

WOMEN, QUOTA AND THE PRESS

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 2018 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

A research on Newspaper reporting
around the historic 25% quota for
women in Local Government from
September 2017 – December 2018

Women, quota and the press: Media coverage of the 2018 local government elections

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around the historic 25% quota for women in
Local Government from
September 2017 – December 2018*

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Women and Media Collective

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Preface

The Local Government elections, which were held in February 2018 was a significant one. It is the first elections to be held under the new hybrid electoral system introduced at local government level in 2012 as amended in 2017. It is also significant for another reason. It is the first election to be held which puts into operation a mandatory 25% quota for women at local government.

This resulted in the total number of representatives at local government to be increased from 4486 to around 8356 members. In terms of Section 27F of the Amendment, 25% of the total number of members in each local authority shall be women members. This is a significant achievement in comparison to the 1.8% of women representation in Local Government from the previous years.

Against this backdrop, this research looks at newspaper reporting on operationalizing the historic women's quota. The research looks at newspapers in three stages. First, the period during which the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 was passed in Parliament and the announcement of the 2018 Local Government elections from September – November 2017. The second stage covers election campaigning, issues that surfaced during the campaign period and the day of the election from December 2017 – February 2018. The third stage covers, the post-election period to understand how the quota was reported on in the media from February 2018 – December 2018.

The Women and Media Collective (WMC) had help from many people to compile this research. We

sincerely thank Iromi Perera for unpacking the research findings and writing it. A special thanks to Kshama Ranawana, Thushari Madahapola and H.Inthumanthy for their efforts in finding the articles and analyzing them. Many thanks are also owed to Kumudini Samuel for conceptualizing and editing the research. Thank you to Inoka Priyadharshani and Ramchandran Priyadharshini for translating this research to Sinhala and Tamil. For proofreading this research, our thanks go out to Seetha Ranjani and Kuhanithy. Thanks to M.S.T Gowry for the layout of this publication.

The research was published with the support of the Royal Norwegian Embassy. We would specially like to thank Monica Svenskerud and Sundari Jayasundara for their corporation and support.

WMC has used many strategies to increase women's representation particularly at local level over the past 20 years. At present, WMC is working towards building an ethical political culture in Sri Lanka by strengthening women's political representation. This research was conducted with the objective of protecting the mandatory 25% quota for women at local government.

Sanchia Brown

Programme Officer

Women and Media Collective,

January 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- This research was conducted on newspaper reporting, in response to and the implementation of the legally mandated 25% quota for women in local government, for the purpose of knowledge building and knowledge sharing on women's representation in politics and the need to enhance affirmative action.

- The study covered newspaper reporting for the period September 2017 - December 2018. Four newspapers, two daily and two weekly, in each of the language groups - Sinhala, Tamil and English were selected for this research study. The newspapers were identified with the objective of capturing mainstream media reporting across State and private media. The selected newspapers were the Sunday Times, Sunday Observer, Daily Mirror, Daily News (English language; Dinamina, Silumina, Sunday Lankadeepa and Lankadeepa (Sinhala language); Sunday Veerakesari, Veerakesari, Sunday Thinakaran and Thinakaran (Tamil language).

- During the research period of September 2017 - December 2018, a total of 415 articles relevant to or about the women's quota were published across all three languages in the twelve newspapers that were tracked. 117 of these were in English newspapers, 148 in Sinhala and 150 in Tamil. The number of articles referring to or about the women's quota were high in the months right before the February 2018 election (December 2017 and January 2018) and peaked in February 2018 and decreased in the months following.

- When looking at the type of articles published during this period, over half of the

articles, 242, were news reports. This was followed by 79 feature articles, 43 interviews, 28 opinion pieces and 23 editorials. Out of the 415 articles written during the research period, 30 articles appeared on the front page and 15 of these were published in English newspapers with 10 articles appearing during February 2018, 9 in Sinhala newspapers with 6 articles appearing in February 2018 and 6 in Tamil newspapers with 3 articles appearing in January 2018. It is noteworthy that none of the weekly newspapers had a front-page article during this period with the exception of the Sunday Veerakesari that had a page one article in April 2018.

- When looking at the newspaper reporting from September 2017 - December 2018 the coverage of the implementation of the women's quota can be divided into three key stages. The first is the September - November 2017 period which covers the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 and announcement of the February 2018 Local Government elections which was the first election where the 25% quota was implemented. The second is the December 2017 - February 2018 period which covers the election campaigning and associated issues in the lead up to the election, and the actual election itself in February. The third is post-election where much of the coverage is on the issues around implementation of quota and some challenges in ensuring all councils have 25% representation.

- Following the passage of the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017

by Parliament in August 2017, the coverage in the newspapers reported in detail what changes this Act would bring with many of those interviewed hailing it as progressive. Minister of Local Government and Provincial Councils, Faizer Mustapha is quoted or interviewed the most in these articles where he calls on all political parties to protect the spirit of the amendments. Several articles also featured interviews with other members of the Government who spoke on the importance of the women's quota. There were no women interviewed regarding the passage of the Act, and those quoted in all three languages were male Members of Parliament commenting on the importance of the quota. Many articles in all three languages also pointed out that despite Sri Lanka having the first female Prime Minister in the world and also a female President, representation of women at all levels – local, provincial and parliamentary – were extremely poor especially compared to the South Asia region.

- In the lead up to the Local Government election, during the period of campaigning, much of the coverage, especially in the English media was about election violence. These included reports of incidents, statements and updates from election monitoring bodies - People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFRE), Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) and Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) as well as detailed analysis from civil society groups such as the Women's Action Network (WAN). There were also several statements from the Election Commission reporting on investigations into violence against female candidates and warnings of actions that could be taken against such violence. The statements from the Election Commission also included warnings that elections will be postponed in those areas where there was violence against women.

- Coverage in all three languages also high-

lighted the challenges that female candidates were facing in the campaign period in addition to violence. These challenges ranged from actually getting nominations to the culture of impunity that made it difficult for women to contest, to the lack of support from political parties, the difficulty in getting their names on the relevant lists and specific issues faced by Muslim female candidates. This reporting was mainly driven by statements and press updates by the election monitoring bodies as well as civil society groups who provided examples of challenges and issues in specific areas in order to highlight the challenges women candidates were facing.

- In the lead up to the election, there was a lot of coverage in the Sinhala and Tamil media about the women candidates who were contesting the election. This coverage included profiles of some candidates, interviews or features where they spoke about why they are contesting and what their plans are should they be elected. This sort of coverage was notably absent in the English newspapers. These articles also discussed women's representation in governance in Sri Lanka compared to other countries, women's history of politics in Sri Lanka and why the quota is important for Sri Lanka.

- The Tamil media in particular highlighted the importance of women from the tea plantation sector contesting elections and that they were encouraged to contest in order to change the political culture and represent the plantation sector. Some interviews and features highlighted the fact that the quota alone will not help women contest from the plantation sector, as the patriarchal society they live in has never given them any leadership positions, not just in politics, and therefore parties will have to invest in leadership development. Overall there were more interviews with political parties and women politicians in the Tamil media about the importance of quota and/or issues faced by women contesting for elections.

