



International Foundation
for Electoral Systems

Women's Political Representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral System Analysis and Recommendations

Background

Sri Lanka has taken some positive steps to address significant gaps in women's electoral representation and achieve greater gender equality. One such step is the introduction of a quota at the local government level, and a new electoral system with a quota at the provincial level. However, women in Sri Lanka continue to face serious barriers to political representation, and the country ranks among the lowest in the world for the percentage of women in national legislatures. For example, the most recent parliamentary elections in 2020 resulted in just over 5 percent of elected women representatives in Parliament.

This persistent underrepresentation of women combined with other recent trends — such as negative impacts of the global COVID-19 pandemic that further exacerbated gender inequalities — underscore the need for targeted action. To help inform stakeholders' efforts to sustainably promote women's political leadership and participation in Sri Lanka, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) published a research paper, *Women's Political Representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral System Analysis and Recommendations*, which analyzes the current standing of women's representation and the main reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in politics, and offers recommendations for how to address the underlying and persistent barriers.

Women's Rights in the Sri Lankan Legal Framework

A comprehensive review of the existing legal framework of Sri Lanka on gender equality was essential for this research. Currently, Sri Lanka is a signatory to numerous international and domestic legal frameworks and has initiated numerous non-binding charters and action plans requiring increases in the number of women representatives and in women's political participation more broadly. Sri Lanka utilizes quota systems to advance women's participation — *reserved seats*, which hold office seats for women candidates; *legislative quotas*, which mandate a percentage of women candidates; and *voluntary party quotas*, where political parties voluntarily commit to nominating a certain number or percentage of women candidates. However, confusing legal frameworks prohibit ease of enforcement and the complete lack of legally enforceable quotas at the national level result in the significant underrepresentation of women in Parliament. Plans for a new draft of the Constitution for Parliament's approval in 2022 present new opportunities to advance women's political participation. While the draft chapter on Fundamental Rights includes provisions for women's rights that signal opportunities to reform electoral laws — promoting women's representation in politics — the present steering committee is comprised of only one woman out of a cohort of 21 government appointees.

Current Status of Women's Representation in Sri Lanka

The three levels of elected leaders in Sri Lanka are as follows: the national level, made up of the president and Parliament; the provincial level, made up of nine provincial councils; and the local level, made up of 335 local administrative bodies. Underrepresentation of women occurs at each level due to a variety of systemic and institutional obstacles as outlined below

- **Parliament:** Despite a proportional representation (PR) system, which often results in higher representation of traditionally marginalized groups, women's representation in parliament is very low — at 5.3 percent (12 of 225 are women, none are Tamil or Muslim). Additionally, Sri Lanka boasts only one woman cabinet minister and has only ever appointed two women to state minister positions.
- **Provincial Councils:** Women held less than 5 percent of Provincial Council seats and the new legal framework providing a quota is yet to come into effect. The status electoral system and the provincial council elections themselves remain uncertain.
- **Local Authorities:** Women running for seats within local administrative bodies benefit from the local election laws which call for both a legislative candidate quota of 50 percent of PR seats and 10 percent of first past the post (FPTP) seats, and a minimum 25 percent of reserved seats for women in each council if the candidate quotas produce less than 25 percent representation. However, the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) lacks an enforcement mandate on anything beyond the candidate nomination process.

Barriers To Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka

Evidence in Sri Lanka shows women's advancement through increased university graduation rates, economic opportunities or the attainment of leadership positions in civil society organizations do not mirror an increase in their representation as political leaders. Key barriers faced by women when contesting for political office in Sri Lanka include:

- **Electoral system structure:** As national-level candidates must canvass for votes in a large district, this costly and logistically challenging aspect of campaigning negatively impacts women candidates. These increased costs in parliamentary elections favor candidates with a "capacity to command votes," which usually disadvantages women. A 5 percent electoral threshold establishing a minimum vote share for a party to secure representation further disincentivizes the inclusion of women candidates among men.
- **Political party frameworks:** A lack of transparency in political party frameworks creates environments tolerant of stereotypes that disadvantage women. Weak intraparty frameworks and regulations allow for nontransparent candidate nomination processes which lack enforceable, gender-sensitive regulations resulting in highly centralized institutions run by men.
- **Weak political finance regulations:** The lack of political finance regulations means candidates must largely fund campaigns using their own resources in a country where the per capita income for men is more than twice that of women. Few Sri Lankan women candidates receive any resources from their political parties, further exacerbating problems.
- **Discrimination in the media:** A lack of legal regulations surrounding the media results in low news coverage of women candidates alongside a disproportionate level of hate speech on social media. When coupled with a comparative lack of access to resources, this leads to the reinforcement of stereotypes allowing for the exclusion of women candidates from more serious media coverage related to national security, economics and politics, thereby undermining women candidates' roles as decision-makers on national and international issues.
- **Violence Against Women in Elections (VAWE):** A VAWE assessment conducted by IFES during the 2018 local government elections evidenced a lack of structures and mechanisms to safeguard women candidates. Surveys showed incidents of physical attacks by rival candidates and their supporters, incidents of political party leaders soliciting sexual bribes as a condition for obtaining nominations and an increase in online violence against women candidates.

Key Recommendations

IFES recommends the following practical steps that a range of actors could take to promote women's political engagement more effectively and, in so doing, strengthen Sri Lanka's democracy:

- Prioritize women's voices in electoral and constitutional reform discussions; move beyond the equality-based legal model to incorporate affirmative measures that increase the number of women in elected office; and lay the foundation for follow-on legislation or electoral codes that address "disincentives" that deter most women from entering politics in the next round of constitutional and electoral reforms.
- Adopt or strengthen quotas at the parliamentary, provincial and local government levels that include reserved seats for women, requirements that women make up 50 percent of candidate lists and sufficient enforcement mechanisms for the ECSL if quotas are not followed.
- Advocate for greater, more substantive roles within legislative bodies and political parties for women elected through quotas and general seats to ensure their contributions are heard and valued.
- Ensure more equal media coverage of women elected representatives through legislation, media codes of conduct and/or awareness-raising and provide media training and networking opportunities for elected women and women candidates.
- Allow for additional funding to political parties that run and elect more women and, if a system of public funding is adopted, require that a portion of political party funds be reserved for women's campaigns and training in gender sensitivity. Additionally, pass campaign finance laws that limit unrestricted spending and proactively integrate gender-sensitive provisions.
- Promote gender sensitivity within political party frameworks by requiring that women make up a significant proportion of political party committees, provide gender sensitivity training for political party members and integrate gender considerations into political parties' election codes of conduct.
- Mitigate electoral violence against women through a variety of mechanisms, including establishing partnerships between the ECSL, social media companies and civil society watchdog groups to better monitor instances of online violence against women in politics; including prohibitions against electoral violence against women in media and in political party codes of conduct; and strengthening reporting and enforcement channels within Parliament and other government bodies to provide women representatives with a clearer and more efficient path for reporting violence in the workplace.