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Presence and Influence

Local Politics and Gendered Realities



Uvini Panditha

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Presence and Influence: Local Politics and Gendered Realities

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“Oh, well, my dear, why do you want to vote or play anything but a domestic role? You know quite well that ‘the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world,’ so what more can you want?”What such men don’t realise of course is that if the house is woman’s place, so also it is man’s place. For is not the state composed of individual homes? And are not matters which concern the state of vital importance to all those – both men and women- who have homes?”

(Kularatne, 1922)

Chapter 1

Introduction

In 1960, Sri Lanka made global history when Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the first female premier in the world (Kodikara 2009, 15). Her ascent was widely celebrated as a milestone in the global struggle for gender equality and a sign of progressive change. Yet, as scholars such as Kodikara (2009) and de Alwis (1995–96) note, this moment did little to dismantle the patriarchal structures that confined women to the private sphere. Bandaranaike entered politics after the assassination of her husband, echoing a pattern in which women in Sri Lanka enter formal politics, primarily as *wives, widows, and daughters* of male politicians rather than through independent mobilisation. In this sense, her political authority was less a reflection of women’s collective empowerment and more a continuation of patriarchal politics, repackaged with the symbolic legitimacy of widowhood and sacrificial motherhood (Kodikara 2009, 15). Indeed, as feminist scholars have pointed out, Sirimavo Bandaranaike’s public image was deeply rooted in the long-standing cultural archetype of the ideal Sinhala-Buddhist woman: virtuous, self-sacrificing, and loyal, embodied most powerfully in the figure of Vihara Maha Devi, to whom Bandaranaike was routinely compared (de Alwis 2004).

Foremost among historical role models for Sinhala womanhood, Vihara Maha Devi has been described as “a woman without blemish,” “firm in the faith,” and “virtuous” (Seneviratne 1969). As both the mother of King Duttugemunu¹ and an enduring symbol of patriotic sacrifice, she has been repeatedly invoked in public discourse, from colonial-era editorials to post-independence nationalist protests, to represent a model of ideal femininity, the “Moral Mother”. A woman who nurtures heroic sons for the nation, subordinates herself to the preservation of country, race, and religion, and exercises her influence only within the boundaries of maternal morality (de Alwis 2004). Although women’s role in Sri Lankan society has historically been more complex, this gendered nationalist narrative has nonetheless significantly shaped dominant understandings of women’s participation in public life, where it has often been valued symbolically rather than substantively.

¹ King Duttugemunu, who ruled the Anuradhapura Kingdom from 161–137 BCE, is remembered in Sri Lankan historical chronicles for defeating King Elara and bringing the island under a single ruler. Within Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist narratives, he is often portrayed as a heroic defender of the nation and Buddhism. Consequently, contemporary politicians frequently invoke his image to symbolise strong leadership, national unity, and the protection of national sovereignty.

But, despite this lineage of symbolic reverence, the actual presence of women in formal politics remains disproportionately low. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, only 5.4% of elected members were women (IPU 2025a). Although this figure rose to 9.8% in 2024, it is still far below an adequate representation, particularly in a country where women constitute 51.61% of the population (IPU 2025b; World Bank 2025a). Symbolism, it seems, has not translated into structural access or political equality. Indeed, women's political representation in Sri Lanka, indicated by its position at 163 in the global monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, is among the lowest in the world and lower than its South Asian neighbours, Pakistan and India, who stand at 111 and 149 respectively (IPU 2026).

In recognition of these gaps, the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 introduced a mandatory 25% quota for women at the local government level (Vijayarasa 2020). When implemented in 2018, it marked a dramatic increase in female representation, rising from 2% between 2008 and 2011 (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2012) to nearly 23%, with around 2,000 women elected to office (Manuratne et al. 2024). It also enabled many women with no prior political experience and no familial political backgrounds to enter local government (Peiris and Lekamwasam 2021). Additionally, the quota facilitated the inclusion of Muslim women who were the most underrepresented in the local government, with there being only three female Muslim councillors prior to 2018 (Kodikara 2023). But the introduction of quotas has not dismantled the structural power imbalances within the political landscape. Women remain dependent on male-dominated party hierarchies to secure nominations. Gatekeeping remains rampant with reports of party officials demanding sexual favours for nominations, illustrating the exploitative dynamics women must navigate (Munasinghe and Ariyaratne 2019).

Quotas, therefore, offer a structural opening for women's political participation and have succeeded in increasing the number of women in elected office globally and in Sri Lanka (Rai 2016; Manuratne et al. 2024). However, they do not automatically lead to empowerment, influence, or meaningful engagement in governance. Many women continue to encounter barriers both during candidacy and after election, including institutionalised sexism, tokenism, and exclusion from decision-making (Vijayarasa 2020). The effect of the quota system on substantive representation thus remains ambiguous.

While there has been increasing academic attention to the design and implementation of gender quotas, there remains a significant gap in research examining how women elected following the introduction of such quotas navigate deeply patriarchal and male-dominated political environments in Sri Lanka. In particular, little is known about how informal institutional practices, such as gatekeeping, gendered expectations, and resistance from male colleagues, impact women's ability to participate meaningfully and exercise authority.

It is therefore necessary to move beyond numbers and explore the lived experiences of the women who entered politics following this quota to assess whether this policy intervention has led to meaningful transformations or merely added new symbolic figures to a long legacy of reverence without real power.

