mentor each other and promote women's representation in politics: "I feel cross party development is the reason why male politicians are made to turn around and look at women. More than party development, cross party activity has created a climate where 30 women irrespective of party affiliation will be sent into politics. Hereafter, they will become a force." (FGD 5 2021)<sup>11</sup>; "There is the space to form such groups across parties. A network needs to be formed and I think a lot of districts are laying the groundwork for networks. That is when there can be a national collective voice." (Sharifa, women's rights activist, Batticaloa).

There is also a willingness among women in local government to come together to provide psychosocial support. "When there's cross-party connection, because

we are able to be amongst women, there's security, some comfort, some support, and good counselling among one another. Even when we take counselling, it's the best relief amidst carrying such a heavy burden. Those of us who gather are all about the same age. We are able to talk to one another of our issues. We are able to discuss and share with one another how each of us face challenges." (FGD 6 2021)<sup>12</sup>

These examples of willingness to come together across party lines in itself can be viewed as a pro-woman agenda. However, this goal is dependent on access to two fundamental capacities – financial independence and the 'space' to operate. The experience of almost all of the women in local government interviewed indicated lack of funds as an impediment to women's networking: "Many women who were nominated through the quota system do not have a steady or permanent source of income and their families dictate household expenditure. Therefore, these women are unable to meet basic costs such as transport to and from meetings and also to contribute financially to community projects." (Sharaz, former local government member, Ampara)

The social and cultural costs of networking also extend to personal relationships and fulfilment of productive roles:

You want to attend the training programme, but your situation is such that you can't cross the hurdles of social, cultural, and family restrictions. There's that problem. They have this mindset that we are just playing about...If the programme stipulates that you should attend four places, husbands could ask [question us] three to four times as it seems like a joy ride to some. Culture may not make space for us. A social issue, they may ask what we're doing in hotels. All of these are issues. We must win through all of these. (FGD 6 2021)

Overcoming perennial challenges such as poverty and restrictions in mobility which stem from patriarchal norms still remains a significant barrier to building greater and meaningful solidarity among women in politics.

Beyond material challenges, women politicians also face opposition when they identify with a feminist agenda. The incongruity of feminist principles which underscore the importance of equality and intersectionality with conventional gender norms result in women who push for a pro-woman agenda being sanctioned for their 'deviance.' Yamuna (candidate who contested but lost local government elections, Batticaloa) believes that politics is necessary to bring about change and advocates for good governance, post-war reconciliation, gender equality, rights to legally access safe abortion services, sex education,

promotion of an anti-violence agenda, and greater visibility of war victims. However, such advocacy and activism as a politician portrays her as a 'bad woman' due to society's demand that women remain within the frame of cultural expectations to be accepted as 'good' politicians. Similarly, Chathurika (incumbent parliamentarian) from the Western Province considers herself a feminist politician and believes that a feminist makes a very good woman leader as she will be more collective, consultative, and less hierarchical. However, she too is critiqued for not being an authentic 'Sinhala Buddhist' because of the political stance she takes and because she identifies as a feminist. The feminist perspective with which she approaches issues such as sexual harassment, the economy, unpaid care work, and perceptions about women, is not something that her male counterparts identify with or prioritise even though they impact and are important aspects of larger politics. Solidarity can provide the necessary support for women activists taking such a stance.

A further challenge in building solidarity among women in politics and pursuing a feminist agenda is the rejection of the label 'woman politician' by most of the respondents and the desire to be identified simply as a 'politician.' This 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. In fact, it most often reflects a desire not to be side lined or ghettoised in the construction of political priorities, "hemmed within a certain space" (Chithrakala, local government member and national level candidate, Jaffna), but to be able to be viewed as representing all constituents and not just women. "I am not a woman politician just because I am a woman. My wish is to be recognised as a politician. But at the same time, I am proud that I am a woman. Because you know it is difficult for women to enter politics and we are role models for a lot of women." (Chithrakala, local government member and national level candidate, Jaffna) Thus, she simultaneously wanted to come into a decision-making position to be a voice for all while challenging discriminatory policies against women. Solidarity building between women politicians must take into consideration this paradoxical situation of simultaneously wanting to represent constituents of all genders but also needing to unite as women to break the glass ceiling. One pathway is to involve male enablers who are in support of women's equal political participation.

The experience of exclusion and social sanctions due to the dominant socio-political culture seems to inhibit women politicians' ability to come together to push a feminist or women's agenda in politics. Ideological

differences among women politicians themselves, who may sometimes subscribe to patriarchal values, also makes it difficult to arrive at a common strategy for women (Chathurika, incumbent parliamentarian).

