**Political Parties and Gendered Political Representation in Sri Lanka: Low Descriptive Representation Despite Considerable Socio-Economic Advancement**

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree

of

McGill University, Department of Political Science

Montréal, QC, Canada

Supervised by Prof. Narendra Subramanian

## Abstract

Sri Lanka has made notable progress in gender equality, including high electoral participation rates among women, female leadership at the prime ministerial level, and advancements in healthcare and education for women. Despite these achievements, women's representation in formal political institutions remains strikingly low. This study investigates the underlying reasons for this discrepancy by examining three main explanations for women's underrepresentation in Sri Lankan politics: socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors. The analysis finds that while all three factors contribute to the gender gap, institutional barriers—particularly the role of political parties—are the most significant. Political parties in Sri Lanka exhibit centralized, non-transparent, and patriarchal structures that hinder women's entry and progression in politics. These findings suggest that political parties are a crucial factor explaining why women's representation in Sri Lanka lags behind other South Asian countries. The study contributes to the broader literature on gender and political participation by highlighting the critical role of political parties in fostering or obstructing equitable democratic representation.

## Résumé

Le Sri Lanka a réalisé des progrès remarquables en matière d'égalité des sexes, notamment par des taux élevés de participation électorale des femmes, des dirigeantes féminines au niveau du premier ministre et des avancées dans les domaines de la santé et de l'éducation pour les femmes. Malgré ces succès, la représentation des femmes dans les institutions politiques formelles reste étonnamment faible. Cette étude examine les raisons sous-jacentes de cette disparité en analysant trois principales explications de la sous-représentation des femmes dans la politique sri-lankaise : les facteurs socio-économiques, culturels et institutionnels. L'analyse révèle que bien que tous ces facteurs contribuent à l'écart entre les sexes, les obstacles institutionnels, en particulier le rôle des

partis politiques, sont les plus significatifs. Les partis politiques au Sri Lanka se caractérisent par des structures centralisées, non transparentes et patriarcales qui entravent l'entrée et la progression des femmes en politique. Ces résultats suggèrent que les partis politiques sont un facteur clé expliquant pourquoi la représentation des femmes au Sri Lanka est en retard par rapport à d'autres pays d'Asie du Sud. L'étude contribue à la littérature sur le genre et la participation politique en soulignant le rôle crucial des partis politiques dans le soutien ou l'entrave à une représentation démocratique équitable.

## Acknowledgements

**Table of Contents**

**List of Figures**

**List of Abbreviations**

CP          Communist Party

FLFP          Female Labor Force Participation

LSSP          Lanka Sama Samaja Party

LSSP          Lanka Sama Samaja Party

MWDF          Mannar Women's Development Federation

MWHRD        Mannar Women for Human Rights and Democracy

SLAS         Sri Lanka Administrative Services

WAN          Women's Action Network

## I. Introduction

Sri Lanka has been celebrated for the significant progress it has made on gender equality in the past century. There have been two female prime ministers; electoral participation rates among women are high; the country introduced universal franchise in 1931, ahead of several European countries; and Sri Lanka has made significant progress on ensuring women's access to healthcare and education. Women's life expectancy is now around 80, and there are more women than men enrolled in university (Athukorala et. al, 2021, p. 7). However, these trends do not seem to have translated into similar gains in women's representation in political office. Strikingly, the Inter- Parliamentary Union reported last year that out of 190 countries, Sri Lanka ranked 179th on the share of women in national parliaments. In South Asia, only the Maldives ranked lower (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023, n.p.). Women's representation in the executive and local government has remained extremely low as well.

In this thesis, I investigate why women in Sri Lanka remain underrepresented in formal political institutions, despite the country performing well on other indicators of gender equality. I test three dominant explanations for women's underrepresentation in politics (socio-economic, cultural, and institutional), and find while that factors from all three camps hold some explanatory power, the most impactful factors are institutional ones. Specifically, political parties act as gatekeepers that hinder women from entering politics. I find evidence of a centralized, non-transparent institutional structure and a patriarchal culture within political parties, as well as active resistance among party members to women's entry into and upwards mobility within parties, limiting these developments.

The thesis is structured as follows. Firstly, I provide an overview of key political developments in Sri Lanka since independence. Secondly, I review existing literature on barriers to women's representation in politics and map out three dominant explanations for women's underrepresentation; Thirdly, I discuss key concepts, my case selection, and research design;

and lastly, I present my findings and discuss the implications of these against the backdrop of existing scholarship.

## II. Context

*A brief history of women in Sri Lankan politics*

Sri Lankan women have a long history of political engagement. They were at the forefront of social, economic, and political reform in the nineteenth and early twentieth century Not only were they respected members of anti-colonial and/or reformist organizations such as the Ceylon Labour Party and the Social Reform Society; they also formed their own movements such as the Ceylon Women's Union, the Tamil Women's Union, and the Women's Political Union, to name a few (Jayawardena & De Alwis, p. 246). By 1931, Sri Lanka was the first British colony to introduce universal suffrage, giving Sri Lankan women the right to vote well before some European women – including French, Belgian and Swiss women (De Silva, 2000, p. 227).

Despite the early roots of women's political activism, most political parties did not start addressing gender equality concerns until about two decades after independence. Only leftwing parties included gender issues in their platforms in the early years of independence, notably the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Lanka Social Equality Party, LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP) (Basu, 2005, p. 6). For the general elections in 1952, 1956, 1960 and 1965, both parties' manifestoes included support for women's equality, maternity benefits, and welfare services for mothers and children (p. 6). Despite these efforts, gains in women's wellbeing were marginal until the late 1960s, and women kept a secondary position to men in party life. Until 1970, the number of female candidates at general elections never surpassed 3 per cent (Basu, 2005, p. 6), and throughout the 1980s and 1990s, most political parties kept nominating around 3 per cent women to elections (Liyanage, 1999, p. 115). In 2021, only 5.8 per cent of seats in parliament were occupied by women, which is well below the world average (23.4 per cent) as

well as the Asia average (19.6 per cent) (Koens & Gunawardana, 2021, p. 464). These numbers suggest that the long tradition of women's political engagement has not translated into equal representation in formal political institutions.

Women's interests have not been entirely neglected, however. Starting in the 1960s, the Sri Lankan government made a targeted effort at enhancing welfare in the population, which had significant impacts on women's lives. Through comprehensive welfare packages, including free education and health services, as well as subsidized food schemes, women's literacy rates increased from 67.3 per cent in 1963 to 87.9 per cent by 1994, maternal mortality rates decreased from 16.5 per cent in 1945 to 0.2 per cent in 1995, and life expectancy rose from 41.6 years in 1946 to 74.2 years in the early 1990s (Basu, 2005, p. 33). These numbers have improved in the 21st century, albeit less rapidly: women's literacy is 92% (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2024), the maternal mortality rate is 0.03 (WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, & UNDESA/Population Division, 2023, p. 66), and women's life expectancy is 80 (WHO, 2022). These factors contribute to Sri Lanka's image as progressive on gender issues, particularly compared to other South Asian countries.

*The Sri Lankan Civil War (1983-2009)*

Political domination by the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka since independence has driven Tamil demands for sovereignty. Notably, the Sinhalese political elite declared Sinhala the country's official language in 1956; Buddhism was granted special status in 1972; university admissions were modified to favor Sinhalese students; and many landless Sinhalese were given land in majority Tamil areas of the country (Anandakugan, 2020). These policies, combined with the unsatisfactory response to Tamil calls for political devolution and widespread youth unemployment in Tamil areas, triggered the rise of numerous Tamil militant groups in the 1970s and 1980s, and eventually culminated in full-scale war from 1983 to 2009 between the Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sri Lankan armed forces. The 26-year

long war ended with the Sri Lankan army crushing LTTE force in 2009, leaving a traumatic legacy of an estimated 40 000 (mostly Tamil) civilian casualties (Vasudevan, 2013, no page).

The Sri Lankan Civil War caused major disruptions in Sri Lankan society, posing both challenges and opportunities to individual women and collective women's movements. Women's movements faced hard dilemmas during and after the war, including by shifting their focus on gender inequality to tackle broader human rights violations (Basu, 2005, p. 9). While these movements primarily sought to reduce violence, other women decided to join the LTTE in combat or in other roles, challenging dominant gender norms that portray women as peaceful, caretaking, or as pure victims of war (Alison, 2011). This was arguably empowering for some, but the war also had devastating effects on large parts of the population, especially women (Azmi, 2015). Many became internally displaced, lost their livelihoods and properties, experienced the death of their loved ones, and became victims of violence and intimidation, to name a few.

*Gender and politics in the post-war era*

Women were affected by the aftermath of the war in unique ways. Many were left in particularly vulnerable positions, especially those with intersecting marginalized identities. For example, many Tamil women that had joined the LTTE (either voluntarily or involuntarily) were left deprived, relying on the state and NGOs for basic necessities (Parashar, 2013, p. 13), and had no political roles after leaving the group despite the group's claims to fight for women's empowerment (Alison, 2003, p. 45). Those that had not participated actively in the war were also affected, notably the many women who became widowed or displaced, or both. War widows faced severe economic, social and cultural hardships as existing support structures broke down and social stigma exacerbated their marginalization years after the war (Saman & Obert, 2018).

The focus on women purely as victims of war has been criticized, however. While women in Sri Lanka have undeniably faced significant hardships as a result of war, they have exercised agency and public participation in important ways. Firstly, women have formed activist networks, mobilizing at national and local levels (Thiruchandran, 2012, p. 249). For example, the Women's Action Network (WAN) had advocated on national political issues such as gender quotas and law reform (Koens & Gunawardana, 2021, p. 469). Tamil women have been particularly active in advocating for women who have become disabled from the war, as well as in land rights struggles (Kandasamy, Soldatic, and Samararatne 2017). Secondly, there have been clear instances of women initiating political change during elections, such as in April 2010 when Shanthi Sachithanandam headed an all-women list of Tamil candidates to contest in the district of Batticaloa (Koens & Gunawardana, 2021, p. 469). Finally, women have demonstrated a commitment to participating in public life more broadly – according to the most recent report available from the Department of Census and Statistics, around 60 per cent of provincial public service workers are women (Department of Census and Statistics, 2017, p. 11). These are just a few examples of women not just as victims, but also as agents of social and political change.

Despite finding meaningful ways of contributing to shaping post-war society, women remain underrepresented in political office. The numbers are particularly low in local governments, with women accounting for less than 2% of elected members before the implementation of gender quotas in 2018 (Vijeyarasa, 2020, p. 1). Notably, Sri Lanka was one of the last Asian countries to introduce a gender quota (p. 1). At the national level, the representation of women has only been slightly higher – around 5% in post-war parliaments (Herath, 2018, p. 738). These numbers suggest a persistent gender gap when it comes to representation in political office, despite the long history of women's political participation through other channels.

**III. Literature review**

*Socioeconomic explanations*

Various studies have found correlations between women's political representation and a range of socio-economic factors, especially education and participation in the paid labor force (see e.g. Inglehart & Norris, 2000; Burns, Schlozman & Verba, 2001). On a global scale, women tend to have lower levels of education, be less likely to secure employment, and when they find employment, it tends to be in lower-paying jobs (Kittilson & Schwindt-Bayer 2012; Mammen & Paxson 2000). These discrepancies can then lead to women having a disadvantaged positon in political spaces, particularly when pursuing elected office.

Education has been considered a powerful predictor of political participation, including in the seminal work by Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001). They find that formal education directly imparts knowledge and communication skills essential for public debate and political analysis. Indirectly, it provides opportunities for young people to engage in school government, clubs, sports, and newspapers, serving as a training ground for political involvement. These activities help develop leadership, civic cooperation, negotiation, and organizational skills crucial for political engagement. Additionally, involvement in non-political associations, such as charitable organizations or religious groups, can foster political recruitment. Lastly, education is found to increase political interest and knowledge, and to promote positive attitudes towards democratic principles (Le & Nguyen, 2019, p. 2).

The causal link between educational attainment and political participation has been disputed, however. Some argue that the relationship between the two can be better explained by pre-adult factors that influence both, such as family socio-economic status and socialization at an early age (see e.g. Kam & Palmer, 2008). That being said, these explanations still acknowledge that a correlation can be observed between education attainment and political participation. Gender discrepancies in access to education can therefore serve as a predictor for political participation among women.

Education can give access to high-income jobs, which in itself is considered an important contributor to political participation, as it can provide the financial resources and networks necessary for political activity. Women are often underrepresented in the labor force – currently, the labor force participation rate is around 47% for women globally, whereas it is 72% for men. In other words, there is a global gender gap of 25 percentage points, although this gap is as high as 50 percentage points in some regions (ILO, 2022). Women who do participate in the labor force are often employed in lower-paying jobs (such as the caring, retail and hospitality sectors) and work in vulnerable conditions, with fewer opportunities for upward mobility (Maguire, 2018, p. 30). The lack of economic stability and job security diminishes women's ability to take the financial risks associated with political candidacy – especially in contexts where the cost of campaigning is be high (Kayuni & Chikadza, 2016). A significant expense arises from the loss of earnings due to the time investment required for candidate selection and campaigning (Maguire, 2018, p. 30). Evans (2008) finds that among 57 female MPs and candidates, full-time engagement and substantial financial backing is necessary for successful campaigning, posing a disproportionate burden on women. This trend is consistent with findings from Ireland, where financial barriers similarly hindered women's political aspirations. Additionally, women were reportedly far less likely to have access to family finances (Knight et al., 2004). Lastly, a high education and/or a high-paying job is often associated with higher status in society, giving better access to a higher-profile network, which in turn is associated with both participation and representation in decision-making bodies (Persson, 2013, p. 693). '

To summarize, socioeconomic explanations point to the gender gaps in education and the labor force, and relatedly earnings and networks, as key explanatory factors for women's underrepresentation in politics. Women tend to have lower access to socioeconomic goods in

society, making women less likely to participate in politics and less likely to succeed in pursuing elected office.

*Cultural explanations*

Some scholars turn away from materialist accounts and instead provide a cultural argument for why women remain underrepresented in political institutions. These accounts often follow a constructivist logic, assuming understandings of "men" and "women" and their roles in society to result primarily from social processes. This leads to expectations of how women and men ought to behave – and when they do not conform to these expectations, they experience formal and/or informal sanctions. Political spaces are traditionally masculine, whereas the domestic sphere is culturally assigned to women, creating an invisible barrier for women to enter political spaces as they face various social penalties for their non-conformity (See e.g. Koens & Gunawardana, 2021; McKay, 2011; Tickner, 1992).

Patriarchal norms and cultural attitudes are found to significantly shape women's political engagement. In many societies, family control and decision-making powers are predominantly held by men, limiting women's ability to make independent career decisions and engage in politics (see e.g. Agarwal, 1994; Li, 2023). The division of labor remains clearly gendered, with women often restricted to domestic duties. This creates a barrier to women's entry into formal politics, as they are expected to prioritize family responsibilities over public roles (Kangas et al. 2015; Maguire, 2018, p. 32). Even when women enter political office, they tend to be represented in "feminine" issue areas such as family, children, and women's issues such as women's health, strengthening the idea that the political space accessible for women is limited to those areas that align with ideas of women as nurturing and family oriented.