This research thus aims to answer the following questions: What kinds of institutional and socio-cultural barriers did women face during campaigning and after being elected? To what extent has the quota created space for substantive participation, and how do women perceive their roles and effectiveness within local councils?

Based on a literature review of secondary sources and primary data from 40 qualitative interviews, this study explores the institutional dynamics and socio-political challenges women representatives encountered following their entry to local government in 2018, analysing their experiences through the lens of feminist institutionalism. This theoretical framework helps illuminate how both formal rules and informal norms within political institutions can shape, constrain, or enable women's political trajectories, revealing the often-hidden mechanisms that govern participation, inclusion, and authority.

Following this introduction, the paper examines the historical context of women's political participation in Sri Lanka. This section explores how gendered expectations have shaped women's access to political power, focusing on the role of patriarchal gaze in the nationalist discourse and the distinction between symbolic and substantive representation. The next section outlines the conceptual framework of the study, drawing on feminist institutionalism to analyse how formal and informal institutional norms shape women's political participation. This is followed by a discussion of the research methodology, which is based on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with women elected to the local government in

2018. The subsequent section examines the key challenges faced by women during and after the local government election, analysing barriers encountered within political parties, local councils, and the broader sphere of family and society. The paper then explores how women navigated and negotiated these constraints in their political work. The final sections present the study's conclusion and outline recommendations for key stakeholders, including the government, political parties, local authorities, the Election Commission, and civil society organisations.

Chapter 2

Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka: A Historical Context

In March 1931, women's rights activists in Sri Lanka secured suffrage for women over the age of 21, marking a significant milestone in women's struggle for political participation. Yet, at the first election held under universal suffrage in June 1931, no females ultimately contested. While a few had initially put their names forward, they withdrew prior to election day (de Alwis and Jayawardena 2023). The *Ceylon Observer* remarked sarcastically that "*for present, domestic budgets should present a more immediate problem for the wives of public officers than the budget which future ministers will frame.*" (Ceylon Observer 1931). But what was overlooked by this newspaper is that two of the women who attempted to contest were the wives of government doctors, who were compelled to withdraw following regulations issued in January 1931 that prohibited the wives of government servants from standing for election. It was only later that year, in November 1931, that the first woman, Adeleine Molamure, entered the State Council (de Alwis and Jayawardena 2023). While this marked an important symbolic breakthrough, women's entry into formal politics in Sri Lanka remained limited and closely tied to elite and socially sanctioned pathways. This pattern was further reinforced in the decades that followed, culminating in the appointment of Sirimavo Bandaranaike as the world's first female prime minister. However, despite these landmark moments, women's overall political representation has remained consistently low, suggesting that such achievements did not translate into broader structural change in women's access to political power. These early patterns of restricted and elite entry were closely intertwined with gender norms that associated women with the domestic sphere while positioning politics as a male domain. The following section thus examines how these dynamics were shaped through nationalist discourse and the patriarchal gaze, and how they continue to inform the distinction between symbolic and substantive representation in Sri Lanka.

Patriarchal Gaze and National Identity

Scholarly debates on women's political participation in Sri Lanka often highlight a striking paradox. Despite the symbolic presence of high-profile women in positions of power, such as the premiership and presidency, structural barriers have

continued to exclude women from meaningful representation (Jayawardena 1986; Kodikara 2009). Elite, dynastic pathways have dominated access to office, masking the near absence of women outside political dynasties in decision-making spaces (Jayawardena 1986). It is against this backdrop that the 25% local government quota, implemented in 2018, has been heralded as a structural attempt to expand women's participation, though it has been met with considerable resistance in practice.

Women's access to political power in Sri Lanka has deep historical roots shaped by kinship and privilege. Historical records show that in ancient times, queens such as Kuveni, Anula Devi, Soma Devi and Lilavati ruled the country and, in some accounts, led armies into battle (Jayawardena 1986). The case of Queen Anula, who is said to have ascended the throne after a series of political manoeuvres, highlights the extent to which women could exercise authority at the highest levels of governance. However, the manner in which she is represented in chronicles such as the *Mahavamsa*,² often as immoral or deviant,³ also reflects a discomfort with female authority that exceeded accepted gender norms.

Thus, it is apparent that Sri Lanka's gender order does not neatly conform to what has been described as a "classic patriarchy" in other parts of South Asia (Kandiyoti 1991). Evidence from the pre-colonial period also suggests that Sinhalese women were not uniformly confined to the domestic sphere, as they had access to property, retained claims to family patrimony, and participated in economic and social life beyond the household. These patterns indicate that gender relations in Sri Lanka, while hierarchical, did not operate through the same rigid structures of seclusion and control observed elsewhere in the region (Jayawardena 2002).

However, this does not imply the absence of gender hierarchy. Rather, Sri Lanka's historical experience points to a context in which women's participation in public and political life was possible, yet remained mediated by expectations of male authority and social respectability. It is within this tension that later nationalist

2 This is an ancient Buddhist text written in Pali, which is considered to be one of the earliest historical records of Sri Lanka. However, as it was written by a Buddhist monk, it tends to place more focus on the history of Buddhism and dynastic succession, rather than political or social history.

