

WOMEN, QUOTA AND LOCAL COUNCILS

A report on the observation of Local Councils in five districts
following the enactment of the 25% quota for
women in Local Government Sri Lanka.



Women and Media Collective
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Colombo

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Women and Media Collective

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Contents page

Preface.....	1
Executive Summary.....	2
Methodology.....	6
Introduction.....	8
Observer Participation.....	10
Observing of Districts.....	12
<i>Kurunegala District</i>	13
<i>Galle District</i>	15
<i>Badulla District</i>	17
<i>Nuwaraeliya District</i>	18
<i>Trincomalee District</i>	20
Other Factors.....	21
<i>Language</i>	21
<i>Procedures</i>	21
<i>Minutes/Reports</i>	21
<i>Order Paper</i>	21
<i>Time Allocation</i>	22
Funding.....	22
Drawbacks of the study.....	23
Concluding Recommendations.....	24

Preface

Since the enactment of the 25% women's quota at Local Government in 2016 the Women and Media Collective (WMC) has sought to understand how the quota has been harnessed to ensure a more meaningful representation of women in politics. Over the past 3 years WMC has engaged in research, advocacy and capacity enhancing programmes to leverage the impact of the historic women's quota. We hope that similar affirmative provisions will be put in place at the Provincial and Parliamentary levels. The mandatory quota for women has indeed made significant changes for women's political representation. One of which was an increase in the number of women in Local Authorities which was less than 100 to more than 1990 following the Local Authorities election in 2018,

This study is based on the observations of the proceedings of 25 selected Local Authorities in the districts of Kurunegala, Galle, Badulla, NuwaraEliya and Trincomalee. WMC through five partner organisations observed 5 Pradeshiya Sabha's of each District to examine how women took on their responsibilities as a local councillor, the extent to which they were successful in carrying out their work and if they had any challenges to overcome in the process. This research is from the view point of the 5 women's organisations who observed the local councils from the period of November 2018 - December 2019. The findings will present to us women's engagement in council meetings, the male perceptions of women councillors, the importance and relevance of training, language, procedures, time allocation, sensitivity to women's issues and funding. The report also consists of a set of recommendations to political parties, social organisations and the media based on observations that were made.

In conducting this research we would like to thank Kshama Ranawana for compiling the observation reports and writing it. A special thanks to Sumika Perera of Women's Resource Center, Chandra Wedagedara of Women's Development Center, Sriyani Pathirage of Rural Women's Front, Galle, Maithreyi Rajasingham and H. Inthumathy from Viluthu, and Ponnaiyah Logeshwari of Women's Solidarity Front who led the observation teams in the respective districts. Thanks to Kumudini Samuel for conceptualising the research along with Viola Perera and Tharanga De Silva for their valuable support. Also extending gratitude to Monica Svenskerud and Sundari Jayasuriya of the Royal Norwegian Embassy for their inputs and funding support. It is because of their support that we are able to present this research to you in a precise manner.

Sanchia Brown

Programme Officer

Women and Media Collective

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Executive Summary

There were two special features in the Local Government elections held in February 2018. A shift to a mixed member proportional system and the introduction of a legally mandated quota to ensure 25% representation of women. Under the mixed member proportional system 60% of seats were made up of wards and women were assured of a minimum nomination of 10% to contest for these seats on a first past the post basis. Approximately 537 in number. Women also made up 50% of the additional persons list from which the balance number of appointments, numbering approximately 1454 were made in proportion to votes obtained by parties eligible for the seats in the Local Authorities. The Election Commission was mandated to ensure that 25% of representatives in every council were women. The latter was a significant victory for women's rights advocates and activists, who had, for long been pushing for more equitable representation at decision making levels for women.

The Women and Media Collective began their formal advocacy for increased women's representation in elected political bodies in 2001. It played a significant role in the advocacy and articulation of the 2016 and 2017 electoral reforms that resulted in the women's quota and continued its work tracking the operationalising of the quota both at the February 2018 Local Government elections and by observing the work of selected Local Authorities with their newly elected members. This study which forms a part of this work under our programme '**Changing Minds: Strengthening Inclusive Governance and Affirmative Action to Increase Women's Representation in Politics**' was undertaken to understand both the successes and the challenges women face in their work as members of Local Councils in the aftermath of the quota.

The two features under which the local government election was held resulted in a sudden expansion of the numbers of members in local councils both men and women. It also brought women into almost all the 341 Local Councils, raising their number from less than 100 to nearly 2000. This compelled most Local Councils to quickly make ad-hoc arrangements to accommodate everyone within limited physical space as well as to work with limited resources both financial and material till more substantial provisions were made.

WMC selected five Districts for study where women from local organisations attended Council sittings as observers. The observations were conducted from November 2018 to December 2019 with selected women's partner organisations who have been and continue to work actively to increase and strengthen women's representation in politics. These were the Women's Development Centre, Badulla, Women's Solidarity Front, Nuwara Eliya, Women's Resource Centre, Kurunegala, Viluthu, Trincomalee and the Rural Women's Front, Galle.

On the whole, the study found an initial reticence by women to fully engage in council proceedings for lack of knowledge and experience about how councils operated. However, with time and exposure to training, they quickly gained the confidence to be more engaged in the work of Local Government and to better represent the interest of their constituents.

The study also found a serious reluctance among male members and in particular Chairpersons of Councils to take women members seriously and treat them as equal partners in the work of the councils. Unequal distribution of funds where women usually receive little or no money to carry out projects was endemic in all councils observed. Council activities are dominated by male councillors who often use up more time than others, disrupt when women are making interventions and generally attempt to sully the image of women in politics. There is a very negative attitude amongst most men about women being in politics and a deep-seated disenchantment that the mandatory 25% quota has robbed men a due place in local government.

