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**Women's Under-representation in
Decision-making In Sri Lanka**

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The thesis presents for the Examination of the Master of Communication at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura.

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Introduction to the format

This thesis has written in a format that is slightly different from the traditional format used for thesis writing. Since this thesis and its topic related to Communications, which is closely associated with journalism, the thesis has written in a journalistic style and comprises of different relevant materials obtained from different resource bases. The research has been carried out following journalistic manner. Please note that some of the interviewees do not hold their posts any longer, at the time of this thesis is being completed and submitted.

Introduction

It was Sri Lanka that produced the world's first woman Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1960. Sri Lankan women received universal franchise in 1931 just after two years British women had gained it in 1928. At the moment 52.3% of the total population of Sri Lanka are women. We had a woman Executive President from 1994 to 2005. But women's representation in the supreme legislator in Sri Lanka, the Parliament has only remaining as around 4% since 1931. This is an inadequate percentage when compared with the percentage of women in the country. Sri Lanka has one of the lowest women's representations in Parliament and other decision-making bodies when compared to the other countries in the region and the world including very conservative countries like Pakistan.

Women's representation in local government in India is 33.33%. It is 30.12% in Pakistan and 23.31% in Bangladesh. In Nepal this figure is 8.5%. Women's representation in the Lower House in India is 8.1% and, it is 11.6% in the Upper House (2004). These figures are 21.3% (2002) and 17.0% (2003) in Pakistan. In Nepal, women's representation in Parliament is 5.9%. The percentage of women in the Lower House of Thailand is 10.6% (2005) and 10.5% in the Upper House. In Indonesia women's percentage in the Lower House is 11.1% (2004). In the new constitution of Afghanistan, a space of 25% is allocated for women's representation. India made an amendment to its constitution in 1992 allocating 33.33% seats for women in Parliament (<http://www.idea.int/themes/>).

The low representation of women in all decision-making levels is one of the major problems existing in Sri Lanka at the moment. This has created several major invisible problems in the country, making a negative impact, especially on women and the common society. It has also made a direct negative impact on the country's development. Since the problems are often not directly connected to the issue under consideration, citizens and the decision makers of Sri Lanka seldom see the connection between women's low representation in decision-making bodies and some of the existing problems in Sri Lanka. As an example most of the local streets in Sri Lanka do not have streetlights and are left very dark at night. Male politicians in local level decision-making bodies have no interest and do not see any reason to allocate money to illuminate local streets. This is one of the major problems faced by working women and ordinary women who have to walk out in the dark and face much abuse, harassments and violence in their day-to-day life. Women's representation in local decision-making bodies is 1.7%.

The objective of this thesis is to explore the historical background, present situation and the hidden reasons connected to women's low representation in Parliament and other decision-making levels in Sri Lanka in order to seek permanent practical solutions which aim at increasing Sri Lankan women's representation in all decision-making levels, especially in Parliament and in key decision-making bodies up to the level of other neighboring countries in the region.

This first chapter will describe the typical Sri Lankan woman, Sri Lankan culture, religions and society, the background of Sri Lankan politics, elections and will present profiles of some key woman politicians in Sri Lanka. This will help to understand the background to the problem and the connection between women's low representation in decision-making levels and existing hostile environments in related fields, especially in politics.

The second chapter will illustrate some ideas expressed by two former Women's Affairs Ministers, some key journalists in Sri Lanka and will present some of the important statistics related to women's representation in decision making bodies. The statistics

included in this chapter plays a major role when it comes to studying the gravity of the problem. This chapter will help to understand different developments related to this problem.

The third (final) chapter will deal with the views of present Women's Affairs Minister, a ministry official and a few key women in journalism and politics. A woman activist also expresses her view in this chapter. It also points out some key statistics on Sri Lanka recorded by some key International Organisations such as United Nations. The chapter concludes with some descriptions of the programmes launched by the Women's Affairs Ministry to increase women's representation in decision-making bodies and the latest developments in this issue. Final chapter is a forecast of the future direction of the problem and practical solutions to increase Sri Lankan women's representation in all decision-making bodies.

This thesis will assist decision makers to find out a permanent practical solution and increase women's representation at decision-making levels in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan women who are in positions of putting pressure on the decision makers will also benefit from this thesis. Journalists will also benefit, because they will be able to understand their duty towards increasing women's representation in decision-making bodies by giving prominence to this issue. Generally this thesis will be useful to all Sri Lankan women who can read and understand English.