3 Queen Anula of Anuradhapura is the first recorded queen regent of Sri Lanka who ruled the country from 47 to 42 BCE. According to the *Mahavamsa* and the *Dipavamsa*, she was the consort of King Chora Naga, whom the chronicles claim she poisoned. Afterwards, records indicate that she poisoned at least four other husbands and consorts, before eventually governing the country on her own.

discourses further consolidated gendered ideals, increasingly associating women with the private sphere while simultaneously symbolically elevating their role within the nation (Jayawardena 2002).

This dynamic is also evident in the entry of early female legislators such as Naysum Saravanamuttu and Adeline Molamure, where women's access to political office was often facilitated through familial lineage and elite status rather than independent political mobilisation (Jayawardena 1986). This "widow-wife-daughter" pattern persisted into the modern era, where the few women who successfully entered the political arena often did so through familial ties, particularly following the deaths of male relatives. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, for instance, became prime minister following her husband's assassination, while her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga entered politics after the death of her husband, presidential hopeful Vijaya Kumaratunga. In these cases, political legitimacy was symbolically transferred through male lineage, reinforcing the notion that women's political roles were contingent upon their relationships to powerful men rather than their own political agency (Jayawardena 1986).

This legacy continues to shape women's entry into politics today. Many female councillors and parliamentarians emerge from established political families that provide financial backing and access to entrenched support networks, while independent female candidates often struggle to secure nominations or resources. Electoral success in contemporary Sri Lanka still depends on the dual requirements of "money and muscle," both of which remain largely controlled by men. Thus, in instances where women have not entered politics "over the dead bodies" of their male relatives, their political advancement has largely depended on male patronage and kinship ties. In this sense, women enter politics not only through patriarchal structures but also within the constraints these very structures impose (Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003).

While dynastic entry into politics is a common phenomenon across South Asia, Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara (2003) observe that in Sri Lanka, this trend has not been confined to elite families. Owing to the country's volatile political climate, marked by recurrent political assassinations at national, provincial, and local levels, widows, mothers, and daughters have entered politics at all tiers of government, often as successors to slain male relatives.

Yet, kinship-based entry has not always been contingent on male death. In some cases, wives and daughters have entered politics while their husbands or fathers remained politically active. For instance, Naysum Saravanamuttu contested the 1931 election after her husband lost his civic rights and was unseated from his political position (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2012). This marked the emergence of what scholars describe as “couple politics,” a pattern that became more pronounced with the establishment of provincial councils. Male parliamentarians strategically nominated their wives to these bodies to consolidate their regional power bases (Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003), illustrating how women’s political presence often functioned as an extension of male control rather than as an expression of autonomous agency.

However, earlier generations of women politicians, particularly those active between the 1930s and 1950s, demonstrate a different trajectory. While some of them were married to prominent male politicians, their political identities were not reducible to these relationships. They had engaged in activism and public service long before marriage and maintained independent political convictions. For example, Vivienne Gunawardena⁴ was not only an outspoken critic of patriarchy but also known for holding political views that diverged sharply from those of her husband and male relatives in office (Jayawardena 1997). These women thus represented a more substantive form of participation, challenging the patriarchal assumption that female politicians were mere appendages of their husbands.

However, as Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara (2003) note, this earlier generation stands in stark contrast to many present-day “proxy” politicians, women who occupy office nominally but function primarily as stand-ins for their husbands or male relatives. Such women often lack political autonomy or ideological commitment of their own, yet take pride in their association with male power, reflecting the continued endurance of patriarchal patronage in Sri Lankan politics.

Jayawardena (1986) offers a compelling explanation for this continued political subordination of women in Sri Lanka by highlighting the role of education in reinforcing rather than disrupting traditional gender roles. She argues that while women were granted access to education, the process itself functioned to socialise

4 She was a prominent socialist politician who was part of Sri Lanka’s first political party; Lanka Sama Samaja Party, becoming a Municipal Councillor in 1950 and a Member of Parliament between 1956-60, 1964-5 and 1970-7. She also served as the Junior Minister of Health.

them into roles that were only superficially distinct from those prescribed by traditional society. In other words, the education system did not equip women to challenge patriarchal structures but instead reproduced them in more modernised forms. Furthermore, Jayawardena (1986) contends that because Sri Lankan women were not subjected to overtly harsh practices, such as sati or child marriage, which marked parts of neighbouring South Asia, they did not develop a mass movement for emancipation that sought to transform the underlying social order. While the country's comparatively progressive gender indicators in education and health, particularly high female literacy rates, low maternal mortality, and high female life expectancy,⁵ along with the relative absence of overtly restrictive practices, projected an image of gender equality, this did not mean the absence of patriarchy; rather, it operated in more subtle and socially embedded forms (Jayawardena 1986). This lack of overt conflict created conditions in which some women were able to enter professional and even political spaces, including the emergence of women in the highest political offices, such as a female prime minister and president, without disturbing the deep-seated patterns of gendered subordination. This historical pattern of elite access, reinforced by educational and social norms, contributed to the formation of nationalist discourses that continue to shape and constrain women's place in the political sphere today. However, these social achievements have not translated into broader gender equality, as Sri Lanka continues to report low female labour force participation and limited female political representation (World Bank 2025b).