Appointment of women councillors to council committees is limited and women are often overlooked when appointments are made to technical and financial committees.

On the whole, councils lack a commitment to uphold gender sensitivity within the councils and to also introduce gender sensitive programming. Women's roles are continued to be seen through religious and cultural frames, and programmes considered those within women's purview are biased in favour of stereotypical activities such as cookery, pre-school teaching, dressmaking etc.

Inadequate knowledge of the legislation pertaining to the local government including the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 16 of 2017 and gazettes pertaining to the functions of council was noted, not only amongst women councillors but males as well. Though women are committed to implementing development projects, they do not get adequate coverage in the media, thus creating a notion that they do not make any positive contributions to the electorate. This is compounded by their limited knowledge in the use of social media tools.

This study throws light on the challenges women, especially first-time councillors' face and that the provision of a mandatory quota alone is not sufficient to ensure better representation of women at decision making levels. While political will is required to safeguard the quota and make similar provisions for other levels of government, political parties, community organisations and the media must work collectively to uphold this right.

A common thread of observation is the non-allocation or limited allocation of funds for women councillors for their development projects. This is particularly so in the case of councillors who are in opposition parties. As well, women councillors are allocated fewer resources from the funds provided through political parties. Observers note that some women councillors have not received any monetary allocation from political parties since March 2018. There are instances when proposals submitted by women

councillors are not included in the meeting reports, and even when amendments are made, those too are not entered in the reports. It is clear that women experience many challenges in having their proposals accepted and implemented.

The five districts picked for the study were, Galle, Kurunegala, Badulla, Trincomalee, Nuwara Eliya. For the study, WMC engaged the services of women's organisations in the relevant districts. Two or three women drawn from these organisations attended meetings of the selected councils during the chosen period to observe the functioning of the Councils, to observe the contributions made and challenges faced by women elected to these councils and to determine the commitment to gender sensitivity. While a few of the Councils selected for the study were Municipal Councillor Urban Councils, a majority were Pradeshiya Sabhas. Since the administrative functions of local councils are overseen by a Commissioner, partner organisations first obtained permission from the Commissioners to attend council meetings as observers.

Given below is a breakdown of councils observed, the total number of councillors in each of the councils, the number of women councillors and observers from each district:

Galle District	Total councillors	Women Councillors	Observers
Galle Municipal Council	33	8	2
Hikkaduwa Pradeshiya Sabhava	21	5	3
BopePoddala Pradeshiya Sabhava	22	5	2
Akmeemana Pradeshiya Sabhava	28	8	2
Baddegama Pradeshiya Sabhava	34	7	2
Observer organisation – Rural Women's Front			

Kurunegala District	Total councillors	Women Councillors	Observers
Kurunegala Municipal Council	21	6	3
Ibbagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabhava	43	10	3
Kurunegala Pradeshiya Sabhava	34	8	2
Polgahawela Pradeshiya Sabhava	39	9	3
Ridigama Pradeshiya Sabhava	29	6	2
Observer organisation – Women's Resource Centre			

Badulla District	Total councillors	Women Councillors	Observers
Badulla Municipal Council	25	6	2
Soranathota Pradeshiya Sabhava	16	4	2
Hali Ella Pradeshiya Sabhava	40	10	2
Passara Pradeshiya Sabhava	23	5	2
Badulla Pradeshiya Sabhava	16	6	2
Observer organisation – Women's Development Centre			

Nuwareliya District	Total councillors	Women Councillors	Observers
Hatton Dickoya Pradeshiya Sabhava	16	4	2
Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabhava	16		1
Norwood Pradeshiya Sabhava	21	6	1
Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabhava	21	5	1
Kotagala Pradeshiya Sabhava	16	4	2
Observer organisation – Women’s Solidarity Front			

Trincomalee District	Total councillors	Women Councillors	Observers
Uppuveli Pradeshiya Sabhava	17	5	3
Muttur Pradeshiya Sabhava	24	3	4
Kinniya Pradeshiya Sabhava	16	Not stated	3
Kinniya Urban Council	13	Not stated	3
Trincomalee Urban Council	24	6	4
Observer organisation - Viluthu			

Introduction

The low representation of women has remained a factor of Sri Lankan politics despite the constitutional guarantee of equality, policy commitments, promises in electoral manifestos and international treaty obligations. Sri Lanka's representation of women in Parliament has remained at under 6% and continues to be so, while in Provincial Councils it is 4% and at Local Government it has been under 2% for many years¹, up until the Local Government elections held in February 2018. Through a struggle that lasted decades, women's organisations and activists addressing the under representation of women in politics finally achieved success in the form of a mandatory 25% quota for women in Local Government². The Women and Media Collective (WMC) was at the forefront of this struggle playing a catalytic role in bringing about amendments to the Local Authorities Elections Amendment Act, No. 16 of 2017 which provides for the increase of women in Local Councils up to a minimum of 25%.

Advocating for affirmative action in the form of legally binding quotas in Parliament, Provincial Councils and Local Government, was one of the many strategies that WMC has used to increase women's representation and participation in politics over the past 20 years. Our contribution to the Constitutional Reform process initiated in 2016 in proposing standards for equal representation and engaging in the discussions on electoral reform are imperative to the increase in women's representation at all levels of government. Apart from proposing mandatory legal measures, as an organisation, WMC has called on political parties to institute voluntary quotas to bring in women to decision making positions within their parties; worked with local women's CSOs and women in political parties to train and prepare women for elections, leadership and decision making. It has worked with women candidates across party lines to call for free and fair elections; violence free elections and votes for women. It has also supported independent women's lists when political parties have failed to nominate women. It has promoted accountability in politics by working with locally based Women's CSOs to monitor the work of Local Authorities and advocate for gender sensitive programming and gender budgeting. Furthermore, it has engaged in voter education by profiling women candidates and calling for votes for women using various media and other interventions. WMC continues its work enhancing the capacity of the newly elected local councillors and creating a public discourse on the need for affirmative action to increase women's representation in Parliament and in Provincial Councils.