Chapter One

Sri Lankan women's low representation in decision-making – The history, general facts and commonalities

Typical Sri Lankan culture, society, religions and traditional woman

Sri Lanka has been a Sinhalese-Buddhist country from the beginning. Sri Lankan women are similar to the women in other South Asian countries such as India, Nepal and Bangladesh when it comes to culture and certain traditions. But there are specific features in Sri Lankan women. Sri Lankan women are normally timid and more focused on their duties as typical housewives and mothers. This is because the traditional Sri Lankan society expects it of them. Today Sri Lankan women play a significant role as active partners in the country's development, contributing as employees in many fields but still most of them and a significant part of the Sri Lankan society possess traditional values such as seeing women as a home based community. This often prevents women from being appointed to decision-making bodies.

It is important to understand the typical Sri Lankan culture, society, religion, politics and women in order to understand why Sri Lankan women do not have adequate representation in Parliament and other administrative structures. Sri Lankan woman can be divided into three (3) main categories and they are:

- A. Women in the rich high class who are well educated, independent to some extent, employed and live in the capital and other suburb cities
- B. Ordinary working women (middle class) who have sound education and live and work in semi urban areas in Sri Lanka.
- C. The rural women who have only general school education and do not work either in the State sector or private sector but are self employed or work as farmers and not independent.

The rich, educated Sri Lankan women who live in the heart of Colombo, the commercial capital of Sri Lanka and the suburb cities belong to the top class (upper class). The women usually have a sound education obtained from either private educational institutions or foreign educational institutes. Some of them have higher education qualifications such as Master Degrees or PhDs. They lead a luxurious life and most of them single or married to rich businessmen or well-educated and professional men. These women tend to have a very clear idea about democracy, human rights and the importance of obtaining adequate representation for women at decision-making levels. But at the same time there are few women in this category who do not have either education or common sense and live like dolls without brains but talk about women's liberation. Most of the women belong to this category do not care for the traditional Sri Lankan culture or traditional social values.

Women belonging to the second category usually have high school education and they work at either State (Public) or private sector institutions located in Colombo or suburbs. Majority (about 75%) of the female State sector workers belong to this category. They have average ideas about democracy, human rights and the importance of gaining adequate representation in the Parliament and other decision-making bodies in Sri Lanka. But the problem is most of them are too busy with taking care of their professional and personal lives. It seems they do not have enough time to think and act when it comes to politics other than voting during elections. Most of these women more focused on their jobs and families but some are concerned about politics and the right to be represented in the Parliament. They don't have much freedom when compared to the rich high-class women.

The majority of Sri Lankan women belong to the third category of rural women. Typical Sri Lankan rural women are very much under control of men. Many do not have education higher than ordinary school education (Ordinary level which is grade 10). Most of these women stop studying at the age of 18 or 20. They get married at their early twenties and have a family with two or three kids. Most of the time their husbands also have the same level of education as them. Women in this category are only involved in

women's organizations at rural level, which provide them financial and technical assistance for self-employment and social welfare. They do not believe in their rights. They normally just ignore politics completely or just support their husbands' political views and vote the person selected by their husbands. Obtaining a voice for themselves and being represented at decision-making level in the country is just 'going against family and the role of a typical Sri Lankan woman' for them, and especially for their husbands. Rural husbands interpret their wives' involvement in active politics as hanging around with men and doing something that non-feminine.

All the women who go abroad and work as housemaids in the Middle East and countries such as Cyprus and Singapore belong to this category. These housemaids (working abroad) do not have access to vote during elections. Almost all the women in this category are below the poverty line and depend on the relief packages offered by the Government.

Most Sri Lankan women, especially rural women are tightly attached to the traditional Sri Lankan culture, social values and religion. According to traditional Sri Lankan culture, a woman's main role is taking a good care of her character (all Sri Lankan women should be virgins until they get married), her family (parents, siblings, children) and her home. Sri Lanka is mainly a male dominated society. Women move freely in society but most of the times under the protection of a male (father, elder brother, boyfriend or husband). Sri Lankan women are not expected to be live alone in separate apartments or a separate house even it belongs to them. It is not acceptable in common society. They always live with their families. They are not supposed to go out after dark, drink alcohol, smoke, wear revealing cloths and hang around with male friends. Young girls are kept away from their male siblings and even from their father for a certain period of time when they attain puberty. Arranged marriages are still in practice and this is one of the most profitable advertising areas for newspapers (including online editions). Usually widows are treated as a symbol of bad luck and not welcomed to special occasions. But since recent past this belief is fading away from the society.

