

# Promoting Gender Equality and Empowering Women: The Experiences and Expectations of Sri Lanka

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## ABSTRACT

Since the inception of the parliamentary system of government, women's political participation and representation in decision-making institutions have not grown in proportion to their population. Consequently, awareness of the need to promote gender equality as a mechanism to address women's issues has emerged at the international level. It has been recognised that empowering women can be achieved by encouraging their participation in decision-making and policy-formulating bodies, particularly in politics and legislatures. There are significant differences in women's political participation across various countries. This paper focuses on South Asia and examines the situation in Sri Lanka by analysing the increasing involvement of women in the legislature. In the history of Sri Lanka, the year 2024 marked the highest level of women's representation in Parliament. This study considers how the rise in the number of women representatives in the Sri Lankan Parliament can contribute to women's empowerment.

**Keywords:** Electoral system, Discrimination, Participation, Customary Law, Fundamental Rights

## INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also a crucial pathway for achieving a prosperous and equitable socio-economic transformation. Women and girls continue to face discrimination and violence worldwide. Gender equality is essential for building a peaceful society. To achieve sustainable development in gender equality by 2030, the United Nations has formulated specific programmes (UNDP Sri Lanka Country Office 2023-2027, n.d.). For every individual in the world, access to education, healthcare, decent employment, a life free from discrimination and abuse, and the assurance of equality and rights are of utmost importance. The Global Agenda for Sustainable Development encourages every nation to pursue efforts that support and achieve gender equality. It also emphasises that empowering women catalyses the acquisition of the human resources necessary for economic growth (UNDP Sri Lanka Country Office, 2023-2027, n.d.). However, gender disparities remain deeply rooted in every society across the world. Women continue to face limited access to decent jobs, occupational segregation, and gender-based wage gaps. Globally, women are still denied or restricted access to education and healthcare facilities, while also being subjected to violence and discrimination. Women's voices often remain marginal in political and economic spheres of decision-making. In this context, this research paper analyses how the increase in the number of seats held by women in Parliament contributes to their political participation and empowerment. It also considers key issues related to women's political involvement and representation in legislative bodies. Evaluating the impact of women's representation in Parliament and assessing the effectiveness of political participation are crucial for drawing lessons for the future. The study examines international frameworks on political participation, women's political participation in South Asian countries, gender equality in Sri Lanka, and women's involvement in politics. For this purpose, secondary data sources have been utilised.

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## UN Initiatives for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly established the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, commonly known as UN Women, to accelerate global progress toward the goal of 'meeting the needs of women and girls worldwide' and to ensure that women and girls everywhere gain dignity and equality (UN Women, n.d.). According to the UN Charter, the following objectives were defined for the UN Women organisation: (i) Eliminating discrimination against women and girls, (ii) Empowering women, and (iii) Achieving equality between women and men as partners and beneficiaries of development, human rights, humanitarian actions, peace, and security (UN Women, n.d.). It was envisioned that this organisation would serve as a strong and dynamic institution dedicated to the protection and advancement of women and girls, and that it would represent a powerful voice for women at international, regional, and local levels.

Through this initiative, member states began to take part in historically significant actions aimed at accelerating the United Nations' goals of achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. The establishment of the UN Women organisation was viewed as part of the UN reform agenda. Focusing specifically on gender equality and women's empowerment, UN Women was created by merging four distinct entities: (i) The Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), (ii) The International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW), (iii) The Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), and (iv) The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) (UN Women, n.d.). By integrating these functions, UN Women assumed three major roles on behalf of the international community: (i) Assisting intergovernmental bodies in formulating policies, global standards, and norms related to women's issues; (ii) Supporting member states in implementing these standards by providing technical and financial assistance upon request, and fostering effective partnerships with civil society; and (iii) Holding itself accountable for its commitments to gender equality and continuously monitoring global progress (UN Women, n.d.).