Majority of the post election coverage was regarding the difficulty in implementing the quota as a few councils were unable to meet the 25% quota according to the provisions of the Act and therefore unable to proceed with the formation of the council. The two list system was blamed for this conundrum in statements and interviews with the Election Commissioner. As the days passed by, the coverage revolved around the future of the quota. Some discussions noted that lessons must be learnt from this election before implementing the quota for the next election. They noted that the law must be amended for clarity. Others averred that the quota was impractical while key persons such as Minister Mustapha and Mayor Rosy Senanayake issues statements in support of the quota, with Minister Mustapha even indicating that they will not bow down to reduce the 25% quota for women. The Election Commission Chairman, Mahinda Deshapriya stated that he had warned the Attorney General of these legal snags from the beginning.

In the Sinhala and Tamil media, most notably, in the Lankadeepa (7 articles), Veerakesari (16 articles) and Thinakaran (6 articles), there was a lot of follow up on how the quota implementation was working out in local councils after the inaugural meetings, including specific reports from various local councils from around the country. Reports from these meetings included decisions made, how women councilors expressed their views, and their participation in general. Tamil media also had many interviews with newly elected women councilors and civil society activists about post-election experiences and the success of the quota.

It is evident that newspapers or media organisations in general benefit hugely from election monitoring bodies. Most of the coverage regarding election violence, as well as information about which laws were broken and action that

should be taken were reiterated by these groups and reported accordingly. However, the reporting was more frequent in the English media compared to the Tamil media, which means that monitoring bodies need to ensure information flows in all three languages and Tamil media outlets must make more use of independent monitoring bodies when reporting during election periods.

There is very little analysis that is done by the newspaper reporters themselves and most of the substantial analysis comes from civil society organisations or through interviews with activists/policy makers. For example, statements from the Women's Action Network (WAN) which was published extensively in the English newspapers discusses ways in which violence against female candidates in particular should be viewed, especially of Muslim candidates and of online hate speech. Such in depth analysis is not to be seen outside of such statements and interviews.

In reporting about women candidates where qualifications and suitability of candidates were discussed, a majority of those interviewed spoke of the fact that the women candidates should be qualified and educated and not the mother, sister or wife of a politician. However, in none of the interviews or articles was there a different narrative or analysis discussing whether men are held to the same standard and about questioning the suitability of men in office or male candidates, or on the topic of existing nepotism that is deeply entrenched in the political culture.

In certain months in the lead up to the election, most weekly newspapers had very little or no coverage regarding the quota or women's representation. As people tend to read more weekly newspapers compared to daily newspapers there should be more in depth analytical articles as well as features in weekly newspapers.

INTRODUCTION

This report is one element of the work towards 'Changing Minds: Strengthening Inclusive Governance and Affirmative Action to Increase Women's Representation in Politics' implemented by the Women and Media Collective (WMC). This newspaper research was conducted on the response to, and the implementation of, the 25% quota for women in local government (Local Authorities) for the purpose of knowledge building and knowledge sharing on women's representation in politics and the need to enhance affirmative action.

The overall work on women in politics undertaken by WMC seeks to deal with three key challenges to building a democratic and ethical political culture in Sri Lanka in relation to women's representation in political institutions. The first is the under representation of women in politics and the need to build a public discourse in favor of an increase in women's political representation. The second deals with the issue of women's political participation and perceptions of women's capacity to engage in politics, including legislative politics, and therefore the need to address the issue of strengthening women's engagement in the legislature. The third seeks to enhance the capacity of the increased number of women representatives who will be elected to Local Authorities (an increase from the current 2% to 25%) the majority of whom will be new to local government.

An amendment to the Local Authorities Elections Act in 2017 (The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017) ensured that local councilors are elected according to a proportional representation system where 60% of members represent single member or multi member wards and 40% are returned from a list termed the 'additional persons' list without a ward based constituency. The total number of members in local government was increased from 4486 to approximately 8356 members. In terms of Section 27F of the Amendment, 25% of the total number of members in each local authority shall be women members¹. These affirmative provisions in the Local Authorities Elections Act of 2017, which ensured women 25% of Local Authority seats, shall be termed the women's quota or quota in this research study. With the quota in place, the number of women in Local Authorities or local councils increased from 89 to 1991² following the Local Government elections on February 10, 2018. The 2018 elections also saw the appointment of the first female mayor to the Colombo Municipal Council, Rosy Senanayake³.

The research for this report was conducted by Kshama Ranawana, Thushari Madahapola and Viluthu, Center for Human Resource Development.

1. <https://groundviews.org/2018/02/07/the-significance-of-the-25-quota-for-women-in-local-government/>

2. <https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/governments-womens-quota-a-total-success/>

3. <https://www.democracyspeaks.org/blog/empowering-female-councilors-sri-lanka>

METHODOLOGY

The study covered newspaper reporting for the period September 2017 - December 2018. Four newspapers, two daily and two weekly, in each of the language groups - Sinhala, Tamil and English were selected for this research study. The newspapers were identified with the objective of capturing mainstream media reporting across State and private media. The selected newspapers were -

Public Library did not stock newspapers after one year of publication c) the National Library only allowed a person to read a predetermined number of newspapers following which a payment had to be made to access more newspapers d) While both places initially allowed laptops inside the building, following the April 21st 2019 bomb blasts, this practice was discontinued. Neither of the places had a Wi-Fi connection for visitors, which meant

	Weekly	Weekly	Daily	Daily
English	Sunday Times	Sunday Observer*	Daily Mirror	Daily News*
Sinhala	Sunday Lankadeepa	Silumina*	Dinamina*	Lankadeepa
Tamil	Sunday Veerakesari	Sunday Thinakaran*	Veerakesari	Thinakaran*

Table 1: Selected newspapers from state and private media *State media

From January 2019 - September 2019, three researchers assigned to collecting information from each language looked at every single newspaper published during the research period, per using a total of approximately 2900 newspapers. These newspapers were accessed at the Public Library, the National Library of Sri Lanka, copies available at the Women and Media Collective office as well as copies available at other organisations, such as Viluthu and online versions of newspapers.

Researchers had to acquire a membership card to use the newspaper archives at the Public Library and National Library. Some of the challenges they faced when using the archives at these two institutions included a) that newspapers for only one month could be accessed at a time b) the

that after collating the information, the researcher had to check for the stories online at home.

The information gathered from the newspapers were entered into an excel database as they looked at the articles. The excel database gathered the following information -

- a) Basic information such as name of newspaper, date of publication, type of article (whether news article, feature, interview etc.), page number.
- b) Detailed information about each article such as a summary of each article, whether any of the information in the article fell into the following categories and what was said - key quotes, election violations, information regarding campaigning, issues regarding quota, implementation of the quota, future of the quota.

KEY FINDINGS

During the research period of September 2017 - December 2018, a total of 415 articles relevant to or about the women’s quota were published across all three languages in the twelve newspapers that were tracked. 117 of these were in English, 148 in Sinhala and 150 in Tamil. The number of articles referring to or, that were about the women’s quota were the highest in the months right before the February 2018 election, peaking in February 2018 and decreasing in the months following.

(Refer Chart 1)

When looking at the number of articles by newspaper, weekly newspapers in all three languages reported in similar numbers while in the daily newspaper reporting, Tamil newspapers contained more articles about or referring to the women’s quota, closely followed by Sinhala newspapers (Refer Chart 2). When looking at the type of articles published during this period, over half of the articles were news reports (242 articles). This was followed by 79 feature articles, 43 interviews, 28 opinion pieces and 23 editorials (Refer Chart 3).