This resistance to women's political participation is deeply rooted in cultural and nationalist discourses that define women's roles within society. As de Alwis (2002) has argued, while the formulation and content of debates surrounding female political participation have shifted over time, the "primary premise" underpinning these discourses has not changed. Sri Lankan women, whether Sinhala, Tamil, or Muslim, continue to be constructed as reproducers, nurturers, and custodians of 'tradition', 'culture', 'community', and 'nation'.

Within this broader framework, Sinhala nationalism in particular has long idealised the woman as modest, chaste, ignorant of the world beyond the home,

5 Recent data continues to reflect this pattern. Statistics from 2023 reveal that the female literacy rate in Sri Lanka remains very high, estimated at over 92% for adult females (aged 15 and above), while the maternal mortality rate continues to remain low at 18 deaths per 100,000 live births (World Bank 2025b).

obedient to their husbands, and devoted to their families (Marecek 2000). Within such narratives, women are seen as symbols of nationhood, embodying the nation's honour and purity or as the property of the national collective that must be guarded and controlled (Enloe 2014; Jayawardena and de Alwis 1996). These portrayals strip women of political subjectivity, casting them as cultural icons rather than political actors and reinforcing hierarchical gender roles that confine them to the domestic sphere.

Colonialism reinforced these divides by bringing forth ideas of Victorian morality into Sri Lankan society. These ideals, combined with the influence of Christian patriarchal norms and the emergence of nineteenth-century Sinhala Buddhist nationalist thoughts, contributed to the formation of a notion of gendered respectability that produced submissive feminine subjects (Jayaweera 1990; de Alwis 1997). For instance, literature produced by Christian missionary workers during the colonial period reveals that they considered converted Sinhalese women to be *“more intelligent, decent in outward appearance and more moral than others”* (Selkirk 1844, 324). According to de Alwis (1997), the term ‘outward appearance’ was often embellished with words such as “decent”, “domestic”, “modest”, “gentle”, “simple”, “submissive” and “shy”. This illustrates how Victorian ideals emphasised women's roles as modest, morally upright guardians of the household, thereby associating femininity with domesticity and moral virtue. In response to colonial domination, nationalist ideologies romanticised “tradition” and further reinforced a gendered division of space: the feminised private sphere versus the masculinised public sphere (de Alwis 1995–96). Women were expected to preserve cultural values within the home, while political power remained a male domain (Marecek 2000). Through this process, women came to be positioned as guardians of communal honour, making their social worth dependent on the maintenance of moral respectability.

Thus, women were compelled to enter public spaces cloaked in the respectability of wifehood, motherhood, or widowhood (de Alwis 1995). The nationalist construction of the “respectable woman” as a good wife and mother subjected women's dress, speech, and conduct to intense moral scrutiny. Those who transgressed the boundaries of what was deemed proper or modest risked public humiliation, character assassination, and moral condemnation (Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003).

Feminist scholars argue that for women's needs and interests to be truly recognised and respected, they must be included in the nation not as passive symbols, but as speaking subjects with political agency (Marecek 2000). Yet nationalist portrayals of women continue to reinforce hierarchical gender relations, drawing authority from patriarchal social structures that sustain women's subordination and marginalisation (Qamar 2023). Within this framework, women who defy domestic norms or enter political life face moral and sexual stigmatisation (Marecek 2000). As Yuval-Davis (1997) notes, women are cast as the biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, a role that entrenches restrictive ideas about their "proper" place in society.

Even women from privileged backgrounds who enter political office are not immune to these dynamics. They often become targets of moral attacks and character assassinations, particularly those questioning their sexual virtue, strategies that also serve as warnings to other women contemplating public life (Marecek 2000). This exposes the Catch-22 that women in politics face; respectability is demanded as a condition for entering the public sphere, yet it is impossible to preserve once they are there (de Alwis 1995). Malathi de Alwis (1995, 150) interprets this paradox in the context of nationalism and male dominance as "*the patriarchal gaze of the nation...that constantly seeks to scrutinise the under-belly of respectability*".

This patriarchal gaze continues to sustain a political culture that regards politics as a male domain, and women's entry into public life, including politics, is regarded as a transgression of their socially prescribed role (Marecek 2000).

While these patterns have historically shaped women's access to political office in Sri Lanka, recent developments suggest that they may not be entirely fixed. As illustrated above, in the decades following independence, women's entry into Parliament was largely mediated through kinship ties, as wives, daughters, or widows of male politicians, and remained closely tied to elite political networks. Electoral politics also tended to reproduce the same set of political actors, with familiar figures re-entering Parliament across election cycles, often shifting party affiliations but retaining their political presence. The 2024 general election, however, marked a notable shift, not only in the number of women elected to Parliament but also in the pathways through which they entered politics. More importantly, many of these women did not emerge from established political

families, particularly those representing the ruling party, signalling a break from earlier trends where political lineage functioned as a primary entry point. A considerable proportion were educated professionals, and the majority were first-time parliamentarians, suggesting that access to political office is no longer confined to elite, family-based networks.

This shift was further highlighted by the election of a Malaiyaha woman without any political lineage, marking an expansion in both the social and ethnic profile of women in Parliament. The presence of women from diverse professional backgrounds, including lawyers, teachers, activists, entrepreneurs, academics, and sociologists, reflects a broadening of the types of expertise and experiences entering formal politics. Among them was Dr Harini Amarasuriya, who became the first female prime minister to hold a doctorate in Sri Lanka, symbolising this transition towards professionalised political entry (Parliament of Sri Lanka 2026a). While it remains to be seen whether these changes will translate into sustained transformation, they point to a potential reconfiguration of the structural pathways through which women access political office in Sri Lanka.