However, despite the efforts of UN Women, the international community has been criticised for failing to promote women's political participation in a meaningful way. In response to this, quota systems were introduced as an international legal mechanism and a temporary measure to ensure greater gender equality in political participation. The Beijing Declaration endorsed the use of quota systems as a temporary measure to enhance women's political participation. Furthermore, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) recognised that such quotas should not be considered a form of discrimination (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2003). Regional organisations, such as the Venice Commission, established to provide advice to European countries on democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, also recommended that nations adopt gender quota systems and promote effective monitoring mechanisms to ensure their proper implementation (Compilation of Venice Commission Opinions and Reports Concerning Political Parties, revised in October 2021). Although quota systems were recommended to enhance women's participation in politics, countries were given the freedom to adopt and implement these mechanisms in ways and proportions suitable to their own contexts. In this regard, three main types of quota systems are used internationally to promote women's political participation.

### Reserved Seats

In the Reserved Seats System, a specific percentage or number of seats is allocated to women representatives. This system is a legally mandated seat allocation, established through constitutional or electoral law amendments. A certain number of electoral constituencies or districts are designated and enforceably reserved for women. Unlike systems where women are merely nominated as candidates in constituencies, the Reserved Seats System ensures that women are elected as representatives. Through this method, women's representation within the total number of elected members is guaranteed (Directorate-General for Research, 1997). The reserved seats system is widely practised in South Asian countries.

The system of allocating seats without competition has been criticised for potentially undermining the merit and qualifications of women candidates. This concern regarding merit can be avoided by allowing competition among women candidates for the reserved seats. For instance, in countries such as Kenya and India, women

compete among themselves for the seats reserved for them in local government elections. In contrast, in countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, women are appointed to the national legislature without contest. Although the reserved seats system is considered highly effective in ensuring greater political representation for women, critics argue that it may not guarantee adequate or meaningful representation.

### **Legislative Quotas**

Legislative quotas refer to the requirement to nominate a certain percentage or a specific number of women candidates to the legislature. Nearly eighty (80) countries have adopted laws establishing gender-based legislative quotas. In countries such as Spain and France, candidate quota systems are mostly implemented by law. However, women candidates are often placed at the bottom of the candidate lists, where they have little chance of winning. Through this practice, political parties believe they can keep women in weaker positions within the nomination ranking. Furthermore, parties tend to nominate women candidates in constituencies where the chances of winning are low, while nominating male candidates in constituencies with higher chances of success. As a result, women rarely attain positions beyond that of a candidate. Therefore, due to weaknesses in electoral laws, the implementation of legislative quota systems remains less effective compared to the reserved seat system.

To address this issue, several countries have legally adopted a ‘double quota system’ which mandates either a minimum percentage or a minimum number of women in the candidate list. In addition, it enforces mechanisms that invalidate the candidate lists of political parties that do not adhere to the mandated women’s seat allocation requirements. Through this approach, the inclusion of women candidates in the nomination lists becomes mandatory.

Although the 2017 Election Act of Pakistan introduced an amendment requiring political parties to include at least five (5%) per cent women candidates on their nomination lists, its overall impact was minimal (Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency, 2018). In the 2013 elections, a total of 228 women served as representatives in the National and Provincial Assemblies, including 70 in the National Assembly, 17 in the Senate, and 141 in the Provincial Assemblies. Approximately twenty percent (20%) of the total representation in politics consisted of women candidates (Zia, 2013). In the 2018 elections, sixty-nine (69) women candidates were elected to the National Assembly (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2018).

Rwanda has adopted and implemented such a system to ensure that the percentage of women candidates nominated for elections remains significantly high. Similarly, countries such as Argentina, Bolivia, Costa Rica, and Mexico impose certain restrictions on political parties to encourage the inclusion of women candidates on their nomination lists. For instance, these countries may reject or refuse to accept nomination papers or party candidate lists, publicly reprimand political parties, or allow 48 hours for revisions to their lists. Through such measures, greater opportunities are created for more women to be elected as representatives.