Relatedly, women's engagement in politics is influenced by gender stereotypes, which are learned and reinforced through various social channels, including family, friends, colleagues,

media, and public representations (Bauer 2013, p. 26). These stereotypes are often taken for granted and operate subconsciously, partly because they tend to be learned early in life: for example, there is evidence to suggest that by the time children begin school, they have already internalized stereotypic associations that link women to nurturing roles and men to provider roles (p. 26). This stereotype socialization process is self-reinforcing: individuals expect women to embody certain characteristics (such as being nurturing and sensitive, often referred to as communal stereotypes), many women *do* exhibit these traits, and this confirmation reinforces the pre-existing stereotypes. This, in combination with the fact that political leadership is often associated with masculine stereotypes such as decisiveness and even aggression (referred to as agentic stereotypes), pose a dilemma (or *double bind*) for women who pursue political roles: conforming to communal stereotypes may undermine their perceived viability as political leaders, while adopting agentic qualities like assertiveness can lead to backlash for being unfeminine (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Despite the double bind and the implication that gender stereotypes disproportionately disadvantage women, the empirical evidence on gender stereotypes and women's electoral success is mixed. Some studies find that communal stereotypes disfavor female candidates at higher levels of office such as presidency, because agentic traits are more often expected at this level (Huddy & Capelos, 2002). Relatedly, there is evidence that stereotypes can facilitate support for female candidates at the provincial or local level because feminine stereotypes align more with the major issues at this level, such as education (Kahn, 1994). Others find that stereotypes have little to no effect on evaluation of female candidates (Brooks, 2013). Schneider & Bos (2014) propose that stereotypes of women do not apply to female politicians in a straight-forward way – rather, female politicians form "a new stereotypical category with its own unique stereotypical qualities" (p. 245), as they are perceived to be different from women in general, whereas male politicians "rather constitute a subgroup where they share many qualities with

men" (p. 245). In short, the way gender stereotypes favor or disfavor female candidates is not entirely clear and may call for more disaggregated approaches.

While the record on how stereotypes affect electoral success is mixed, other cultural factors are found to impact women's political interest and ambition. For example, media portrayals of women in politics frequently reinforces the idea that women are less capable of balancing political responsibilities with domestic roles (Haraldsson & Wängnerud, 2018). This may help explain why women are found to have lower political ambition and lower interests in politics than men (Haraldsson & Wängnerud, 2018; Dolan, Deckman, & Swers, 2016). Moreover, some scholars find that women's interests in running for office tends to develop through different channels compared to men, typically via single-issue advocacy work (Windett, 2014) and personal experiences (Ladam, Harden & Windett, 2018), rather traditional political routes which men more often pursue, such as through political parties, professional networks, and political families. Lastly, female role models can play a crucial role in encouraging more women to consider political careers (Bunyan & Liluashvili, 2022, p. 13; Wolbrecht & Campbell, 2017), so a lack of women in political office globally might have a discouraging, and self-enforcing effect.

To sum up, cultural factors such as traditional gender norms and gender stereotypes are found to pose barriers to women in several ways; by restricting them to the home and domestic duties; by impacting how voters and/or political stakeholders evaluate them; and how interested or ambitious they are to pursue politics.

*Institutional explanations*

A third analytical lens to make sense of women's political underrepresentation is an institutional one. Specifically, political parties play a vital role in choosing who can contest in elections, and thus who has a chance of being elected (see e.g. Norris & Lovenduski, 1995; Brechenmacher

& Hubbard, 2020). There is evidence suggesting that political parties recruit men "more frequently and more intensely than women" (Butler and Preece, 2016, p. 842). In addition, men are more likely to be self-starters in their political careers while women are often recruited, creating a situation where men receive more encouragement despite needing less (see e.g. Lawless & Fox, 2005, Pruysers & Blais, 2019). Lastly, women tend to respond less positively to recruitment than men (Allen, 2012, p. 711), creating a compound effect systematically disadvantaging women.

In addition to recruitment patterns, political parties may hinder women's upward mobility in substantial ways, which in turn makes it challenging for women to reach a level of seniority that lets them to contest for political office. Given that men tend to occupy higher positions within political parties, incumbency advantage – the phenomenon that current officeholders tend to remain in office - allows men to remain in office and makes it harder for women to run (Schwindt-Bayer 2005, p. 227; Maguire, 2018, p. 6). Furthermore, in contexts where women are largely excluded from key party functions, including nomination procedures to select candidates to run for office, it becomes even harder for women to be selected to run for office (Rameez, 2018, p. 1052).

These tendencies can be exacerbated by non-democratic intraparty structures and few accountability measures. Political parties in many countries are characterized by informal networks and non-transparent recruitment and selection practices, especially at the local party level (Maguire, 2018, p. 7; IDEA, 2021, p. 4). This poses a disadvantage to marginalized and underrepresented groups, including women, who are less likely to have access to networks and information sources (Maguire, 2018, p. 7). Moreover, some reports reveal that political parties lack political will to achieve greater gender equality. For example, a 2013 International IDEA report found that among 33 African countries, there tends to be a disconnect from parties' written commitments to gender equality, from actual measures to implement these

(Kandawasvika-Nhundu, 2013). Similarly, an analysis of 18 Latin American countries found that there is little political will to work for gender equality within political parties (Llanos & Roza, 2019, as cited in International IDEA, 2021). In short, the combination of non-democratic intraparty structures and a lack of will to achieve gender equality can lead to a situation where political parties act as gatekeepers, hindering women from elective positions.

One way these disadvantages have been accounted for is by introducing gender quotas within political parties or other institutions such as parliament or local government. The evidence on the effectiveness of quotas remains inconclusive. Some scholars find that increasing the number of women in office through quotas increases the likelihood that even more women will hold office, by creating more positive attitudes towards women in political positions and by providing role models for other women (Beaman et al. 2009). It can also lead to a "trickle-up effect" where a quota ensures higher recruitment into entry-level positions, providing a bigger pool of women that can advance to positions of higher seniority. However, some argue that gender quotas are ineffective at tackling deep-rooted gendered practices (Maguire, 2018, p. 8), and that women who enter political institutions after the enforcement of gender quotas face stigmatization (Dahlerup & Freidenvall, 2010).

Beyond institutional characteristics that disfavor women as outlined above, violence and intimidation tactics are widespread within political parties globally. Violence against women in politics can include overt forms such as physical harm, but also covert forms such as gender-based hate speech, often meant to discourage women from running as candidates (Zakari, 2015). For example, male MPs utilize sexual or verbal harassment to intimidate and exercise control over women MPs (O'Neil & Domingo, 2015, p. 4). A study from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (2016) finds that harassment and violence against female parliamentarians is very widespread, and suggest that the phenomenon can be found in every country to different degrees (p. 3). They report that psychological violence is the most widespread form, affecting more than 80 per cent

of the study's respondents globally (p. 3). This type of violence includes "threats of death, rape, beatings or abduction" (p. 3), virtually always by male colleagues, both from opposing parties and their own (p. 3). In a later study, the Interparliamentary Union found that younger female MPs were subject to harassment more often, as well as female MPs that were vocal about gender equality and violence against women (IPU, 2018, p. 16). This type of intimidation can lead to an environment where women have more negative attitudes towards politics (Mlambo & Kapingura, 2019, p. 2).

These studies share the notion that institutional factors, especially political parties, is a primary barrier for women in politics. Political parties can hinder women from entering party politics in the first place, or rise through the party ranks and achieve nominations to elected office.

## IV. Methodology

*Concepts*

I draw an analytical distinction between formal and informal political participation. Formal participation encompasses activities that directly involve established political structures and institutions, such as voting in elections, running for political office, or joining political parties. These actions are typically recognized and regulated by official authorities, contributing to the shaping of government policies and decisions. Some have also included institutionalized civil society organizations in this category, such as trade unions (Theocharis & van Deth, 2017, p. 56). By contrast, informal political participation encompasses a broader spectrum of activities that may not be directly tied to official political institutions. This can include engaging in community organizing, participating in advocacy groups, attending protests or demonstrations, or even discussing political issues within social circles. I will be focusing on women's formal political participation – and specifically, their representation in political office such as parliament, provincial and local government. While studying participation through other

channels is certainly valuable, the most striking gap between men and women in Sri Lanka seems to be in political office, as outlined previously.

Drawing on Pitkin's (1967) classic discussion on representation, I highlight the distinction between descriptive and substantive representation. Descriptive representation refers to the characteristics of political officeholders (such as their gender, age, or ethnicity) and the extent to which these reflect the characteristics of the constituents they serve. Substantive representation means policy responsiveness, or the tangible representation of group interests in policymaking. I focus on the descriptive representation of women, meaning whether or not women enter political office in the first place irrespective of how much they advocate for women's interests while in office. I do this for two main reasons – firstly, the gap I have identified in Sri Lanka is the low *number* of women represented in political office. I am therefore less concerned with how women perform in terms of women's issues once in office, but rather, what mechanisms facilitate their entrance into office in the first place. Secondly, a range of scholars find evidence for a connection between the two – parliaments and governments with more women tend to better advocate for women's issues, and thus have better substantive representation (see e.g. Saint-Upéry, 2013; Beaman, Pande & Cirone, 2012), especially when women's decriptive representation is gained through grassroots mobilization rather than top-down enforcement of quotas (Vijayarasa, 2020, p. 3) or family ties (Yadav, 2020, p. 1050). For these reasons, this paper may still hold relevance in a broader discussion of substantive representation even though it is not my primary focus.

*Case selection*

Sri Lanka presents a compelling case for examining the representation of women in elected office for several reasons. As a country with a robust democratic framework, Sri Lanka has a long history of electoral politics and gains in women's empowerment and wellbeing, while

women's representation in political office has remained strikingly low. This paradox makes Sri Lanka an important case for understanding the barriers to women's political participation, as well as the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation, providing some evidence to suggest that the latter does not always require the former.

While Sri Lanka is the primary focus, I also undertake a comparative analysis across South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, and Pakistan). This regional comparison is useful given the shared historical legacies and socio-political contexts that shape the experiences of women in politics across these countries. Firstly, South Asia is a region characterized by a shared colonial history of British domination, which has influenced the development of political institutions, legal frameworks, and social norms (Guneratne & Weiss, 2014, p. 7). Secondly, South Asian countries share common cultural traditions that shape gender roles and expectations. These shared cultural norms often place women in subordinate positions within both the private and public spheres, which has implications for their political representation. By conducting a comparative analysis, this study can identify both region-wide patterns and country-specific deviations in the barriers to women's political participation.

*Research design*

This thesis hinges on the research question of why women in Sri Lanka remain so underrepresented in politics despite significant gains on a range of other respects. I aim to test the explanatory power of each set of factors outlined in the literature review (socio-economic, cultural, and institutional), and I will do so by drawing out observable implications of each of the explanatory categories outlined in the literature review (socioeconomic, cultural, institutional). Each set of expectations includes an assessment of the internal conditions in Sri Lanka, followed by a comparative investigation across South Asia. These will then be assessed in relation to empirical data from the region.

*i) Socio-economic accounts: expectations*

If socio-economic factors are a key driver of gender discrepancies in political office in Sri Lanka, one can expect to observe the following:

1.      a) to be elected for political office requires a higher socioeconomic status, meaning that political officeholders tend to have a higher education and/or considerable wealth; and b) women tend to occupy lower socio- economic positions, e.g. they have less access to education, high-income jobs, and less wealth than men. This data is primarily drawn from the Sri Lankan Department of Census and Statistics; reports from international organizations such as the International Labour Organization and UN Women; and existing academic work on the gender dimensions of education, the labor force, and socioeconomic development in Sri Lanka.

2.      Given that Sri Lanka scores lower on women's representation than its South Asian counterparts, socioeconomic explanations would suggest that the socioeconomic gender gap in Sri Lanka is *greater* than in other South Asian countries. Specifically, this could mean that Sri Lanka has a greater gender gap in access to education, access to the job market, access to credit, and access to healthcare. Comparative data will be drawn from the World Bank, WHO, UNESCO, ILO, as well as national statistics bureaus across South Asia.

*ii)     Cultural accounts: expectations*

If cultural factors are a key driver of gender discrepancies, one can expect to observe the following:

1.      Politics is considered a man's domain, manifested in low levels of women participating *across* various forms of political institutions, including but not limited to voting, protests, and NGOs and other civil society organizations. Women who do engage in politics face social sanctions for deviating from social norms, for example in the form of media scrutiny, harassment, or exclusion from family or communities. This data is drawn from NGO and think

tank reports (including from the Center for Policy Initiatives; International Civil Society Action Network; and Democracy Reporting International), as well as academic work focusing on various forms of women's political participation in Sri Lanka.

2.      More pervasive, traditional gender norms exist in Sri Lanka than in other South Asian countries that perform better in terms of women's political representation. This could mean that cultural traditions such as kinship patterns and property ownership give men more decision-making power in society than women; women are more often restricted to the domestic sphere and spend more time on unpaid care work than in other countries; and women/girls get married at a younger age. Comparative data is drawn from comparative sociological/anthropological literature from South Asia; national time use surveys; and gender empowerment indicators from global datasets provided by V-dem and UNICEF.

*iii)      Party-centric accounts: expectations*

If political parties are a key driver of gender discrepancies, one can expect to observe the following:

1.      Non-democratic practices within political parties that disadvantage women, such as gender biased recruitment and nomination processes; little to no transparency and accountability measures as to how candidates are selected and how funding is allocated; and violence and harassment towards women in political parties. This data will be drawn from reports from NGOs and IGOs that report on political party practices, including the EU Election Observation Mission, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, and Democracy Reporting International; as well as academic articles that investigate party politics in Sri Lanka.

2.      Political parties pose a greater hindrance to women in Sri Lanka than in other South Asian countries. This could mean that there is a bigger gap in women's participation between those political institutions that require party endorsement in some form (such as parliament, the

executive, and local government), and those that do not (such as voting, civil society participation, and participation in political conflict); and/or a bigger gap between branches of government that require party endorsement (the legislative and the executive) and those that do not (the judiciary and the civil service). Data will be drawn from national department of statistics; global databases such as V-Dem and WiRe; and reports from international agencies such as USAID.

After gathering and analyzing data, I evaluate the extent to which the theoretical expectations were met, using the following scale:

*Mostly unmet:* Virtually all aspects of the theoretical expectations were not met or were contradicted by the findings.

*Partially Unmet***:** The theoretical expectations were supported to a limited extent, but significant aspects were not met.

*Partially Met:* The theoretical expectations were supported, with some minor aspects not fully met.

*Mostly Met:* Virtually all aspects of the theoretical expectations were met or exceeded by the findings.

**V. Findings**

*Socioeconomic factors*

i)      Internal conditions

If socioeconomic factors are a key driver of the political gender gap in Sri Lanka, one would expect that successful election to political office requires a higher socioeconomic status, meaning that political officeholders tend to have a higher education, high-paying and/or high-status jobs, and/or considerable wealth. Moreover, it would follow that women tend to occupy

lower socio- economic positions, e.g. they have less access to education, high-income jobs, and less wealth than men.

Socioeconomic factors, particularly education and wealth, appear to have some importance for political officeholders in Sri Lanka. Reportedly, more than half of MPs who publicly make available their academic qualifications either hold a university degree or are in the process of obtaining one[1] (Wanigasekara, 2024, n.p.). In addition, reaching political office tends to require considerable wealth. Getting your name on the ballot and contesting for elections is often expensive, and it is not unusual for aspirants to offer monetary favors to senior party officials or to cover costs of parties and other events to prove their value to the party and to constituents. There are also considerable costs related to advertisements and other campaigning strategies prior to elections (Rajapaksha, 2023). These factors combined make politics significantly less accessible to people from lower socioeconomic strata, especially those with lower education and lower wealth.