A similar, though more cautious, shift can also be observed at the local government level. Preliminary data from the 2025 local government elections indicate that women's representation has increased to approximately 24%,⁶ compared to 23% following the 2018 elections. While these figures suggest a modest upward trend, they remain provisional, as results have yet to be confirmed due to pending cases and unresolved appointments across several local authorities. As such, while the increase points to the continued impact of the quota system in improving women's numerical representation, it remains unclear whether this will translate into more substantive forms of political participation at the local level.

Symbolic vs. Substantive Representation

Within Sri Lanka's nationalist and patriarchal frameworks that define women as cultural symbols, questions arise over whether increased female presence in politics genuinely shifts power relations or merely reproduces existing hierarchies. As women step into public life, they continue to encounter moral scrutiny, institutional

⁶ Assistant Commissioner of Local Authorities, personal communication with author, 30 March 2026. The figures are provisional due to pending cases and unresolved appointments.

resistance, and entrenched gender norms. In this context, the distinction between presence and influence becomes crucial for assessing the outcomes of measures like Sri Lanka's 25% local government quota.

To explore this, it is necessary to clarify what political representation entails. Political representation is rooted in the principle that sovereignty is exercised through institutions intended to reflect the diversity of the population. An ideal democratic system would ensure that women are represented in equal or near equal numbers, with both their shared and gender specific interests effectively addressed (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2012). Pitkin (1967) identified four forms of representation: formal, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive. Formal representation refers to the processes that determine how representatives are selected; descriptive representation measures the numerical presence of women in political bodies; symbolic representation focuses on the meanings attached to women's presence, and substantive representation refers to the degree to which representatives actively advance the interests of those they represent (Pitkin 1967; Childs and Krook 2009). Pitkin (1967) regarded substantive representation as the "one true type", since it demands that representatives' actions align with the constituents' needs.

Yet, despite a growing body of literature emphasising the importance of substantive representation, female political presence in Sri Lanka has remained strikingly low since independence. As shown in Table 1, female representation at the national level did not exceed 6.5% in the decades following independence, despite Sri Lanka's frequent reference to electing the world's first female prime minister and later a female president. Even with recent increases to 9.8%, representation remains markedly low relative to women's share of the population. A similar pattern is observed at the local government level. As illustrated in Table 2, female representation did not exceed 2.5% prior to the introduction of the gender quota in 2018, highlighting the marginal presence of women within formal political institutions. In such contexts, where women's presence remains limited, their inclusion risks being reduced to a largely symbolic exercise rather than a substantive transformation of political power.

Table 1: Female Representation at the Parliamentary Level from 1947 to 2024

Legislature	Year	Total Seats	Female MPs	% of Female Representation
House of Representatives (1 st Parliament)	1947	101	3	3.0
House of Representatives (2 nd Parliament)	1952	101	2	2.0
House of Representatives (3 rd Parliament)	1956	101	4	4.0
House of Representatives (4 th Parliament)	1960 (March)	157	3	1.9
House of Representatives (5 th Parliament)	1960 (August)	157	3	1.9
House of Representatives (6 th Parliament)	1965	157	6	3.8
House of Representatives (7 th Parliament)	1970	157	6	3.8
National State Assembly ⁷	1972	168	6	3.6
National State Assembly	1977	168	5	3.0
8 th Parliament	1978	168	11	6.5
9 th Parliament	1989	225	13	5.8
10 th Parliament	1994	225	12	5.3
11 th Parliament	2000	225	9	4.0
12 th Parliament	2001	225	10	4.4
13 th Parliament	2004	225	14	6.2

⁷ Under the 1972 Constitution, the National Assembly replaced the House of Representatives as the legislature of Sri Lanka.

14 th Parliament	2010	225	13	5.8
15 th Parliament	2015	225	13	5.8
16 th Parliament	2020	225	12	5.3
17 th Parliament	2024	225	22	9.8

Source: Compiled by the author based on Parliament of Sri Lanka 2026a; Parliament of Sri Lanka 2026b, and Department of Census and Statistics 2026.

Table 2: Female Representation at the Local Government Level from 1966 to 2018

Year	% of Female Representation
1966	1.5
1970	2.1
1979	2.5
1982	1.5
1991	1.7
1997	1.9
2006	1.8
2008 -2011 ⁸	2.0
2018	23

Source: Compiled by the author based on Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2020, People's Action for Free and Fair Election 2023

However, symbolic representation is itself often critiqued for reinforcing, rather than dismantling, traditional gender norms. Gamson (1997) and Lombardo and Meier (2014) note that it can uphold gendered divisions of labour by casting men as public actors and women as domestic caretakers. Meier and Severs (2018, 35) go further, arguing that symbolic representation may enshrine gender-specific roles and power hierarchies, providing only the illusion of equality. A related concern is tokenism: Kanter (1977) observes that women who are vastly outnumbered in political spaces are often treated as representatives of their gender rather than as full political actors. This leaves institutional culture firmly in male hands, limiting women's substantive influence (Childs and Krook 2008).

8 This time frame was used because local authorities were functioning with members elected in 2008 (9 local authorities in Batticaloa), 2009 (one local authority each in Jaffna and Vavuniya respectively) and 2011 (322 local authorities) (Kodikara 2012).

