EXTENDED ABSTRACT

WOMEN AND POLITICS: A STUDY OF THE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN IN LOCAL GOVERNANCE

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Abstract

While Sri Lankan women's social, economic and health status have improved significantly in recent past, women remain under-represented in the political arena especially at local governance level. Even the women who are in the local level politics seem not to have a voice in many issues in the local level. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by women who are in local politics, in portraying their active political role. This research was done based on the Kuruwita and Ehaliyagode pradeshiya sabaha in Rathnapura district. 17 women representatives came under the purview of the study. The semi structured interview method was used as the main data collection technique accompanied with secondary data such as research outcomes on gender and ageing and the reports of the two pradeshiya sabha. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis method. According to the findings of the study at the institutional level, influence of senior politicians, lack of opportunity to develop knowledge and personality, influence of party leadership, and violent political culture were the main challenges that they have to face. This study revealed that these challenges were further accompanied by the domestic challenges which discouraged most women in engaging politics in the local level. Mainly cultural factors play a massive role in creating barriers against women at both institutional and domestic levels. Therefore, this study recommends a massive revolution in the education sector in order to change the structured system as to how social needs are fulfilled and to form a society that respects equality and human rights.

Keywords: Local governance, politics, Sri Lanka, women

1. Introduction

In many countries across the world, women have far less opportunities than men in social participation – especially in the arena of political participation and power at the governmental level. According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union, (2021) despite increases in the number of women at the highest level of political power, widespread gender inequality still persists all over the world. They highlighted that in 2020, women comprised 24.9 percent in national parliaments globally while it has increased only up to 25.5 percent in 2021 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021).

When it comes to Sri Lanka, women in Sri Lanka have made significant strides in the area of education, workforce participation, community development activities and in the health sector (Liyanage, 2012). Among the South Asian countries, Sri Lankan women showed the highest literacy rate stated as 91.5 percent in 2014. At the same time, Sri Lanka recorded the lowest maternal mortality ratio among South Asian countries. Women in Sri Lanka are also considered as the highest

economically active group in South Asia even though their work is not in lucrative or good positions as compared to Sri Lankan men (Shekh and Loney, 2018).

However, when it comes to politics in Sri Lanka, a totally different picture emerges and a huge gap can be identified when comparing women's political representation with the other social indices such as educational achievements, health status, economic participation etc. For instance, among the South Asian countries, women's political participation at the national level in Sri Lanka remains one of the lowest as it is only above the Maldives. According to the Inter-parliamentary Union data, Women's representation in 2020 in Bangladesh was 20.9%, Pakistan, 20.2%, Bhutan, 14.9%, India, 14.4%, Myanmar, 11.1% Sri Lanka, 5.3 and Maldives, 4.6%. Sri Lanka also falls within the list of countries with the lowest women's representation in parliaments at the global level (Inter-parliamentary union, 2021). It ranks among the last 10 countries. At the local level or the pradeshiya sabha, women's representation is even lower than in the national level. For instance, in 2016, women's representation in local governance was 2 percent (Liyanage, 2012).

The huge gap between women's achievements of education, health and participation in the development of the county and their participation at national and local levels of politics in Sri Lanka open doors to many global and local researchers to examine why this gap has been created and study how this gap could be filled. Accordingly two main research questions were addressed by the researchers. The first one is, "what are the reasons leading to low women's political participation in the national and local levels?" (Alzubi, 2016; Tan, 2020; Sabur, 2020).The second one is,"why do women need to be in politics? Do they make a difference?" (Karl, 1995; King and Mason, 2001). Within the body of existing research on gender and politics, very little attention has been paid to examine the situation of women who are in politics at the national and local levels. At the national level most of the women candidates come from families with political backgrounds with attendant privileges (Jayathilake, 2009). But most of the women who enter local governance are not of a political background or from privileged families. This creates a number of situations which hinder their capacity and leadership.

Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to examine the challenges faced by women who are in local politics, in portraying their active political role. Accordingly, two research questions will be addressed by the study as follows:

1. What are the institutional challenges faced by women who are in local governance?
2. What are the domestic challenges faced by women who are in local governance?

