

WE HAVE TO HAVE MORE WOMEN IN POLITICS

Rosy Senanayake

Sri Lanka was one of the forerunners in the fight for universal suffrage since 1927; in this region we were one of the first countries to give women the right to vote and contest.

In 1931 when the battle was finally won we had 4.5 percent in the council. However we are yet to move forward from this achievement – almost eighty years later there are only 13 women in an assembly of 225. In this context it is mandatory that the fight for equal representation of women in decision making bodies starts at the local government level.

In the proportional representation system it is very tough for a woman to fight elections and win because there are a number of stumbling blocks: the gun culture, character assassination and the financial commitment. Therefore even if a woman wanted to get into politics, their families would never allow them because of all the hindrances. Even in parliament with the exception of myself and one other, every other woman had a ready made voter base.

Therefore we are looking at the Local Government Bill that is to be debated in parliament on the January 17. Previously the Bill called for 40 percent mandatory youth representation in the nomination list, however in the newer version of the bill this has been changed to 25 percent mandatory women or youth representation.

Even this concessionary action was taken due to the fact that we have a very strong Women's Movement in this country comprising a number of political leaders such as Mrs Ferial Ashraff and myself, as well as leaders from civil society and nongovernmental organizations. A strong caucus of women committed to improving the position of women in decision-making institutions from every sphere, including the supreme decision making body the parliament, and every other possible sphere of life.

However this 25 percent of youth or women means nothing, because it can be filled with either youth or women. I have been fighting for at least 30 percent of mandatory representation of women on the nominations list to ensure that women have a prominent say starting from the local government level. I have spoken to President Mahinda Rajapaksa and Dinesh Gunawardene many times on the

importance of ensuring that there is this mandatory inclusion of women in politics, at least for a few terms.

The new Bill is a combination of proportional representation and the first-past-the-post-system; therefore depending on how many votes a certain party obtains, they are given a number of candidates to be appointed. Therefore the United National Party proposes that the first two or three individuals who are nominated to the local government bodies are women.

Therefore the women do not necessarily need to contest but she can help people to obtain the votes, therefore you will have a certain number of women in each council. Sajith Premadasa is also proposing an amendment to the Bill where he proposes there be 50 percent youth and women, where women get at least 25 percent mandatory representation.

We have to have more women at the grassroots level representing their interests, because if you take India they have over a million women at the grass roots level.

These are women who were totally discriminated and had no political edge in the decision-making realm, but thanks to Rajiv Gandhi who fifteen years ago brought in a quota at the local level and now they have women actively involved in representing the needs of their communities. Women have proven to be more sincere, transparent and committed and it has been proven that women do a better job than men.

As a consequence of this successful exercise in 2010 on International Women's Day, March 8, India brought in a Bill to ensure 33 per cent female representation on the national level. There was unanimous agreement, however they wanted the Bill to be well debated and therefore had it passed the following day.

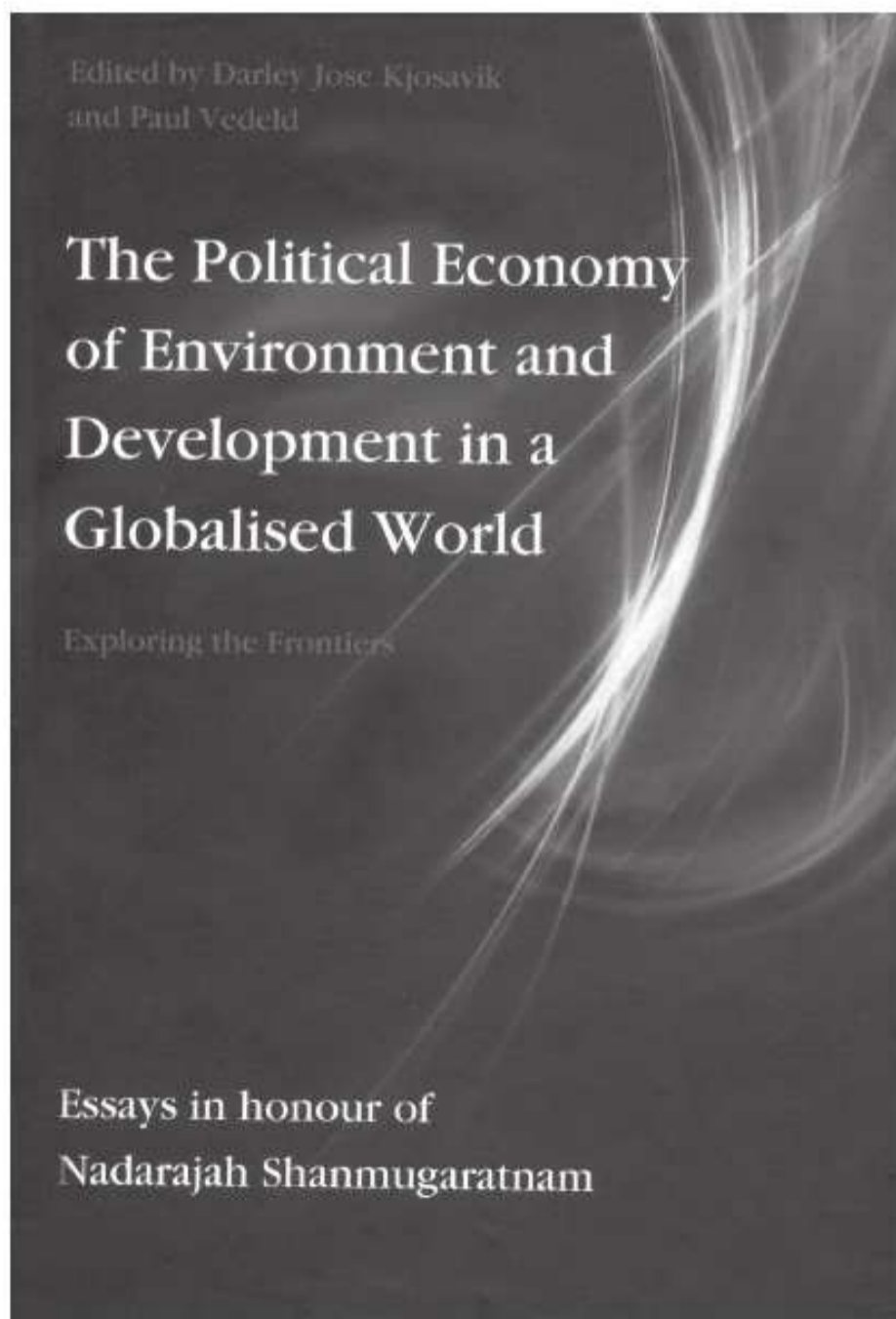
If we compare ourselves with the rest of the region we are lagging behind countries like Nepal, Maldives and Bangladesh. These countries have implemented legislation that ensures representation for women in positions of power. Furthermore certain countries have an act on the landmark resolution on Women, Peace and Security or the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325; however Sri Lanka has no such act.

By no means should we stop the fight for equal representation at the grassroots-level, because although Sri Lanka is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and a number of other conventions, we fail to have any proper legislation passed in parliament in favour of women. Therefore having more women in parliament will ensure that the protection of women is ensured by law.

There are number of eminent women, who would be very committed towards serving the nation in the political arena if the environment was created for them. Female literacy surpasses that of men and even when it comes to university entrance women have the edge, however when it comes to the decision making realm we find very few women represented at the higher levels. This needs to change and the Local Government Bill is the first step towards that change. ■

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