But these critiques of symbolic representation also raise broader questions about what is actually expected of women's political inclusion. In particular, there is often an assumption that gender quotas will lead to substantive changes in democratic practices once women reach a critical mass within legislative bodies. These expectations include a greater sense of empowerment, the acquisition of skills and knowledge related to democratic citizenship and leadership, and increased attention to women's issues (Lupien 2020, citing Altschuler and Corrales 2012). However, such expectations risk placing a disproportionate burden on women's political participation. As Kodikara (2023) argues, just as men are routinely elected to political office irrespective of the quality of their representation, women, too, should have the right to representation regardless of whether they substantively transform democratic outcomes. To suggest otherwise is to hold women to a higher standard than that applied to men.

Moreover, it is also important to recognise that quotas operate within existing political structures, particularly through political parties, which shape and often constrain women's participation. Women politicians are accountable to party manifestos and programmes (Cornwall and Goetz 2005), but they are also subject to informal institutional norms, both of which can limit their agency. These constraints help explain why increased numerical representation does not automatically translate into substantive influence. Comparative evidence from South Asia further illustrates these dynamics. In Tamil Nadu, India, for instance, the gender-based reservation policy significantly increased women's presence in local councils, sometimes up to 50%, yet many remained excluded from decision-making networks dominated by men (Patel et al. 2021). Similar patterns emerge in Pakistan, where women are rarely included in key party committees, such as those drafting party manifestos, limiting their influence on core policy agendas. Instead, they are often deployed for voter mobilisation and public demonstrations rather than substantive policy work (Naseer et al. 2023). In Bangladesh, female MPs lack budgetary allocations, with many treated as second-tier parliamentarians or as a "vote bank" for the treasury benches (UN Women 2021). Across these countries, quota-elected women are frequently marginalised from the arenas where core decisions are made. This aligns with token theory, which shows how minority status combined with low ascribed social status can limit authority, even in leadership roles (Kanter 1977). In deeply patriarchal political systems, the symbolic presence of women rarely disrupts entrenched power hierarchies and may instead leave institutional control firmly in male hands.

However, this is not a reason to reject quotas. Rather, it is necessary to view quotas and descriptive representation as an initial step towards achieving more substantive forms of political participation. Comparative evidence, for instance, suggests that some women are able to navigate these institutional constraints strategically. Patel et al. (2021) highlight that women have, at times, leveraged family ties, community standing, or even traditional gender roles to gain legitimacy, suggesting that symbolic positioning can sometimes be used to carve out limited, though constrained spaces of influence. In Sri Lanka, this strategy has been most visible through Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who rose to power as the widow of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike rather than through structural reforms aimed at broadening women's political access (Jayawardena 1986; Kodikara 2009). Defying both political odds and claims that she had "*presided over nothing fiercer than the kitchen fire*", she transitioned from an aristocratic housewife to three-time Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (Gooneratne 1986, 160). Her rise was facilitated by her elite aristocratic background and by the nationalist gender ideology that Partha Chatterjee (1993) describes as that of a "new woman", educated and capable of moving in public life, yet symbolically rooted in tradition. This framing reassured male political peers and the electorate, allowing her to enter public life without fundamentally challenging patriarchal norms. Sirimavo herself articulated this conservatism, asserting that women's 'servitude' to men was voluntary and rooted in Buddhist tradition, and that neither men nor women were considered superior to one another. Such statements, while seemingly egalitarian, reinforced culturally sanctioned gender roles and legitimised the patriarchal family as the "sacred unit" (Rambukwella and Ruwanpura 2016). As Kodikara (2009) notes, kinship-based political entry rarely translates into structural change for women as a group, keeping their political roles tethered to family loyalty rather than gender-conscious agendas.

The above example highlights Phillips's (1995) argument that the mere presence of women in office does not amount to true representation. The gap between descriptive presence and substantive influence is especially pronounced when women enter politics via tokenistic or familial routes, which rarely dismantle the institutional barriers sustaining gender inequality (Patel et al., 2021). While symbolic representation may produce high-profile success stories, without deeper institutional reform, it risks reinforcing the very norms it appears to challenge.

For women to move from being symbolic figures to substantive political actors, structural transformation is essential. This requires deliberate efforts to reform

political institutions that continue to privilege male dominance and informal power networks. Bridging this gap requires examining the institutional cultures that shape women's political roles. Even when quotas raise the number of women in office, patriarchal norms and informal power networks can persist, undermining women's authority and decision-making capacity. Feminist institutionalism offers a framework to analyse these processes by showing how both formal rules and informal norms embed gendered power into political structures (Mackay, Kenny and Chappell 2010; Krook and Mackay 2011).

Chapter 3

Conceptual Framework: Feminist Institutionalism

While symbolic and substantive representation focus on *who* is present in political spaces and *what* they do, feminist institutionalism shifts attention to the institutional rules, norms, and practices that shape those outcomes. In contexts such as Sri Lanka, where formal mechanisms and informal traditions intertwine, this lens is particularly valuable for revealing how gendered power is embedded in political life.