Examining the socioeconomic position of women in Sri Lanka reveals mixed findings. Firstly, Sri Lanka has achieved remarkable developments in girls' education. Starting with the free education reforms in the 1940s, the gender gap in education has steadily decreased. By 2005, Sri Lanka had achieved a lower secondary school completion rate of 95% for girls, higher than any developing country regional average (Gunewardena, 2015, p. 3). Today, girls and boys attend grades 1-13 in virtually equal numbers, the lower secondary school completion rate is around 98% (Department of Census and Statistics, 2020). Moreover, around 70% of graduating students from state universities are women (Ratwatte, 2023, p. 1). Secondly, economic growth policies in the late 1970s led to diversified employment opportunities, including the expansion

---

[1] 70 MPs have said that they are either undergraduates or have graduated with bachelor's degrees, and 15 parliamentarians have mentioned Doctorates as their highest educational qualification. Among those without a university degree, 52 MPs have mentioned GCE A/L as their highest educational qualification and 23 MPs have listed Diplomas (Wanigasekara, 2024, n.p.).

of garment factories and expatriate work, especially in the Middle East (Kottegoda, 2004, p. 3). Women were impacted the most by these efforts: their participation in the labor force rose from around 19 per cent in the early 1980s to around 32 per cent in the early 2000s (p. 3).

However, this trend has stagnated since the turn of the millennium: in 2023, the labor force participation rate among women was 32.1%, less than half of that of men (71.9%), and significantly lower than the global average for women (47.2%) (International Labour Organization, 2024a). These numbers position Sri Lanka as having the 14th largest gender gap in labor force participation in the world (UNDP, 2021, p. 1). Moreover, around 49% of women in the labor force are employed in the informal sector (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023, p. 37), and tend to have less protection against economic shocks, meaning they are more likely to fall into poverty. Lastly, there is evidence to suggest a wage gap between men and women. It is reported that women earn 27% less than men per hour (International Labour Organization, 2024b, p. 39), and that this gap is even higher in the informal economy (especially in agriculture) where women are not guaranteed the same wages for the same work as men (Koens & Gunawardana, 2021, p. 472). Similarly, it is reported that women in the private sector can earn 30-36% less than male colleagues for the exact same job (International Labour Organization, 2018).

Given the achievements in girls' and women's education, the persistent gender gap in the labor force warrants closer scrutiny. Many of the job opportunities that opened for women in the late 1970s did not require higher education (Kottegoda, 2004, p. 3). The increased number of women in the labor force has thus primarily been those with lower educational attainment, who earn correspondingly lower wages. Meanwhile, educated unemployment has increased for women in Sri Lanka, as more women have pursued higher education without seeing a matching increase in opportunities in the labor market. These developments suggest a gendered labor market where women hold lower-paying jobs; where education does not necessarily lead to

better job opportunities for women; and which treats men and women with the same skills differently (Gunewardena, 2015).

The underlying reasons for the disadvantaged position of women in the Sri Lankan labor market are manyfold and can be better understood by investigating demand-side and supply-side factors. Key demand-side factors include negative attitudes among employers and workers towards women, as well as unfavorable legislation. For example, it is reported that employers consider women's additional domestic responsibilities in the hiring process, which lowers demand for female employees (Kiringoda & Vithanage, 2023). Moreover, it is not uncommon for employers to make hiring decisions informed by gender stereotypes and assume women to be less fitting for a range of jobs (Solotaroff et al., 2020, p. 60). Even after recruitment, women tend to be given less opportunities for promotions and career advancement, in large part due to domestic responsibilities (Kiringoda & Vithanage, 2023; Madurawala, 2021). There are also important legislative barriers in the recruitment process – including laws on maternity leave and restrictions on nighttime work for women. Although these laws are intended to protect women in the workplace, they make hiring women more costly for employers, especially given that there are no government subsidies in place for paid leave or replacement workers. They can therefore be considered a barrier for women to join the workforce and advance their careers, (UNDP, 2021, pp. 3-4).

Key supply-side indicators include a lack of role models and networks for women (Madurawala, 2021); widespread sexual harassment in the workplace, discouraging women from entering and staying in a job (UNDP, 2021 p. 5); mobility barriers; a digital gender gap; and an uneven distribution of domestic labor. Mobility barriers include inadequate infrastructure such as unsafe roads and public transport (Ratwatte, 2023, p. 8), combined with widespread sexual harassment on public transport. According to the UNFPA, 90% of women who use public transport in Sri Lanka have experienced sexual harassment on buses and trains, which in turn

becomes a major discouraging factor for women from traveling long distances to work (UNFPA, 2017, p. 1). Sri Lanka also has a notable digital gender gap, which makes certain jobs unavailable to women, especially as an increasing number of jobs require digital tools. Reportedly, women in Sri Lanka fall behind men when it comes to phone ownership, internet access, and knowledge of how to use the internet (Galpaya & Zainudeen, 2022). Lastly, women bear the burden of household responsibilities and childcare far more often than men. According to a report from the Department of Census and Statistics (2023), 60 per cent of women who are economically inactive list housework as a primary reason. Only 4.1% of men report the same reason (p. 13). These factors contribute to diminishing women's ability to seek jobs, especially when women face many of these barriers at once.

The disadvantaged socioeconomic position of women in Sri Lanka has been exacerbated by numerous crises. The civil war resulted in an estimated 40 000 war widows (Vasudevan, 2013, no page) concentrated in the north of the country, and some villages consisting of up to 30 per cent female-headed households (UNOCHA, 2011, p. 35). These women faced (and continue facing) the double burden of being the primary breadwinner as well as being fully responsible of domestic labor, while simultaneously facing stigma (Vasudevan, 2013; Ratwatte, 2023). Furthermore, the post-war years in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka were characterized by significant securitization and a strong military presence across the regions (Kumudini, 2017, p. 8), resulting in many women actively avoiding leaving their homes due to a fear of attack or surveillance (Satkunathan, 2012). These restrictions, in turn, limit women's access to livelihood opportunities, education, and social services (Vasudevan, 2013). More recently, the COVID-19 pandemic had severe gendered impacts. Firstly, given the high number of women that are employed in the informal sector, they are at higher risk of losing their income following the economic shock of COVID-19 (UN Women, 2022). Secondly, women have had to take on a greater burden at home with schools and childcare centers closing down during the pandemic.

As a result, many women have had to limit their working hours or quit their jobs entirely to take care of their families (Ratwatte, 2023, p. 3). The disproportionately severe impacts on women can be observed – from the end of 2019 to the end of 2020, the absolute number of men in the workforce increased by 38,938, while the number of women decreased by 189,148 (Madurawela, 2021). Women continue to struggle due to the ongoing economic crisis in Sri Lanka, which has been categorized as the worst in the nation's independent history (Ratwatte, 2023, p. 2). These developments, combined with the abovementioned findings, suggest that women not only occupy fewer jobs and lower-paying jobs, but also that they are likely to face harsher consequences of crises. In short, despite important developments in women's socioeconomic standing, significant gender gaps still remain.

ii)      Regional comparison

If the primary driver behind the gender gap in political representation in Sri Lanka is socio-economic factors, one would expect Sri Lanka to score low compared to other South Asian countries on indicators of women's socio-economic conditions, including participation in the labor force and educational attainment. In countries where women have a more equal socioeconomic position vis-à-vis men, it would also follow that women have equal access to credit, which can be approximated by measures of account ownership; and good health, which can be approximated by maternal mortality rates and life expectancy.

Generally speaking, the socio-economic conditions in South Asia reveal significant gender disparities. There is a clear tendency for women and girls to have less access to education and fewer economic opportunities than men overall. That being said, trends vary considerably between countries. In terms of girls' access to education, Sri Lanka consistently falls on the high end of the scale. Sri Lanka has the second-highest rate of girls (97.6%) completing lower secondary school, behind Nepal (100%) – followed by the Maldives (94%), Bangladesh (91.3%), India (88,8%), Bhutan (65,8) and Pakistan (43,9%) (UNESCO, 2024). Relatedly, Sri

Lanka has the second-highest adult literacy rate among women (91,6%) behind the Maldives (98,4%), followed by Bangladesh (72%), India (69,1%), Bhutan (63,9%), Nepal (63,3%), and Pakistan (46,5%) (UNESCO, 2024). Lastly, Sri Lanka has the second highest percentage of female enrollment in higher education in the region (58,3% of students in tertiary education is female), behind the Maldives (59,0%) - followed by Nepal (52,7%), Pakistan (48,9%), Bhutan (48,7%), India (48%), and Bangladesh (37,3%) (UNESCO, 2023). In short, women in Sri Lanka outperform most other South Asian countries with a high literacy rate and good access to education, including a higher rate of university enrollment than men.

**Figure 1: Labor Force Participation by Sex**
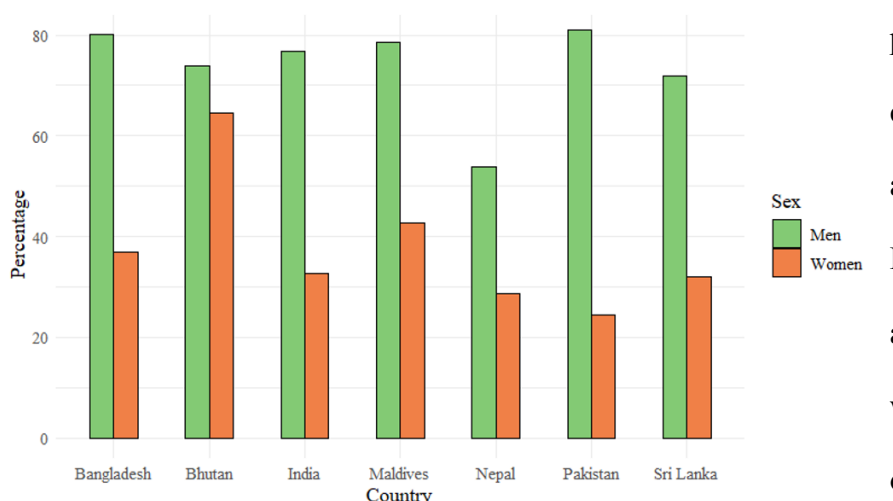


Female labor force participation (FLFP) is a consistent challenge across South Asia. The FLFP in South Asia is among the lowest in the world, and lower than other regions with "comparable incomes and growth trends" (Murthi & Raiser, 2023, n.p.). When disaggregating by country, some trends emerge: FLFP in Sri Lanka (32,1%) is the third lowest in the region ahead only of Nepal (28,7%) and Pakistan (24,5%) (see Figure 1). Looking at the percentage point difference between the sexes[2], the difference in Sri Lanka is 39,8 between men and women, which is exactly the median in the region. A smaller difference is found in the Maldives (36 percentage points), Nepal (25,2 percentage points) and Bhutan (9,4 percentage points), and a bigger difference is found in Bangladesh (43,2 percentage points), India (44,1 percentage

---

[2] The percentage point difference between sexes provides a better indicator of the gender gap in labor force participation. It can be that labor force participation is low or high for both sexes, so the absolute percentage of women in the labor force does not give sufficient information.

points), and Pakistan (56,5 percentage points) (International Labour Organization, 2024b). These numbers reveal that Sri Lanka falls on the mid-to low end of the scale in terms of female labor force participation in the region, while being one of the highest scoring countries in terms of women's education. The challenge of educated unemployment as outlined previously might therefore be particularly pervasive in Sri Lanka.

Beyond education and labor force participation, access to credit can serve as another indicators of women's overall socioeconomic position. Women with accounts are more likely to qualify for loans to start or expand businesses, invest in education, or cover unexpected expenses, all of which contribute to improving their socioeconomic status. Owning an account gives women direct control over their finances, facilitating economic decision-making without permission from male family members, which in turn enhances their ability to participate fully in both the economy and society. According to most recent numbers, Sri Lanka had the highest percentage of women owning an account (89.3%), followed by India (77,5%), the Maldives (74,2%), Nepal (49,9%), Bangladesh (43,5%), Bhutan (27,7%), and Pakistan (13,5%) (World Bank, 2024). Moreover, Sri Lanka and India had the lowest gender gap – in fact, both countries have gender parity in account ownership. This is in contrast to Pakistan, where twice as many men have an account. This suggests that women in Sri Lanka and India enjoy greater financial independence – or at least that it is more common for women in these countries to have some independent access to credit.

Lastly, women's health indicators can provide a more holistic view of women's socioeconomic conditions. Although it is not directly related to political participation, it can serve as a broader indicator of how women's needs and interests are prioritized in the country. Two commonly used indicators of women's health are maternal mortality rates and life expectancy for women. When looking at this data in South Asia, Sri Lanka has the lowest maternal mortality rate in the region and the second-highest life expectancy for women at birth (79.8 years), behind the

Maldives (80.8 years) (WHO, 2020). It is important to note, however, that these health indicators could also be influenced by the overall level of socioeconomic development in a country, as advancements in healthcare, infrastructure, and public services tend to improve with economic progress. That being said, these numbers suggest that Sri Lanka has achieved significant advancements in socio-economic development more broadly, but also that it has achieved a type of economic development that meets women's health needs.

iii)     Analysis

The socioeconomic conditions in Sri Lanka reveal considerable gender gaps in the economy. While education among women is high, it seems that education does not yield the same economic benefits for men and women, as educated women face considerable barriers to entering the labor force. In general, labor force participation is lower for women, and there is a tendency for women to earn lower wages. The disadvantaged position of women in the economy is compounded during crises, as many women are employed under vulnerable conditions and/or the informal sector; they often face the double burden of work and childcare; and female-headed households face more stigma, scrutiny and social exclusion. Based on these factors, it seems that the theoretical expectations for the internal conditions of low political representation in Sri Lanka are mostly met (with the important exception of education levels), and that socioeconomic factors help explain the gender gap in political participation.

When examining trends in South Asia, a more nuanced picture emerges. Given the low level of women's political representation in Sri Lanka, one would expect Sri Lankan women to have worse socioeconomic conditions than their South Asian counterparts. This is not exactly the case. Sri Lanka is among the highest performers in terms of education and literacy, alongside the Maldives and Nepal. Interestingly, both Sri Lanka and the Maldives have the lowest levels of political representation in the region. In terms of female labor force participation, Sri Lanka falls on the mid-to low end of the scale, revealing a bigger gap between education levels and

labor force participation than elsewhere in the region. This suggests that educated unemployment is a bigger issue in Sri Lanka than elsewhere. However, the countries with higher female labor force participation (The Maldives, Nepal and Bhutan) do not have correspondingly high levels of political representation. Both the Maldives and Bhutan (alongside Sri Lanka) have lower numbers of women in parliament and local government than the rest of the region (UN Women, 2024). Lastly, Sri Lankan women have a higher rate of account ownership than any other South Asian country, as well as longer life expectancy and lower maternal mortality rates. One the one hand, this suggests that Sri Lanka has achieved relatively high economic development more broadly. On the other hand, it points to a type of economic development that empowers women financially and meets the women's health needs. These insights combined reveal a more nuanced relationship between socioeconomic conditions and political representation in the region. While the theoretical expectations were mostly met when examining Sri Lanka alone, the theoretical expectations for the comparative analysis were partially unmet. To conclude, socioeconomic conditions help explain some of the variation in political representation in Sri Lanka, but are insufficient in explaining why Sri Lankan women are more underrepresented than in most other South Asian countries.

| | *Theoretical expectations* | *Expectations met?* |
|---|---|---|
| *Internal* | Political office requires a high socioeconomic status; women tend to occupy lower socio- economic positions | *Mostly met* |
| *Comparative* | Worse socioeconomic conditions for women in Sri Lanka than elsewhere in the region, including in terms of education, FLFP, access to credit, and health. | *Partially unmet* |

*Cultural factors*

i)      Internal conditions

If cultural factors are a primary cause for gender discrepancies in political representation, it would follow that politics is considered a man's domain, manifested in low levels of women participating *across* various forms of political institutions, including but not limited to voting, protests, and NGOs and other civil society organizations. It would also follow that women who do engage in politics face social sanctions for deviating from social norms, for example in the form of media scrutiny, harassment, or exclusion from family or communities.

