



VIEW POINT - 4

By The Pathfinder Foundation

The Shame of Political Exclusion of Women.

Since independence, women in Sri Lanka have made considerable progress in the social and economic spheres. 90% of them are now literate and their health indicators are impressive for a country at Sri Lanka's current level of development. Sri Lanka has performed extremely well on the Millennium Development Goal on maternal mortality, which has seen extremely disappointing progress across the world. Women are also more visible than ever in the public domain. They are well represented in the public service; the medical; legal and teaching professions; the arts and a number of other areas. They have also made progress in the private sector, though they are under-represented at senior management levels. Progress has also been achieved in reforming gender discriminatory laws and there has been increased awareness of gender and women's rights.

However, not all women enjoy Sri Lanka's vaunted social development indicators. Women continue to face challenges in accessing education and health services in the plantation sector, as well as among the poor in urban areas. They are also disproportionately subject to economic exploitation and the burden of poverty. The ethnic conflict has also affected women and children more. They accounted for 80% of the displaced and the loss of male relatives has meant that more than 20% of the households are now headed by women.

Women also continue to experience violence, patriarchal practices and social oppression. Despite their greater presence in the employment market, the gender division of labour remains unchanged with women continuing to bear multiple burdens.

Arguably, the most concerning phenomenon is women's political exclusion. After more than 70 years of universal adult franchise and 60 years of Independence, women are still marginalized from elected political bodies. They account for only 5.8% of members of parliament; 5% of members of provincial councils; and a mere 1.8% of members of local authorities. Women's

representation at local government level is the lowest in South Asia and is among the lowest in the world.

In the global context, more than 80 countries have implemented quotas/reservations for women at least at the local level. There is a reservation of seats for women in some form in every country in South Asia other than Sri Lanka. In India, the Women's Reservation Bill (March 2010) was passed with an overwhelming majority. The current government has promised to increase the reservation for women at the Panchayat level to 50%.

Sri Lanka's dismal statistics have prompted the National Committee of Women to make strong representations to the effect that any reform of the electoral system must make a provision for a 33% legal quota/reservation for women in nomination lists. In response to this, a Parliamentary Select Committee on Electoral Reform (2006) recommended that political parties should include provisions in their policies to ensure nomination of women candidates in order to improve their representation in politics. However, two bills drafted to give effect to the recommendations of this Parliamentary Select Committee did not mention any mechanism to increase women's representation.

The following recommendations would increase women's representation in politics.

- Political parties should nominate a minimum of 30% women candidates at all levels in party and political structures. This target should be reached within a time-bound period.
- More women Cabinet Ministers, Junior Ministers and Provincial Council Ministers.
- Training and other support for women candidates, including financial support.
- Voting rights for Sri Lankan migrant workers abroad, a great majority of whom are women.

Early action is required to address this glaring manifestation of discrimination that clearly disadvantages 52% of the population and 56% of the electorate. The current situation is most unbecoming of the country which gave the world its first elected female Head of Government. Furthermore, increased female representation is likely to contribute to a much needed improvement in the political culture of the country.

Readers' comments via email to pm@pathfinderfoundation.org are welcome.