### **Voluntary Party Quota Allocations**

The Voluntary Party Quota refers to the practice by which political parties, at their own discretion, allocate a certain proportion or number of candidacies on their party lists to women. In countries such as Sweden, voluntary party quotas are incorporated into the constitutions or statutes of political parties. Unlike seat allocations mandated by the constitution or electoral law, party quotas are implemented based on the independent will of each political party. Voluntary party quotas tend to emerge in political environments characterised by a weak institutional commitment to promoting women’s political participation. However, the outcomes achieved through such voluntary measures are often found to be less effective. There are no legal mandates or restrictions within the political system to ensure the implementation of party quotas. Ultimately, the success of voluntary party quotas depends on the personality, determination, and capability of women’s rights activists who strive democratically to overcome the male-dominated nature of political parties.

## Women's Political Participation in South Asian Countries

In South Asia, women's participation in politics is often overlooked. Most political parties are characterised by male dominance. As a result, women and their interests are usually neglected by political parties. The belief that men are better suited than women to exercise power in the public sphere is deeply rooted and widespread across South Asia. Although political parties tend to ignore women's participation, it can be observed that they often use images of women in their campaigns as a strategy to attract votes.

Although progress has been made globally in terms of political participation, it is evident that gender disparities continue to persist in the political participation of South Asian countries (eight nations). Women in these countries continue to face obstacles such as rigid cultural stereotypes, patriarchal social norms, and a lack of education and resources. Despite these challenges, women have made remarkable progress, as evidenced by their increasing representation in significant positions within legislative bodies and local government institutions.

In many South Asian countries, women have attained high political positions primarily through family connections. For example, Sirimavo Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka became the world's first female Prime Minister; Benazir Bhutto of Pakistan, overcoming rigid Islamic cultural stereotypes in a Muslim-majority country, served twice as Prime Minister; Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga became Sri Lanka's first female President; and Indira Gandhi served as India's first female Prime Minister. Similarly, Sheikh Hasina, the first female Prime Minister of Bangladesh, also rose to power through familial political ties. In addition, Sonia Gandhi, who has played a significant role in Indian politics, may also be included in this list.

In India, a few women have held some of the highest positions of political power. For instance, Indira Priyadarshini Gandhi served as the first female Prime Minister of India. Since then, Indian women have not had the opportunity to hold the position of Prime Minister. Pratibha Devisingh Patil became the first female President of India, while Droupadi Murmu, belonging to a tribal community, was elected as the first tribal woman and the second female President of the country. Additionally, eighteen (18) women have served as Chief Ministers of various Indian states. Since the 1990s, opportunities for women to participate in politics at the grassroots level have increased in India. The 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Amendments to the Indian Constitution reserved one-third of the seats for women in Panchayats (village councils) under Article 243D of The Constitution (Seventy-Third Amendment) Act, 1992. This development brought about a significant transformation in women's political participation. Following these amendments, women began to emerge as leaders and decision-makers at the village level, and in several states, they have come to occupy more than 50% of the reserved seats. In the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, 74 women were elected as Members of Parliament. However, in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, there was no significant change. Women's representation in Parliament declined marginally from 14% to 13.6%, with seventy-eight (78) women elected in total, including thirty-one (31) from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Women's representation in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha remains relatively low. According to 2024 statistics, women held 14% of the seats in the Lok Sabha (The Law Advice, 2024). Although discussions have been ongoing regarding a reservation bill aimed at allocating 33% of seats for women in both Houses of Parliament, the bill has not yet been enacted.

To address the persistent underrepresentation of women in politics, Pakistan incorporated a system of reserved seats for women (a quota system) into its constitution between 1956 and 1973. The 1956 Constitution allocated 3% of the seats to women, reserving ten (10) seats for them (Constitution of Pakistan 1956, Article 44, Clause 2). These seats were equally divided between East and West Pakistan. According to the 1973 Constitution, twenty (20) seats were reserved for women in the National Assembly of Pakistan. Following the 1977 elections, the National Assembly was dissolved, and martial law was declared. In 1981, General Zia-ul-Haq established the Majlis-e-Shoora (Federal Advisory Council), which included twenty (20) women members (National Assembly of Pakistan). In 1985, women were allocated 20% of the seats in the National Assembly, in addition to those obtained through direct elections, which was twice the quota established in 1956. This system remained in effect until 1990, after which it was discontinued. Currently, the National Assembly of Pakistan reserves sixty (60) seats for women (Bano, 2009), in addition to eleven (11) seats that women can contest and win through general elections, totalling seventy-one (71) seats held by women in the legislature (Bano, 2009). At the provincial level,

a total of one hundred and twenty-eight (128) seats are reserved for women. In local government bodies, 33 % of the seats are currently allocated to women (Bano, 2009).