Traditional gender norms undoubtedly persist in Sri Lanka. Women tend to take on most of the unpaid care work at home, in part due to perceptions of women as natural caregivers (Hoole, 2021, n.p.). As discussed in the previous section, 60 per cent of women who are economically inactive list housework as a primary reason (Department of Census and Statistics, 2023), and employed women are often expected to do most of the housework (Ratwatte, 2023, p. 2). Those that do participate in the work force are heavily represented in lower-status jobs culturally assigned to women, such as in the textile and plantation sectors (Herath, 2018, p. 736). Furthermore, women are reportedly perceived to be poor leaders, which helps explain their exclusion from «boardrooms, leadership in media houses and scientific communities» (Hoole, 2021, no page). These attitudes tend to be particularly strong in rural areas (Herath, 2018, p. 736), and may create an additional barrier for women to pursue political roles.

Although these norms persist, Sri Lankan women have long been key drivers of political change. Firstly, Sri Lanka had the first ever female prime minister as early as 1960 (Sirimavo Bandaranaike), as well as a female president (Chandrika Kumaratunga) – a feat a lot of established democracies have yet to achieve, although both Bandaranaike and Kumaratunga gained their positions largely through family ties. Women also played pivotal roles in social, economic, and political reform movements in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, including by being respected members of anti-colonial and reformist organizations, as well as forming their own. Importantly, a group of middle-class women formed the Women's Franchise

Union in 1927, culminating in Sri Lanka becoming the first British colony to grant universal suffrage in 1931 (Jayawardena, 1994, p. 128), ahead of several European countries including Belgium, France, and Switzerland (De Silva, 2000, p. 227).

The 1980s and 1990s became important decades for women's mobilization, notably in the form of maternalism in response to the violence that unfolded during the civil war in northern and Eastern Sri Lanka, as well as during the JVP uprising in the south (de Alwis, 1999 in de Alwis 2009). Some key developments include the formation of the Mothers' Front in Jaffna in 1984 to protest the Sri Lankan state's mass arrest of Tamil youth; and the formation of the Mothers' Front of Sinhala women in the south in response to the disappearance of male family members during the JVP uprising (de Alwis, 2009). Beyond organizations centered around maternalism, Tamil and Muslim women formed the Mannar Women's Development Federation (MWDF), followed by the Mannar Women for Human Rights and Democracy (MWHRD) and the Women's Action Network (WAN), addressing issues such violence against women and child recruitment into the LTTE, to name a few (Samuel, 2017, p. 90).

By contrast, many women joined ranks of armed groups as combatants or other personnel, especially in the LTTE. Some joined the movement voluntarily, others were forced (Basu, 2005, p. 11). Women joining the LTTE may represent a departure from the social construction of women as tranquil, passive, and domestic, and allowing for a reimagination of women as not just mothers and wives but also as forceful agents of political change. For example, Alison (2003) finds that female combatants felt a sense of empowerment in stepping outside of their traditional roles, and that some had the opportunity to learn about politics and women's issues through dialogue with others in the movement. Even some male combatants in the LTTE stopped seeing their female counterparts as "women" and started seeing them as equal peers (p. 138). Upon closer investigation, however, it appears that these gains were limited. Although involvement in the LTTE may have been emancipating for some, many women were forced to

join against their will, and patriarchal norms prevailed among high-ranking members despite the high number of female cadres (Basu, 2005, p. 11). Additionally, in most cases women found themselves in worse positions post-war than prior to the start of the war (Azmi, 2015, p. 200). Former combatants were heavily surveilled by the Sri Lankan government in the post-war period, disrupting their day-to-day life (p. 210), and these women often faced poverty, harassment, and social exclusion.

In recent years, women have continued to participate in public life through a range of channels. For example, women have joined the Sri Lanka Administrative Servies (SLAS) in significantly increasing numbers – from making up 29% of the SLAS in 1995, to 64% in 2015 (Anwara Nilmi & Thoradeniya, 2017, p. 237). Furthermore, 31,3% of judges in the judicial system are women (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021). While these are not considered political participation directly, they suggest that women are qualified and willing to take on key roles in public life. Today, women vote as much, if not more than men – according to most recent numbers, 56% of voters in Sri Lanka are women (Kamdar, 2020, no page). Women have also continued to assume important roles in civil society after the civil war. Many of the women-led NGOs formed during the war kept addressing societal issues after the war, such as the MWDF assisting women ex-cadres in the LTTE who faced social exclusion, as well as issues of land and resources as internally displaced women returned and resettled in the North (Samuel, 2017, p. 90). Moreover, women have played an important role in peacebuilding efforts after the war including participation in peace committees, inter-ethnic and inter-religious federations, and service provision for victims of wartime violence (Herath, 2010; ICAN, 2013). More recently, women have contributed significantly to the *Aragalaya* movement, commencing in March 2022 with a protest near President Rajapaksa's residence and continued with a series of nonviolent demonstrations against President Rajapaksa's government. Thousands of women joined the protest, not just on the sidelines but also leading protest activity. A survey by the Center for

Policy Initiatives (2023) revealed that almost one fifth of women in Sri Lanka partook in the protests. In short, many women have demonstrated that they are qualified for, and interested in joining political spaces in much of Sri Lanka's modern history.

When examining the extent to which women's political engagements have been met with social sanctions, the evidence presents a nuanced picture. Democracy Reporting International (2021) finds that social media coverage of female candidates for the 2020 parliamentary elections were mostly supportive, albeit with some biased coverage. The type of biased coverage primarily included being portrayed in the context of male politicians, but also included being presented in reference to their behavior, appearance, or personal life (Democracy Reporting International, 2021, p. 13). These findings suggest that the general public is overall supportive towards female candidates, with some segments more critical or more likely to rely on stereotypes when evaluating these candidates. According to findings from Rameez (2018), the social sanctions women face differ from region to region. The percentage of women receiving no support from their families to participate in municipal or urban councils ranges from 6.6% (Batticaloa Municipal Council) to 33% (Kalmunai Municipal Council). The percentage of women receiving no support from their peer groups/friends ranges from 11.1% (Ampara Urban Council) to 18.2% (Kalmunai Municipal Council) (p. 1054). These findings suggest an overall low tendency for women to receive no support from peers and friends, and a highly variable tendency to receive support from families to participate in local politics. Participation in violent conflict appears to have cost women harsher sanctions, however. In most cases these women faced serious social sanctions within their communities and society more broadly. For example, female combatants in the LTTE were often portrayed as monsters in the media, rumored to be even more violent than their male peers, and seen as fundamentally different from "normal women" (Alison, 2003, p. 140). Additionally, women in the LTTE often could not marry outside of the organization because of the stigma (Alison, 2003, p. 54), and have faced

exclusion from local political spaces and serious difficulty finding employment (Azmi, 2015, p. 212). These findings reveal that although women frequently join political spaces in various forms, and often receive support to do so, they also sometimes face social sanctions. Particularly when the type of political participation they pursue deviate further from cultural understandings of the "feminine", the sanctions increase in severity. In other words, social norms still pose some barriers to women's political participation.

ii)    Regional comparison

While the pervasiveness of gender norms is difficult to measure and compare across countries, some qualitative sociological studies can help to carve out some key differences across the region. There are also some tangible indicators that can serve as proxies: this section will examine the time spent on unpaid care work; child marriage rates; freedom of discussion for women; and property rights for women. If gender norms are a key driver of Sri Lanka's gender gap in political representation, it would follow that there are notably *more* pervasive norms and patriarchal culture in Sri Lanka than in other South Asian countries, meaning more time spent on unpaid care work among women, higher child marriage rates among girls; lower freedom of discussion for women; and weaker property rights for women in Sri Lanka than elsewhere in the region.

Patriarchy is deep-rooted in most of South Asia. According to Jejeebhoy and Sathar (2001), important characteristics of the region include "patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, inheritance and succession practices that exclude women, and hierarchical relations in which the patriarch or his relatives have authority over family members." (p. 687). Yet, there are discernible differences between the countries, and when examining these differences, it appears that Sri Lanka stands out as a region where these norms are either less pervasive or less limiting to female empowerment. Agarwal (1994) suggests that the subcontinent can be broadly categorized into four geographic zones in terms of female empowerment (including the extent

of resistance to women exercising legal rights; female seclusion and control over female sexuality; and women's freedom of movement). Pakistan, Northwest India and Bangladesh are among the most patriarchal; Central, Eastern and Northeast India are somewhere in the middle; and South India and Sri Lanka are the least patriarchal (p. 1469). This is in line with findings from Jejeebhoy and Sathar, who report that Uttar Pradesh (Northwest India) and Punjab (Pakistan) stand out has highly stratified by gender, and where traditional, conservative cultural norms limit women's autonomy, whereas Tamil Nadu (South India) is more egalitarian by comparison (pp. 707-708). Although this study does not include Sri Lanka, it finds similar patterns of geographical differences in gender relations. These studies can serve as a starting point to carve out broad cultural zones in South Asia, and suggest that Sri Lanka (along with South India) can be categorized as the least patriarchal.



**Figure 2: Hours spent on unpaid care work, by sex**
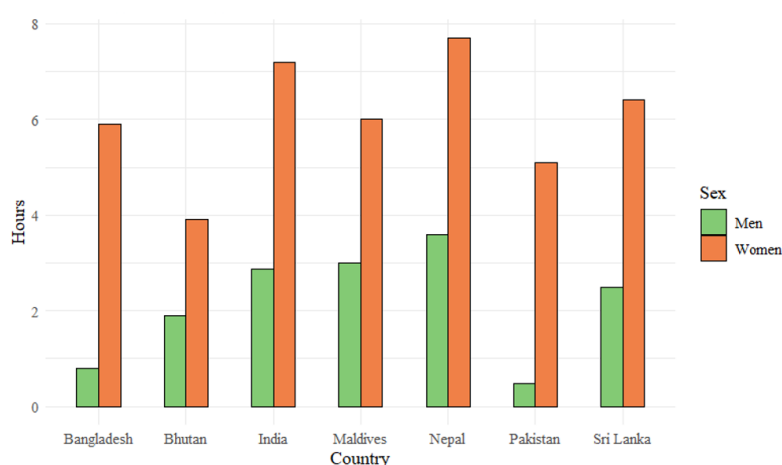
When comparing cross-country data, it does not seem that there are notably *more* pervasive gender norms in Sri Lanka than elsewhere. Firstly, comparing time use surveys[3] conducted by all governments in the region, Sri Lanka has the third-lowest difference between men and women in terms of unpaid and domestic care work (3.9 hours), behind Bhutan (2 hours) and the Maldives (3 hours) (see Figure 2). This suggests that while women are expected to take on household and childcare duties, this

---

[3] For Bangladesh, see (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023). For Bhutan, see (Suh, Dorji, Mercer-Blackman & Hampel-Milagrosa, 2020). For India, see (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2020). For the Maldives, see (OHCHR, 2022). For Nepal, see (USAID, 2022). For Pakistan, see (UN Women, 2019). For Sri Lanka, see (Gunewardena & Perera, 2023).
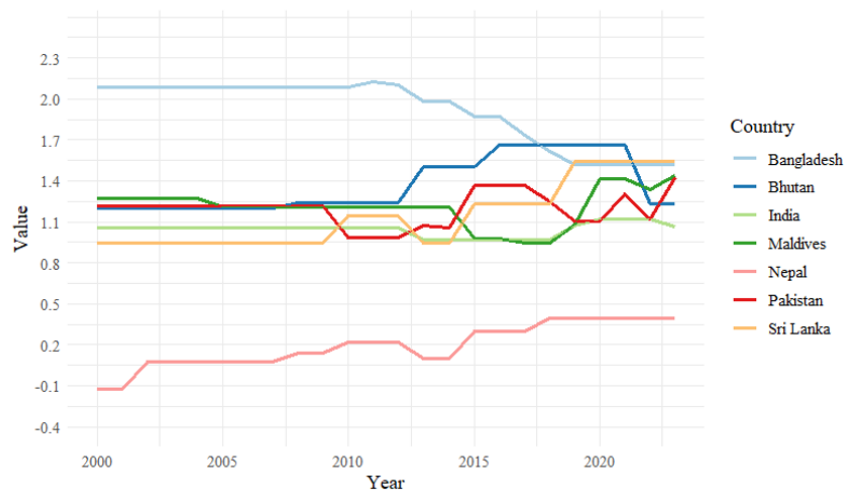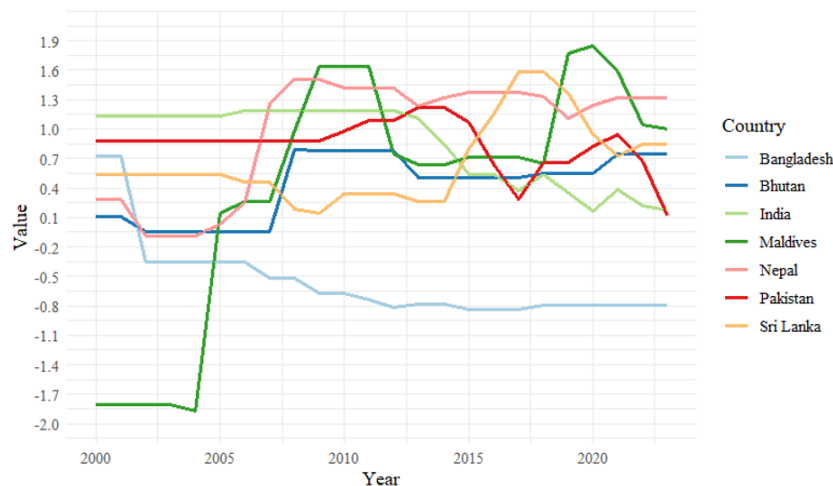
**Figure 3. Property rights for Women.**



**Figure 4. Freedom of discussion for women**.



effect is not *as* strong on average as in Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. Secondly, Sri Lanka has the highest score in the region in terms of women's property rights[4], although scores across the region have fluctuated since the turn of the millennia (see Figure 3). In terms of freedom of discussion[5], Sri Lanka has scored in the mid-to high range of the scale, except in the last years of the civil war and the immediate post-war period (See Figure 4). Today it ranks third highest in the region- behind Nepal and the Maldives. This suggests that Sri Lankan women are more free to engage in political discussions without sanctions than in Bhutan, Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Lastly, Sri Lanka has the second-lowest rates of

---

[4] Defined by V-dem as women's "right to acquire, possess, inherit, and sell private property, including land. Limits on property rights may come from the state (which may legally limit rights or fail to enforce them); customary laws and practices; or religious or social norms."(Coppedge et al., 2024b, p. 193)

[5] Defined by V-dem as "the extent to which women are able to engage in private discussions, particularly on political issues, in private homes and public spaces (restaurants, public transportation, sports events, work etc.) without fear of harassment by other members of the polity or the public authorities.". It captures "restrictions by the government and its agents but also cultural restrictions or customary laws that are enforced by other members of the polity, sometimes in informal ways." (Coppedge et al., 2024b, p. 189)

child marriage[6] in the region (estimated at 1%), behind the Maldives (estimated at 0%), while the rest of the region ranges from 4%-16%[7]. In short, while gender norms undoubtedly exist in all South Asian countries that constrict women to the domestic sphere and exclude them from the public sphere, there is little to no evidence to suggest that these norms are significantly *more* pervasive in Sri Lanka than in other South Asian countries. In fact, Sri Lanka seems to fall on the mid-to low end of the scale in terms of a patriarchal culture, whereas Bangladesh, Pakistan, and (parts of) India fall on the high end of the scale.

iii)     Analysis

The findings reveal that patriarchy and traditional gender norms exist in Sri Lanka. Women are often expected to be responsible for domestic work, and men are seen as better leaders and decision-makers. However, the long history of women's political engagement in Sri Lanka suggests that it is not entirely unusual for women to be agents for political change, and highly visible ones at that. The early struggle for universal suffrage; anti-war and pro-war engagements; peacebuilding; civil society engagement; and protests in the post-war era, all with extensive involvement of women, stand out as key features of Sri Lanka's modern history. It is important to note, however, that these engagements have not come without sanctions – particularly for those women who radically challenge traditional gender norms. The most severe repercussions are evident in the treatment of female ex-combatants from the LTTE. These patterns suggest that while the political space in Sri Lanka does not entirely exclude women, and is at times supportive to their participation, it is still constrained by gender norms. It seems that women can engage more easily in politics when they do so within a framework that aligns

---

[6] Defined by UNICEF (2024) as "percentage of women aged 20 to 24 years who were first married or in union before age 15" (no page).

