

# **'Biology is not destiny': Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka**

Friday 14 September 2018, by [WEERASINGHE Rohini](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2018).

**In this interview taking-off from the 2018 local government, Rohini Weerasinghe connects the experiences of women in politics to the oldest power structure in the world: patriarchy. She argues there is a correlation between the lack of recognition of women's economic contribution and their marginalisation in politics, including by 'good governance' touting civil society organisations. In her view, women's increased representation in local government allows for women qua women to participate in those institutions; and for councils to become more cognisant of women's issues and perspectives.**

## **1. Introduction**

In the crucial 1993 Western Provincial Council election, *Rohini Weerasinghe* was nominated by the *Desha Vimukthi Janatha Pakshaya* ('Peoples Party for National Liberation' associated with the late Nihal Perera) of which she was a politburo member, to contest as part of the winning Peoples' Alliance opposition coalition. Born in Balangoda and educated in Colombo, her first lessons of leadership as a child were learned from her parents. As vice-president of the students' council at Peradeniya university in 1966, she was in the leadership of a campus upsurge that year. It was reading *The Female Eunuch* by Germaine Greer (first published in 1970 and introduced to her by Susil Sirivardhana), that sparked her feminist consciousness.

Following contact with the feminist scholar-activist Kumari Jayawardena, she became part of the women's movement after 1977, initially with the *Kantha Handa* ('Voice of Women') group. Postgraduate study on the Development Studies master's programme at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague between 1981 and 1982, specialising in 'Women and Development', was another radicalising influence. She became convenor of the *Kantha Shakthi* ('Strength of Women') organisation (founded on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1983), which was resourced through voluntary labour, personal donations, and her income as a freelance researcher. The organisation raised the consciousness of women graphite-shed workers in Colombo; women workers in the Katunayake free trade zone (reaching them through medical and legal advice); and rural working women in many parts of the island; and also published a monthly newspaper of the same name in Sinhala and English largely written and edited by her.

*In the course of the recent election campaign, female politicians reportedly were told by others that women's political participation detracts from their assumed 'primary' role which is as mother and care-giver, that is, within the private or domestic sphere. This belief was apparently held by some women voters too. How is it that despite women's enormous economic contribution as domestic workers in the Middle-East, in export agriculture (especially tea and rubber), in export industries, as well as in food production; near universal rates of literacy for women and men; higher female participation in higher education than male; visibility (albeit not equitable representation) of women in leadership positions in the public, private and non-governmental sectors etc., that these social and gender norms are so prevalent and persistent?*

Such views on women's 'primary' role should have been challenged then and there by the women themselves. I don't know whether they did so or not. Biology isn't destiny. Motherhood is not only biological but social: both empowering and disempowering of women. Not only women candidates but their male and female allies also should have challenged those views. I don't know how much support they received from their families and from women's groups. But when I contested in 1993, I didn't face such prejudices. On the contrary I received impressive and encouraging support from the youth of the *Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna*

(JVP—'National Liberation Front') and many other male social and political activists. Slogans such as "*Kantha Vimukthi-ta Jayawewa!*" ('victory to women's liberation') were picked up mostly by these men and women. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party [main constituent of the Peoples' Alliance] tried to corner me, and not give time to speak, and so on, but I was able to stand my ground. And this too soon after the repression of the JVP and during the [ruling] United National Party's *beeshanaya* (terror) period; when one left one's home not expecting to return to it. That is because behind me was a political organisation [the *Desha Vimukthi Janatha Pakshaya*]; with leaders and cadres supportive of women's liberation. During the Local Government election, women lacked support from their political parties and party leaders. These party leaders still think that biology is destiny. It was the German fascists led by Hitler who said that women's place is with children and in the kitchen and church [*kinder, küche, kirche*]. Sadly our 'democratic' political leaders of the 21<sup>st</sup> century still believe the same.