However, it is important to note that there are a few occasions when women politicians have rallied together across parties for a specific cause. Sri Lankan women MPs have been known to speak against domestic violence and in favour of liberalising abortion, sex education in school, and increasing awareness regarding the use of contraception (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2012). More recently, the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus supported the first ever woman for the position of Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police in Sri Lanka, when her appointment was challenged by male counterparts specifically because of her sex (*Daily News* 2021). Since then, three more women have been appointed to the position of DIG within different departments of the Police which speaks to the influence women can assert when they unite for a common cause. However, 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 (Yamuna, candidate who contested but lost local government elections, Batticaloa).

Therefore, while solidarity on the basis of a negotiated feminist agenda might be the ultimate goal, the immediate need is to facilitate a national cross-party coalition of women politicians and political aspirants mentoring each other, which could eventually lead to the formation of an informed feminist agenda.

### The Way Forward

Collective association and action can lead to empowerment "from a state of powerlessness that manifests itself in a feeling of "I cannot" ... [to] a feeling of "we can" (Kabere 1994: 245) and enable women "to take courses of action which would not be available to individuals" (Sweetman 2013: 219). There is a long road ahead to achieve the type of national coalition of women in politics in Sri Lanka that is based on shared and negotiated interests of enhancing women's participation in politics and pushing a pro-woman agenda. Some foundations have been laid by feminist activists, civil society, NGOs, and more progressive political parties through lobbying for and training aspirants to enter through the quota for women in local government and in the formation of informal networks, women's coalitions/committees/wings, and regional cross-party networks. It is worth evaluating those efforts to date to assess what they have achieved and where they have experienced roadblocks or more limited impact. It is

important to generate more evidence-based knowledge on what mentoring and solidarity look like and their myriad potentials. Such knowledge can better inform target individuals and communities and encourage them to adopt good practices.

Insights from informants show that there is a desire among women in politics (at least at the local government level) to mobilise across parties and form communities of friendship and mentorship. This interest and commitment from the women themselves has the potential to evolve into a more organised platform which works towards social transformation through a gendered lens. Therefore, it is necessary to undertake further consultation with women to better understand how they envisage such platforms and their presumed potential. Emphasis was also laid on the fact that this would require the support, mentorship, and leadership of senior women politicians "who can cut through the party politics" (Chathurika, incumbent parliamentarian). The Sri Lankan Women Parliamentarians' Caucus could play a key role in this regard by raising the visibility of common concerns or challenging gender bias in politics. Further research on the agency, role, and attitudes of the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus is required to understand the potentials and implications of such inter-party vertical networking and mentorship.

There is also a need for sustained engagement and monitoring of the efficacy of existing platforms as well as more research on the willingness of women politicians and challenges faced in mobilising across ethno-religious divides and carving a shared political vision. This should be achieved through a collaboration between organisations working on women and politics, the State, women's movements, and feminist groups. It is only through such collaboration and joint ownership that such solidarity groups – formal and informal – can be sustained. While increasing women's representation in Parliament through a mandatory quota may be a way forward, improving the capabilities of women politicians and aspirants to "discuss their lives, analyse their shared experiences of injustice and oppression, develop common goals" (Sweetman 2013: 218) by networking within and across party lines, and starting to conceptualise a political commitment based on their priorities, could pave the way for a shared women's voice in the political sphere in the country.

### Notes

1 This paper stems from research conducted for a study titled "Joining the race: Pathways to politics for grassroots and development-sector women in Sri Lanka and Indonesia" conducted by the Australian National University, University of Technology Sydney, Universitas

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- 2 Names of case study respondents are pseudonyms.
- 3 By 'ideal' we mean women who have years of experience working for their communities either as activists or social workers, who have financial backing from personal and family sources, who are well networked, and demonstrate leadership in their current roles.
- 4 Sri Lanka has not held Provincial Council elections since 2014 owing to successive governments' disagreements over amendments to election laws. At present, the Provincial Council Elections Act is awaiting amendment, after which elections are intended to be held.
- 5 Discussion with activists, councillors, and former LG members from Galle and Matara in Sri Lanka.
- 6 Discussion with former members of Youth Parliament from Nuwara Eliya, Kalutara, and Galle in Sri Lanka.
- 7 Discussion with activists, councillors, and a researcher from Colombo, Kandy, and Nuwara Eliya, Sri Lanka.
- 8 Discussion with activists and a scholar in Colombo, Sri Lanka.
- 9 Discussion with women elected and activists from Mannar, Puttalam, and Jaffna in Sri Lanka.
- 10 Discussion with women elected from Jaffna, Batticaloa, and Trincomalee in Sri Lanka.

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