[7] The most recent child marriage rates in the region, from highest to lowest, were the following: Bangladesh 16%, Bhutan 6%, Nepal 6%, India 5%, Pakistan 4%, Sri Lanka 1%, Maldives 1% (UNICEF, 2024).

with societal expectations of femininity, leaving the more "masculine" aspects of politics less accessible, such as violent conflict. These findings suggest a nuanced picture where the theoretical expectations are partially met.

When considering Sri Lanka within the broader South Asian context, the country appears to have less pervasively unequal gender norms compared to most other countries in the region. Acknowledging that this is difficult to establish with certainty, a more conservative interpretation is that there is little to no indication that patriarchy is *more* pervasive in Sri Lanka than elsewhere. For instance, in terms of time spent on unpaid care work, there is a smaller difference between men and women in Sri Lanka than in Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. In other words, while Sri Lankan women are indeed constrained by the burden of unpaid care work, they are, on average, less restricted than women in other countries. Additionally, Sri Lanka ranks mid-to-high in terms of property rights and freedom of expression, indicating a somewhat more progressive stance on women's autonomy. The country also has the second-lowest rate of child marriage in the region, suggesting a less pervasive patriarchal culture that prioritizes girls primarily as future wives and mothers. Interestingly, those countries where patriarchal culture appears most entrenched (such as Pakistan, India and Bangladesh) do not necessarily have the lowest levels of women's political representation. Therefore, the theoretical expectations regarding the relationship between pervasive gender norms and women's political underrepresentation are mostly unmet. While the internal gender gap in Sri Lanka can be partially attributed to cultural factors, these explanations are insufficient fail to account for why Sri Lankan women remain more underrepresented in comparison to their counterparts in other South Asian countries. On most indicators of female empowerment, Sri Lanka scores better than most other countries in the region.

|  | *Theoretical expectations* | *Expectations met?* |
|---|---|---|
| *Internal* | Low levels of women participating across institutions; women who participate face social sanctions | *Partially met* |
| *Comparative* | More time spent on unpaid care work among women, higher child marriage rates among girls; lower freedom of discussion for women; weaker property rights for women in Sri Lanka than elsewhere in the region. | *Mostly unmet* |

*Institutional factors*

i)     Internal conditions

If political parties are a key driver of gender discrepancies in political office, one would expect to observe non-democratic practices within political parties that disadvantage women, such as gender biased recruitment and nomination processes; little to no transparency and accountability measures as to how candidates are selected and how funding is allocated; and overt discouragement practices such as violence and harassment towards women.

There is evidence to suggest that women face significant barriers to enter political parties, as well as upward mobility within parties. There are weak laws for political finance, which tend to privilege incumbent candidates and/or candidates with better connections and resources. In fact, Sri Lanka is one of the few countries without any regulations on campaign financing or mechanisms to monitor expenditures (Athukorala et al, 2021, p. 18). This poses a serious threat to transparency and funding and tends to disfavor women who are less likely to have access to funding channels (EU Election Observation Mission, 2020). Moreover, Koens and Gunawardana (2021) report that political parties tend to deny female candidates the same funding as male candidates (p. 474). These trends, in combination with women's weaker

economic position in Sri Lanka as discussed previously, make for a considerable disadvantage when it comes to competition for political office.

In addition to weak regulations on party finance, The International IDEA and the Centre for Policy Alternatives (2005) find political parties in Sri Lanka to be highly centralized with leader-centric power structures often oriented around men. Similarly, a 2019 USAID report finds that central decision-makers in Sri Lankan political parties (who are almost always men) act as gatekeepers, favoring their male peers and therefore hindering women's enter into, and upward mobility within parties. The report notes that among 70 parties registered in the Department of Elections, only four of these (or 5.7%) have a female general secretary (p. 26). None of the historically biggest political parties are headed by a woman (Athukorala et al., 2021, p. 6), and none of the parties currently in parliament are headed by a woman (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2024).

Female candidates across political parties have reported in interviews that the major role of male party leaders in choosing nominees compromises women's ability to run for office (Athukorala et. al, 2021, p. 6). Similarly, Rameez (2018) finds that over 70% of female respondents in local governments are excluded from the nomination process to local government elections and that this process is dominated by men. Rameez (2018) also finds that between 65% to 95% of the female respondents "do not engage in propaganda and celebration of victories or raise their legitimate concerns in the local government authorities" (p. 1052), highlighting a tendency for core processes in political parties to exclude women. Women's tasks are often limited to voting in the elections, once the candidates have been selected by a smaller group of male colleagues. Illustratively, a female respondent noted that "We only vote in elections. Candidates send us vehicles to go to the polling station on the election day. We leave the rest of the election-related activities such as propaganda, canvassing, nomination, celebration etc. to males" (p. 1052). Relatedly, most female respondents from the executive and

legislative branches in a USAID report were of the opinion that party leaders do not sufficiently include women in the nomination process, nomination lists, and in leadership roles (USAID, 2019, p. 26). Lastly, a 2017 CEDAW Shadow Report highlights the failure to nominate women within political parties as well as leaders lacking political will to introduce institutional measures to increase participation (The Women and Media Collective, 2017). Indeed, only 59 women were nominated by the five largest political parties in the 2020 parliamentary election, accounting for less than 6 per cent of their total candidates (Newswire, 2020). Interestingly, 12 of the 225 elected Members of Parliament (MPs) were women (5,3%) (Democracy Reporting International, 2021, p. 4), representing a similar share as the pool of nominees – suggesting that voters do not disproportionally favor men when presented with a candidate list. These findings indicate that political parties actively exclude women from key party functions and make it challenging to run for office across levels of government.

In addition to the exclusion of women from key party functions, there is evidence to suggest that male party members actively discourage their female counterparts from pursuing elected office through harassment and violence. For example, female candidates reported rampant harassment and threats in the 2018 local elections (EU Election Observation Mission, 2020, p. 40), and female candidates faced sexual intimidation from other (almost always male) candidates more often than men, including from within their own party (Bjarnegård, Håkansson & Zetterberg, 2022, p. 36). Relatedly, USAID (2019) highlights an entrenched patriarchal culture in political parties in Sri Lanka, including informal subcultures within parties that make women feel "intensely uncomfortable to operate in, and if they do, they face derisive and demeaning treatment" (p. 34). The lack of protection of female candidates is further stressed in a statement released by Women's Action Network in January 2018 noting that "[w]e have not set up enough structures and mechanisms to safeguard female candidates. There isn't a level playing field for women entering politics." (Gunasekara, 2018, no page). The lack of protection,

combined with widespread discouragement practices from male peers can act as a significant barrier for women to enter, stay, and advance within political parties.

ii)     Regional comparison

Gatekeeping and discouragement practices in political parties is not uncommon in South Asia. Comparing the magnitude of these practices across countries is challenging given the unavailability of standardized comparative data, but some observable implications can be tested. Specifically, one can examine the extent of women's participation in institutions that do not involve party politics, and institutions that do. The former category includes voting, civil society organizations, resistance movements, and branches of government that are mostly separate from party politics (namely the judiciary and civil service). The latter category includes local and provincial government, national parliament, and the executive. If political parties act as gatekeepers to a greater extent in Sri Lanka than in other South Asian countries, it would follow that women's participation is lower in institutions where party nomination is required, compared to those where party nomination is not required – and that the difference in participation between these institutions is more extreme than elsewhere in the region.

While most countries in South Asia have relatively equal levels of electoral participation among men and women, some differences can be detected. The percentage of female voters in each country ranges from 43% to 56%[8], and Sri Lanka has a) the highest total percentage of female voters, and b) second highest in relation to the total female population (after the Maldives)[9].

---

[8] In ascending order, the percentage of female voters in each country in the region is the following: Pakistan 45,66% (Gallup Pakistan, 2024); India 48,67% (PIB Delhi, 2024); Nepal 49% (Women for Politics, 2020); Bangladesh 49,28% (Alamgir, 2023); Maldives 49,4% (Maldives Elections Commission, 2024); Bhutan 51,26% (Dema, 2023); Sri Lanka 56% (Kamdar, 2020).

[9] The percentage of women out of the total population varies across countries, and countries with a higher percentage of women overall are more likely to have a higher percentage of female voters. The percentage of women overall in each country, from lowest to highest, is as follows: 42,9% in the Maldives; 47,2% in Bhutan; 48,4% in India; 49,6% in Pakistan; 50,5% in Bangladesh; 51,9% in Sri Lanka; and 52,1% in Nepal (UNDESA, 2024).

While voting is a relatively small component of political participation, it can serve as an indicator that a significant proportion of women in Sri Lanka are interested and able to contribute to the democratic process, even more so than most of its South Asian counterparts.

Given the sometimes spontaneous and highly varied forms of civil society and conflict, it is hard to find indicators that provide some ground for cross-country comparison. However, some approximations can be used as a starting point. The indicator "CSO women's participation" from V-Dem measures "(A) whether women are prevented from participating in civil society organizations (CSOs) because of their gender and (B) whether CSOs pursuing women's interests are prevented from taking part in associational life", where 0 indicates "almost always" and 4 indicates "almost never" (Coppedge et al., 2024b, p. 204). In other words, countries with higher levels of civil society participation among women get higher scores. Comparing the scores across South Asia, Sri Lanka has the third highest score in the region, behind Nepal and Bangladesh, and has consistently been a relatively high performer in the region since 2000 (see

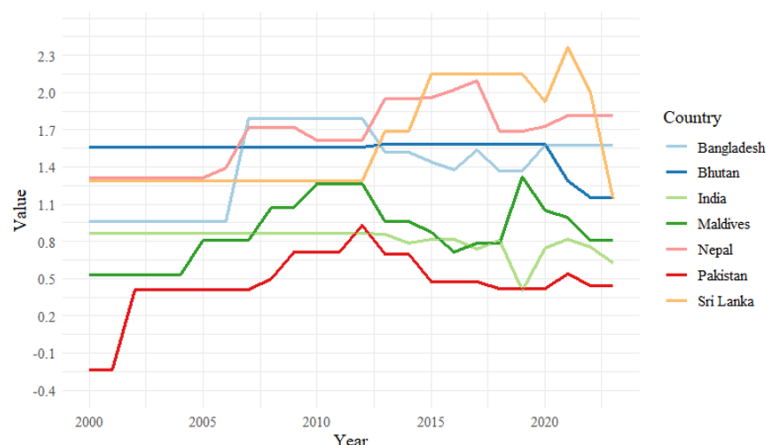**Figure 5. Civil Society Participation for Women.**



Figure 5). It is worth nothing that all countries in South Asia fall on the lower end of the scale, suggesting that women across the region face notable barriers to participate in civil society organizations.

A similar trend can be observed when comparing women's participation in political conflict. Comparative data on conflict participation is even more difficult to standardize, given the scarcity and secrecy of information as well as the high level of variance from conflict to conflict. One indicator that can be retrieved from the WiRe dataset from the Harvard Kennedy School, which records "women's participation in 338 [violent and non-violent] maximalist resistance

campaigns in every country in the world from 1945 to 2014" (Chenoweth, 2019). The variable "Extent Women in Frontline Roles" gives each campaign a score from 0 to 3, where higher scores indicate higher levels of women's frontline participation. On average, Sri Lanka (together with Nepal) has the second highest score (1.5) behind the Maldives (2). It is important to note that such average scores do not provide a complete picture of women's participation in conflict, and that comparison between the countries on this indicator must be done with caution[10]. However, the data provides a preliminary suggestion that women in Sri Lanka have participated to a relatively high extent in political conflict, while still acknowledging that further research on this topic is necessary.

Lastly, investigating the participation of women in branches of the state that do *not* require party nomination can be another useful way to test the magnitude of political parties' gatekeeping. Although the judiciary and civil service do not constitute political participation directly, they can serve as indicators of women's qualifications and interest in participating in public life. Importantly, entry into these branches tends to be merit-based, relying on entry examinations, university performance, and prior experience (although it may also be influenced by social status and networks, and in some cases be subject to regional quotas with ethnic dimensions). Sri Lanka has the second-highest share of women in the civil service (64%) (Nilmi, 2017, p. 229), behind the Maldives (65%) (Maldives Bureau of Statistics, 2023). This is a considerable leap from the rest of the region, where Bangladesh scores third highest (49%) (Islam, 2023), followed by Bhutan (40%) (Royal Civil Service Commission, 2023), India (27%) (Dua, 2024), Nepal (26,5%) (Dhungana, 2021), and Pakistan (5%) (Tribune, 2022). Sri Lanka also has the

---

[10] Some reasons for this include 1) each country has a different number of conflicts. Countries with a lot of conflicts registered in the dataset (such as India and Pakistan) are likely to get a lower score as it is unlikely to sustain a high number of women in many different conflicts. It also makes it challenging to identify trends within countries with equal accuracy, as it is easier to get a more accurate estimate with a higher number of conflict. 2) Information about conflicts can be difficult to come by, especially smaller conflicts that do not receive much media or NGO attention. This can affect the accuracy of the scores assigned to each conflict.

second-highest share of women in the judiciary (31,3%) (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021), behind India (34,6%) (Routh, 2024), followed by Bangladesh (29%) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics), Pakistan (18%) (Bhatti, 2024), Maldives (15%) (UNDP, 2024), Bhutan (14,5%) (National Commission for Women and Children, 2019), and Nepal (11%) (Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kathmandu, 2024). The relatively high share of women in the Sri Lankan civil service and judiciary suggests that women are qualified to and interested in entering the public sphere.