According to research there has been a range of challenges and root causes to women's equal representation and participation in political institutions. Obstacles have been identified at four fundamental levels (Kodikara, 2009, Liyanage, 2005, Samuel 2000) - at the level of political parties, at the level of electoral systems, at the personal level and at the level of the electorate. To address this WMC was one of the first women's organisations in the country to implement a programme of women observing the workings of Local Councils, an initiative that began in 2007. With the objective of increasing women's knowledge of Local Government, building their capacity to contest Local Government elections and helping them enable good governance, 14 Local

¹https://www.lk.undp.org/content/srilanka/en/home/library/democratic_governance/the-struggle-for-equal-political-representation-of-women-in-sri-.html

²<https://groundviews.org/2018/02/07/the-significance-of-the-25-quota-for-women-in-local-government/>

Councils were observed in 3 districts by 25 women observers. The observations were conducted by women's organisations in Badulla, Monaragala and Kurunegala. The observation teams attended monthly meetings of the selected Local Councils and observed the local government processes. The findings of the observations were presented as part of a gender report in a consultation with the Chairperson of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform, MP Dinesh Gunewardene in June 2007.

Building on this experience WMC formulated a programme to observe the workings of Local Councils in 5 selected districts from November 2018 – December 2019. The observations were conducted through women's organisations in each of the districts, namely, the Women's Resource Centre, Kurunegala, Women's Development Centre, Badulla, Rural Women's Front, Galle, Viluthu, Trincomalee and Women's Solidarity Front, Nuwara Eliya. Women observers were trained on monitoring the local council proceedings along with compiling of the information observed into concise monthly reports. The reports were reviewed and strategic activities based on the review were followed through. The observations also gave us insight as to how the newly elected local council women performed, particularly those who were trained over the years by WMC.

Adding on to the experiences of the observers, WMC too observed the council proceedings of the Hali Ela Pradeshiya Sabha in Badulla and the Bope Poddala Pradeshiya Sabha in Galle in the months of May and June 2019 with its partner organisations. The visits provided us with information first hand on the local council proceedings, and provided us with inputs for the compilation of observation reports and development of trainings for Local Council women. It was noted that the Local Council meetings are held under strict guidelines, however in some instances these guidelines are not followed accordingly. In terms of gender equality we see that there are no forms of guidelines that represent gender equality and thus there is no formal practice of it during council proceedings. This in turn makes it that much difficult for newly elected local council women to be able to conduct their work within councils in a fair and just manner. The local councillors themselves were very cooperative with the observers. However, it was noted that the observers had to face certain challenges when observing the proceedings. For instance, certain councils did not permit observers to sit in the proceedings, or the observers were not informed of the correct date of the meetings, other challenges also include the lack of facilities for observation itself such as chairs for observers or an adequate space to take down notes.

The observations study

This study was coordinated and written by the Women and Media Collective (WMC) to draw on the experiences of the newly elected local council women elected through the 25% mandatory women's quota in Local Government. It provides us with insight as to how women local councillors, most of them elected for the first time are making strides within their electorates through their committed participation in the local council proceedings. The study is a comprehensive report of the observation made by the partner organizations in the five districts. Annexed to this study are detailed reports of the observations made in the Local Councils from each of the observed districts.

As part of the 'Changing Minds: Strengthening Inclusive Governance and Affirmative Action to Increase Women's Representation in Politics' project the WMC partnered with Local Women's Organisations in five districts (Women's Resource Centre, Kurunegala, Women's Development Centre, Badulla, Rural Women's Front, Galle, Viluthu, Trincomalee and Women's Solidarity Front, Nuwaraeliya) to monitor how women local councillors are adapting to the local council meetings, the proposals made by them, receiving of funds, their involvement in council committees, do they face any forms of discrimination and the overall conduct of both men and women councillors. Each partner organisation from a district had to observe five Pradeshiya Sabhas from October 2018 – December 2019 and compile monthly reports based on their findings. Each Pradeshiya Sabha was observed by 2-4 women observers who were trained by WMC prior to starting the observations. A reporting format was also provided to the observers.

While the report in itself will provide you with a detailed description of what was observed, it is important to discuss some of the challenges that were encountered by the observers during the period of the observations.

Observer participation

Observers were allowed to observe most of the Pradeshiya Sabha meetings as the Council Commissioners were appreciative of the evaluations made by them. While observers were granted permission by the Commissioner to attend council sessions, they nevertheless faced obstructions in several of the councils. Observations of the councils in the Central and Eastern Municipal and Pradeshiya Sabhas was challenging for various reasons. At times required documents to enable attendance were not available, changes in dates were not notified and a lack of corporation between the observers and the councils resulted in the prohibiting the observers from entering the council meetings. Of particular note were the challenges faced by observers attached to Viluthu, the organisation that observed local councils in the Trincomalee District, as described here: permission to sit in as observers was refused, some were asked not to attend meetings following the Easter Sunday 2019 bomb attacks, invitations to attend meetings being received on the day of the meeting, or mailed to them on the day of the meeting, some being informed they could attend meetings at a future date. Other councils noted space restrictions in the public gallery making observations difficult, or where two chairs and a desk would be provided, even though three observers were present. In other instances, because the councils were formed after the recent Local Government elections in 2018 (i.e from 335 Local Government bodies to 341), the observers were not allowed to observe the council meetings due to the fact that the councils were newly formed and had been functioning only since the election. However, in the councils that were observed, observers had positive feedback to provide.