Bangladesh is one of the South Asian countries that introduced reserved seats for women in Parliament. Through this measure, it became possible to increase the number of women in Parliament. According to the Constitution that came into effect in 1972, 5% of the seats were reserved for women. In numerical terms, fifteen seats (15) out of the three hundred (300) seats in Parliament were reserved for women. In 1978, this allocation was increased to 10%, amounting to thirty (30) seats out of the 300 seats in Parliament (Halder, 2024). Due to the lack of consensus, the provision for reserved seats was not renewed for the elections held in 1988 and 2001. However, apart from the reserved seats, 2% of women continue to be elected to Parliament through direct elections.

In 2015, Nepal adopted a new constitution. It states that at least 33% of the seats in the Legislature and local government bodies must be allocated to women (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). This reservation system has significantly increased women's participation in politics in Nepal. Through this, women have achieved notable progress by participating in both local government bodies and the national legislature.

The Constitution of the Maldives is different from the constitutions of other South Asian countries. The Constitution does not mention any special provisions for reserving seats for women in Parliament. Although there are no constitutional barriers to women participating in politics, the Maldives is a country where patriarchal cultural norms are deeply rooted. The belief that women have less capability than men is widespread. As a result, these cultural factors become significant barriers to women's participation in politics. The 1968 Constitution of the Maldives prohibited women from contesting the presidency. In January 2008, the People's Special Majlis (Constitutional Assembly) removed this gender-based restriction, thereby allowing women to seek the highest executive office. However, to date, no legal mechanisms have been established in the Maldives to reserve seats for women in parliamentary elections. In the 2019 national parliament, women constituted 4.6% of its members. In the current (2024) Parliament, four (4) women serve as Members of Parliament. Of the 369 candidates who contested the election, 43 (11.6 %) were women (International Foundation for Electoral Systems, 2024). Amendments were introduced to legislation to mandate a minimum of 33% female representation at the local government level. Currently, women account for 39.5% of all representatives in local government bodies (Rajesh, 2022). Nevertheless, no quota legislation for women has been established at the national level.

In Bhutan, the number of women contesting elections and being elected to the National Assembly is relatively low compared to Men. Less than 8% of women are nominated and elected to the National Assembly, the National Council, and local government bodies. Although the Constitution and electoral laws provide women with equal civil and political rights, the number of women participating in politics remains very low. To address this issue, a system of reserved seats for women was proposed. According to this proposal, political parties were required to allocate 30% of their seats to women, and this was included in the electoral reform bill. However, this amendment to the electoral law was not passed in the National Assembly. The percentage of women elected to the Bhutanese Parliament was 13.8% in 2008 and 8.3% in the 2013 elections. This increased to 15.2 % in 2018 (The Royal Government of Bhutan, 2019).

### **Gender Equality Policy and Laws in Sri Lanka**

The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka guarantees equality before the law, equal protection, and the absence of gender discrimination. It further affirms that the Constitution permits the enactment of laws, regulations, and administrative measures aimed at promoting the welfare of women, children, and persons with disabilities. At the national level, the Constitution of Sri Lanka explicitly prohibits sex-based discrimination under Articles 12(2) and 12(3), and its guarantees of equality before the law and equal protection lay the foundation for a policy framework to address Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV). Through this, it can be said that the Constitution aims to build a society free from discrimination. To reinforce this, the Constitution further states: "The State shall ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens, so that no citizen is discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, or occupation" (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 27, Sub-article 6). Additionally, the

State must eliminate economic and social inequalities and prevent exploitation of individuals by other individuals or by the State (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 27, Sub-article 7). However, the Constitution also specifies that no citizen can bring a complaint against the State in any court or tribunal for failure to implement these provisions (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 27). Therefore, it should be noted that the judiciary has not recognised a review of the State's compliance with this article. This highlights that in Sri Lanka, there exist laws that are inconsistent with fundamental rights. Nevertheless, to increase women's participation in politics, a law was enacted and is being implemented in Sri Lanka in 2017 (Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 31 of 2017), which mandates a 25% reservation of seats for women among members elected to local government bodies.

