The Gender Dimension in Local Governance: Challenges and Opportunities for Women's Participation and Influence in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the challenges and opportunities associated with women's participation in local governance in Sri Lanka, focusing on the implementation of the 25% quota system introduced in 2018. While the quota significantly increased women's numerical representation from 1.9% in 2011 to 23.2% in 2018, substantive engagement remains hindered by socio-cultural norms, institutional barriers, and political violence. Insights from 50 semi-structured interviews reveal that women face persistent challenges such as gender-based discrimination, lack of support from political parties, and inadequate capacity-building measures. Despite these obstacles, many women representatives exhibit resoluteness and commitment to community issues. The study, therefore, advocates for comprehensive reforms: leadership training, financial support, and awareness at the community level, to guarantee substantive representation. The findings add to the discussion of gender and governance by indicating the multi-dimensional nature of women's experiences and also by offering actionable recommendations toward ensuring participatory governance.

Keywords: Gender equality, local governance, women's political participation, socio-cultural barriers, political violence.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Women's participation in governance is one such cornerstone of inclusive and democratic processes for decision-making (Nsana & Daka, 2023). Whereas most countries committed themselves at the Beijing Declaration and through the Platform for Action regarding realizing gender equality, gender inequalities persist in political institutions (Beijing Declaration, 1995). In 2023, only 26.9% of parliamentary seats worldwide were held by women, which indicates

persistent gaps in political representation (UN Women, 2024). The same discrepancies in developing regions are very strong, rooted in traditional socio-cultural standards and system-based impediments for women's access to political podiums.

Sri Lanka is often praised for producing the world's first female Prime Minister, in 1960. On the question of gender and governance, Sri Lanka presents a paradox. It has impressive female literacy rates and successes in sectors like health and education, yet an extremely low level of female participation in politics (Kumari et al., 2020). This was since 1948; however, political participation by women in politics hovered below 6%, and similar trends have been portrayed within the local government structures (Gunasekera, 2023). The 2024 parliamentary election saw a historic milestone with 21 women elected, setting a new record for female representation in Sri Lanka's parliament (Newswire, 2024). Indeed, the policy introducing a quota system for 25% women in local governance introduced through the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Acts of 2016 and 2017 saw an important measure taken for rectifying the historical balance of representation (Krishnamohan, 2018). This policy stipulated the minimum representation of women in local government bodies as a means of encouraging inclusiveness in decision-making processes.

Yet, despite these gains, an increase in numbers alone is unlikely to ensure equal participation. Structural and cultural obstacles often impede their capability to effectively practice policy influence and actual leadership. These challenges thus demonstrate the need for both structural and qualitative scrutiny in appreciating women's political engagement in the Sri Lankan experience.

1.2. Significance

It is also believed that the involvement of women in local governance strengthens democratic practices and develops the community. The point of view and experience enable them to focus on an aspect that usually has been left out by the male-dominated decision-making processes. Several studies have indicated that women in governance focus on social welfare policies such as education, health, and sanitation that directly affect the well-being of the community (UN Women, 2024).

This gives a reason why Sri Lanka should ensure that more and more women are included as a means of influencing discussions that articulate grassroots issues-a subject that is paramount when dealing with local governance issues. Because, up until now, women have been extremely underrepresented in such representative structures, their potential in advocating for gender-sensitive policies remains very limited, while the 25 percent system is viewed as an opportunity to ensure their voice trickles into the corridors of the local government institutions. However,

this could only be realized when the systemic challenges of gender-based discrimination, lack of training in leadership, and lack of support systems are overcome (Gunasekera, 2023).

This can ensure gender equality in Sri Lanka through women's participation in local governance. Further, this would also strengthen the democratic fabric in Sri Lanka. Inclusive governance, with the reflection of diverse perspectives, forms policies that are responsive to the varied needs of different segments. In addition, it would provide an avenue for them even at the national level in contributing toward larger socio-political transformations.