**Figure 6: Percentage of women in different institutions by country.**
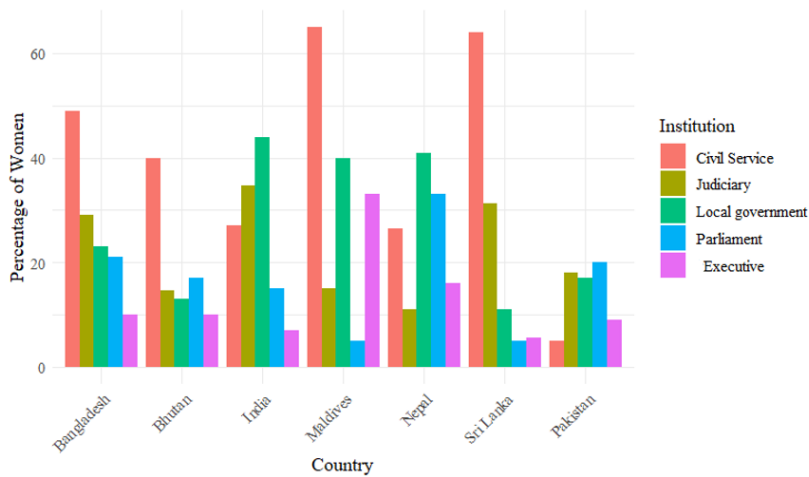


Comparing women's participation in institutions that do *not* require party endorsement, to those where they are, a pattern emerges. Sri Lanka has strikingly low shares of women in local governments, parliament, and the executive, compared to most other South Asian countries (see Figure 6). Firstly, Sri Lanka has the lowest share of women (11%) in local governments in the region, the second-lowest share of female parliamentarians (5.3%) behind the Maldives, and the lowest share of female ministers (5.5%) (UN Women, 2024). These numbers are in stark contrast to how much Sri Lankan women participate in other ways as outlined above. This pattern is reflected in a 2019 USAID report which looks at women's empowerment in the legislative, executive and judicial sectors of the state across four countries in South Asia. The study assigns a "power score" for each sector based on the share of women across "leadership tiers", where women in higher tiers (e.g. the cabinet) are weighed more heavily than in lower tiers (e.g. chairpersons in local government). The study finds that Sri Lankan women have a

higher power score in the judiciary than all other South Asian countries included in the study (India, Bangladesh, and Nepal), while scoring lower than all South Asian countries on both the legislative and executive branches. This provides further support to the hypothesis that Sri Lankan women have a disproportionately hard time entering, as well as rising through the ranks in institutions that are tied to political parties, whereas they face significantly less barriers in institutions that are more merit-based[11].

iii)    Analysis

The internal structure and functioning of political parties appears to be a key factor influencing women's political representation in Sri Lanka, including non-transparent and non-democratic institutional frameworks. Women are sometimes denied funding and systematically excluded from key party functions, limiting their ability to influence decision-making processes and rise within party ranks. Additionally, violence and intimidation directed toward women within party structures further discourage their involvement. These factors combined meet the theoretical expectations and suggest that political parties in Sri Lanka act as substantial barriers to women's political representation.

In comparison to other South Asian countries, the role of political parties as a barrier to women's political representation becomes even more apparent. In Sri Lanka, women exhibit relatively high levels of participation in institutions that do not require party endorsement, such as civil society organizations, protests, and voting, as well as in conflict-related activities. Additionally, women in Sri Lanka participate at high levels in other branches of government, such as the civil service and judiciary, where advancement is typically merit-based rather than dependent on party affiliations. These trends suggest that Sri Lankan women are active participants in public life when their involvement does not rely on party endorsement. At the

---

[11] It is important to note that parties can exert influence over bureaucratic and judicial recruitment, but do not determine them to the same extent as party recruitment.

same time, Sri Lanka has among the lowest levels of female participation in institutions that do require party endorsement, including parliament, the executive branch, and local government, when compared to other South Asian countries. Again, these findings meet the theoretical expectations and highlight the unique role that political parties in Sri Lanka play in limiting women's political representation.

| | *Theoretical expectations* | *Expectations met?* |
|---|---|---|
| *Internal* | Non-democratic practices within political parties that disadvantage women; little to no transparency and accountability; overt discouragement practices such as violence and harassment towards women. | Mostly met |
| *Comparative* | More severe difference in gender gap between political participation channels that require party endorsement, and those that do not; More severe difference in gender gap between branches of government that require party endorsement, and those that do not | Mostly met |

## VI. Discussion

The findings in this paper suggest a nuanced picture of the causes of women's underrepresentation in political office in Sri Lanka. Several factors from all three explanatory categories appear to influence the access to political office. Most notably, unequal access to the workforce; gender norms that restrict women to the domestic sphere; and a male-dominated culture within political parties seem to be the most pressing issues. When investigating internal conditions alone, it is difficult to discern what factors have the most impact. However, when comparing across countries, socioeconomic and cultural explanations are met with some contradictory evidence. That is not to say that socioeconomic and cultural factors hold no

explanatory power – but that they are insufficient in explaining why women in Sri Lanka are so much *more* underrepresented than in most other South Asian countries. Sri Lanka fares relatively well in terms of women's socioeconomic conditions and the prevalence of patriarchy. There is little to no evidence to suggest that Sri Lankan women fare significantly *worse* than other South Asian women, especially compared to those countries where women are more represented in legislatures and local governments than in Sri Lanka. The findings instead suggest that to understand the full extent of women's underrepresentation in Sri Lanka, it is crucial to consider the effect of political parties. Within Sri Lanka, there is evidence of a male-dominated and non-democratic institutional structure within parties, which consistently fails to recruit women; excludes women from key party functions; and creates an unsafe environment through harassment and violence. From a comparative perspective, the findings suggest that Sri Lankan women are consistently among the most underrepresented in institutions where parties are involved in the nomination and selection process – namely the executive, national parliament, and provincial and local government - while being among the most represented in other political institutions where political party nomination is not necessary. These findings provide support to the hypothesis that political parties are a key factor in limiting women's political participation in Sri Lanka.

|  | Theoretical expectations: Internal conditions | Theoretical expectations: Comparative |
|---|---|---|
| Socio-economic factors | *Mostly met* | *Partially unmet* |
| Cultural factors | *Partially met* | *Mostly unmet* |
| Institutional factors | *Mostly met* | *Mostly met* |

While the role of political parties stands out as a key explanatory variable, it is important to note that the three explanatory categories cannot be fully disentangled. For example, the culture

of male domination within political parties in Sri Lanka is likely informed by gender norms, and rests on assumptions that women are not fit to be politicians. Furthermore, political parties can be seen as part of a gendered labor market where education impacts job opportunities for men and women differently. It is also possible that institutional factors (such as the lack of intraparty democracy and transparency) contribute to *amplifying* the effect of socioeconomic and cultural factors. For example, exclusion from the labor force can become a bigger issue for representation when political parties operate mostly on personal and professional networks rather than merit. If there were more transparent, merit-based ways to enter political parties, even at low levels of seniority — perhaps more university graduates (many of whom are women) can have a better shot at entering party politics without having a large professional network. The lack of transparency and intraparty democracy can also amplify the effects of gender norms, as it allows men within parties to continue to discriminate against women without scrutiny. That is to say that gender norms in Sri Lanka are likely already an issue for representation, but that this issue gets amplified through the institutional structure of parties. In short, it is not the goal of this paper to argue that political parties alone explain the gender gap in political representation, but rather that political parties are a crucial component of the explanation.

While acknowledging that these findings are by no means exhaustive, some implications are worth considering. Firstly, these findings add to a growing body of literature on the role of political parties in ensuring well-functioning democracies. A healthy democracy requires checks on power, not only across institutions and competitive parties, but also within institutions and within parties specifically. Even in countries that are considered democratic, political parties can operate in non-democratic ways that disproportionately favor dominant groups in society and lead to perpetual underrepresentation of other groups, including women. The findings in this paper offer support to the existing arguments that political parties can be a

key component in ensuring inclusive societies (e.g. Amundsen, 2016; Cross & Katz, 2013; Scarrow, 1999), and that the study of political parties warrants a gendered lens. Secondly, the comparative investigations in this paper reveal some unexpected insights about the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation. While multiple studies find that descriptive representation facilitates substantive representation (e.g. Saint-Upéry, 2013; Beaman, Pande & Cirone, 2012), evidence from South Asia presents a more complex picture. The countries that score the best on women's wellbeing and empowerment, including in terms of education, labor force participation, health, time spent on domestic care work, and child marriage, are rarely the ones with the highest level of descriptive representation in elected bodies. There could be several reasons for this – firstly, that countries with more women represented in elected bodies is largely due to gender quotas that only increase the number of women but are not actually effective in increasing substantive representation; secondly, that women in elected institutions are not necessarily more interested in focusing on women's issues than men, perhaps because there are other issues that are seen as more pressing; thirdly, that the gender of a given elected officeholder in South Asia is less influential than party discipline or even family loyalty. A strong party discipline might result in less independence for individual officeholders to pursue issues that they personally care the most about; and it is not uncommon for "political families" to hold significant political power in South Asia – resulting in officeholders regardless of gender pursuing policies that are in the interest of their family rather than their gender (see e.g. Yadav, 2020). In other words, the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation in South Asia appears to be complex and at times contradictory and warrants further research.

*Alternative explanations*

It is possible that the underrepresentation of women in political office can be attributed women's disinterest in party politics, rather than active exclusion and gatekeeping by political parties. Socioeconomic and cultural factors might explain some of this disinterest – for

example, women facing significant uncertainty in the job market and/or the responsibility of caring for family members, might not entertain the thought of pursuing politics given the added time investment without guaranteed economic return. Gender norms could also condition women to think they have no reason to be interested in a political career. However, these explanations fall short for a few reasons. Firstly, as outlined previously, there seems to be a significant political interest among Sri Lankan women in general, seen in the number of women participating in protests, civil society organization, conflict, peace-building, and branches of government that do not involve party politics. Secondly, the active exclusion of women from key party functions and the prevalence of violence and intimidation towards female party members serve as a strong indicator that many men within parties actively discourage women from pursuing party politics. And while disinterest among women is likely widespread, the findings in this paper suggest that discouragement practices in political parties form a more impactful barrier to women's representation in political office.

*Limitations*

There are several limitations to the research presented in this paper that affect the accuracy and generalizability of the findings. Firstly, this paper treats South Asian countries as units for the sake of identifying broad regional trends. By doing so, it does not do justice to the political, economic, and cultural diversity at the subnational level, especially in highly diverse countries such as India and Pakistan. Sri Lanka itself is very challenging to analyze as a unit, especially given the cleavages between the Sinhala-majority south and west, and the Tamil-majority north and east. In many ways, these differences have been deepened because of the civil war. Some characteristics of the North and East with particular relevance to the topics discussed in this paper include considerably higher levels of poverty (Sarvanathan, 2016, p. 587); a far higher concentration of war widows and relatedly, female heads of households (Vasudevan, 2013, n.p.); and even lower levels of women's representation (Koens & Gunawardana, 2021, p. 464).

A growing body of literature focuses on the complexities of women's participation and empowerment in the North and East of the country (see e.g. Koens & Gunawardana, 2021; Kumudini, 2017; Lund & Azmi, 2020; Vasudevan, 2013), but they are beyond the scope of this study, which instead aims to identify overarching trends in Sri Lanka and across region.

Secondly, there are considerable limitations to the data. Cross-country quantitative data from South Asia is scarce – especially on topics of intraparty norms and procedures. The relatively few sources that provide cross-country data on the topics covered in this thesis either do not include South Asian countries at all (e.g. Kopecký & Spirova, 2019), or just one country at a time (e.g. Ipsos, 2023, which only covers India out of all the South Asian countries). Some data exists from individual countries, but this data provides limited ground for comparison when the indicators differ from study to study, and coding criteria may differ even if the indicator overlap. More accessible and numerous are qualitative studies that do not attempt to create specific measures at all – and while these are useful to gain a deeper understanding of each country, the magnitude of effects is challenging to measure and compare. This thesis has gathered a wide set of data (both qualitative and quantitative) from various sources in an attempt to identify indicators that are possible to compare across countries. These are at times retrieved from the same database (e.g. V-dem and WiRe), but also at times from different sources (e.g. time-use surveys and national statistical data) which cannot guarantee standardized coding criteria. These gaps compromise the reliability of the findings in this paper.

The positionality of the author highlights a final set of limitations to this research. As a scholar from a Western country, educated in Western institutions, the perspective presented here is shaped by the cultural and academic context in which I have been trained. My interpretation of the issue at hand is informed by the literature and data available to me, but I lack the cultural and contextual knowledge that comes from lived experience within Sri Lanka. Given this, it is not my aim to assert any normative claims about what Sri Lankan women need or what their

priorities should be. In fact, the representation of women in elected office is not necessarily considered the most pressing issue in Sri Lanka. For example, Jayasekara (2022) found in a survey that most MPs, regardless of gender, did not highlight gender inequality as the most pressing issue in Sri Lanka. Rather, economic development, democratic governance, and law and order were reported as more pressing (p. 232), particularly in light of the severe economic crisis currently affecting the nation. My intention in this research is rather to offer an analytical perspective on the patterns of women's representation in elected office, and to contribute to the broader understanding of this issue while remaining mindful of the voices of Sri Lankan women themselves.

*Avenues for future research*

The limitations outlined above shed light on several avenues of future research. Firstly, the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation in South Asia also warrants further research as the relationship appears contradictory to many existing studies. Secondly, disaggregated approaches on gender and political participation in South Asia would provide more context-specific insight to the overarching trends identified in this paper, Lastly, there is a need for more systematic comparative data across South Asia, especially on gender and political participation. This kind of data will significantly contribute to the understanding of gender and politics in the region, which is not only useful to scholars and development practitioners, but perhaps most importantly to men and women across the region that strive for a more equitable society.

## VII. Conclusion

This thesis has tested three dominant explanations for women's underrepresentation in politics (socio-economic, cultural, and institutional). I find that the barriers to women in politics are manyfold, and include a gendered labor market; social norms that restrict women to domestic

duties; and non-democratic and male-dominated political parties. While these varied factors help explain the gender gap in Sri Lankan politics, I find that socio-economic and cultural factors fall short when analyzing Sri Lanka in a broader regional context. To understand why women in Sri Lanka are *more* underrepresented than in other South Asian countries, political parties are a key explanatory variable. It appears that the centralized, non-transparent and male-dominated institutional structure within political parties poses a greater barrier to women's representation in Sri Lanka than elsewhere in the region. These findings are important to the literature on gender and political participation, especially in South Asia. It supports existing arguments about the importance of political parties to ensure an equitable democratic process; highlights gaps in cross-country data on South Asia; and raises new questions about the relationship between descriptive and substantive representation.

**References**

Agarwal, B. (1994). Gender and Command over Property: A Critical Gap in Economic Analysis and Policy in South Asia. *World Development, 22*(10), 1455-1478

Alamgir, M. (2023, February 19). Draft Electoral Roll 2022: Women comprise over half of new voters. *The Daily Star*. Retrieved from https://www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/news/draft-electoral-roll-2022-women-comprise-over-half-new-voters-3251456

Alison, M. (2003). Cogs in the Wheel? Women in the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. *Civil Wars, 6*(4), 37-54

Alison, M. (2011). "In the war front we never think that we are women": Women, gender, and the Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam. In L. Sjoberg & C. E. Gentry (Eds.), *Women, gender, and terrorism* (pp. 131-155). University of Georgia Press.