There is also a perception amongst some that the observations are the work of Non-Governmental Organisations with particular partisan agendas. At least one training session that was being conducted close to the parliamentary elections held in August 2020 had been disrupted by the Mayor of Galle.

Relationship with councillors

As the observers were part of women's organisations and had previously worked with the women local councillors, they were able to further strengthen their relationships with council women. As observations progressed, women observers were able to become more familiar with male councillors as well which was a positive aspect of this work.

Reporting back

At the end of the observation period each of our partner organisations held meetings at the district level to present the findings of the observations to the Local Councillors, Chairman of the councils, District Commissioners, Governors and other relevant government representatives. The experiences of the council women were also discussed at the meetings along with the challenges and their achievements at the local council meetings and in their constituencies. The district level meetings were useful; to initiate

a dialogue between the women local councillors and the relevant government representatives as the recommendations presented in the district level reports were taken into consideration by the relevant authorities.

Some conclusions

Although the mandatory quota for women was initially viewed as a damper by most, including male local councillors, the increase in participation of women at the local council proceedings is indeed a way for making decisions at the local level in a more democratic and inclusive manner. The 2018 local government elections did not only see an increase in women but an increase in male local councillors as well. The space that women have to work in is however challenging on the grounds of reputation, conduct and diversity. This is because the proposals presented by the women local councillors at the council meetings are most often rejected unless, as the report indicates, they are representing the main political parties or have adequate experience as local councillors or both. This leaves the question of whether a newly elected woman local councillor is able to achieve the same result as against those who have had years of experience. Is it meaningful to have the quota in place with a promise that all elected women will contribute to their constituencies equally in comparison to their counterparts? Thus, this report will shed light on the participation of the women local councillors, to understand if their role as a local council woman is recognised within the council, if they encourage more gender responsive proposals and if their decisions made at the local level will be beneficial to their constituencies.

Overall Findings - Observing of Districts

Introduction to Local Council Proceedings

The introduction of the 25% mandated quota increased the number of women in Local Councils. When for decades there would have been one woman in any given Council, or no women at all, the quota has brought 25% women into the Local Council except in sixteen.

This resulted in a negative narrative around the 25% quota, and heightened the aversion some males have against women being in politics. Observers noted that many males harbour a grudge against the women, blaming the latter for taking the rightful place of the male in the Councils.

Observers note that one of the reasons that some women councillors had been reluctant to be more active at the initial stage was due to their being nominated to contest the election by political parties just to meet the 25% requirement, and therefore, not being adequately prepared. There were several, according to an observer in Nuwaraeliya, who had been nominated in place of their fathers or husbands who were unable to run for election.

While most women spoke positively about their experience as Councillors, the report also found that for many, this was their first term in office. It was noted that where women had taken a back seat earlier on, that with time, many had gained the confidence to be more actively engaged in the proceedings of the councils. There were instances where women had, along with others argued against and defeated budgets allocations which were perceived as detrimental.

With the introduction of training for these councillors by various non-governmental bodies' post-election, their involvement in council affairs has improved, with many women from councils not selected for the study too now requesting similar training. This is because as identified in the study and similar research there is a lack of knowledge amongst councillors on the Local Government Act itself and the workings of the Council.

Kurunegala District

How women engaged at Councils meetings

A notable achievement was the decision taken by the Ridhigama Pradeshiya Sabhava in the Kurunegala District in December 2019 that there must be 50% women represented in all of its committees.

Women have also begun to display their strengths; ensuring they have adequate time allotted to speak, supporting each other and speaking against actions of male councillors which are detrimental to women. Initially women of small political parties were not given an opportunity to speak however in the second year it was found that these women too were able to speak out at the council meetings.

Councils are for the most part well organised and follow the day's Order Paper, prepared by the Council Secretary.

During the duration of the study it was noted that often proposals submitted by women were ignored or put aside to be taken up later. This was the norm except where women councillors belong to the party ruling the council, in this case the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). Across the councils, it was observed that the same set of councillors from each council would be the ones to submit proposals. A woman councillor of the Kurunegala Municipal Council had stated that her proposal was not included in the minutes of the meeting. At this point the meeting was disrupted as councillors from both opposition and governing parties had shown concern that proposals were not included in the minutes.

It was noted that in Kurunegala Pradeshiya Sabha only 10% of proposals by women are implemented. Given the limited opportunities available, women cannot show off their strong points. The allocation for women is not equal to male colleagues and less so for women in the opposition.

Male perceptions of women Councillors

In terms of conduct both men and women are subject to ridicule by others. Of note is that women councillors are also subjected to malicious comments by male councillors often in terms of caste and sex. Male councillors allude to the fact that women have got into local government by dispensing sexual favours. While some male councillors subject women to such malicious comments, others have been observed to be supportive of their women colleagues. When women councilors have spoken up male councillors have disregarded their capabilities by questioning their educational qualifications.

While some chairmen acknowledge the presence of women in the councils even if they are from a different political party, other chairmen in councils do not provide much support to them.

The importance of relevant training

Training received through civic organisations has helped women gain confidence to face the challenges of office and to withstand corruption.

Women councillors however, need more exposure to use of social media tools and also more media coverage of the work they do.

Women councillors are also encouraged by the support received from their families and colleagues both males and females and senior members of their parties. They also appreciate the assistance they receive from women's groups and community organisations and encouragement from the electorate.

Time Allocation

Women do have the opportunity to speak during meetings though on many an occasion it was noted they would be disrupted by their male counterparts.