In Sri Lanka, the state mechanism to ensure gender equality was first implemented in 1978 with the establishment of the Women's Bureau under the Ministry of Plan Implementation. In 1983, the Women's Bureau was re-established under the Ministry of Women's Affairs and Teaching Hospital Services (Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, 2025). The Women's Charter, adopted by the Government in 1993, guarantees equality and equal protection under the law and explicitly prohibits sex-based discrimination (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare, 1993). In the same year, the National Committee on Women (NCW) was also established (Ministry of Women, Child and Youth Affairs and Sports, 2024). The Women's Charter also imposes obligations on the state to address violence against women, procedurally and substantively, in preventing and responding to violence (Ministry of Women's Empowerment and Social Welfare, 1993). To address women's issues at the national level, the Ministry of Women's Affairs (as an independent ministry) was established for the first time in 1997 (Ministry of Women, Child Affairs and Social Empowerment, 2025). In 1978, in response to increasing concerns regarding Sexual and Gender-based Violence (SGBV), dedicated units were set up in police stations for women and children to file complaints (Jayatilaka et al., 2019). In a similar effort, the Ministry of Labour and Labour Relations established a Gender Bureau, through which Sri Lanka proceeded to ratify and adopt key United Nations conventions on gender equality.

- Ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 5 October 1981
- Signature to the Beijing Platform for Action -BPFA - 4- 15 September 1995
- Ratified UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – 1991
- Sri Lanka ratified a key International Labour Convention on gender equality, the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) on 01 April 1993
- Sri Lanka acceded to the UN Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment on 3 January 1994
- Sri Lanka acceded to the CEDAW Convention Optional Protocol on 15 October 2002
- Ratified the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (Palermo Convention) on 22 September 2006
- Provisions related to trafficking were introduced by the Penal Code Amendment Act No. 16 of 2006

The National Plan of Action on Women (2014), formulated and presented to Parliament, outlined key strategies for addressing violence against women. The Population and Reproductive Health Policy, formulated in 1998, includes several provisions aimed at addressing violence against women. The National Health Policy, the National Youth Policy, the National Family Policy, the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act of 2005 and its accompanying Plan of Action, the National Mental Health Policy, the Policy on Anti-Trafficking, the National Action Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights, and the Guidelines for a Code on Sexual Harassment collectively represent key national commitments that incorporate redress mechanisms for addressing Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, 2024).

The Penal Code provides the legal basis for taking action against perpetrators of SGBV, and it was amended in 1995 to strengthen these provisions. The definition of rape was broadened, the phrase ‘against her will’ was repealed, and the term ‘without her consent’ was brought in, in keeping with international developments in this area. In addition, the criminal law was amended to introduce mandatory sentencing for the rape of girls under 16 years of age, along with enhanced penalties for more aggravated forms of rape. Through these policy reforms, the State addressed, to some extent, key areas of SGBV, aiming to provide relief to survivors and uphold its commitments to international policy frameworks (Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, 2016). The Prevention of Domestic Violence Act No. 34 of 2005 is a gender-neutral statute that sets out the procedure for obtaining a magistrate’s restraining order, either independently or through police assistance. As such, the Act functions primarily as a preventive mechanism (Prevention of Domestic Aggrieved Violence Act, No. 34 of 2005).

## DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Recognising the importance of human resources is essential for a developing country, where every citizen should enjoy equal treatment and access to opportunities. To achieve this, the government must have an efficient and effective mechanism to address the needs of marginalised groups, including women, children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities. Therefore, it is the duty of the government to ensure that all individuals are granted equal opportunities, without considering any form of physical or gender-based disadvantage.