This research was done based on the Kuruwita and Ehaliyagode pradeshiya sabaha in Rathnapura district. There were 55 seats in the Kuruwita pradeshiya sabha which consists of 12 women representatives while in Ehaliyagode pradeshiya sabha 5 were women representatives out of a total of 31 seats. Accordingly all the 17 women representatives came under the purview of the study. The semi structured interview method was used as the main data collection technique accompanied with secondary data such as research outcomes on gender and ageing and the reports of the two pradeshiya sabha. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis method.

2. Literature Review

Women's representation in political power contributes to the establishment and continuation of democracy; it also establishes human rights for women. At the same time, being able to increase the quality of representation through having more women representation in politics can stimulate women and improve the quality of political decisions. It also opens up more space for women to address issues that are unique to them (Thoradeniya 2021). However, when analyzing the literature on gender and politics, three factors can be identified as the main barriers against women's active participation in politics across South Asian countries including Sri Lanka. When the pilot study was done, the same factors could be identified as impacting negatively against the women even in local

governance which contributes to limiting or stopping their political career even at the local level. Therefore, those factors will be explained and analyzed as an analytical framework for analyzing the empirical data.

The first factor is the social structure in a society. Cultural facets, patriarchal facets, religion etc. can be mentioned as crucial factors playing a significant role against women in politics. For instance, across most of the countries including Sri Lanka in which patriarchal attitudes are quite strong, political participation of women is less than 10% and in some countries like Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, women's representation in politics have been totally rejected by state sanctioned religious ideology (Shvedova, 2005).

The second factor is the political structure in a country. For instance, the patriarchal social system that determines political life, low support from political parties, for example, not providing financial support, limited access to political networks, limited contact with public institutions, little space for education and training, the nature of the political system can all be mentioned as crucial factors for discouraging interest among women to involve with politics or withdrawal from engaging in politics (Coole, 1988; Jayawardana & Kodikara 2003; Liyanage, 2004; Omvedt, 2005).

The third factor researchers say is that ideologies of a society may play a significant role in determining women's participation in politics. How the status of women in a country is defined, willingness to provide opportunities for women to involve in politics, formulate a systematic program for that such as quota system, and working to reduce gender inequality are the crucial ideological factors that increase or decrease political involvement (Kenworthy and Malami, 1999; Shredova, 2005; Varghese, 2020). Therefore, in this study, it is expected to use these three factors as analytical models to examine the influences shaping women's roles and situations while engaging in local governance activities.

3. Findings and Discussion

The main focus of this study was to examine the challenges faced by women in local governance or the pradeshiya sabha in Rathnapura district. Accordingly, the study addressed two research questions viz. what are the institutional challenges and what are the domestic challenges that women face while involving in politics at the local level. In addressing the first research question, the study reveals that almost all women politicians have to listen to the senior male politicians which hinder their capacity, voice and leadership. The challenges they face can be listed as follows:

1. Influence of senior politicians
   Most of the women representatives said that they do not have any chance to express their views even though their first responsibility is to represent the women in the area and address their issues. Other male politicians heckling them when they attempt to talk, ridiculing and insulting them and their having to take prior approval from the senior politicians if they are going to talk at all regarding some matter were the main challenges they face in the monthly meeting in the pradeshiya sabaha.
2. Lack of opportunity to develop knowledge and personality
   There is no systematic program for women or men MPs in Sri Lanka to improve their knowledge and personality. Most of the people learn it by experience in having close relationships with senior politicians. But mainly male politicians have this opportunity since the social structure allows them freedom while women politicians remain isolated due to the social pressure, cultural practices conditioning social relationships etc. This study shows that even though the women in the local governance have come forward thus far by facing those challenges, to go further they need some energy from the social setup which is currently lacking since huge gender inequalities appear in the arena of local politics.
3. Influence of party leadership
   Nominations and staying in the political party often depend on party leadership and the local level

leadership especially in the Pradeshiya sabha or the local governance. In this scenario women face lots of challenges in keeping the relationship with the party leadership as well as the local level leadership. This study reveals that this is the hardest part in their political career since if they lose the relationship with the party leadership they reject the system while if they keep the relationship it creates lots of other issues such as creating rumors, impact on their family life etc. Therefore, they have to maintain the balance between these two forces which puts a lot of pressure on them and even negatively impacts their performance.