When it comes to religion, women have a very sacred place in the Buddhist (70 % of Sri Lankans are Buddhists) society as well as in the Hindu (7.1 % of Sri Lankans are Hindu) society. The mother is called 'Gedara Budun' (the Buddha of home). The whole family respects her. She always has an invisible power in connection with making almost all important decisions. When there are brothers and sisters in a family, brothers enjoy more power and independence than sisters even when they are younger than sisters. The daughters of the family have the least power. Both Buddhist and Hindu societies treat women with special respect but Buddhist women have more freedom to move in the open society than Hindu women.

But in the Islamic families (7.6 % of Sri Lankans are Muslims) women are treated almost as prisoners. They have no power at all and lead a very restricted life in Sri Lanka. Sri Lankan Muslim women are similar to Muslim women in any other Islamic country in Asia (living a very restricted life under the control of men) but Mrs. Ferial Ismail Ashraff and Anjan Umma (mentioned in the section of 'Profiles of key women politicians in Sri Lanka') are exceptions.

The traditional Sri Lankan women who were living prior to colonialism were very independent although there was a male domination in the society to a certain extent. But it was not comparable with the tough and widely spread male domination in India exists since civilization up to now. During colonialism, British rulers introduced the 'Victorian woman' to Sri Lanka. This Victorian woman is entirely different from the traditional Sri Lankan woman. The profile of Victorian woman made a significant impact on traditional Sri Lankan woman and imprisoned her in her own home with a load of household chores limiting her freedom and rights. But the traditional Sri Lankan woman was an active member of the decision-making process in the family and contributed her labour to agricultural activities. Apart from changing the traditional Sri Lankan woman into a doll without any feelings and rights the same system introduced rigid Victorian style male domination into Sri Lanka turning upside down the milder household head type of male domination that existed in Sri Lanka. This Victorian male domination made severe impact on the traditional Sri Lankan women further limiting her to her home and

identifying her braveness and physical strength as something non-feminine and not fashionable.

Politics and elections in Sri Lanka in general

According to the general belief in Sri Lanka, if someone wants to become a politician, there are some special requirements. The first is a lot of money in millions of rupees. The second requirement is good connection to a political party leader or a popular politician or become a leading businessman who finances political parties. The third requirement is good connection to the 'underworld'. Many Sri Lankan politicians often storm around the country with thugs and army deserters before they gain State power. Generally most Sri Lankan politicians at the local level are not well educated and they have not come from decent family backgrounds. Some of them are convicted criminals. Any person who possess above requirements can get nominations for the next election.

The preferential system (current system used by political parties to select persons to appoint as MPs), which introduced in 1982 and still existing in Sri Lanka, encourages politicians to eliminate (physically) the next person above him in the list in order to get into the parliament. This system has created a lot of violence, hatred and deadly competition within the same political party and between politicians who work and campaign together for one political party. There are small rival gangs within one political party who try to eliminate the person who is just above one.

Politics in Sri Lanka has a very violent history. Assassination of politicians has become 'a normal and usual act' in Sri Lanka since late 1950s. The first political assassination reported from Sri Lanka in 1959 when an unidentified gunman in a yellow cloth murdered former Sri Lankan Prime Minister S.W.R.D.Bandaranaike. In 1993 former Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa was killed by a Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) suicide bomber while taking part in the May Day celebrations in Colombo. In 1999 another LTTE suicide bomber attacked former Sri Lankan President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga but she escaped with injuries. She lost her right eye by the

attack. The latest political leader murdered in the recent past was Sri Lankan Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadiragamar who was killed by a LTTE sniper in August 2005.

Apart from Presidents and Prime Ministers LTTE suicide bombers and other unidentified gunmen and bombs have killed several key political figures in Sri Lanka in the past, especially a large number of members of the Parliament. Former Sri Lankan Deputy Defense Minister Ranjan Wijeratne was killed by a LTTE car bomb in 1991. There were approximately 250 suicide bomb attacks killed political leaders attached to different political parties between 1983 and 2006.

Elections have become more and more violent in Sri Lanka since independence. The 1977 Parliamentary General Election was the most violent election in the Sri Lankan history, which killed a large number of people and destroyed millions of rupees worth of private property belonging to the supporters of the lost political party.