In Sri Lanka, the protection of fundamental rights under the Constitution is frequently curtailed by prevailing customary laws. The Constitution acknowledges that written and unwritten customary law, which may not align with the fundamental rights enshrined in the Constitution, continue to operate in practice (The Constitution of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, Article 16). An example of this includes the *Tesawalamai* law<sup>1</sup> and the *Kandyian Law*<sup>2</sup>. The *Tesawalamai* law governs matters related to the daily life of people living in the Northern Province. Under this law, a married woman in the Northern Province cannot buy or sell immovable property, such as land or houses on the land, without her husband’s written consent.

According to Sri Lanka’s Constitution, women, like men, are entitled to equal opportunities and equal rights. However, in practice, societal attitudes that place women in a secondary position have yet to change, as highlighted by women’s organisations and advocacy groups. To illustrate this, in the presidential election held in September 2024, thirty-eight (38) candidates contested. However, no political party provided an opportunity to any female candidate. As a result, this election was recorded as a presidential election in which no woman contested. From a gender perspective, the 2024 presidential election can be described as an election primarily focused on a power struggle among men.

In 1931, universal suffrage was extended to all men and women above the age of 21. Before the Donoughmore Constitution came into effect, only members of the elite class were granted the right to vote, and even then, it was subject to certain conditions. However, women belonging to these families were excluded from voting rights. Women had to fight hard to secure their universal franchise. They submitted a petition to the Donoughmore Commission demanding their right to vote. As a result of this effort, and despite opposition from some elite political leaders, women were granted equal voting rights.

In 1931, two women were elected to the State Council, accounting for 4% of the total membership of the Council. In 1934, one woman was elected to the State Council. After that, no women were elected until 1947. In 1947, Ninety-five (95) members were elected to Parliament, and among them, three (3) women representing leftist political parties were elected. Over the 77 years from 1947 to 2024, the percentage of women in Parliament has increased by only 2.7% (see Table No. 01).

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<sup>1</sup> A Regulation for Giving Full Force to the *Tesawalamai* or the Customs of the Malabar Inhabitants of the Province of Jaffna, as Collected by order of the Governor Simons in 1706.

<sup>2</sup> The Kandyian Law Declaration and Amendment Ordinance is a Sri Lankan statute that codifies and amends specific elements of traditional Kandyian law, particularly those relating to property and inheritance

Table No. 01 Representation of Women in the Legislature, 1931–2024

Type of Legislature	Election Year	Total Seats	Women’s Seats	%
1 <sup>st</sup> State Council	1931-1935	58	2	3.4
2 <sup>nd</sup> State Council	1936-1947	58	1	1.7
1 <sup>st</sup> Parliament	1947-1952	101	3	3.0
2 <sup>nd</sup> Parliament	1952-1956	101	2	2.0
3 <sup>rd</sup> Parliament	1956-1959	101	4	4.0
4 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	March- April 1960	157	3	1.9
5 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	July 1960-1964	157	3	3.8
6 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	1965-1970	157	6	3.8
7 <sup>th</sup> Parliament, and 1 <sup>st</sup> National State Assembly	1970-1972, 1972-1977	157	6	6.5
2 <sup>nd</sup> National State Assembly, and 1 <sup>st</sup> Parliament	1977-1978, 1978-1989	168	11	5.8
2 <sup>nd</sup> Parliament	1989-1994	225	13	5.3
3 <sup>rd</sup> Parliament	1994-2000	225	12	4.0
4 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2000-2001	225	9	4.4
5 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2001-2004	225	10	5.8
6 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2004-2010	225	13	5.8
7 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2010-2015	225	13	5.8
8 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2015-2020	225	13	5.8
9 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	2020-2024	225	12	5.3
10 <sup>th</sup> Parliament	From 2024 to the present	225	22	9.7

Source: Parliament (Handbook) Website

The tenth (10) parliamentary general election, another stage in Sri Lanka’s political evolution, was held in 2024. Over eight thousand eight hundred (8,800) candidates contested in this election (Yatawara, 2024). Very few women contested as candidates in this election. Some major political parties, including the People’s Liberation Front, which had failed during the armed uprising, nominated a few women candidates to contest in the Colombo

district, rather than in other districts. In this election, 9.7 % of women were elected to Parliament (see Table No. 01).