Allen, P. (2012). Falling Off the Ladder: Gendered Experience of Councillor Turnover. *Political Quarterly, 83*(4), 711–713.

Amundsen, I. (2016). Democratic Dynasties? Internal Party Democracy in Bangladesh. *Party Politics, 22*(1), 49-58

Anandakugan, N. (2020). *The Sri Lankan Civil War and Its History, Revisited in 2020*. Harvard International Review. Retrieved from https://hir.harvard.edu/sri-lankan-civil-war/

Anwara Nilmi, M.A.F., Thoradeniya, D. (2018). Women in Administrative Service in Sri Lanka. In: Ahmed, N. (eds) Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia. Palgrave Macmillan.

Athukorala, S., Ramanathan, S., Applegate, M., & Bibler, S. (2021). *Women's Political Representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral System Analysis and Recommendations.* IFES Whitepaper. International Foundation for Electoral Systems.

Azmi, F. (2015). I Want My Wings Back to Fly in a New Sky: Stories of Female Ex-LTTE Combatants in Post-War Sri Lanka. In S. Shekhawat (Eds.), Female Combatants in Conflict and Peace (pp. 200-215). London: Palgrave Macmillan

Baldez, L. (2004). Elected Bodies: The Adoption of Gender Quota Laws for Legislative Candidates in Mexico. *Legislative Studies Quarterly, 29*(5), 231–58.

Bandarage, A. (2010). Women, Armed Conflict, and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka: Toward a Political Economy Perspective. *Asian Politics & Policy, 2(*4), 653-67

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2019). Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2018. Retrieved from https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/Gender%20Statistrics%20of%20Bangladesh%202018.pdf

Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics. (2023). Time Use Survey 2021. Retrieved from https://data.unwomen.org/publications/bangladesh-time-use-survey-2021

Baniamin, H. M. & Jamil, I. (2022). Women's Representation and Implications for Fairness, Trust, and Performance in Local Government: A Survey Experiment in Sri Lanka. *Political Research Quarterly, 75*(4), 1229–1239

Bartels, L. (2008). *Unequal Democracy: The Political Economy of the Gilded Age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Basu, A. (2005). *Women, political parties and social movements in South Asia*. UNRISD Occasional Paper, No. 5. Geneva: United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)

Baturo, A. & Gray, J. (2018). When Do Family Ties Matter? The Duration of Female Suffrage and Women's Path to High Political Office. *Political Research Quarterly, 71*(3), 695–709

Bauer, N. M. (2013). Rethinking stereotype reliance: Understanding the connection between female candidates and gender stereotypes. *Politics and the Life Sciences, 32*(1), 22-42

Bauer, N. M. (2015). Emotional, sensitive, and unfit for office? Gender stereotype activation and support for female candidates. *Political Psychology, 36*(6), 691-708.

Beaman, L., Pande, R., & Cirone, A. (2012). Politics as a male domain and empowerment in India. In The impact of gender quotas (pp. 208-226). Oxford University Press.

Bhatti, H. (2024, March 30). Just 7 women among 126 superior court judges, report finds. Dawn. Retrieved from https://www.dawn.com/news/1824655

Bjarnegård, E., Håkansson, S., & Zetterberg, P. (2022). Gender and Violence against Political Candidates: Lessons from Sri Lanka. *Politics & Gender, 18*(1), 33–61

Brooks, D. J. (2013). He runs, she runs: Why gender stereotypes do not harm female candidates. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Pres

Schneider, M. C., & Bos, A. L. (2014). Measuring stereotypes of female politicians. *Political Psychology, 35*(2), 245-266

Brechenmacher, S. & Hubbard, C. (2020). Breaking the Cycle of Gender Exclusion in Political Party Development. Working paper. Carnegie endowment for international peace. Retrieved from https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/202003-BrechenmacherHubbard_final.pdf

Bunyan, D. & Liluashvili, N. (2022). *Study Identifying Barriers to Women's (Women Candidates') Political Participation in Georgia*. Council of Europe. Retrieved from https://rm.coe.int/eng-study-barriers-to-women-s-women-candidates-political-participation/1680a95e53

Burns, N., Schlozman, K. & Verba, S. (2001). *The Private Roots of Public Action*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Butler, D. & Preece, J. (2016). Recruitment and Perceptions of Gender Bias in Party Leader Support. *Political Research Quarterly, 69*(4), 842–51.

Chenoweth, E. (2019). Women in Resistance Dataset (Version V3). Harvard Dataverse. https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/BYFJ3Z

Chopra, D. (2021). Paid Work and Unpaid Care Work in India, Nepal, Tanzania, and Rwanda: A bi-directional relationship. In K. Grantham, G. Dowie, & A. de Haan (Eds.), *Women's Economic Empowerment: Insights from Africa and South Asia* (1st ed., pp. 186-206). Routledge.

Chuki, S. (2018). Women in Parliament—Entering the Public Male Domain in Bhutan. In: Ahmed, N. (eds) Women in Governing Institutions in South Asia (pp. 41-58). Palgrave Macmillan

Claibourn, M., & Sapiro, V. (2001, April). Gender differences in citizen-level democratic citizenship: evidence from the comparative study of electoral systems. In *Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April*.

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Borella, C., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Krusell, J., Marquardt, K. L., McMann, K., Mechkova, V., Medzihorsky, J., Natsika, N., Neundorf, A., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., Pernes, J., Rydén, O., von Römer, J., Seim, B., Sigman, R., Skaaning, S.-E., Staton, J., Sundström, A., Tzelgov, E., Wang, Y.-t., Wig, T., Wilson, S., & Ziblatt, D. (2024a). *V-Dem [Country-Year/Country-Date] Dataset v14*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project. https://doi.org/10.23696/mcwt-fr58

Coppedge, M., Gerring, J., Knutsen, C. H., Lindberg, S. I., Teorell, J., Altman, D., Angiolillo, F., Bernhard, M., Borella, C., Cornell, A., Fish, M. S., Fox, L., Gastaldi, L., Gjerløw, H., Glynn, A., Good God, A., Grahn, S., Hicken, A., Kinzelbach, K., Marquardt, K. L., McMann, K., Mechkova, V., Neundorf, A., Paxton, P., Pemstein, D., Rydén, O., von Römer, J., Seim, B., Sigman, R., Skaaning, S.-E., Staton, J., Sundström, A., Tzelgov, E., Uberti, L., Wang, Y.-t., Wig, T., & Ziblatt, D. (2024b). *V-Dem codebook v14*. Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Project.

Cross, W. & Katz, R. S. (2013). *The Challenges of Intra-Party Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

De Alwis, M. (2009). Interrogating the 'political': feminist peace activism in Sri Lanka. *Feminist Review, 91*, 81-93.

De Silva, K. (2000). The Problems of Governance in Sri Lanka: the Subversion of a Democratic Electoral Process. *South Asian Survey, 7*(2), 227–245.

Democracy Reporting International. (2021). *Gender and Sri Lanka's 2020 parliamentary elections: Disparities in the coverage of male and female candidates on Facebook*. Retrieved from https://democracyreporting.s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/images/2937DRI-LK-Gender-and-SLs-2020-Parlimentary-Elections-SMMA_Final.pdf

Department of Census and Statistics. (2017). Preliminary Report: Census of Public and Semi Government Sector Employment – 2016. Retrieved from http://www.statistics.gov.lk/PublicEmployment/StaticalInformation/CensusReports

Department of Census and Statistics. (2021). Judges/magistrates by type of court, sex and year. Retrieved from http://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticalInformation/WomenEmpowerment/JudgesMagistratesbytypeofcourtSex

Department of Census and Statistics. (2023). Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey Annual Report – 2022. Retrieved from http://www.statistics.gov.lk/LabourForce/StaticalInformation/AnnualReports/2022

Dema, C. (2023, April 25). Are women not voting for women? *Kuensel*. Retrieved from https://kuenselonline.com/are-women-not-voting-for-women/

Dhungana, P. (2021). Reservation policy and women in civil services of Nepal. Moolya Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/364384991_Reservation_policy_and_women_in_civil_services_of_Nepal

Dissanayake, M. (2019). "Women's Political Participation in SL." *Ceylon Today*, November 4. https://ceylontoday.lk/print-more/44246.

Dolan, J., Deckman, M. M., & Swers, M. L. (2016). *Women and politics : paths to power and political influence* (Third edition). Rowman & Littlefield.

Dua, K. (2024, April 23). Indian civil services is short on women. It's not the govt's fault. The Print. Retrieved from https://theprint.in/opinion/indian-civil-services-is-short-on-women-its-not-the-govts-fault/2052672/

Eagly, A. H., & Karau, S. J. (2002). Role congruity theory of prejudice toward female leaders. *Psychological Review, 109*(3), 73-598.

European Union Election Observation Mission. (2020, January). Sri Lanka, Presidential Election, 16 November 2019: Final Report. Retrieved from https://www.europarl.europa.eu/cmsdata/212448/Sri-Lanka_presidential_election_16_November_2019_EU_EOM_report.pdf

Escobar-Lemmon, M. & Taylor-Robinson, M. (2016). *Women in Presidential Cabinets: Power Players or Abundant Tokens?* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Evans, E. (2008). Supply or Demand? Women Candidates and the Liberal Democrats. *British Journal of Political & International Relations, 10*(4), 590–606

Gallup Pakistan. (2024, March 22). A total of 58.9 million female voters registered for the 2024 General Elections, of which 41.6% cast their votes, over 5% less compared to the 2018 General Elections– Gallup Pakistan Digital Analytics on Elections. Retrieved from https://gallup.com.pk/post/36252

Galpaya, H. & Zainudeen, A. (2022). Gender and digital access gaps and barriers in Asia: But what about after access? Expert paper for UN Women Expert Group - CSW67: Innovation and Technological Change.

Guneratne, A., & Weiss, A. M. (2014). Introduction: Situating domestic politics in South Asia. In A. Guneratne & A. M. Weiss (Eds.), *Pathways to power: The domestic politics of South Asia* (pp. 1-20). Orient Blackswan.

Gunasekara, S. (2018, January 27). Women candidates marginalised despite mandatory 25% quota. Financial Times. Retrieved from https://www.ft.lk/opinion/Women-candidates-marginalised-despite-mandatory-25--quota/14-648190

Gunewardena, D. (2015). Why aren't Sri Lankan women translating their educational gains into workforce advantages? (Working Paper). Brookings Center for Universal Education. Retrieved from https://www.ungei.org/publication/why-arent-sri-lankan-women-translating-their-educational-gains-workforce-advantages

Gunewardena, D. & Perera, A. Valuing Unpaid Care Work in Sri Lanka using the National Time Use Survey 2017. Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies. Retrieved from https://bids.org.bd/uploads/events/ABCD2023/Day_2/Session%206_paper_2.pdf

Haraldsson, A., & Wängnerud, L. (2018). The effect of media sexism on women's political ambition: evidence from a worldwide study. *Feminist Media Studies*, *19*(4), 525–541. https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1468797

Hillygus, D. (2005). The Missing Link: Exploring the Relationship Between Higher Education and Political Engagement. *Political Behavior, 27*(1), 25–47.

Herath, D. (2010). Social reconstruction amidst material reconstruction. In D. Herath, K. Höglund, K. Schulz, Tudor Silva (Eds.) *Post-War Reconstruction in Sri Lanka: Prospects and Challenge*s. Kandy, Sri Lanka: International Center of Ethnic Studies (ICES).

Herath, G. (2018). Challenges to meeting the UN Sustainable Development Goals in Sri Lanka. *Asian Survey, 58*(4), 726-746.

Hoole, E. (2021, August 2). #ActForEqual: What did a series of conversations on gender equality in Sri Lanka reveal? UN Women. Retrieved from https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2021/08/what-did-a-series-of-conversations-on-gender-equality-in-sri-lanka-reveal

Huddy, L., & Capelos, T. (2002). Gender stereotyping and candidate evaluation: Good news and bad news for women politicians. In V. C. Ottati, R. S. Tindale, J. Edwards, F. B. Bryant, L. Heath, Y. Suarez-Balcazar, & E. J. Posavac, (Eds.) *The social psychology of politics* (pp. 29-53). New York, NY: Kluwer Pu

ICAN. (2013). Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women's Struggle for Security and Justice. Retrieved from https://icanpeacework.org/2013/03/elusive-peace-pervasive-violence-sri-lankan-womens-struggle-for-security-and-justice-spring-2013/

International Labour Organization. (2018, March 8). Women at Work: The Course for Sri Lanka. ILO. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/women-work-course-sri-lanka

Inglehart, R. & Norris, P. (2000). The Developmental Theory of Gender Gap: Women's and Men's Voting Behavior in Global Perspective. *International Political Science Review 21*(4), 441–462.

Inter-Parliamentary Union. (2023). Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments. Retrieved from https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=2&date_year=2023

International IDEA, & Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2004–2005). Sri Lanka Country Report based on Research and Dialogue with Political Parties. Retrieved from http://www.idea.int/parties/upload/SriLankaCountryReport.pdf

International Labour Organization. (2022, February). The gender gap in employment: What's holding women back? Retrieved from https://webapps.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#intro

International Labour Organization. (2024a). ILO Modelled Estimates and Projections database (ILOEST) ILOSTAT. Data retrieved April 6, 2024, from World Bank Gender Data Portal. https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/sl-tlf-acti-zs

International Labour Organization. (2024b). The gender pay gap in Sri Lanka: A statistical review with policy implications. International Labour Organization. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/publications/gender-pay-gap-sri-lanka-statistical-review-policy-implications

Ipsos. (2023). The state of Democracy. Retrieved from https://ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2023-12/Ipsos-KnowledgePanel-TheStateofDemocracy.pdf

Islam, A. (2023, March 8). Women falling behind men in BCS despite quota. Bangladesh Post. Retrieved from https://bangladeshpost.net/posts/women-falling-behind-men-in-bcs-despite-quota-107485

Islam, M. (2014). Women, Politics and Patriarchy: A Case of Bangladesh. In: Alston, M. (eds) *Women, Political Struggles and Gender Equality in South Asia*. *Gender, Development and Social Change*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Jalalzai, F. (2013). *Shattered, Cracked or Firmly Intact? Women and the Executive Glass Ceiling Worldwide*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Jayasekara, R. (2022). Toward advancing substantive representation of women in parliament: Case study of Sri Lanka. In *Substantive representation of women in Asian parliaments* (pp. 226-245). Routledge.

Jayawardena, K. (1994). Emancipation and subordination of women in Sri Lanka. In *Feminism and nationalism in the Third World* (pp. 109-137). London: Zed Books.

Jayawardena, K. & de Alwis, M. (2002). The Contingent Politics of the Women's Movement in Sri Lanka after Independence. In S. Jayaweera (Eds.), *Women in Post-Independence Sri Lanka* (pp. 245-277). New Delhi: Sage Publications India.