People's Action for Free and Fair Elections (PAFFREL) (<http://www.paffrel.lk>) is the leading umbrella organization, which monitors elections taking place in Sri Lanka. PAFFREL was formed in 1987 by a group of NGOs in order to monitor the Presidential Election of December 1988. Since then it has monitored all major elections held in the country. PAFFREL, a non-profit, non-governmental organization also hosts and facilitates foreign election monitoring missions that visit Sri Lanka such as European Union Election Observer teams.

According to PAFFREL (<http://www.lankaworld.com/paffrel/publications>), the 2001 Parliamentary General Election was one of the most violent elections held in the history of Sri Lanka. PAFFREL statistics says that due to violent acts that took place on the day of the election alone 24 persons died. Violence incidents took place with the involvement of army deserters and underworld figures. It is unfortunate that as a means of protection against threats and intimidations counter – violence has become a part of the political culture in Sri Lanka.

According to PAFFREL the highest number of violent acts were reported from Gampaha district in the Parliamentary General Election of October 2000. 24 persons died during an attack that took place in Muttur. Another 10 persons died and 40 persons were injured in an attack that took place in Medavachchiya, which is close to North-East region.

According to the same source, the 1999 Presidential Election (December) recorded a few major violent acts. The suicide attack on former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, which killed and injured several people, is one of them. Mrs. Kumaratunga lost her right eye due to this attack. On the same day another bomb attack took place at Ja-Ela aiming at United National Party (UNP) election meeting. The two attacks were attributed to the LTTE. Threats, intimidations, assaults on party activists causing grievous injuries, arson, damage to property, abductions, attempted murders, homicides and murders are among the other violent acts reported during the same elections.

The 1999 Wayamba Provincial Council elections held in January mark a significant event in the history of violence against women in Sri Lanka. A female supporter (name withheld due to ethical reasons) of one of the leading political party was forced to walk naked in a main road by her political opponents. According to PAFFREL statistics, violence on the Election Day particularly in the morning was so organized as to determine the result of the poll. Violence during the election campaign was aimed at suppressing the opposition and preventing it from campaigning freely. Most prevalent were armed gangs moving around in vehicles thereby causing fear and intimidation, assault, **violence against women** (physical, verbal and emotional violence), violence against media personnel, sabotaging election rallies by attacks on them, burning and destroying political party offices, chasing away of polling agents, forced entry into polling stations on the election day and unlawful introduction of ballot papers into ballot boxes.

One of the significant violent events took place during the 1997 Local Government Elections was the assassination of Mr. Nalanda Ellawala, an MP of the People's Alliance (PA) from the Rathnapura district.

According to PAFFREL statistics 12 murders, 47 incidents of serious violence and 1003 incidents of assaults were reported during the 1994 Parliamentary General Election. Most of the violence took place during the election campaign.

According to PAFFREL on the day prior to voting, the election secretariat of the police had received 550 complaints since the nomination day.

In the 1989 Parliamentary General Election, there were killings and threats of murder against candidates throughout the election campaign. 669 politically motivated killings were reported during the period from December 19 to February 10 (during less than a month).

Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP: People's Liberation Front), the third force in Sri Lankan politics today, killed hundreds of candidates during the 1989 Parliamentary General Election because they did not obey their order to quit contesting as a protest against then Government.

Historical background of Sri Lankan women politicians

The history of Sri Lanka commences with a queen who ruled the country in 544 B.C before the arrival of King Vijaya, the first King of Sri Lanka who came from India. Several queens have ruled Sri Lanka in the past. Among them, there are four significant queens who ruled the country in ancient times. Queen Anula was the first Sinhalese Queen who ruled the country from 47 B.C. to 42 B.C. Then Queen Seewali ruled Sri Lanka in 35 A.C but her regime last only for four months. Queen Leelawathi ruled ancient Sri Lanka from 1197 A.C. to 1212 A.C. The last Sinhalese Queen was Kalyanawathi who ruled Sri Lanka from 1202 A.C. to 1210 A.C. Her regime lasted for eight years making her the longest reigning Sinhalese Queen.

According to the Sri Lankan history, there was a male domination in the country from the beginning but it was not similar to what exist in India at all. The male chauvinism exist in India (dowry related murders, forcing widows to suicide by jumping into the husband's