1.3. Research Objectives

This study investigates the challenges and opportunities pertaining to women's participation in local governance in Sri Lanka, with a specific focus on the 25% quota system. The main objectives of this research are:

1. To evaluate the impact of the 25% quota system on women's representation in local governance.

2. To identify the socio-cultural and institutional barriers that hinder women's effective participation in governance.

3. To examine the personal motivations and strategies employed by women to navigate these challenges.

4. To propose policy recommendations for enhancing women's engagement and influence in local governance structures.

Precisely through dealing with these objectives will be the contribution of the present study to the overall ongoing discourse on gender and governance in Sri Lanka; policymaking implications will definitely ensure sound policy making on it in the future for political agents, civil society institutions, as well as researchers.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Global Perspectives on Women's Participation in Local Governance

Recognized broadly by the world, women's participation in local governance is an indispensable ingredient of attaining equitable and sustainable development (Nsana & Daka, 2023). Several studies carried out at various parts of the globe identified the transformative roles of women in decision-making bodies, especially in solving basic social and community problems. For example, research by UN Women showed that women leaders support policies on education, healthcare, and public welfare, thus nurturing inclusive development.

Participation in governance for women, often, has faced socio-cultural and structural challenges. Women have minimal abilities of participation in the political processes where there are strongly enthroned patriarchal norms along with little or no access to education and economic means by the citizenry. This fact was assured to a great extent by evidence coming from South Asia (Choi, 2019). With this understanding, quota systems considered and placed were perceived to be boosting the possibility of improvement regarding presence within the purviews of local levels of governance for women. For example, Rwanda is often cited as one of the world leaders regarding gender parity, and their quota system has seen 61% of parliamentary seats occupied by women (Mukabera, 2019).

However, quotas alone are not adequate to ensure qualitative participation. Research evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia has also documented that, while numerical representation increases with the use of quotas, capacity-building programs are essential in support of, and simultaneous with, institutional reforms to ensure substantive engagement takes place (Nwankwor, 2016). These findings support calls for comprehensive approaches toward facilitating women's participation in local governance.

2.2. Sri Lankan Context

There lies an innate paradox in the history of political participation by women in Sri Lanka. Although the country was among a good number of other independent nations in 1960 to assume the world's first-ever female Prime Minister in the person of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, from a generational perspective, this female representation in politics has stayed relatively and persuasively low (Bashir, 2023). The data from the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (2024) indicates that from between 1947 and 2014, the all-average for women's participation was less than 6 percent in Parliament and as low as 1.9 percent in local government levels before quotas were brought into being.

It has been that cultural and structural obstacles have been a setback to the involvement of women in governance. This consistently discourages women from entering politics: traditional thinking of gender roles, including those that state that the place of women is to care and work in the home. Apart from that, political violence and harassment discouraged them from going into politics (Gunasekera, 2023). These different challenges were compounded by the lack of support from political parties because they rarely gave women candidates nomination and resources to run their campaigns.

The introduction of the 25 percent quota system in 2016 marked a milestone to address such inequalities (Krishnamohan, 2018). It at least ensured representative inclusion of women in local-level bodies for gender balance in decision-making. Even though the quota system

increased the representation of women in local governance, the insufficiency in capacity building and institutional reforms has hindered the implementation process to a greater extent (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara, 2012).

2.3. Quota Systems: The Case of the 25% Quota in Sri Lanka

The 25% quota for women in Sri Lankan local government bodies has been a remedy to make the local governance system more representative for historic underrepresentation. It was brought about by the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Acts, No. 16 of 2016 and No. 1 of 2017. The quota system comes into operation within a mixed electoral framework, wherein 60 percent of representatives are elected directly and 40 percent on the basis of proportional representation (Krishnamohan, 2018). This structure forces all political parties to ensure that at least 25 percent of their candidates are women.

The implementation of the quota system generates mixed results. On one hand, the quota system has brought in a considerable rise in the numerical representation of women. For instance, it is for the first time in the 2018 local government elections that women made up 23.2% of the elected representatives (Udamini, 2021). On the other hand, qualitative effects of this policy remain very less inspiring. Moreover, most of the women who are being elected as per the quota system lack past political experience, which furthers their inability to exert meaningful influence in governance.