Sensitivity to Women's Issues

As councils are not required to be gender sensitive during meetings, women are impacted negatively in carrying out their responsibilities.

Another drawback is that women councillors receive little recognition at other government institutions. Women councillors have appealed for the introduction of some form of identification to resolve this issue.

Funding

While difficulty in obtaining funds is true in the case of both male and female councillors, women have been making a strong case for their allocations. Funds have been allocated in some instances and women have been able to implement development projects in their wards. However, there is a perception that women are not capable of handling big projects and large financial allocations. Attempts by contractors to defraud them have been noted. As well, women representing opposition parties receive fewer resources.

While women councillors receive very little publicity about the work they do, they are also challenged by male contractors displaying a different attitude than they do with male councillors, and difficulties in having payments released from Divisional Secretariats for work completed.

At the same time, women acknowledge support received from district leaders of their political parties and ministers for releasing funds for development work.

Galle District

How women engaged at Councils meetings

Across councils, smaller political parties receive no acknowledgement. Of note too is that there are very few women representing smaller political parties. The majority of women in the councils were from the larger better established political parties. A qualitative difference was noted in the Galle Municipal Council. Women are more engaged than their counterparts. Women Local Councillors from prominent political parties are able to present proposals and are approved while women from smaller political parties are ridiculed or their proposals are not accepted.

Despite that, it is in the Galle Municipality that a qualitative difference was noted. Early on in the year women were unable to fully participate in the council meetings but by the month of October in that same year it was noted that women were more forthcoming in their participation. It was noted that women took control of the time that was offered to them. Women are actively engaged in the committees they are appointed to and make their presence felt.

In the Akmeemana Pradeshiya Sabha out of the six women councillors none were seen presenting proposals in the month of January 2019, apart from when a woman councillor would present a proposal on occasion. In the final report of December 2019, observers noted that the most timely and constructive suggestions were made by the women of this council. By this time, the women were considered to have high standards compared to the reports of the previous months. The Baddegama Pradeshiya Sabha too

saw a steady improvement in the women local councillors, it was noted that earlier on women councillors did not make much contribution during the meetings and observers thought that women should be more active in councils. However by April, women were showing signs of improving within the council by becoming more active compared to the previous months. In the Hikkaduwa Urban Council women rarely participated in the council meetings and the proposals were not connected to the welfare of women, in October however a special meeting focusing on maternal and child health was held in the council.

Male perceptions of women Councillors

One drawback is the fact that male councillors take up more time, depriving women adequate time to make presentations. At times it has been noted that male councillors tend to be disruptive when women are speaking. Though unhappy with the situation, women do not voice their concerns. In the month of October, it was noted that while women improved in their participation, views of the women councillors were given attention to.

In the Akmeemana Pradeshiya Sabha all political parties are allocated the same amount of time to speak. Male domination is clear within the council and women refrain from participating. At least one woman is appointed to each of the council committees. The council has raised the need to protect women of domestic violence. A provision of nutrition packages to pregnant women and children will also be distributed in the area.

An autocratic behaviour in the Bope-Poddala pradeshiya sabha was noted which resulted in the women having hardly any time to speak. Although women were given equal time to speak, men would dominated the discussions. This was the case in November but by December and January male councillors were providing women with the time to participate in the council.

There is continued hostility from some male councillors, who believe that a quota for women is not acceptable and that the latter has no understanding of local government politics. Males also feel that women are taking their place in politics.

The importance of relevant training

While women seemed backward at the beginning of the study, there has been much improvement in terms of their engagement with the functioning of the councils. One reason for the improvement is the training the RWF has facilitated, where women councillors with leadership potential had been identified and invited for training. Not all had accepted the invitation. However, since the commencement of the training, there have been requests from other women councillors, including those whose councils had not been selected for observation, to be trained. Following the training, there has been a marked difference in the women. They have been actively participating in debates and have also spoken out against council budgets.

RWF has also learnt how to approach and work with the women councillors and identify their specific needs. It has formed a women's group including those from Hambantota and Matara and had taken the lead in facilitating workshops conducted by the and on understanding the Right to Information Act.

Some of the councils were not happy that they were being observed. A training session that was being conducted in the run up to the Parliamentary elections in 2020 had been disrupted by the Mayor of Galle.

Badulla District

How women engaged at Councils meetings

A historic first in the local government elections of the Badulla District is that twelve Tamil women and one Muslim were elected to the councils. The women's quota there by provided an opportunity for women from the plantation community to be represented in Local Authorities resulting in raising awareness of issues specific to the plantation community, both within the council and among the public.

In the Badulla Pradeshiya Sabha the women local councillors have submitted a number of proposals which are approved. One woman Local councillors in particular has submitted a proposals at almost every meeting and half of them have been approved. Other women councillors are either fairly active or none at all.

In the Hali-Ela pradeshiya sabha although women local councillors have been allotted time to make submissions they don't use the time that has been provided to them during council proceedings. Only a few women present proposals. In the Passara pradeshiya sabha women local councillors would complain that they had not received any funding for their proposals even though they have been approved. One woman councillors said that she has lost interest in attending meetings as their proposals were not approved and funds were not passed. In the Soranathota pradeshiya sabha women councillors don't make good use of the time to speak during council meetings even though they face no discrimination.

Male perceptions of women Councillors

There is not much regard for councillors appointed through the list, and they are also ridiculed when presenting ideas at meetings. As well, some councillors are not punctual, while others are seen leaving meetings early; this is common to both men and women.

In some councils males are supportive and assist the women. While women have the opportunity to serve on the various council committees, most often they are appointed to the committee on environment and left out of committees such as finance, industries or community development. Nevertheless, women councillors consider this opportunity created through the mandatory quota requirement as one to serve the public without limiting themselves to an election campaign.