Jejeebhoy, S. & Sathar, Z. (2001). Women's Autonomy in India and Pakistan: The Influence of Religion and Region. *Population and Development Review, 27*(4), 687–712

Kahn, K. F. (1994). Does gender make a difference? An experimental examination of sex stereotypes and press patterns in statewide campaigns. *American Journal of Political Science, 35*(1), 162-195

Kam, C. D., & Palmer, C. L. (2008). Reconsidering the effects of education on political participation. *Journal of Politics, 70*(3), 612-631

Kamdar, B. (2020, September 25). Women in Sri Lanka make up 56% of voters, but only 5% of legislators. *The Diplomat*. https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/women-in-sri-lanka-make-up-56-of-voters-but-only-5-of-legislators

Kandasamy, N., Soldatic, K., and Samararatne, D. (2017). Peace, Justice and Disabled Women's Advocacy: Tamil Women with Disabilities in Rural Post-Conflict Sri Lanka. *Medicine, Conflict and Survival, 33* (1), 41–59.

Kangas, A., Haider, H., Fraser, E., & Browne, E. (2015, July). Gender and governance. GSDRC. Retrieved from https:// gsdrc.org/topic-guides/gender/gender-andgovernance/

Kayuni, H. M., & Chikadza, K. F. (2016). The Gatekeepers: Political Participation of Women in Malawi. Bergen: Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI Brief, Vol. 15, No. 12), 4 p.

Kiringoda, K. & Vithanage, H. (2023, November 6). *Empowering Sri Lankan Women: Highlights from the National Policy Conference on Women's Access to Decent Work in Sri Lanka*. Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. Retrieved from https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2023/11/06/empowering-sri-lankan-women-highlights-from-the-national-policy-conference-on-womens-access-to-decent-work-in-sri-lanka/

Kittilson, M., & Schwindt-Bayer, L. (2012). *The Gendered Effects of Electoral Institutions.* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press

Knight, K., Galligan, Y., and Choille, U. (2004). Equalizing Opportunities for Women in Electoral Politics in Ireland. *Women & Politics, 26*(1), 1–20

Koens, C. & Gunawardana, S. (2021). A continuum of participation: rethinking Tamil women's political participation and agency in post-war Sri Lanka. *International Feminist Journal of Politics, 23*(3), 463-484

Kopecký, P., & Spirova, M., (2019). *Semi-structured expert interviews in cross-national research: Studying party patronage in contemporary democracies*. In Sage Research Methods Cases Part 2. SAGE Publications, Ltd., https://doi.org/10.4135/9781526493743

Kottegoda, S. (1996). Female Headed Households in Situations of Armed Conflict. *Nivedini, 4*(2), 1-8

Kottegoda S. (2004). Gender dimensions of poverty in Sri lanka. Centre for Poverty Analysis. Retrieved from https://www.cepa.lk/publications/gender-dimensions-of-poverty-in-sri-lanka-2/

Kumudini, S. (2017). Building Transversal Solidarities: Women's Search for Peace in Sri Lanka. In R. Manchanda (Eds.), *Women and Politics of Peace: South Asia Narratives on Militarization, Power, and Justice* (pp. 1-16). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

Ladam, C., Harden, J. J., & Windett, J. H. (2018). Prominent role models: High-profile female politicians and the emergence of women as candidates for public office. *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(2), 369-381.

Lawless, J. & Fox, R. (2005). *It Takes a Candidate*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Le, K., & Nguyen, M. (2019). *Education and political engagement* (MPRA Paper No. 110964). Retrieved from https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/110964/

Li, Z. (2023). Family power structure and women's subjective well-being: evidence from China. *Applied Economics*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/00036846.2023.2289919

Little, A. W. (2024). Sri Lanka past and present. In A. W. Little, *Development, education and learning in Sri Lanka: An international research journey* (pp. 11-26). UCL Press.

Liyanage, K. (1999). Women in political parties: The Sri Lankan experience. In S. Kiribamune (Eds.), *Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: A Comparative Perspective*. Kandy: International Centre for Ethnic Studies.

Lizotte, M. & Sidman, A. (2009). Explaining the Gender Gap in Political Knowledge. *Politics & Gender, 5*, 127 –151.

Lund, R. & Azmi, F. (2020). Female headship and exclusion from small-scale fishing in Eastern Province, Sri Lanka. In R. Lund, K. Kusakabe, N. Rao & N. Weeratunge (Eds.), *Fisherfolk in Cambodia, India and Sri Lanka*. London: Routledge

Madurawala, S. (2021, September 7). Sri Lanka's Gender-based Employment Segregation: Does it Increase Women's Vulnerability Amidst COVID-19? Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka. Retrieved from https://www.ips.lk/talkingeconomics/2021/09/07/sri-lankas-gender-based-employment-segregation-does-it-increase-womens-vulnerability-amidst-covid-19/

Maguire, S. (2018). *Barriers to women entering parliament and local government*. Institute for Policy Research, University of Bath. Retrieved from https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/barriers-to-women-entering-parliament-and-local-government/

Maldives Bureau of Statistics. (2023). International Labor Day 2023 Report. Retrieved from https://statisticsmaldives.gov.mv/mbs/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ILD-2023.pdf

Maldives Elections Commission. (2024). *Parliamentary Election 2019 Statistics*. Retrieved from https://stat.elections.gov.mv/Home/PE2019

Mammen, K. & Paxson, C. (2000). Women's Work and Economic Development. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 14, 141–64

McKay, J. (2011). Having it all? Women MPs and Motherhood in Germany and the UK. *Parliamentary Affairs, 64*(4), 714–736.

Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation. (2020). Nss Report: Time Use In India-2019 (January – December 2019). Retrieved from https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1660028

Mlambo, C. & Kapingura, F. (2019). Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region. *Cogent Social Sciences, 5*(1), 1-13

Moghadam, Valentine. (1999). Gender and Globalization: Female Labor and Women's Mobilization. *Journal of World-Systems Research, 5*(2), 367–88.

Murthi, M., & Raiser, M. (2023, August 7). *#ClearHerPath: More women in the workforce will drive prosperity in South Asia*. World Bank Blogs. https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/voices/clearherpath-more-women-workforce-will-drive-prosperity-south-asia

National Commission for Women and Children. (2019). Gender Equality in Bhutan – A Situational Analysis. Retrieved from https://www.ncwc.gov.bt/notifications/324

Norris, P., & Lovenduski, J. (1995). *Political recruitment: Gender, race and class in the British Parliament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O'Connell, S. & Ramshaw, G. (2018). Violence Against Women in Politics: Global Perspectives of a Global Issue. *Westminster Foundation for Democracy.* Retrieved from https://www.wfd.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/violence-against-women-in-politics-global-perspectives-of-a-global-issue.pdf

OHCHR. (2022). Preliminary findings: A time to bridge gender gaps and accelerate progress. Retrieved from https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/09/maldives-bridge-gender-gaps-accelerate-progress-say-un-experts

Pande, R., Beaman, L., & Cirone, A. (2012). Politics as a Male Domain and Empowerment in India. In S. Franceschet, M. Kook, & J. Piscopo (Eds.), *The Impact of Gender Quotas: Women's Descriptive, Substantive, and Symbolic Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Parashar, S. (2013). What Wars and 'War Bodies' Know about International Relations. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 26*(4), 615–630.

Parliament of Sri Lanka. (2024). Lady Members. Retrieved from https://www.parliament.lk/lady-members

Persson, M. (2015). Education and political participation. *British Journal of Political Science, 45*(3), 689-703.

Philip, M. & Niraula, B (1995). Gender inequality and fertility in two Nepali villages. *Population and Development Review 21*(3): 541–561.

PIB Delhi. (2024, February 9). Largest electorate for General Elections - over 96.88 crore electors registered across the country. Election Commission. Retrieved from https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=2005189

Pitkin, H. F. (1967). *The Concept of Representation*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Pruysers, S. & Blais, J. (2019). Narcissistic Women and Cash-Strapped Men: Who Can Be Encouraged to Consider Running for Political Office, and Who Should Do the Encouraging? *Political Research Quarterly, 72*(1), 229–242

Rajapaksha, N. (2023). *The Cost of Politics in Sri Lanka*. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Retrieved from https://www.costofpolitics.net/asia-and-the-pacific/sri-lanka/

Rameez, A. (2018). Political Participation of Women in Local Governance: A Case Study of Selected Local Government Bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Journal of Asian and African Studies, 53*(7), 1043–1061

Ranasinghe, P. K. R. (2020). Women in the legal profession: challenges and opportunities. *Knowex Social Sciences Journal, 1*(2), 69-78

Ratwatte, L. (2023). Converging Crises and the Cost of Exclusion: Unveiling the Invisible Women of Sri Lanka's Economy. *Journal of International Women's Studies, 25*(3), 1-15

Routh, S. (2024, May 9). Indian courts see increase in women judges between 2018-2023. Business Line. Retrieved from https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/data-stories/data-focus/proportion-of-women-judges-in-indian-courts-shows-improvement-between-2018-and-2023/article68153379.ece

Royal Civil Service Commission. (2023). Annual Report July 2022-June 2023. Retrieved from https://www.rcsc.gov.bt/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/ANNUAL-REPORT-22-23.pdf

Royal Norwegian Embassy in Kathmandu. (2024). How "Access to Justice" contributes to strengthening gender equality. Retrieved from https://www.norway.no/en/nepal/norway-nepal2/news/access-to-justice-womens-rep/

Sadie, Y. (2005). Women in Political Decision-Making in the SADC Region. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity,* 65, 17–31.

Saint-Upéry, M. (2013). Les Noirs doivent-ils être représentés par des Noirs et les femmes par des femmes: Un oui mesuré. *Raisons politiques, 50*, 53-77.

Saman, M. & Obert, M. (2018, November 14). 'The war widows of Sri Lanka'. Pulitzer Center. Retrieved from https://pulitzercenter.org/projects/war-widows-sri-lanka

Samuel, K. (2017). Building transversal solidarities: Women's search for peace in Sri Lanka. In R. Manchanda (Ed.), *Women and politics of peace: South Asian narratives on militarization, power, justice* (pp. 80-96). London: Sage.

Sarvananthan, M. (2016). Elusive economic peace dividend in Sri Lanka: all that glitters is not gold. *GeoJournal, 81*(4), 571-596

Satkunanathan, A. (2012, March 9). 'What Sri Lanka is...': acknowledging the ethnic conflict in post-war reconciliation. Open Democracy. Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/what-sri-lanka-is-acknowledging-ethnic-conflict-in-post-war-reconc/

Satkunanathan, A. (2017). Sri Lanka: The Impact of Militarization on Women, in Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et. al (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scarrow, S. E. (1999). Parties and the Expansion of Direct Democracy: Who Benefits? *Party Politics, 5*(3), 341 –362.

Solotaroff, J.L, Joseph, G. Kuriakose, A.T., Sethi, J. (2020). Getting to Work: Unlocking Women's Potential in Sri Lanka's Labor Force. World Bank. Retrieved from https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/151551583219126707/pdf/Getting-to-Work-Unlocking-Women-s-Potential-in-Sri-Lanka-s-Labor-Force.pdf

Suh, J. Dorji, C. Mercer-Blackman, V. & Hampel-Milagrosa, A. (2020). Valuing Unpaid Care Work In Bhutan. Asian Development Bank. Adb Economics Working Paper Series.

The Women and Media Collective. (2017). "Sri Lanka Shadow Report to the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women". Retrieved from https://cedawsouthasia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/S9.pdf

Theocharis, Y., & van Deth, J. W. (2018). Political participation in a changing world. Routledge.

Tickner, J. (1992). Gender in International Relations: Feminist Perspectives on Achieving Global Security. New York: Columbia University Press.

Thiruchandran, S. (2012). *Women's Movement in Sri Lanka: History, Trends and Trajectories*. Colombo: Social Sciences Association.

UN Women (2019). Families in a Changing World. https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2019/06/progress-of-the-worlds-women-2019-2020

UN Women. (2024). Women in local government. Retrieved from https://localgov.unwomen.org/

UNDESA. (2024). World Population Prospects 2024. Retrieved from https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/

UNDP. (2021). State duties: women's participation in Sri Lanka's workforce and the UNGPss. UNDP. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/bizhumanrights/publications/state-duties-womens-participation-sri-lankas-workforce-and-ungps

UNDP. (2024). Women of the Bench: Maldivian women judges forge a path forward. Retrieved from https://www.undp.org/maldives/blog/women-bench-maldivian-women-judges-forge-path-forward

UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS). (2023) UIS.Stat Bulk Data Download Service. Retrieved from https://apiportal.uis.unesco.org/bdds.

UNESCO Institute for Statistics. (2024, April 24). Literacy rate, adult female (% of females ages 15 and above) - Sri Lanka. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.ADT.LITR.FE.ZS?locations=LK

UNFPA. (2017). Sexual harassment on public buses and trains in Sri Lanka. UNFPA Sri Lanka. Retrieved from https://srilanka.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/FINAL%20POLICY%20BRIEF%20-%20ENGLISH_0.pdf

UNICEF. (2024). Child Marriage. Retrieved from https://data.unicef.org/resources/dataset/child-marriage/

UNOCHA. (2011). Sri Lanka Joint Plan of Assistance to the Northern Province (JPA). Colombo: UNOCHA. Retrieved from https://reliefweb.int/report/sri-lanka/compendium-projects-towards-sri-lanka-joint-plan-assistance-northern-province-2011

USAID. (2019). Women's leadership as a route to greater empowerment report on the diamond leadership model. Centre for Policy Alternatives. Retrieved from https://www.cpalanka.org/womens-leadership-as-a-route-to-greater-empowerment-report-on-the-diamond-leadership-model/

USAID (2022). Nepal Time Use Data for Enhancing Social Inclusion and Gender Equality. Retrieved from https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA021FF8.pdf

Vasudevan, R. (2013). 4. Context: setting the stage. In *Everyday Resistance*. Geneva: Graduate Institute Publications.

Vijeyarasa, R. (2020). Women's absence in Sri Lankan politics: Lessons on the effectiveness and limitations of quotas to address under-representation. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 81, 1-9

Visaria, Leela. 1996. "Regional variations in female autonomy and fertility and contraception in India," in Roger Jeffery and Alaka M. Basu (eds.), *Girls' Schooling, Women's Autonomy and Fertility Change in South Asia.* New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Wanigasekara, V. (2024, May 25). Do Sri Lankan Politicians Need Educational Qualifications? Colombo Telegraph. https://www.colombotelegraph.com/index.php/do-sri-lankan-politicians-need-educational-qualifications/

WHO. (2020, December 4). Global Health Observatory data repository: Percentage of women aged 15-49 years currently using contraception. Retrieved August 15, 2024, from https://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.688

WHO. (2022). Sri Lanka: Health data overview for the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka. Retrieved from https://data.who.int/countries/144

WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA, World Bank Group, & UNDESA/Population Division. (2023). Trends in maternal mortality 2000 to 2020. World Health Organization. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240068759

Windett, J. H. (2014). Differing Paths to the Top: Gender, Ambition, and Running for Governor. *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy, 35*(4), 287-314

Wolbrecht, C. & Campbell, D. E. (2017). Role Models Revisited: Youth, Novelty, and the Impact of Female Candidates. *Politics, Groups, and Identities, 5*(3), 418-34.

Women for Politics. (2020, October 23). Women Voters in Nepal: What do we need to know about women voters? Retrieved from https://www.womenforpolitics.com/post/women-voters-in-nepal-what-do-we-need-to-know-about-women-voters

World Bank. (2024). Account ownership at a financial institution or with a mobile-money-service provider (% of population ages 15+). Retrieved from https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/indicator/fx-own-totl-zs

Yadav, V. (2020). Political Families and Support for Democracy in Pakistan. *Asian Survey, 60*(6), 1044-1071