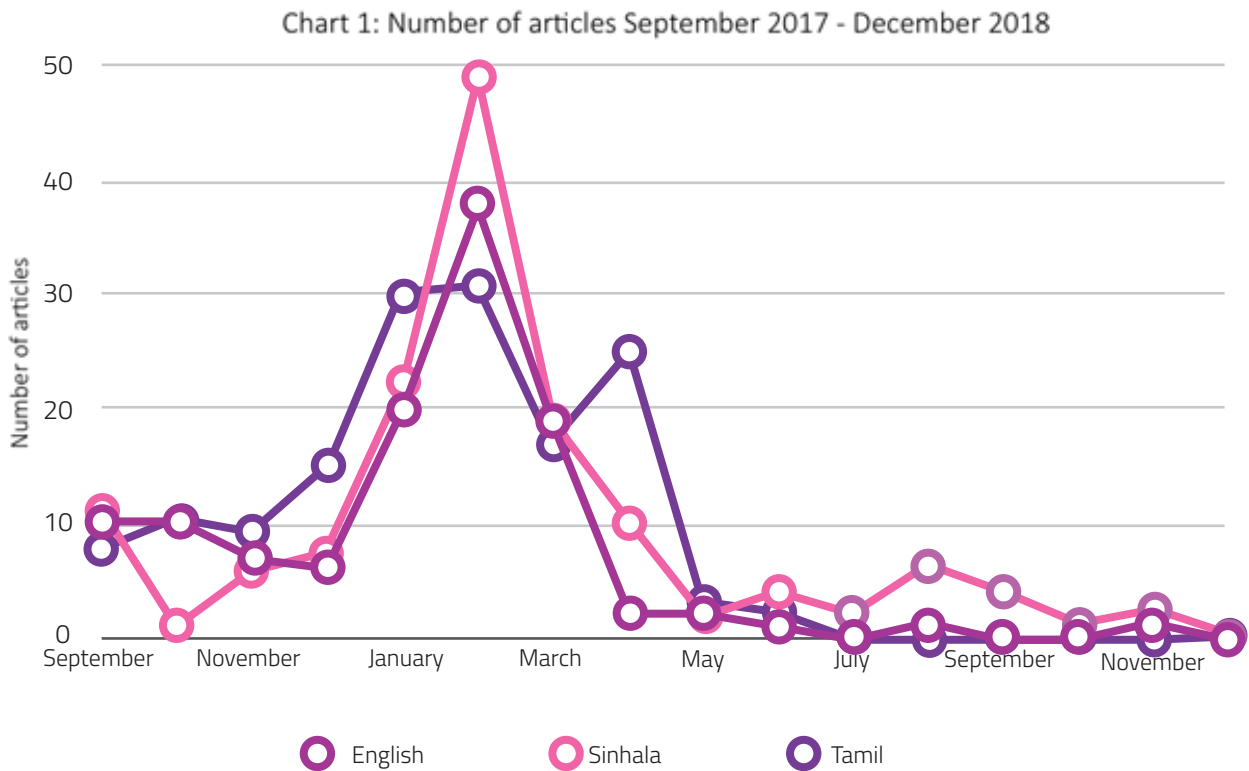
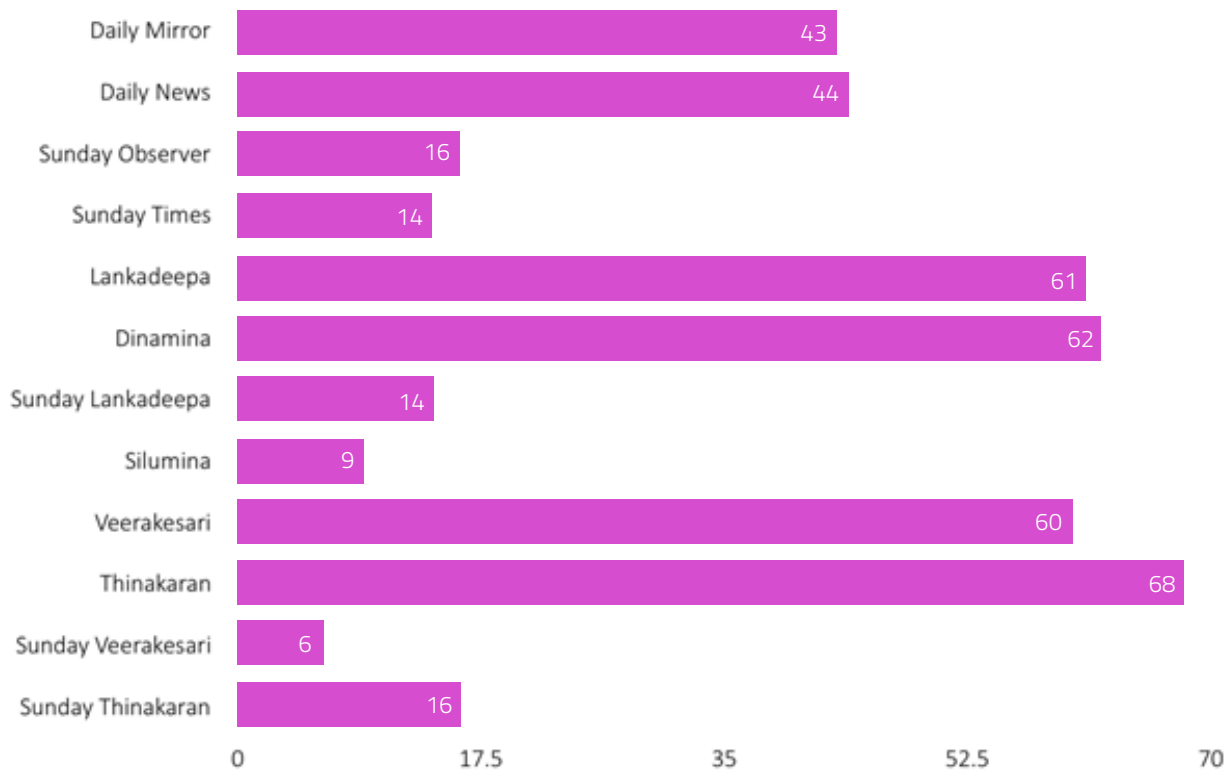


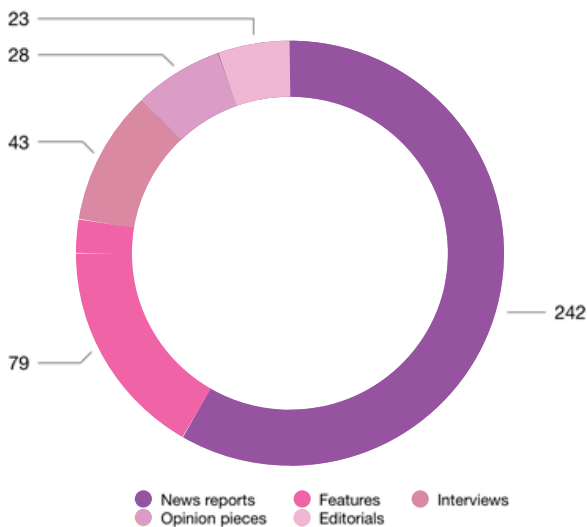
Chart 2: Number of articles by newspaper



Out of the 415 articles written during the research period, 30 articles appeared on the front page. 15 were published in English newspapers with 10 articles appearing during February 2018, 9 in Sinhala newspapers with 6 articles appearing in February 2018 and 6 in Tamil newspapers with 3

articles appearing in January 2018 (Refer chart 4). It is noteworthy that none of the weekly newspapers had a front-page article during this period with the exception of the Sunday Veerakesari that had a page one article in April 2018 which was a feature of the first female Pradeshiya Sabha Chairman in Maskeliya.