Sri Lanka records the lowest level of women’s political representation in the parliaments of South Asian countries. In the Ninth (9) Parliament (2020–2024), only twelve (12) women served as Members of Parliament (see Table No. 01). Among them, several, including the current Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya, entered Parliament through the National List.

In the 2024 election, the National People's Power (NPP) nominated five (5) women candidates from the Colombo District, representing 23.8% of the district’s total nominees. In the Gampaha District, only three (3) out of 22 candidates were women, while in the Kalutara District, three (3) of fourteen (14) candidates were female, corresponding to 13.6% and 7% of the total candidates, respectively. In the Kandy, Matale, Badulla, Galle, and Kurunegala districts, two (2) women were nominated in each district. Apart from the Jaffna and Batticaloa districts, one (1) female candidate was nominated in each of the remaining districts (see Table No. 02)

Table – 02

<b>Women Elected to Parliament – 2024</b>		
Districts	Women Candidates	Elected Women
Colombo	5	3
Kalutara	3	2
Gampaha	3	1
Badlla	2	1
Matara	1	1
Ratnapura	1	1
Kegalle	1	1
Kurunegala	2	1
Puttalam	1	1
Monaragala	1	1
Kandy	2	1
Galle	2	1
Hambantota	1	0
Matale	2	1
Nuwara Eliya	2	2
Polonnaruwa	1	0
Anuradhapura	1	0
Digamadulla	1	1
Trincomalee	1	0
Vanni	1	0
National List		2
	<b>34</b>	<b>21</b>

Source: Election Commission, 2024

An analysis of the nomination procedures of all major political parties from 2010 to 2020 reveals that their nomination lists have consistently failed to provide adequate opportunities for female candidates. Although women constitute 52% of the total population (Interim Report of the ANFREL, 2024) and 56% of the registered electorate (Kamdar, 2020), their voices remain markedly underrepresented in formal political spheres. However, during the period from 2020 to 2024, only 5% of the members of Parliament were women (see Table No. 01).

Nevertheless, political parties have generally exhibited reluctance in nominating women as candidates, with the senior leadership responsible for candidate selection remaining overwhelmingly male-dominated. This dynamic has perpetuated structural barriers and systemic neglect in the nomination of women. Furthermore, it is important to note that, to date, no legal provisions mandating reserved seats for women in parliamentary elections have been enacted, a factor that must be carefully considered in any comprehensive analysis of women's political representation.

In the parliamentary election held in November 2024, the National People's Power (NPP) nominated thirty-two (32) women out of two hundred and sixty two (262) candidates, representing 12.9% of its total candidates, while the Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) nominated fifteen (15) women candidates (see Table No. 02). Furthermore, both the NPP and SJP allocated four National List seats each to women (CIR Web Editor, 2024).

According to the final candidate nomination lists released by the Election Commission in 2020, women constituted only a small fraction of the nominees across major political parties. Of the two hundred and fifty-two (252) candidates nominated by the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), merely 4% were women. The Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) nominated nine (9) women out of two hundred and sixty-two (262) candidates, representing 3.4%. In contrast, the National People's Power (NPP) nominated sixteen (16) women, accounting for 6% of its two hundred and sixty-two (262) nominees. The Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) nominated three (3) women out of forty-four (44) candidates (CIR Web Editor, 2024). Between 2010 and 2015, major political parties allocated only 5% of their nominations to women. In the 2015 elections, the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) nominated seventeen (17) women out of two hundred and forty-one (241) candidates. In contrast, ITAK nominated only two (2) women out of forty-four (44) candidates. The Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) did not propose any women candidates in the same election. In 2010, the UPFA nominated eighty (8) women, the United National Party (UNP) fifteen (15) women, and ITAK only one (1) woman. In addition, the People's Liberation Front and the SLMC contested the elections in alliance with other parties (CIR Web Editor, 2024).