It was reported that newly elected councillors, both men and women had not been given due recognition when the Hali Ella council first met. However, this situation had been resolved amicably. In the Badulla Pradeshiya Sabha there are no disturbances when women councillors are speaking. In the Soranathota pradeshiya sabha women councillors are able discuss matters pertaining to violence against women and organise workshops for women in time for Women's International Day.

Time Allocation

Issues are reported regarding the allocation of time, where women councillors in some instances are short-changed when senior members of the councils use up more time. This phenomenon is common to both male and female first-time councillors. Often times, their suggestions are criticized. As well, women councillors in the Hali Ella council are particularly hampered in terms of time allocation, as the council is made up of 40 members.

Sensitivity to Women's Issues

The Soranthota Pradeshiya Sabhava in the Badulla district showed more sensitivity to women's issues. For instance, the council chairman is a woman and at the council meeting in March 2019, she has stated that it is necessary to step out and help women overcome the problems they face.

Funding

A common thread of observation is the non-allocation or limited allocation of funds for women councillors for their development projects. This is particularly so in the case of councillors who are in opposition parties. As well, women councillors are allocated fewer resources from the funds provided through political parties. Observers note that some women councillors have not received any monetary allocation from political parties since March 2018. This was the main issue for women local councillors in the Passara Pradeshiya Sabha as they were not allocated any funding throughout the year to carry out their work. There are instances when proposals submitted by women councillors are not included in the meeting reports, and even when amendments are made, those too are not entered in the reports. It is clear that women experience many challenges in having their proposals accepted and implemented.

Nuwaraeliya District

How women engaged at Councils meetings

The introduction of the mandatory quota has seen an increase in the number of women councillors. While this is a good sign, it transpired that many of the women councillors were seeking direction, as they had little or no knowledge of the workings of a local council.

Observers explained that owing to this situation many women were reluctant to fully participate in council proceedings. Furthermore, even though Tamil women councillors are able to speak in Sinhala, their language skills are insufficient to understand the intricacies of some discussions, thus making it difficult for them to respond right away.

Since reports of the meetings are delivered late to councillors, they have little or no time to prepare for the next meeting. WSF believes that councils should address this situation and bring in a policy to manage it. Women also need to be trained in preparing reports that would generate funding.

There are at least two women councillors who do not have higher education like some others, yet, owing to a strong trade union background, they are able to actively participate at council meetings and discharge their responsibilities as required.

In the Norwood Pradeshiya Sabha the council comprises of six women. Throughout the reporting period however only one-woman councillor is seen submitting proposals to the council. The chairman of the Maskeliya Local Council is a woman, a unique factor from the local councils that were observed. The chairman is noted to be involved in the council proceedings as she too submits proposals at meetings. Over time she has faced some challenges in managing council proceedings and the Commissioner has volunteered to help. It was noted that though WSF had invited all Chairmen of councils to a meeting to discuss their findings and identify solutions, only two had attended the meeting. Despite this there are no proposals presented by women in February and March. In the Hattong-Dickoya Urban Council women are speaking out at council meetings and making use of the opportunity.

In the Abagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha a woman councillor while mentioning the quota for women suggested that the quota was not fulfilled in their council and that the council is still male dominated. In the month of January and February 2019, women have made submissions and participate in proceedings. In the month of May 2019, it was noted that women's participation had been low.

Male perceptions of women Councillors

Observers reported that most male councillors including the chairmen have a negative attitude to women being in politics. According to the male politicians, women are not good at politics, and their inclusion only creates more problems not only within the councils but also at home. Often, various challenges are set up for the women by male members of their own political parties. However, women have the support of some of their male colleagues in council.

In the Maskeliya Pradeshiya Sabha, the Kottagala Pradeshiya Sabha and Hattong-Dickoya Urban Council women councillors are given the opportunity to speak and their views are considered. Although women are given the opportunity to speak, they don't make good use of the opportunity. In the Kottagala PS women have expressed their opinions and observers indicate that male councillors are supportive of the women councillors.

The importance of relevant training

Observers note that political parties must take the initiative in training women before nominating them, and also allocate money in their budgets for gender programmes. Training will give the women the confidence to better engage in the proceedings of councils, and also teach them to be independent. This would also ensure that women with various skills sets will not be overlooked for leadership positions and they will also be able to evaluate their performances themselves.

Trincomalee District

How women engaged at Councils meetings

According to the observations made during the period of study, it was noted that in most councils' women are afforded the opportunity to participate in the proceedings. However, in some councils their participation is unsatisfactory, In the Uppuveli Pradeshiya Sabha although women are allocated time to speak at the council meetings, they are reluctant to do so. In the meeting in September 2019, it was noted that women were more often talking among themselves as there was a hesitation amongst some to offer any opinion. In the Trincomalee Urban Council the women councillors attended the meetings but did not present any proposals, shared their views or commented on the ideas of others. In the Kinniya Pradeshiya Sabha all three women councillors presented proposals and participated in the proceedings. Their proposals were approved without any opposition.

Interestingly, the women in the Northern councils take the lead in council proceedings. Most of male councillors, observers noted, take their cue from women colleagues.

Observers state that the reason for this could be because many of the women are seasoned political workers. The opposite is true however in the Eastern councils where, like all other councils, women take second place to the males.

Male perceptions of women Councillors

In the Kinniya Pradeshiya Sabha it was noted that all three women councillors were able to share their views first and present their proposals without a disturbance from others. It was observed that everyone in the council were free to express their views, including women. In the Kararchi Pradeshiya Sabha and Poonkari Pradeshiya Sabha women councillors were allocated adequate time to express their views.