Moreover, the quota system has been criticized for perpetuating family-dominated politics, in which women are often nominated as proxies for male relatives. This dynamic undermines the goal of empowering women as independent political actors. Complementary measures that have been called for by scholars to address these challenges include leadership training programs, mentorship initiatives, and establishment of support networks for women representatives (Samuel, 2018).

2.4. Theoretical Framework: Feminist Political Theory and Representation

The critical view on women's participation in governance comes from feminist political theory (Martin, 2004). At its core, the latter framework contests the exclusionary nature of the traditional political institutions and demands that diverse perspectives be considered in the course of making decisions. Feminist scholars have thus postulated that the poor representation of women in governance is an effect and cause of the wide-scale gender inequalities (Jenson, 2015).

Descriptive and substantive representation is an intrinsic part of feminist political theory. Descriptive representation is about the numerical women who come into political institutions,

while substantive representation is all about the ability of those women to shape policy outcomes and push for gender-sensitive governance (Mansbridge, 1999). In Sri Lanka, this 25% quota system serves descriptive representation, but its effectiveness will have to be complemented by substantive engagement.

The framework also highlights the intersectionality of challenges faced by women in governance-class, ethnicity, and geographical location are some layers that add to the barriers of political participation, which becomes more pronounced in a country as diverse as Sri Lanka. For instance, Tamil and Muslim women in Sri Lanka bear the additional layers of marginalization due to ethnic and religious identities (Gunasekera, 2023).

A feminist political theory in the Sri Lankan context highlights that quota systems require comprehensive structural and cultural reforms for the dismantling of patriarchy, increasing women's access to resources, and the strengthening of their leadership at every level of governance. It is only then that the country can achieve meaningful gender equity in local governance.

This review, therefore, integrates global insights, historical perspectives, and theoretical frameworks toward an all-rounded understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to women's participation in local governance in Sri Lanka. The findings bring out a need to go beyond numerical representation to qualitative aspects of women's engagement in decision-making processes.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study has adopted a qualitative research design for an investigation into the challenges and opportunities faced by women in local governance in Sri Lanka (Bryman, 2017). The qualitative approach would be apt to capture the intensity and complexity of shared lived experiences among participants in this study for an intensive understanding of socio-cultural and institutional factors that impinge on their participation in governance. Semi-structured interviews were a major source of data collection in this study (Brinkmann, 2013). This approach allowed participants to describe their experiences in their own words, while providing enough structure to ensure that interviews were consistent. Semi-structured interviews also allow for flexibility in probing emerging themes during discussions comprehensively to understand the issues.

3.2. Data Collection

The primary data was collected by conducting interviews with 50 female representatives of different local government bodies of Sri Lanka. These interviews were carried out from January to September 2024; each interviewee was interviewed for about 45 to 60 minutes. The questions asked during the interview covered most aspects of the participant's experiences, motivations for joining politics, obstacles faced, and strategies followed to tackle them. Interviews were conducted in Sinhala and Tamil and English, depending on participant preference. This approach ensured that language barriers did not negatively impact the expression of experiences or perspectives.

The interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent from participants and then verbatim-transcribed. Field notes were taken down during the interviews, recording the non-verbal cues and contextual factors that would further deepen the analysis. These techniques therefore guaranteed a complex and subtle dataset for analysis.

3.3. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was thus adopted (Berndt, 2020), in which an effort was made to include subjects from various socio-political contexts across Sri Lanka to ensure that the sample would be representative according to the selection criteria: gender, geographical representation, ethnic and religious diversity, and political affiliation. All participants were females who had been elected to local government bodies representing urban, semi-urban, and rural districts. It consisted of a diverse sample composition that included different ethnicities and religious orientations, such as Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim, so as to obtain the intersectional dimensions of gender, ethnicity, and religion in respect of leadership. Drawing from different political backgrounds prevented political bias in giving a wider view in relation to the political dynamics that influence women's placement within governance. This was considered an important sampling strategy to make sure that challenges and opportunities faced by women in local governance are representative.