### 1. Sexual Division of Labour

On this sexual division of labour, which relegates women into reproduction: it's an age-old practice, deeply rooted, and accepted by the masses and by culture. If you look at the examples of other countries, how was this challenged? In China, the situation of women was horrible. You may have heard of Mao Zedong's famous statement on the four thick ropes binding the Chinese people prior to the 1949 Revolution, especially the peasantry in relation to political, clan and religious bonds and women in relation to masculinity. They were able to challenge such oppression in China, because Mao and the Communist Party under his leadership also challenged them. Likewise in the former Soviet Union under Lenin. Here in

Sri Lanka has there ever been a political party challenging the sexual division of labour and violence against women? There was nothing except a small party like the DVJP when Nihal Silva was its leader.

Women's economic contribution is not recognised. Domestic work abroad by Sri Lankan women is the highest source of foreign exchange into the country, but are women migrant workers recognised? So in all these sectors: plantation sector, the garment sector, as housemaids and other migrant workers, women's enormous contribution to agriculture and food production, small trade and small industries, is invisible. What is the appreciation or recognition that women get? How is the reality of women's work shown or concealed in the official statistics in terms of women's labour force participation? It is a myth that women only work in the private domestic sphere.

Most women in Sri Lanka come from economically and socially disadvantaged families in the rural areas. Why do they migrate to the Middle East leaving their children behind? The root causes are the breakdown of the rural economy mainly agriculture, lack of infrastructure, lack of facilities and lack of employment for rural people. You cannot stop migration of women through laws [i.e. circular banning trans-national migration of women with children under the age of five years]. None of the governments have implemented the Women's Charter of 1993 or the UN Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) or the Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) which include policies for

the promotion of the rights of women.

What does literacy mean within this given education system? Literacy is very useful because in comparison with countries like Bangladesh or India, women in Sri Lanka are able to read with their high level of literacy [over 92% and almost equivalent to that of men]. They can understand printed material. That is an advantage. But literacy by itself does nothing to challenge the subordinate status of women, the sexual division of labour, and the stereotypes, myths and prejudices imposed on women by society and internalised by women themselves which limit their horizons. If we want to march towards a modern society, the recognition and acceptance of women as equal citizens is a foremost priority in the country. We don't have a modern education system, which equips the citizens with life-related awareness such as the environment, human rights and women's rights.

There should be a conducive political and social environment for the mass of women to openly do politics. This is not the case in Sri Lanka. Historically, women everywhere have faced obstacles in entering any male-dominated domain including sports, university education, professions such as medicine and so on. Women face such situations because patriarchy is the oldest power structure in the world. This is why my former teacher [at the ISS] Dr. Maria Mies titled her famous book, *Women: The Last Colony* (of man). Her observation indicates how old and how obstinate patriarchy is. This is why structural changes in society are needed for women's equal participation in politics. Now, the recent local government election happened within the existing social-political paradigm of liberal democratic dependent capitalism. The public-private dichotomy, affecting not only women but the whole society, is deeply rooted in the soil and not challenged by dependent capitalism. Even in the advanced capitalist West, women at the individual level have to fight very hard to get men to help with housework and childcare.

*In recent amendments to the local government election law, the number of local government seats was increased by 33%, presumably to overcome the objection and resistance of political parties and male politicians, to accommodate the 25% quota for women's political representation through reduction of the number of male representatives. What does this manoeuvre signify about the recent hard-won victory of temporary special measures to correct the gross exclusion of women in politics and the broader struggle for equality?*

The number of local councils [*Pradeshiya* or Divisional, Urban and Municipal] at present is 341 and the estimated number of members to be elected was 8,486. Actually, the international campaign for greater women's representation in politics demands a quota of 33% for women in elected bodies. However, Parliament only approved a lesser number of 25%. No women's rights advocate asked for an increase of 33% in the number of local government seats. What was asked, is to reserve that percentage for women, out of the existing number. That is the meaning of a quota.

Now the cost of maintaining these bodies, with their excessive number of councillors, is projected to shoot up to Rs. 34 billion from Rs21 billion previously.<sup>1</sup> This decision to increase the number of seats by a third, at absurd expense, is not due to lack of understanding on the part of politicians. The people are already burdened with the cost of living and endless other difficulties. The political parties and the Parliament have put an additional burden on the people to maintain these politicians. What was expected by bringing more women into local government, is to facilitate and enhance women's agency for women's concerns at the local level; and to take up issues at the community level from women's perspective – that is, respecting inclusivity, equality, justice and transparency – to address the problems of women heads of households, the security and safety of children, economic and social justice to the poor (most of whom are women), and so much more. This is why women are needed in the local councils.