Chart 3: Type of articles

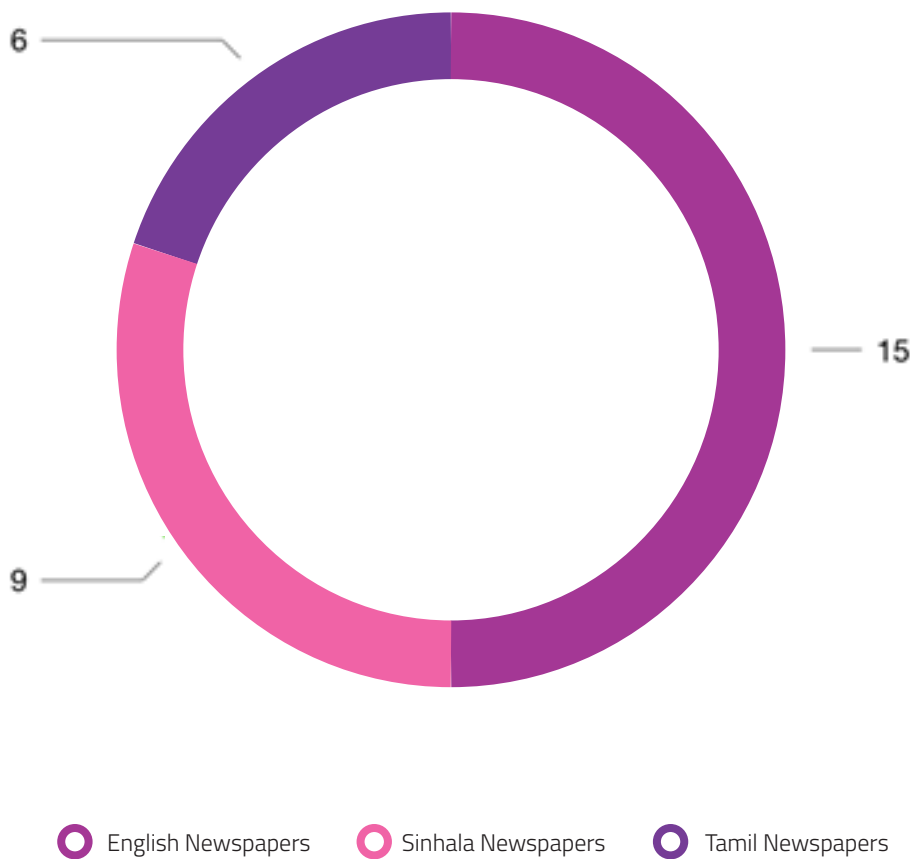


In English newspapers, most of the articles that appeared on the front page particularly during February 2018, post the election, was with regard to the delay in setting up councils – interviews with Mahinda Deshapriya about the reasons for delay, the EC being urged to ensure that Local Authorities be set up without delay, legal snags in operationalising the quota, Minister for Local Government and Provincial Councils, Faizer Mustafa stating that the EC must order parties to adhere to quota etc. In the months prior (December 2017 and

January 2018) the front-page articles included news items relating to election violence, about holding of elections, the gazetting of the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017. In February there was also a front page news article about the appointment of the first female ‘Adivasi’ councilor, W.M Shiromala from Dehiattakandiya⁴. Sinhala frontpage articles were mostly about the issues in setting up councils after the elections while implementing quota, as well as news items

regarding the violence and abuse faced by women in the run up to the election. In Tamil newspapers, news items quoting the Executive Director of CaFFE about the importance of prioritizing women for political parties in the North as well as about the low prevalence of violence against women, as well as news items quoting female candidates on the importance of women getting elected to office in the North were featured in the front page.

Chart 4: Front page articles



⁴ <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/Shiromala-first-Adiwasi-public-representative-145742.html>

HOW DID NEWSPAPERS REPORT?

When looking at the newspaper reporting from September 2017 - December 2018 the coverage of the implementation of the women's quota can be divided into three key stages. The first is the September - December 2017 period which covers the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 and announcement of the February 2018 Local Government elections which was the first election where the 25% quota was implemented. The second is the December 2017 - February 2018 period which covers the election campaigning and associated issues in the lead up to the election, and the actual election itself in February. The third is post-election where much of the coverage is on the issues around operationalizing of the quota and the difficulty in ensuring all councils have 25% representation.

Stage one (September - December 2017)

“New legislation that replaced the earlier Local Government election law is an advance in democracy. For the first time it has ensured 25% women representation in local government bodies. Such a mandatory quota is necessary in the context of male dominated political parties and

cultural constraints on women's political activities. It has done away with the notorious preferential or 'manape' system and retained the advantages of proportional representation through a hybrid system combining the latter with the First-past-the Post system. The abolition of the preferential vote makes electioneering much cheaper and accessible to poor candidates. It also reduces the dependence on money-bags.” - Daily News feature, September 2017⁵

The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017, which legislated the 25% quota for women at the level of local authorities was followed by the passage of the Provincial Councils Elections (Amendment) by Parliament in September 2017. The coverage in the newspapers reported in detail what changes (the Local Authorities Act)⁶ would bring with many of those interviewed hailing it as progressive. Minister of Local Government and Provincial Councils, Faizer Mustapha is quoted or interviewed the most in these articles where he calls on all political parties to protect the spirit of the amendments. Several articles also interview other members of the ruling Government who spoke on the importance of the women's quota.

⁵ <http://www.dailynews.lk/2017/09/08/features/127589/lg-polls-and-local-interests>

⁶ In this study we concentrated particularly on reportage of the Amendments to the Local Authorities Act.

“Women who are the main component of the economy have been elevated in the economic field. Women will strengthen the political power just as they have the economy. This is the goal of the government. Will give women’s representation 25% and give them strength in the political arena.” – Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe speaking at a women’s empowerment awards event on September 1, 2017, quoted in Lankadeepa September 5, 2017.

There were no women interviewed regarding the passage of the Act, and those quoted in all three languages were male Members of Parliament commenting on the importance of the quota. Many articles in all three languages also pointed out that despite Sri Lanka having the first female Prime Minister in the world and also a female President, representation of women at all levels – local, provincial and parliamentary – were extremely poor especially compared to the South Asia region as well. The Sunday Observer in an article published on September 3, 2017 quoted former Minister Sudharshini Fernandopulle following a media briefing where she had stated that she had insisted for 25% for women and had threatened to vote against the previous provision which allocated only 1400 seats or 16% for women.