3.4. Data Analysis

Data analysis was done thematically, following the framework set by Braun & Clarke (2012). Thematic analysis is a method that entails identifying, organizing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data. The process of familiarization involved reading through the transcripts multiple times, aiming for intimate knowledge of the data. Initial coding followed, capturing the notable features of the data related to the research questions. These codes were then organized into broader themes, refined, and reviewed for coherence and relevance. Clearly defined, the final themes linked to the objectives of the study.

Organization of data and coding into themes, using NVivo software, was done to ensure the material analysis was systematic and transparent. The use of software assists in the identification of patterns and relationships that emerge through data repeatedly. Direct quotations were included in the analysis for the presentation of authentic findings by participants.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

The research was designed and conducted in ways to protect the rights and welfare of participants, in accordance with high ethical standards. Subjects were informed in detail about the purpose and nature of this study, the procedures involved, and possible risks before the study began (Barrow et al., 2022). Informed consent in written form was obtained, ensuring that they were fully aware of their rights, including the right to withdraw from the study anytime without any consequences. Identifying numbers were assigned to participants and personal information deleted from the transcripts. The records with data were stored confidentially and locked at all times, accessible to authorized persons only.

The cultural sensitivity also ensured that data collection itself was sensitive to the participants' culture. The interviews were conducted without violating any of the cultural norms and practices of the participants, making them comfortable and safe.

This therefore presents an analytic framework through which multi-faceted experiences within the Sri Lanka context might be researched in relation to women in local governance. It is ethical to capture a diversity of perspectives while high on the scale of contribution to ongoing discussion within the country concerning gender and governance.

4. Findings

This section presents the findings from 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews with elected female representatives from local government in Sri Lanka. The results are discussed below in terms of the following key themes: quantitative impacts of the 25% quota system, socio-cultural barriers, institutional challenges, personal motivations, and experiences of political violence. Wherever appropriate, direct quotes of participants have been used to underpin qualitative findings supported by tables summarizing data.

Quantitative Overview of Women's Representation

The 25% quota system introduced at the 2018 local government elections substantially increased women's numerical representation. Prior to the introduction of the quota, representation by women in local government stood at a lowly 2% (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2019). It rose to 23.2% after the 2018 election, which, though a marked improvement, showed that some

districts only achieved partial compliance with the quota, where women took up only 21% of seats in those areas.

Table 1: Women's Representation Before and After the 25% Quota

Year	Women's Representation (%)	Legislative Intervention
2011	1.9%	No quota system
2018	23.2%	Introduction of 25% quota

The numerical increase, while significant, does not necessarily translate into substantive engagement. Interviewees highlighted this discrepancy, with one participant noting, *"The quota brought us to the table, but we are still not heard as equals."*

4.1. Socio-Cultural Barriers

Traditional Gender Norms

Socio-cultural factors proved to be a subtle impediment to the full participation of women in governance. Many respondents reported societal expectations, where caregiving and homemaking were prioritized over their public responsibilities. This dual burden constrained their ability to dedicate time and energy to political activities. One representative stated, *"My community supports me on paper, but they still expect me to manage my household perfectly while attending council meetings."*

Community Perceptions

Attitudes in the community towards women in leadership positions were mixed. While some participants reported receiving support and encouragement, others faced skepticism and criticism. A Muslim representative from Kalutara district expressed, "*In my community, women entering politics are still seen as stepping out of their place*." Such perceptions not only undermine women's confidence but also limit their ability to engage fully in governance.

4.2. Institutional Challenges

Lack of Support Internally from Political Parties

The institutional barriers were more pronounced within the parties themselves. Most participants decried a lack of resources and opportunities by their parties to reach out for mentorship or

engaging in decision-making: One participant explained, "*The party nominated me because of the quota, but they did not provide any training or funds for my campaign*."

Proxies in Familial Politics

The quota system has inadvertently consolidated family-dominated politics, as women are sometimes nominated as proxies for men. This reduces the original intent of the quota requirement to mere symbolism, not making women independent decision-makers. A participant from one of the rural councils narrated, "*I was asked to run only because my husband could not. People still see him as the real decision-maker*."