Political institutions, often assumed to be gender-neutral, have historically been built through the exclusion of women and continue to reflect deeply entrenched gender biases (Witz and Savage 1992; Goetz 2007, 47). As a result, men are not only overrepresented but are also perceived as inherently more legitimate political actors (Duerst-Lahti 2008, 182). This normalisation of male dominance is sustained not solely through coercion, but also through cultural associations between leadership and masculinity (Hooper 2001, 41), reinforced by organisational rules, routines, and discourses that render women's perspectives invisible (Acker 1992, 567; Hawkesworth 2005, 147). Central to this is what Chappell (2006) terms the *gendered logic of appropriateness*, which is a set of formal and informal rules, norms, and practices that delineate "acceptable" masculine and feminine behaviours for political actors. Such logic, historically shaped by male dominance in political and bureaucratic spaces, produces gendered effects that both reflect and reinforce broader societal and political gender expectations. While some of these rules are codified, many are embedded in informal routines that often go unquestioned and are treated as 'natural' (Chappell 2006). They are maintained through subtle forms of exclusion, resistance, or even symbolic violence against those, often women, who challenge the prevailing gender order, serving the interests of powerful male elites who benefit most from maintaining the institutional status quo (Holmes 2020; Chappell 2006).

Although women have gradually entered these male-dominated arenas (Witz and Savage 1992), their presence often disrupts existing norms, exposing the extent of male control (Lovenduski 2005, 147). Achieving numerical gender parity alone, therefore, does not guarantee institutional transformation (Chappell and Waylen 2013). In the political sphere, the gendered logic of appropriateness has traditionally

manifested through the assumption that men inherently possess the rationality, authority, and temperament to lead, while women are relegated to supportive or auxiliary roles (Lovenduski 2005, 147). As Connell's (2002) concept of the *gender regime* illustrates, such arrangements create institutional environments in which "many men are comfortable and most women are not" (Lovenduski 2005). As Hooper (2001, 52) observes, simply replacing men with women in traditionally masculine roles rarely challenges the gendered symbolism or embedded practices of these institutions.

A core insight of feminist institutionalism is that formal and informal institutions operate in tandem. Formal institutions are codified rules, consciously designed and clearly specified (Lauth 2000, 24; Lowndes 2005, 292). Informal institutions, by contrast, consist of traditions, customs, and norms that persist over time (Pejovich 1999, 166; Helmke and Levitsky 2004, 727) and are often more resistant to change precisely because they are unwritten and culturally embedded (Helmke and Levitsky 2006). These informal norms frequently operate to the detriment of women, even when formal frameworks appear inclusive. Understanding the interaction between the two is crucial, as formal rules may promise equality, while informal practices can subvert or dilute their impact.

In Sri Lanka, these informal norms are not merely limited to political institutions but also operate through family and community, as they regulate women's political participation through norms of respectability and domesticity. According to de Alwis (1988), the domestic sphere has historically been regarded as women's primary domain, reflecting what Herath (2015) describes as a constellation of "traditional beliefs, attitudes and social practices" that shape women's social positioning. These norms are reproduced within the patriarchal family structures, where girls are socialised differently from boys and where political behaviour itself is often mediated through male authority (Herath 2015). For instance, it is not uncommon for wives to be expected to "vote for the same party as the husband" (Peiris 2022), reinforcing the idea that women's political preferences are derivative rather than autonomous. Similarly, while motherhood is culturally revered in Sri Lanka, women's intellectual and political capacities are frequently trivialised, often reduced to the notion that their wisdom extends only as far as "*the length of a kitchen spoon*", reflecting a deeply sexist stereotype that limits women's intellectual capacity to domestic concerns (Attanayake 2008). Such expectations not only circumscribe women's perceived competence but also shape the level of

familial support available to those who seek to enter public life, where, as noted by UNFPA (2025), women often encounter resistance within their own households.

Thus, when it comes to the political field, the family and community's traditional conception of women's role serves as a significant impediment to the emergence of female candidates. Women's mobility, public presence, and participation in late-night political activities are subject to scrutiny not only within party structures but also within the women's own households and local communities (Conway, Ahern and Steuernagel 2004; Dolan, Deckman and Swers 2010). In this way, the *gendered logic of appropriateness* is reproduced across multiple institutional sites, demonstrating that political institutions are embedded within broader social relations that shape who can legitimately occupy positions of power.

This interaction between formal inclusion and informal constraint is similarly observed within party politics, where informal gatekeeping often undermines formal reforms. As gatekeepers of elected office, political parties determine candidate selection, resource allocation, and access to decision-making networks (Norris and Lovenduski 1995). In Sri Lanka, these gatekeeping functions are embedded within a deeply patriarchal framework that reflects broader social norms confining women to domestic roles and questioning their political capabilities (Kodikara 2009; Kanold 2020; Herath 2015). Party structures are highly centralised and shaped by male-dominated networks, which limit women's access to leadership and decision-making positions (Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003). While women's involvement and membership in political parties often occur through women's wings, scholars note that these structures primarily serve the interests of male party leadership rather than functioning as genuine pathways for women's political advancement. Political parties publicly promote women's wings that are ideologically aligned with the broader party apparatus, yet these bodies have historically been used to mobilise the female electorate during elections and to provide auxiliary support to male politicians (Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003). As De Silva (1995) observes, their main activities involved engaging in welfare work, income-generation initiatives, providing behind-the-scenes support at meetings, and swelling the ranks at rallies. Although programmes such as poverty-alleviation initiatives implemented through the Kantha Samiti attract large numbers of rural women, membership in these committees does not translate into opportunities for mainstream political participation or leadership. Consequently, women are often relegated to supportive or grassroots-mobilisation roles for male

leaders rather than being positioned to influence party strategy or manifestos (Kodikara 2008; Manuratne et al. 2024; Pinto-Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003).