4. Violent political culture

All the women involved with the study stated that there is no survival in politics as a politician if the people who are involved with it accept the violence willingly or unwillingly. Therefore, most of the women politicians stated that they will not continue their political career further after they finish their period as a minister in the local government since it gives them lots of pressure with attendant feelings of frustrations, guilt and impacts their family life as well.

When addressing the second research question, it appears that many of the women politicians face a number of challenges at the domestic level over those at the institutional level which leads women away from active political participation. According to the study findings those factors can be listed as follows:

1. Definition of women's roles by Sri Lankan culture

Reproductive responsibilities, the family roles traditionally assigned to women, limited freedom and consequently little opportunities for personal growth plus institutional pressure negatively affect women's political representation. This influences women to not involve themselves with politics – even influences the women who are currently in politics (Liyanage, 2012). As mentioned earlier, women who are in national level politics are mostly from privileged families and have financial and social privileges which enables themto maintain their household work. This study reveals that women who are in politics at the local level are from mostly ordinary families and not financially stable; therefore these women bear the whole responsibility of their household work. The little to no support received at the familial level discourages most of the women who are in local level politics.

2. Issues related to power

Sri Lanka is a patriarchal society and the 'power' of the family always exists with the husband or the father in the family. However, when the wife or the daughter are engaged in political activity, a gradual power struggle within the family can arise. The women who were interviewed stated that the feeling of empowerment they get through their political activity may unconsciously influence them to exhibit confidence and independence at home and this is negatively as well as positively impacting their family lives. They say that they become more aware about the rights of women and do not allow husbands to abuse them financially, socially as well as sexually, as was often the case before. However, they state that this situation also tends to create tensions in their family life as they have developed a sense of freedom, identity and decision making power within the family.

As per the above discussion, several aspects of women in local politics can be observed and these can be listed as follows:

1. There is a big gap between the women who are in national politics and local politics. Even though this study is not a comparative study, it appears that women who are in national politics have the capacity to face lots of challenges due to their powerful and privileged backgrounds, though they too still face gender inequalities. However, when compared with the national politics, the women who are in the local politics are in a very disadvantageous position which hampers their political career.

2. Cultural factors are the most powerful factors which impact women's political participation; most of the barriers women face has been created by cultural forces at both the institutional as well as the domestic levels. This means the Sri Lankan social structures, political structures as well as political ideologies are the main barriers against women entering, remaining within, or growing in political involvement.
3. Gap between education and social structure
   Even though the education sector has developed up to the level of developed countries in Sri Lanka, this doesn't reflect in the social structure, attitudes, human rights and many other aspects within the country especially within decision making bodies.

4. Conclusion

The main objective of this study is to examine the challenges faced by women who are in local governance in Sri Lanka. This study was based on the Kuruwita and Ehaliyagode pradeshiya sabaha or local governance and all the women who were in the two pradeshiya sabhas were involved in the study; accordingly 17 women politicians participated in the study. Semi-structured interview method was used for the collection of data. Findings of the data show that women who are in local governance are in a highly disadvantageous position due to the structured social system in Sri Lanka. Cultural factors play a massive role in creating barriers against women at both institutional and domestic levels. It can be seen that patriarchal attitudes, women's socialization process, religion, definition of women's roles, and the political culture at large has mostly negatively impacted against many women, preventing them from involving with politics and even discouraging those who are currently in politics. According to the liberal feminist approach, the main mechanism for women's liberation is to implement proper education and establish common law which treats men and women equally (Maynard, 1995) Even though the women in Sri Lanka have the freedom to attain the same educational levels as men, there is a gap between the education sector and the social structures still in place. There is rampant gender inequality in each and every sector including political participation as a result of this huge gap. Therefore, this study recommends a massive revolution in the education sector in order to change the structured system as to how social needs are fulfilled and to form a society that respects equality and human rights.

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