Sensitivity to Women's Issues

Councils in the North and the East showed more sensitivity to women's issues.

Funding

Owing to unavailability of funds, projects in some councils are taken up only on a priority basis

Other factors

Language

Another note of concern was the language factor. Monitors note that in Councils made up of councillors from the Sinhala, Tamil and Muslim communities, and where proceedings are conducted in Sinhala, even though translation facilities are provided, it does not necessarily mean that Tamil and Muslim councillors fully understand the discussions. This results in their being unable to respond immediately to the issues at hand.

Procedures

Meetings are generally held according to the Order Paper. Monies for projects approved by the council are passed after clearance from the Finance Committee.

Minutes/Reports

Reports of the meetings are made available to Councillors a day prior or at times even the day of the meeting, leaving councillors very little time to study the report and make interventions if necessary. This was a concern that was raised in almost all the councils studied.

An attempt to resolve this issue was reported from the Badulla District, where observers noted that following a workshop for councillors on the Citizens Charter, conducted by the Institution of Local Government of Sri Lanka, the trainer had recommended that reports be emailed to councillors. There was agreement to commence this practice in January 2019.

Order Paper

Every council has an Order Paper for the meeting. While some councils did adhere to the paper, and others tried, in most instances the days discussions would get derailed by issues that are not of concern of the council, i.e.: party politics or national issues. This means that the actual time spent to study and resolve concerns raised by local residents or to discuss the pros and cons of a proposal would either get little attention or be postponed for the next meeting.

There were many instances where amendments were required for the meeting reports, as councillors identified omissions from the previous month's discussions.

Time Allocation

One area of concern was that some male councillors would speak for longer than their allotted time, thus depriving others adequate time for their submissions. Particularly affected in such situations were the women councillors.

Funding

In terms of having access to funding, the study found that there were several avenues' women councillors could use to, channel funds into development projects in their areas. These included the Rs. 100 million allocated to every division under the 'Gamperaliya' development programme initiated by the United National Party (UNP) led government. The monies were distributed through the Divisional Secretariats. Under this programme most of the development work was carried out by UNP councillors. Each female councillor was allocated between Rs. 1 to 8 million.

Meanwhile, the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) disbursed funds through the 'Rathna Mawatha' Rural Development Program where between Rs.500,000 to Rs. 2 million was given to both male and female councillors of the SLFP and the Sri Lanka People's Front (SLPF).

Women councillors also had access to funds for development from the Ministry of Economic Affairs and from parliamentarians and ministers through the decentralized budget. Additionally, the Ministry of Local Government provided between Rs. 200,000 to Rs. 300,000.

Certain provincial ministries, such as the Wayamba Development Ministry meanwhile provided Rs. 200,000 to Rs. 1,000,000 for rural development and temple renovation that councils in the Kurunegala district for instance, could utilise.

All of these monies are available to both male and female councillors.

One other issue of note is campaign funding and how women are negatively impacted by their inability to raise funds like their male competitors. One women's group has decided to not only carry out a campaign to raise awareness on the issue, but also write to the Parliament regarding the matter.

A common thread of observation is the non-allocation or limited allocation of funds for women councillors for their development projects. This is particularly so in the case of councillors who are in opposition parties. As well, women councillors are allocated fewer resources from the funds provided through political parties. Observers note that some women councillors have not received any monetary allocation from political parties since March 2018. There are instances when proposals submitted by women councillors are not included in the meeting reports, and even when amendments are made, those too are not entered in the reports. It is clear that women experience many challenges in having their proposals accepted and implemented.

Drawbacks of the study

Drawbacks from the Trincomalee District

One of the drawbacks in this study as mentioned earlier, was that not all of the reports were submitted; reports from the Trincomalee District for instance were limited to one or two per council while all selected councils had not been covered.

Observation of the selected councils in the Trincomalee District was hampered owing to non-corporation by the councils. As noted previously in this report, observers were either refused permission to sit in while meetings were in session, or asked to stop the observations following the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings. Yet others received their letters of permission on the day of the meeting, or letters had been mailed to them on that day, making it impossible for the observers to cover the day's proceedings. Some councils had informed the observers that they could attend meetings at a future date.

Drawbacks from the Nuwara Eliya District

In the case of Nuwara Eliya, reports submitted were either from December 2018 to October 2019 or January to October 2019. As well, observers were not allowed to report on the Norwood Pradeshiya Sabhava after four visits. Therefore, the observers stopped observing the Norwood Pradeshiya Sabha and observed the Ambagamuwa Pradeshiya Sabha instead.

Drawbacks from the Badulla District

In the case of the Badulla district reports were received from 4 councils. Of the four received only two councils, Badulla and Passara were covered throughout the study period. From Hali-Ela there was just the one report, while from Soranathota, reports were submitted for November and December 2018 and January, March, April and July 2019.

Public galleries in the Badulla, Hali Ella and Passara councils lack enough space. While the Commissioners are appreciative of the evaluations being carried out, it was noted that some councils do not co-operate with the observers. Some councils would provide just two chairs and table even when there were three observers.

Other areas of concern were; while all of the reports indicated the number of councillors, separated as men and women attending council meetings on any given day, there was no mention of the exact number of councillors per council. This information was obtained via the internet, from different sources such as the 2018 election result as reported in the media and the Election Commission's performance report to the parliament. In both cases too, only the full number elected to each council was listed, there was no breakdown of numbers between men and women.

The reports also did not indicate whether the women councillors were first timers or whether they have been in Council before. For the purpose of this study, it would have been helpful to have this information to determine whether any first-time women councillors were actively participating in the proceedings or whether the contributions to proceedings were from seasoned women councillors.