“If women’s representation will increase in the local government, the change will be enabled in the country. Women’s political representation is high in other countries, but unlike other countries women’s political participation is low in Sri Lanka.” –Thinakaran news article, November 2017

There were several articles also discussing the challenges that women would face in contesting

under a patriarchal political and political party system. This was mostly in the Sinhala and English newspapers. There were also some articles quoting opposition ministers or opposition politicians, or opinion pieces of senior journalists and academics regarding what they considered the downside of quota - such as the increase in expenditure to accommodate increase in councilors, the needs to have ‘suitable’ candidates who have village interests at heart. There was no counter opinion in such articles, which asked whether current male politicians fulfill this criteria on suitability.

“This need for women’s representation did not come from provincial administrators or women, but by Colombo centric discussions. The end result is that political parties have to make a great effort to find women to contest from the villages. Therefore it is foolish to think that it will give a boost to women’s representation or be a leap forward in democracy.” – Opinion piece by the former editor of Silumina, Chamara Lakshman Kumara, Silumina, December 2017

“Instead of making special arrangements, an electoral system that is beneficial for all should be worked out. Under the existing system not only women, even upright people cannot win. That system has given men who are thugs a place. Therefore, if the electoral system can be changed to reflect the good, then, women’s representation too could be strengthened. That is where we should head to. If not, the women who get elected are those connected to worthless men, not other women. Therefore I don’t believe that would be beneficial for women.” - Article by Anurudda Pradeep Karanasuriya, Senior Lecturer, Political Science, Sri Jayawardenapura University,

Lankadeepa, December 2017

Interviews with Election Commission Chairman Mahinda Deshapriya regarding the Local Government elections of February 2018 included details of how the quota would work as well as information about how to avoid confusion around the implementation of the quota. It was also reported that in order to ensure the numbers were not confusing, the Election Commission had specified the exact number of female candidates to be entered in the nominations list for each local government body⁷. Information from election monitoring groups that was reported also explained the fundamental changes to the election system. There was also reporting around the fact that through the new amendments the youth quota had been removed and that now it would be up to the parties to ensure they make adequate space for youth to contest as well.

“It’s not possible to do everything by law. We have already given 25 percent quota to female representatives and we cannot give another 25 percent for youth again. The political parties too have social responsibilities, therefore, they should allocate a quota for youth from the party level,” - Minister Faizer Mustapha, Daily News, September 2017⁸

The Tamil media did not cover statements or news items that quoted the Election Commission or election monitoring groups and mostly quoted Tamil Parliamentarians or Minister Faizer Mustapha.

The Sinhala press had more articles regarding how the quota would work and its importance compared to other newspapers. English press mainly covered

statements and interviews with Faizer Mustapha and other parliamentarians while the Tamil press covered the importance of quota and its effect on up country Tamil politics. There was in depth coverage in newspapers like the Lankadeepa on the history of women’s politics in Sri Lanka as well as the benefits of quota through coverage of speeches and interviews with the then Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe, academics and parliamentarians. There was no coverage of public opinion around the passage of the Act or the importance of quota.

“I have never heard about violence against women and threats during the LTTE period. But the abuse is increasing and women’s participation in the politics is needed to bring the changes from a woman’s perspective” -Interview with Ananthi Sasitharan, Member and Minister of Women’s Affairs, Northern Provincial Council, Thinakaran, December 1, 2017

“With access to education women have entered all spheres, however their representation in politics is still not enough. Even though they are able to vote to change a government, there aren’t enough women in parliament. As a pilot project to change this situation, a bill to include a minimum number of women in local government has been passed. Some say they cannot find women to contest; that cannot be helped. Someone must be found and the election won. In the Norwegian parliament 50% are women, and that is without any legislation. In some European cabinets at least 50% or the majority are women. Such changes must be effected through law and social interventions,” -former Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe speaking at the 100th anniversary of Visakha Vidyalaya, quoted in the Dinamina, September 10, 2017

⁷ <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2017/12/10/news/female-candidates-minimum-number-mandatory>

⁸ <http://www.dailynews.lk/2017/09/25/features/129195/exclusion-youth-politics>

Stage two (December 2017 –election day, February 2018)

In the lead up to the election much of the coverage, especially in the English media was about election violence and other issues faced by women during the campaigning period, such as lack of support from the political parties. Election violence related reports included reports of incidents, statements and updates from election monitoring bodies People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFRE), Centre for Monitoring Election Violence (CMEV) and Campaign for Free and Fair Elections (CaFFE) as well as detailed analysis from civil society groups such as the Women's Action Network (WAN). There were also several statements from the Election Commission that were reported with details of investigating incidents of violence against female candidates and warnings of acting on complaints of violence. The statements from the Election Commission also included warnings that elections will be postponed in those areas where there was violence against women.

"If there are any barriers preventing the freedom to vote, the Elections Commission will not hesitate to postpone elections in these areas," said Deshapriya. District officers are also studying the areas closely and are expected to inform the Secretariat if additional security is needed for female candidates in certain areas.", Mahinda Deshapriya quoted in a Daily News article, January 6, 2018

Coverage in all three languages also highlighted the challenges that female candidates were facing in the campaign period in addition to violence. These challenges range from actually getting nominations to the culture of impunity that made it difficult for them to contest, to the lack of support from political

parties, the difficulty on getting their names on the relevant lists and specific issues faced by Muslim female candidates.

"There are no women contestants accused of criminal charges or who have got remanded. However, they face challenges to enter politics due to patriarchy. In their own ward itself, male contestants defame women's name during the election campaign. So then women are afraid to come out and get involved in the elections campaigns." – article in the Thinakaran, January 14 2018

"Last week, a group of policemen barged into her residence on the pretext of searching for illegal weapons. When they noticed her election brochures, they asked her about her candidacy. The police said the house search was due to an anonymous 119 call about weapons and printing of counterfeit currency notes. By that time, the whole village had gathered on our street causing shame and embarrassment to the family. I suspect someone planned this to sling mud at me and my family members," Rinuza said.

Many other women candidates in her area had earned the wrath of powerful men including religious leaders soon after they decided to contest, she said.

Candidates in Puttalam contesting under various political parties have decided to go door-to-door in small groups, taking into account the risks. "We used to tell them that we all are from one party — the 'women'. We should all have our say in local governance as we do in our homes," Rinuza said," Kader Ibrahim Rinuza, a candidate contesting from

the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress for the Kalpitiya Pradeshiya Sabha in Puttalam quoted in a Sunday Times article regarding violence and issues faced by women candidates, January 28 2020⁹

Reporting was mainly driven by statements and press updates by the election monitoring bodies as well as civil society groups who provided examples of challenges and issues in specific areas in order to highlight the challenges women candidates were facing. For example, a WAN statement that was carried in the Sunday Times newspaper in January 2018 pointed out the silence of institutions such as the police and the Election Commission, as well as the political parties themselves, on hate speech against women candidates online, the character assassination faced by many women candidates and specific issues faced by Muslim candidates particularly due to Moulavis.

“WAN also observed that it is a painful and problematic fact that so far, none of the political parties these woman candidates belong to, the police who are responsible to uphold the law, the Election Commission, or any political party leaders have condemned the open, public, and disgusting hate speech towards women candidates or verbal and psychological violence by men with religious and political backgrounds towards them. “Their silence makes one question whether women’s participation in politics is truly welcomed, or merely a formal act,” the coalition of women’s organisations noted that women continue to be subjected to subtle, silent, and hidden forms of violence, and as such these violent acts violate their rights and negatively affect the credibility of the election.”