In the Western Province, women candidates have been predominantly nominated in the Colombo and Gampaha districts. In contrast, the Eastern Province and the Badulla District of the Uva Province have not seen any women candidates nominated in the last three elections. Over the same period, five (5) women candidates were nominated in the Colombo District.

In most districts, the same women candidates are repeatedly nominated. These individuals have effectively established their own voter bases, which has hindered the development of a political culture within parties that encourages new women politicians. An analysis of past nominations of women candidates reveals two main trends. Major political parties nominated very few women candidates, whereas independent groups nominated a significantly higher proportion of women. In recent elections, approximately three hundred and twenty (320) independent groups contested, and their candidate lists included a larger number of women. However, there were also instances where some of these women were not formally notified of their candidacy.

With the support of the National Peace Council and the People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL), the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) organised a meeting with presidential candidates and political parties to secure a 25% reservation of seats for women in Parliament. During this meeting, AWAW submitted a report emphasising the necessity of concrete measures to increase women's representation in Parliament and highlighting the importance of women's participation in politics. However, no progress has been made on this matter to date.

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## CONCLUSION

Women in South Asian countries face deeply entrenched social norms that limit their political participation. Persistent gender-based violence, unequal access to opportunities, inadequate educational systems, and traditional gender hierarchies create significant barriers to women's engagement in politics. Additionally, the lack of supportive networks for women, insufficient representation within political parties, and societal reluctance to accept women as leaders further inhibit their political involvement. Political violence also acts as a deterrent, discouraging women from participating in political processes.

Women face significant barriers to political participation due to factors such as social isolation, financial dependency, and lack of political experience. Women from marginalised communities often encounter strong resistance from traditional power structures. These traditional authority systems exert influence over the decision-making processes of marginalised women, limiting their autonomy and capacity to act independently in political spheres.

Sri Lanka's Constitution legally guarantees gender equality and prohibits discrimination. Additionally, special measures have been instituted through laws, regulations, or administrative actions to promote the advancement of women. The country's legal framework provides the necessary laws and procedures to uphold the rights of all citizens. However, it is acknowledged that personal or communal laws such as Muslim law (Sharia), Kandyan law, and Tesawalamai law can, in certain instances, contravene the rights and freedoms granted to women under the Constitution.

Intraparty democracy has not been meaningfully cultivated within Sri Lankan political parties. In the absence of such democratic structures, women seeking nomination are often easily sidelined by their male counterparts. Furthermore, the perception that political participation is less a public service and more an accessible avenue for financial gain has become increasingly prevalent. This has intensified competition within politics as a lucrative occupation—one that male actors are generally unwilling to relinquish to women.

The equal participation and representation of women in politics, as well as the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, have been endorsed by the United Nations, and Sri Lanka has ratified these commitments with the intention of implementing them domestically. Nevertheless, in a patriarchal society, dominant ideological attitudes continue to marginalise women in decision-making processes, a concern frequently reflected in public discourse. Each year, Sri Lanka participates in globally organised events marking International Women's Day on 8 March, during which issues relating to women's rights and freedoms are discussed. Women's rights are also widely highlighted across various media platforms. However, initiatives aimed at improving women's knowledge, attitudes, and capacities have advanced at a noticeably slow pace in Sri Lanka. Moreover, research indicates that initiatives focused on women's empowerment have yielded limited substantive results. Historically, women's participation in politics in Sri Lanka has either been minimal or restricted to a small group, making it a persistent challenge throughout the country's political development. Consequently, women's political representation and leadership remain significantly limited.

Women's history has largely been constructed by men rather than written by women themselves. Consequently, women's movements have advocated for women to document and reclaim their own histories. This call cannot be fulfilled merely through electoral participation such as voting, canvassing, or campaigning. Instead, it must extend to active involvement in parliamentary decision-making processes. In a representative democratic system, women's participation must be substantive and meaningful. Despite Sri Lanka's high literacy rate, only about 5–6% of Members of Parliament are women, a figure that reflects a persistent stain on the country's commitment to democracy and gender equality. Addressing this imbalance requires sustained awareness-building and empowerment initiatives targeting both women and men.

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