While some reports gave detailed information on the income and expenses of some councils including minute details of how much was spent on what, other reports only mentioned income or expenses, while other reports had no mention of finances at all.

Concluding Recommendations

To political parties

- Despite the challenges faced, women councillors have proved they are able to positively contribute to the development and improvement of the constituencies they represent. Therefore, political parties must work to ensure the women's quota mandated for local government is further strengthened. As well, parties must actively lobby for similar quotas for both provincial and parliamentary elections.
- Observers noted that there continues to be a negative attitude towards women entering politics. Therefore, those in all decision-making positions and structures of the party must provide special guidelines to all members of local councils and all-party members that female and male members of local councils are treated alike without discrimination and with equal respect.
- Few women are seen holding decision making positions within political parties. Therefore, allocations should be made for women local council members in the decision-making structures of political parties, so discriminatory attitudes towards women could be eliminated.
- Unequal distribution of funds not only between males and females, but also across party lines has been observed. Therefore, adequate funds should be provided for women who work at the village level on behalf of the party. A proper monitoring process should be established to ensure that the money given to the electoral organizers is spent without discrimination and favour.
- Similarly, parties should provide a common fund for the political activities of women.
- All members of local authorities and in particular new members must be provided with training and guidance to carry out their work effectively. It was observed that women members who received training became increasingly competent in their work. Therefore, knowledge on Local Governance and training on the workings of the councils must be provided by the respective Political Parties and Government Agencies to both male and female councillors.
- In many councils it was noted that councillors, both women and men would ignore all norms of conduct; arriving late, disrupting proceedings, or not actively engaging in the discussions etc. Therefore, all parties must, together with council officers prepare guidelines on conduct that must be adhered to when meetings are in session and ensure behaviour that is respectful of all members is enforced.
- Councils display a severe lack of gender sensitisation including in the programmes implemented. Therefore, a gender sensitive code of ethics for party members, particularly men must be developed and enforced.

- Women are being discriminated against within the basic structures of the council proceedings, such as the allotted time to speak, disruptions while speaking, proposals not accepted or implemented. It is important that the Chairman of the council together with the leaders of the political parties and the Commissioner take on the responsibility of ensuring that women are allowed to participate fully within the council so that they are able to effectively carry out their duties as council women.
- Councils should encourage proposals that are more gender focused which would address the issues of women in the public domain. In addition, councils should be more engaged in women centered programmes such as programmes for International Women's Day, Women's Rights and the elimination of Violence Against Women. Women should be given more leadership roles through the appointments of the Committees in the councils. It has been noted that women are given appointments in more of the 'soft' committees thus women should be appointed into any of the existing committees based on their capabilities.
- Mandate a Women's Committee as one of the council committees.
- Women in particular are subjected to malicious comments and sexual innuendo. Therefore, all political parties in Sri Lanka should act to create a political culture that protects women's rights so that women can enter and engage in politics in a dignified manner. Men must be penalised for sexist and misogynist behaviour.
- Observers noted difficulties women experience when discharging the responsibilities of their office and participating fully in party activities while also attending to the demands of their families. Therefore, in consultation with women, political parties must explore solutions that would enable women to strike an acceptable work-life balance.
- Women have raised the issue of having to bring their children to council meetings during school holidays for instance. Explore setting up alternate care facilities for their children while women attend to their council responsibilities.
- Duties that require women to work during the night have been identified as a safety concern. Political parties must pro-actively address this concern with local government officials and ensure transport is available, especially at night for women to get about their work safely. Inadequate knowledge of the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 16 of 2017 and gazettes pertaining to the functions of council was noted, not only amongst women councillors but males as well. More training is required in this area and a code of conduct covering attendance and behaviour within the council should be implemented

To Public and Social Organizations

- There is limited awareness and/or negative attitudes to women entering politics. Therefore, social activists should play a lead role to raise awareness of the positive aspects of women in politics. Social and community organizations and the media could be gainfully engaged in attaining this goal.
- It is the duty of all citizens to protect the hard won 25% quota for women and to extend this to provincial councils and to parliament. Therefore, public and social organisations should take the lead in spearheading advocacy activities for the formulation of rules and policies to promote equal opportunities for women in all political structures.
- The study indicates that with knowledge and skills training women performed and engaged better in council proceedings. Some of this training has been provided by community organisations. There have also been requests from more women for such training. Therefore, social organisations should provide more opportunities for further knowledge, skills development and training for women elected to local government and to those who plan to enter politics. However, these trainings must be based on need, must be evaluated for efficacy, must be both gender sensitive and developed according to acceptable standards.
- There should be continuous observations of Local Councils by the public and civil society organisations. Through this the public will be able to direct the councillors towards their requirements while also get a better understanding of the council proceedings for public interest. Civil society organisations and in particular women's organisations will be able to provide the support that is needed to further improve the capabilities of men and women local councillors.

To media institutions and media personnel

- It was noted that work carried out by women councillors receive poor coverage by the media. Therefore, media professionals and organisations must consciously create the space in media to highlight the strength and activities of women in local government. This will help in promoting a culture of inclusive political engagement, gender sensitive politics as well as promote an ethical and democratic political culture.
- The discussion on women in politics must be an ongoing one, and not limited to only when an election is called. Therefore, regular discussions on broadcast media and articles on women in politics, the importance of the quota, methods to address drawbacks etc., should be the norm at all times and not only during election campaigning periods. Such actions will ensure the electorate is more open to women being in politics, vote for and elect more women and dispel the negative attitudes held by males in particular and prepare the groundwork for better electoral practices well ahead of an election and also provide opportunities for more women to be in decision making positions.



Women and Media Collective
Established 1964



Norwegian Embassy
Colombo