- WAN statement reported in the Sunday Times

“Women have had to face many challenges during

this election. Previously under the proportional representation system the parties would have to include female candidates name on the list so they would include the names at the very end of the list. But this time because of the 25% quota and the 10% compulsory inclusion women have got a very important place. Due to this, women have had to face different challenges. Some women who are well known in their electorates have been put into other electorates. Names of women who are active and bright have been pushed further down the list and those whose names are placed at the top are women who are known or are related to organisers. In order to protect the quota system we have to work hard to overcome these challenges. Women have problems in some areas. Women are being used in some instances to cook food and provide alcohol in the night to people working on the campaigns. There are some who don’t even have money to print posters. Therefore in order to make this quota system a success we have to work to overcome these challenges. We plan to recommend that female organisers should also be appointed along with male organisers.” – Executive Director of the Women’s Resource Centre Sumika Perera quoted at a press conference organized by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) a, Dinamina, January 27 2018.

Some of the reporting based on press conferences or statements by election monitoring groups were not only about violence, for example in the Sinhala there was some coverage quoting CMEV that some political parties were not fully supportive of women candidates and their campaigns, with some even going to the extent of telling people not to vote for them. Furthermore there was some coverage about mud-slinging and the lack of support from male colleagues.

⁹ <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/180128/news/intimidation-insults-attempt-to-deter-women-poll-candidates-278866.html>

During this period there were many articles in all three languages regarding the importance of quota as well as how the quota system would function, explaining how the nominations period and the overall 25% would be made up. In articles and interviews some positive aspects of the quota and the women candidates that were discussed included that it will enable rural and urban women across the board to get into more active politics and into political life, that the culture of political parties acting as gatekeepers will change, and that gender sensitive policy making will be introduced by women elected to govern. In terms of interviews with a champion for women's quota among the candidates, Colombo Mayor Rosy Senanayake is the most visible in the reporting with several interviews or statements from her.

“While ensuring that more women will join politics, the next has to be a quota for parliamentary seats. In Parliament, I strongly believe that it is the PR system that is depriving women of their rightful access. You need an enormous amount of money for an election. A lot of women who want to enter politics are being discouraged as they have to go through character assassination. For me, affirmative action is the only way forward and 25% is not enough. That should be the minimum, but more would be even better. We need to make it mandatory and use affirmative action with regard to the electoral systems in this country. The women's movements have to be stronger and advocate for this.”, interview with Rosy Senanayake, Daily Mirror January 16 2018

Interviews with citizens about women's representation and the importance of quota showed that there were high expectations from women who

would be elected to office and the belief that policies would benefit from having women champion them or working on them as there are some issues or aspects that only women would be sensitive to.

“Rajani welcomes the move to allocate a quota for women and said having women in politics will facilitate other women to come forward and talk about the various problems they face. “There are things women cannot or do not want to discuss with men, as men will not understand them,” she added.

Having studied at the Batticaloa Hindu College, her knowledge in politics so far has been text book-based having taken up political science for her Advanced Level examination, but years of working as a social worker has honed her skills to take a more active role in politics. “I see a need for strong female representation. The 30-year war has made us strong and we can meet the challenges we have to confront in the political sphere. Be it better street lighting, an efficient drainage system, children's clinics and parks or upgrading cemeteries, all of which come under the purview of the local authorities, she said.”, interview with ITAK candidate from Batticaloa Lakshmi Rajani Jeyprakash, Sunday Times January 14, 2018¹⁰

Interestingly there was much discussion about the 'suitability' of women candidates and that they should be qualified and not a politician's mother, sister or wife. This was also a point emphasised by Minister Faizer Mustapha in some statements and speeches. In an opinion piece by the former editor of Silumina, Chamara Lakshman Kumara in December 2017 wrote that the quota won't work and used as an example what he saw as the ineffectiveness of

¹⁰ <http://www.sundaytimes.lk/180114/news/people-gutted-by-war-drought-speak-out-277078.html>

the 13 women Members of Parliament and that they only “open their mouth to eat or yawn” and that some have not opened their mouth in Parliament in five years. While such misogynistic comments can be found in much of the discourse around quota and women politicians, the reporting of counter narratives to this – questions about whether men are held to the same standards, the efficiency of male politicians thus far etc. – is seriously absent in the print media.

In the lead up to the election, there was a lot of coverage particularly in the Sinhala and Tamil media with women candidates who were contesting for elections. This coverage included profiles of some candidates, interviews or features where they spoke about why they are contesting and what their plans are should they be elected. These articles also discussed women’s representation in governance in Sri Lanka compared to other countries, women’s history of politics in Sri Lanka and why the quota is important for Sri Lanka. Sinhala media such as Dinamina also interviewed or quoted Sri Lankan academics and civil society regarding quota.

“I am contesting not only because I make up the 53% of the population, but also to challenge the existing system and to be part of the new political tradition. It is a proven fact that women are less corrupt than men. I am contesting to show that there are paths to the new political tradition and to change to this dirty political system we must begin from village to village”, Disna. Ranjani Mahaarachchi, candidate from the UNP who contested for the Kegalle Municipal Council, interview translated from Dinamina, February 5, 2018

“I will work to reduce the unbearable cost of living, corruption, and waste propose new income

generating programmes.”, Nanda Wickremanayke, candidate from the UPFA who contested for the Kuliypitiya Municipal Council, interview translated from Dinamina, January 25, 2018

“As a Muslim woman, I had to convince my husband and the extended family to allow me to contest. I want to be a role model for other Muslim women and let them know that women can make a difference. Women should come forward and enter public life because women can talk to other women freely regarding the problems they face,” A.G.S.Naleema, candidate from the Muslim National Alliance (MNA) who contested for the Kattankudy Urban Council, Sunday Times January 14, 2018

The Tamil media in particular highlighted the importance of women from the tea plantation contesting for elections and that they were encouraged to contest in order to change the political culture and represent the plantation sector. Some interviews and features highlighted the fact that quota alone will not help women contesting from the plantation sector, as the patriarchal society they live in has never given them any leadership positions, not just in politics, and therefore parties will have to invest in leadership development.

“We appreciate this 25% quota system, because of the denial of the plantation sector women’s leadership because of patriarchal system. They can utilise this opportunity to enter into mainstream politics and achieve development,” – Interview with P. Muthulingam, Director of the Institute for Social Development, Thinakaran, December 10, 2017

“The plantation sector never provided the opportunity for women to lead the society even temple trustees, school development societies or

cooperative societies. Then how will they improve their leadership? The decision making capacity will not be able to build without leadership. Therefore, if we want to talk about women's representation, firstly we'll have to build-up their leadership. If not it will be just talk during political time to promote the women in politics," *Thinakaran* feature article, December 2017

"When we were in Mullivaikkal no one raised their voice for us and nobody was with us at the end. Our women candidates' priority is justice for the Tamil community. To show our solidarity we have to select the proper candidates.", *S. Lalithakumary*, candidate, quote translated from a front page news article in the *Thinakaran*, January 26, 2018.

Stage three (Post election coverage)

Some of the post election coverage continued to be on issues faced by women candidates including about how they were deceived by political parties even until the day of election and were unable to run for election or win in the ward, or that women with good grassroot level experience were put in the additional list and did not get a seat as a result. Some of the coverage also included briefings by women's rights organisations about how the quota was misused by some parties to making recommendations on how to improve how seats are allocated¹¹.