What has happened instead, through expansion of the number of seats, is placing an additional

burden on the common people. This shows the greed for power and the corrupt and degenerated political culture, lack of commitment to democracy, unconcern for and indifference to the public, and lack of internal democracy within these authoritarian and patriarchal political parties. It was not necessary to increase the total number of seats by so much. This is to do with the greed for power; because men don't want to share power by giving place to a woman. They want it all for themselves.

*Some women who did make it onto the nomination lists, faced intimidation and thuggery from male candidates, including from within their own party or list. Sexist and misogynistic statements were made by male politicians on election platforms. There was no disciplinary action taken by the political party hierarchy against these male perpetrators, nor was there critical coverage by mainstream media. What does this say about the relationship between women, politics and violence?*

Actually this may come into the open on the political platform during election campaigns, but it has been the experience of women whenever they tried to enter any new field. The whole society is male dominated; and therefore so are most professions, trades and occupations. So women who want to enter into politics, face this challenge. Now look at the fight of the few women three-wheeler drivers. At the beginning, they were not allowed to park their vehicles at three-wheeler stands by male drivers. In cricket, women are getting step-motherly treatment. Men's cricket is given all encouragement and is celebrated; but women don't get any attention. Is the political leadership enlightened on women's issues? Are they not misogynist? Are they not patriarchal? And within their parties, why don't they instil discipline? These features are deeply ingrained in political parties.

That doesn't mean we can't or shouldn't do anything about it! There is a lot that can be done including campaigning with the political parties, and working with their leadership, on discrimination against and harassment of women. There is a big need for a wider socio-political movement beyond non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which includes women and taking up women's issues. It is very disappointing that certain movements for justice in recent times were male-dominated as are so-called citizens' movements. They have forgotten that 'citizens' include women. The leaders of these groups are of the view that there are no women in this country who can get on to the public platform and address mass meetings or participate in media conferences.

- call them 'Bamunas' as like the Brahmins of ancient India, they have archaic and derogatory views on women. It is the same in the male-dominated NGOs. There are huge micro-credit organisations like the Women's Bank and Women's Development Federation but these are male-dominated. The law on violence against women is not properly implemented. The police are not trained on applying the Domestic Violence Act to complaints from women. Look at the appointment of the Minister of Women's Affairs: did we ever have a single person who knows the subject and is committed to uprooting injustice to women?

Women's role in the political parties so far has been to make tea for men and do similar things. The male politicians use the women for canvassing, but otherwise women are not given the stage during meetings and nor are they in decision-making positions or in leadership positions. So the relationship between the political parties and women, is one of subordination and exploitation of women within and by the parties. See, there are five women associated with *Kantha Shakthi* who contested in this recent election from Balangoda and Tangalle. Some of them brought votes to their respective parties, but at least two of them have been deprived of their rightful seats by the *Pohottuwa* [Mahinda Rajapakse aligned *Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna* - 'Peoples' Front'] party leadership. These are premeditated actions.

*Beyond this important step for greater democracy, and greater democratisation of the electoral system, through increased representation of women, how do we ensure that women's political participation is substantive and not symbolic and of benefit to women's priorities for local*

*government in particular?*

This is a very important beginning. From around 2% representation in local government, we have come to somewhere around 25%. But we should not stop there. We have to take this forward and demand at least 50%. The women elected should be identified, and they should be organised as women irrespective of political affiliations. The organising should be on two levels: within each council, and also across all local government bodies. Women's groups should engage with them. The women members should be given orientation in the performance of their duties. There should be regular monitoring of their work and support regarding the problems they face, to give them the external support needed. They should be guided on how to use the resources of the council, and its internal procedures. Their awareness of local problems and priorities of marginalised groups within the community should be raised, such as women-heads of households especially in the North and East; livelihood issues; poor quality of infrastructure; transport and communication; satisfactory school bus service; land rights; rights of communities to natural resources especially water, springs etc. They should be trained on boosting their self-confidence, skills, personalities, and of course, on women's rights, justice and equality.

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**P.S.**

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