Personal Motivations and Resilience

Yet, despite the presence of all these barriers, many women made a sharp sense of purpose in determination to serve their peoples. Some motivations for contesting this election ranged over issues with education, health, and the infrastructure challenge that has solely affected them as women alongside other minorities. According to Colombo Representative, "*The reason that I entered politics-it is simply because I wanted women in my area to know about accessing healthcare. Now, that is a core mission at a personal level*."

4.3. Strategies to Overcome Challenges

Women used different strategies to overcome the socio-cultural and institutional barriers. Some of the strategies mentioned included building networks within their communities, seeking out informal mentorship, and using their roles as mothers and caregivers to build a connection with constituents. One participant said, "*People trust me because I understand their struggles as a mother. It's a strength I use to advocate for their needs*."

Experiences of Political Violence and Harassment

The major deterrents that cropped up were political violence and harassment. Several participants reported experiences of verbal abuse, threats, and physical intimidation both during election campaigns and their tenure. A participant from a semi-urban council reported: "*During my campaign, my posters were torn out, and I received anonymous threats telling me to withdraw*."

The problem is, such hostile environments, rather than being confined to personal safety, also deter the broader participation of women representatives. In the words of one interviewee, more stringent legal protections and institutional mechanisms to handle the host of issues are needed: "*If we want more women in politics, we need to make it safer for them*".

4.4. Need for Capacity Building

Skill Development

These findings signify a desperate need for the capacity-building programs of the female representative lot. "*Training in leadership, governance, legal literacy, use of technology, and many more is highly needed*"; the women said. A member from one of the rural councils says, "We need proper training to understand governance and how to use digital tools to do our job effectively; without it, we can't contribute meaningfully."

Financial Support

Limited financial resources also hinder women's implementation of projects at the community level and involvement in governance activities. Many respondents pointed out that allowances received from the local government representatives were hardly sufficient to cover expenses accruing from their undertaking. One respondent said, "*I often have to use my own money to support community initiatives because the budget is never enough.*

Intersectionality of Challenges

The study has shown how ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status have intersected in compounding the gender-related problems facing women in governance. The representative minority women-the Tamil and Muslim representatives-expressed layers of discrimination and marginalization. A representative of Tamil origin said, *"As a minority woman, I face resistance not only because of my gender but also because of my ethnicity."* This finding underscores the need for intersectional approaches in policy formulation and implementation.

Summary of Findings

While the 25 percent quota system has arguably transformed the numerical representation of Sri Lanka's local government, obstacles to substantive concerns and involvement still persist with gender inclusion. Socio-cultural, institutional barriers, amidst violence related to politics backed by inappropriate capacity-building initiatives restrain them in full and effective participation levels within the governance structures. It is through such persistence and commitment among these female representatives that one is reminded that significant and sustainable change might soon come about, provided these obstacles are duly dismantled. Table 2 summarizes the key themes and representative quotes from the interviews.

Table 2: Key Themes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Key Findings	Representative Quote

Socio-Cultural Barriers	Traditional gender norms and community perceptions limit participation.	"They expect me to manage my home perfectly while leading."
Institutional Challenges	Lack of party support and family-dominated politics persist.	"I was asked to run because my husband could not."
Political Violence	Women face intimidation and harassment in politics.	"My posters were torn, and I received threats."
Personal Motivations	Women are driven by a desire to address community issues.	"I entered politics to improve healthcare access."
Need for Capacity Building	Training and financial resources are critical needs.	"We need proper training to understand governance."

This thus provides a critical look into the findings, underlining the complex nature of women's participation in local governance in Sri Lanka, thereby providing the basis for policy recommendations to be made in sections that follow.

5. Discussion

This thus implies that the research findings represent an extraordinary gain on account of 25% of the reservation policy in order to get more women representatives in the local governance mechanism in Sri Lanka. However, this process remains uneven, with substantive participation yet to come because socio-cultural and institutional obstacles were not overcome due to very weak capacity-building processes or inherent systemic barriers, such as political violence and tokenistic representations.