"*Soma Dissanayke*, an entrepreneur running a successful business in *Moneragala* stood for the *SLFP* in the area and she too was put on the additional list, despite having popular support in the area.

In *Puttalam*, the *Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC)* convinced *Bisleah Bhutto* (31) to run for office for the *Puttalam Pradeshiya Sabha* at the eleventh hour as the party simply struggled to fill the female quota in their nomination lists. The party had nominated her to an area where the party had little support- she lost.

"We also had to face some men from my own party canvassing for the opposition party in the area, so that the people would not vote for women from their own party", explained *Bhutto* who had to face the additional 'cultural' burden in the area.

Moreover, in the present crisis, many of her male colleagues have asked that the party not give additional seats to women, with some even threatening to resign if women are appointed to their council,

"My colleague was pregnant when she campaigned for the party from *Kalpitiya* to *Puttalam*. The organiser who gave us his van to campaign now says that politics is no place for a woman. And that we should not ask for a seat", she added." – *Daily News* article with several activists and women candidates about their election and post-election experience, March 1, 2018

However majority of the post election coverage was regarding the difficulty in implementing the quota as some councils were unable to meet the 25% women requirement and even according to the Act could not constitute the necessary numbers, and therefore unable to proceed with the formation of the council. Election Commissioner *Mahinda Deshapriya* stated that "because of a lacuna in the Local Authorities' Elections Act", 25% woman

¹¹ <http://www.dailynews.lk/2018/03/01/features/144220/women-betrayed>

representation could not be maintained in at least ten local government bodies¹². There was a total of 340 Local Councils contested at Municipal and Pradeshiya level. The two list system was blamed for this confusion in statements and interviews with the Chairman of the Election Commission who also in other interviews stated that the 25% cannot be implemented due to practical issues in the new electoral system. There was some pushback to these statements, for example Mayor Rosy Senanayake in a statement issued to the media said that “to now say that this minimum 25 percent of women council members could not be implemented, is disingenuous and in bad faith” and went on to say that the Commission of Elections nor the Political Parties should consider adhering to this law to be “unfair” or “burdensome.” She also stated “The law cannot be set aside nor the clear intent of the law be defeated just because some Parties now have to nominate more women from their Lists than they expected to. To disregard the law would not only be discriminatory towards women but also circumvent the democratic process and the expectations of the electorate”.

As the days passed by, the coverage revolved around the future of the quota with some discussing that lessons must be learnt from this election before implementing it for the next election and that the law must be amended for clarity, to Minister Mustapha’s statements that they will not bow down to reduce the 25% to Election Commission Chairman Mahinda Deshapriya stating that he warned the Attorney General of these legal snags from the beginning. Minister Mustapha and Mayor Rosy Senanayake were key figures who made several statements in support of the quota in the weeks following the election.

“As one of the driving forces behind the provision, I can say with certainty that the law on the minimum representation of women is clear-cut. Under section 27F of the amended Ordinance “not less than twenty five per cent of the total number of members in each local authority shall be women members” The section is unambiguous and straightforward; it is not open to interpretation,”, Mayor Rosy Senanayake in a press release issued to the media urging the EC Chairman to take steps to implement the 25% Quota for Women in LG polls immediately, *Daily Mirror, February 16 2018*

“The parties with overhung seats, will not be able to accommodate more female members, other than the ones already elected.”Therefore, in case of a party that should have three female members but has only one elected female member, the other parties in the Council are compelled to appoint the two excess females to pass the legal barrier. It may contribute to exceed their 25% Party quota. “However much we support the 25% rule this is not fair by those parties,” the Commission Chairman said. The new law on Local Government election requires females to constitute 25% of the total number of members in the Council.” - Mahinda Deshapriya reported in the Sunday Observer, February 2018

The coverage continues on to March 2018 with election monitoring groups expressing concern about the delay and noting concerns around the possibility of unelected candidates getting through. Statements from PAFREL during that time suggested that since majority of the councils met the 25% quota that they should be formed without delay and that the rest should be sorted out later. Most of the articles during this period included interviews or statements from the Election Commission,

¹² <http://www.dailymirror.lk/article/-women-reps-not-possible-in-LG-bodies-146205.html>

election monitoring groups and civil society as well as politicians. Some articles discussed the delays in setting up the councils and that there is no easy solution, and questioned whether quota worked in this election or whether it created more problems. Merits of quota were discussed and whether the system should revert to the old one, however there was much opposition to this that was reported from civil society groups and even the Chairman of the Election Commission was reported stating that quota should stay.

“We showed at the time the bill was being prepared that the 25% women’s representation is problematic. But since everyone wanted to have the poll conducted, we were told not to worry about it, but to conduct the election. Now like we said, there are practical issues. From the contestants list it is mandatory that there is 10% women’s representation, but when a single party wins all the wards, women’s representation falls below the 25%. When less than four members are elected, it is not mandatory that women are appointed. There are such instances, where meeting the mandatory 25% becomes an issue.” – Mahinda Deshapriya interviewed in the Silumina, February 18 2018

“We have asked the EC to implement the laws, nobody can change the laws of the country, the people voted with the intention of implementing the quota and the government and the EC are obliged to fulfill that promise” – Minister Faizer Mustapha quoted in the Dinamina Editorial page, February 28 2018 from a meeting held between the Minister and civil society activists.

“This is a dilemma that parties are facing- that certain senior popular members who may have lost at the ward level with a very low margin or even one

vote, are completely blocked from coming to the council from the PR list in cases such as Dikwella where all the candidates from the PR list should be women. This is a huge problem because they would have invested a lot of time, money and energy,” Kodikara pointed out. However, she stressed that compromises need to be made to implement the quota. “So the fact that some people are affected in this way can’t be helped. It’s unfortunate, but that’s what a quota of this nature does,” she said stressing that the quota tried to address the historic discrimination and marginalization of women. “People will also say that a particular man couldn’t get in, but some useless woman who has no experience in politics got in through the list. That woman has no experience in politics because of how the political parties have worked in this country. People should understand this,” she said. – Researcher and activist Chulani Kodikara interviewed in the Daily Mirror, March 2018

Election observers stated that the election and the implementation of the quota was a win for democracy with more women in power, and that lessons from this election must be taken into consideration before the next election. However, a statement from Minister Faizer Mustafa stated that quota cannot be implemented for the Provincial Council elections as there has to be a new delimitation report in order to do so.

“[Prime Minister], Ranil Wickremasinghe states that the government and parliament’s attention has been drawn to the fact that the [Local Authorities] elections act will need to be amended to resolve the issue of women’s representation which has become a problem as members have to be elected from the wards, and appointed from the list.” – News article in the Silumina, February 18 2018

“They (political parties) are looking at every excuse to deprive female candidates of the opportunity to represent Local Government bodies.” - Rosy Senanayake commenting on the delays in the formation of councils quoted in the Daily Mirror, March 2018

In the Sinhala and Tamil media, most notably Lankadeepa (7 articles), Veerakesari (16 articles) and Thinakaran (6 articles), there was a lot of follow up on how the quota implementation was working out in local councils after the inaugural meetings, including specific reports from various local government councils from around the country. Reports from these meetings included decisions made, how women councilors expressed their views and their participation in general. Tamil media also had many interviews with newly elected women

councilors and civil society activists about post-election experiences and the success of the quota. Much of this coverage took place throughout the months of March and April.

“The first Adivasi woman has contested in the election and has won a place in the history of Adivasi community. She got 1369 votes and ensured her seat in the Dehiattakandiya Urban Council. She says,” My community has given me more support to win in the election and I want to dedicate my life to the ethnic group and religion. Adivasi people’s education and developments will be developed during my period. I have an idea to contest in the Parliament election through my local government experience.” – News article translated from the Veerakesari, February 2018

KEY ISSUES AND WEAKNESSES IN REPORTING

- While there were a lot of reporting regarding violence against female candidates, there was almost no follow up to those incidents. There was no coverage around whether perpetrators were arrested, whether any cases were filed and what the outcomes were.
- It is evident that newspapers or media organisations in general benefit hugely from election monitoring bodies. Most of the coverage regarding election violence, as well as information about which laws were broken and action that should be taken were reiterated by these groups and reported accordingly. However, the reporting was more frequent in the English media compared to the Tamil media, which means that monitoring bodies need to ensure information flows in all three languages and Tamil media outlets must make more use of independent monitoring bodies when reporting during election periods.
- There is very little analysis that is done by the newspaper reporters themselves and most of the substantial analysis comes from civil society organisations or through interviews with activists/policy makers. For example, statements from the Women's Action Network (WAN) which was published extensively in the English newspapers provides ways in which violence against female candidates in particular should be viewed, especially of Muslim candidates and of online hate speech. Such in depth analysis is not to be seen outside of such statements and interviews.
- English newspapers have little or no interviews or information about female candidates. While Mayor Rosy Senanayake is interviewed several times about her views regarding quota, challenges faced by female candidates and implementation of quota, there are no other female voices that are covered unlike in the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers. There is also no reporting in the English newspapers post election about women who took office and what their experience has been like so far.
- In the run up to the February 2018 election, hate speech on social media against female candidates was a serious issue and except for a WAN statement on this issue, none of the newspapers covered the seriousness of it and what that means for a free and fair election.
- In reporting about women candidates where qualifications and suitability of candidates were discussed, majority of those interviewed spoke of the fact that the women candidates should be

qualified and educated and not the mother, sister or wife of a politician. However in none of the interviews or articles was there a different narrative or analysis discussing whether men are held to the same standard and about questioning the suitability of men in office or male candidates, or on the topic of existing nepotism that is deeply entrenched in the political culture.

- In certain months in the lead up to the election, most weekly newspapers had very little or no coverage regarding quota or women's representation. As people tend to read more weekly newspapers compared to daily newspapers there should be more in depth analytical articles as well as features in weekly newspapers. The breakdown of how many articles appeared in weekly newspapers in the lead up to the election is as follows.

Newspaper	September 2017	October 2017	November 2017	December 2017	January 2017	February 2017	March 2017
Sunday Observer	1	0	1	1	4	5	2
Sunday Times	0	1	1	2	6	4	0
Sunday Lankadeepa	1	0	0	0	5	5	0
Silumina	2	0	1	2	1	2	1
Sunday Veerakesari	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Sunday Thinakaran	0	2	0	3	3	1	0

Table 2: Number of articles that appeared in the weekly newspapers in the lead up to the election

RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICES

- The space allocated to women in the run up to and during election campaigns is mostly with regard to election violence or coverage of the legally mandated quota and what that means for Sri Lankan elections. The media has a responsibility to promote democracy and good governance and this requires them to be more proactive than reactive. While there is some reporting in the Sinhala and Tamil newspapers with female candidates about their plans if they are elected and their experience thus far, this kind of reporting is minimum in the English media. However, in all of this coverage there is not a lot of details that are covered – for example more information about the policies, issues they intend to focus on or their political directions. Interviews with Mayor Rosy Senanayake covered this to some extent but it is not a standard practice that is followed with candidates around the country.

- Extensive reporting regarding election violence is crucial and while it may be difficult for media organisations to keep track of all incidents, this is where election monitoring bodies and activist groups play a crucial role. Timely updates on election violence, immediate press releases following major incidents is a must and information must be disseminated in all three languages in order to get adequate coverage. Newspaper organisations too must be updated about information provided by

these groups. In reporting these incidents, it is not adequate to cover the incident alone. There has to be statements taken from the Election Commission about their reaction and what course of action they plan to take. Furthermore, coverage must extend to following up on key incidents and whether any arrests of taken place, whether cases were filed and in general any outcome of the incident. This would otherwise create a landscape where women may be deterred in the future to contest for the elections as they only get to know about violence against female candidates and with no information about how those incidents were dealt with. That there was no follow up or outcome itself is important reporting that must take place, and the culture of impunity placed on record.

- When reporting the various ways in which women face harassment or violence when contesting for elections, journalists must also go beyond just reporting incidents to finding ways to convey the seriousness of the issue to the public. For example, interviews or features with women candidates, or women who have contested for the elections about what it's like to be a woman during a campaigning period would offer an in depth and nuanced narrative.

- It is obvious that election monitoring bodies and civil society organisations play a crucial role in

how information flows to the people. Much of the significant coverage and in depth analysis came from statements and interviews with these groups and it is important that any information that is being disseminated is provided in all three languages. Newspapers on their own do not offer substantial analysis or coverage and in order to ensure that citizens get accurate information in a timely way, the work of these groups must be strengthened and supported.

- However it must be highlighted that all election monitoring groups are led by men and therefore a complete dependency on their output is not recommended. While media organisations cover press briefings and statements by women activists/ women rights organisations it is clear from this research that media organisations do not actively seek them out for interviews, features or even contributions. The value of the contributions by women's organisations by way of statements and briefings that are reproduced verbatim is significant and therefore media organisations and journalists should be giving more substantial coverage to them.

- Newspapers being a traditional media still cover elections in a traditional way and have not evolved adequately to report on new forms of threats and violence in an electoral system, such as the role of the internet, social media and of mobile phones. Targeted trainings around these issues and how to report them in print, how to analyse what they see online during election periods is much needed.

- Overall reporting around use of social media, specifically facebook in an election and in campaigning in particular was non existent. There

should be more robust reporting and analysis on the role of social media in elections, how it was used in the elections, using big data to look at broader trends and usages is something that print media is yet to embrace.

- There needs to be more coverage about women in office about their roles, the challenges they face, strategies they employ to deal with the challenges and how they feel their inclusion in positions of authority affects policy making and governance. This type of coverage could include women who have been in politics/ roles of governance for years as well as those newly elected.

- Opinions and views from men in elected bodies who can be considered allies, about how the increased inclusion of women in governance and policymaking has affected governance in Local Authorities, how to support newly elected women, the experience so far in the various councils would be a valuable addition to the coverage on the importance of women's representation in governance.

- Journalists must strive to ensure a better balance in the way that women in governance or women contesting for elections is portrayed in the media. This does not only mean not depicting women in sexist stereotypes but also extends to offering counter narratives about the way women candidates or women's representation is presented - whether through opinions of people interviewed or news reporting. For example, on the topic of suitability and qualifications of women candidates and nepotism, it is crucial that they raise that men are not held to these standards and what it is needed to break away from the existing political culture.



WOMEN AND
MEDIA COLLECTIVE



Norwegian Embassy
Colombo