Analysis of Numerical vs. Substantive Representation

While the 25 percent quota system has been able to increase the number of women in local government from 1.9 percent in 2011 to 23.2 percent in 2018, this has not fully translated into substantive engagement with representation (Election Commission of Sri Lanka, 2024). This agrees with global research that suggests quota systems cannot guarantee the real participation of women in the processes of political representation in their absence of complementary policies aimed at training for leadership positions, accompanied by support institutional frameworks that are inclusive of such policies (Martin, 2004). As one participant highlighted, "*We are invited to the table but rarely given the opportunity to speak or decide*." Such findings raise the imperative to go beyond numerical targets to genuine decision-making power for women in governance.

Socio-cultural Barriers and Community Perceptions

Socio-cultural norms remain one of the major barriers to women's political participation. The stereotypical gender roles that place women's responsibility as caregivers over their public roles were consistently cited by participants as a limiting factor. Indeed, similar challenges have been noted in other South Asian contexts where strongly entrenched patriarchal norms hinder women's engagement in politics (Bashir, 2023). Such barriers need community-level interventions to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equality.

Perception of the society also influences women's political experience (Akhtar & Ishaq, 2024). While some participants reported receiving support at a community level, many reported skepticism and, sometimes much opposition in rural and conservative constituencies. Again, this proves the need for an awareness campaign at grassroots levels as cultural shift to welcome a woman as a leader will definitely take time.

Institutional Challenges and Political Violence

Other institutional barriers include the limited resources and support that women candidates receive within political parties for their campaigns. Indeed, many participants often reported that their parties gave them minimal training and no funding, which has left them incompetent in their work. It is also clear that this problem is compounded by proxy nominations of women on behalf of male relatives, undermining women's autonomy and reinforcing patriarchal orders (Abeykoon et al., 2022).

The critical deterrents that emerged include political violence and harassment. Respondents shared experiences of verbal abuse, threats, and physical intimidation, which have been captured in broader research on the prevalence of gender-based violence in politics, according to UN Women, 2022. This therefore calls for more stringent legal protection with mechanisms for enforcement in ensuring a safe and enabling environment for women in governance.

Opportunities and pathways for empowerment

While there are still challenges, the resilience and commitment among women in this study create a starting point toward transformative change. Many of the participants reported a great desire to contribute to solving issues affecting their communities and noted that capacity-building programs were very valuable for that matter (Andrews & Boyne, 2010). Some key needs identified included leadership training, legal literacy, and economic support.

There are various responses that address the role of mentorship and networking as mechanisms for overcoming obstacles. It is also where programs bringing together experienced woman leaders and newcomers could guide and advise them through such political landscapes.

Additionally, targeted interventions addressing the unique challenges of minority women were important if inclusivity and intersectionality within governance were ever going to occur.

6. Conclusion

The 25% quota system is considered one of the most significant milestones toward gender equity in Sri Lanka's local governance. Though it greatly increased the numerical representation of women, substantive participation is a far cry yet. Challenges for women are found to be multilayered, ranging from socio-cultural and institutional barriers to political violence and deficits in capacity-building programs.

These are complex challenges, and multilevel action is needed: from policy reforms directed toward the effectiveness of quotas, which have to be implemented through accompanying policies that enable women to exercise their rights and actively participate; to community-level programs that challenge patriarchal norms for equality of gender. Equally, mechanisms at the institutional level need to be in place to provide financial and technical support to women representatives and protection from violence and harassment.

Future research might examine longitudinal impacts of the quota system, such as whether women who enter politics via quotas move into higher levels of governance. Comparative studies across South Asia could provide a more nuanced insight into best practices for improving gender equity in local governance.

While the 25 percent quota system has set the stage to increase representation, qualitative dimensions of participation have to be pursued if participation is to be successful over the long term. The empowerment of women in governance structures is not only a matter of equity but an imperative to ensure that the processes of decision-making are representative and effective for all citizens.

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