Gallagher's (1988) characterisation of candidate selection as the 'secret garden of politics', shaped more by patronage and personal connections than by formal procedures, is as relevant to the present-day context of Sri Lanka as it was when the term was first coined. Party leaders frequently favour family members, long-standing loyalists, or relatives of deceased politicians, producing the well-documented "widows, wives, and daughters" pattern of female entry into politics (Manuratne et al. 2024; Jayawardena 1986; Kodikara 2009). While this practice has facilitated the inclusion of some women, it often bypasses other qualified female members and reinforces the notion of women as political proxies rather than independent actors (Wickramasinghe and Kodikara 2012).

Parties thus function as gendered organisations (Bjarnegård 2013; Kittilson 2013), where the "ideal candidate" is typically male (Chapman 1993; Lovenduski and Norris 1989), and women are often considered secondary choices unless they bring familial political capital or name recognition. The lack of accountability mechanisms within parties, for instance, to address harassment complaints or ensure equitable resource distribution further entrenches these dynamics, sustaining women's symbolic presence while obstructing substantive influence (Khan and Naqvi 2020). Similar patterns occur across South Asia. In India's panchayat quota system, women are often elected as proxies for male relatives; in Pakistan, reserved seats have not dismantled exclusionary party networks; and in Nepal, local governance reforms increased female participation but left patriarchal hierarchies intact (Patel et al. 2021; Naseer et al. 2023; Giri 2024; Norris and Lovenduski 1995).

Institutional change, therefore, requires addressing both formal rules and informal norms together. Formal mechanisms such as electoral systems and gender quotas can reshape party practices in gendered ways (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). Electoral systems influence 'who' parties consider to be a "viable" candidate, often privileging men, while quotas compel parties to explicitly identify and promote suitable women. Yet feminist institutionalists caution that new formal rules are often *layered* onto old institutions without displacing them, or are *converted* to serve the interests of existing power holders (Holmes 2020). Without tackling the informal cultures that underpin political institutions, such as male patronage networks or gender stereotyping, reforms risk remaining symbolic. Sustainable

transformation occurs only when shifts in formal frameworks are matched by changes in the informal institutional logics that govern political life, enabling symbolic inclusion to translate into substantive influence.

Quota Systems and the South Asian Perspective

Building on the feminist institutionalist insight that formal mechanisms can be subverted by informal gendered norms, gender quotas have emerged over the past few decades as one of the most widely adopted strategies for addressing women's underrepresentation in politics, often framed as temporary measures to counter entrenched gender inequalities (Athukorala et al 2021). These quotas typically fall into three categories: legislated candidate quotas, legislated reserved seats, and voluntary political party quotas (Dahlerup et al. 2014). Reserved seats guarantee that a certain portion of seats in legislative bodies are allocated to women, thereby ensuring their election. In contrast, candidate quotas require political parties to nominate a certain percentage or number of female candidates. However, this does not guarantee their electoral success. Voluntary party quotas differ from both systems in that they are not mandated by law. Instead, political parties adopt internal rules committing to nominate a certain proportion of women as candidates. Implementation of these quotas is therefore dependent on the individual political parties (Dahlerup et al. 2014, Athukorala et al. 2021).

Quotas are often introduced with multiple aims: to ensure women's equal participation alongside men; to advance the symbolic status of women as a group; to promote a "woman's perspective" in politics; and to generate a 'role model effect' that expands the pool of talented women for future leadership (Sawer 2000; Childs and Krook 2006; Manuratne et al. 2024). But achieving these intertwined goals is far from guaranteed. Scholars also debate whether numerical gains translate into meaningful and diverse representation or whether they merely result in symbolic or tokenistic inclusion (Bird 2003; Sater 2007; Tripp 2006).

Dahlerup and Gaber (2017) note that quota outcomes depend heavily on broader contextual factors, including electoral systems, political culture, religious norms, the strength of women's organisations, and the nature of democratic institutions. Research has consistently identified three recurring challenges for women elected through quotas. First, tokenism arises when party leaders select women not for

their political competence but because they are perceived as compliant and easily controlled, effectively securing an additional vote for male leadership. Second, marginalisation occurs when women are permitted formal participation but excluded from meaningful leadership roles. Third, invisibilisation, as described by Zetterberg (2009), refers to cases where women hold seats in name but are systematically kept out of legislative processes, thereby exercising little to no substantive power.

Critics further argue that quotas can lead to the selection of elite women, those with strong party loyalty, higher education levels, or familial ties to powerful men, rather than broadening representation to include women from diverse social backgrounds (Bird 2003; Sater 2007; Tripp 2006). Others, however, contend that quotas can open pathways for women from marginalised communities who might otherwise lack the political capital or networks needed to enter electoral politics (Schwartz 2004; Mehta 2002).

Ultimately, as Franceschet, Krook, and Piscopo (2009) argue, quota effectiveness must be assessed not only by the number of women elected but also by whether these reforms disrupt entrenched hierarchies and patterns of domination. From a feminist institutionalist perspective, quotas can be double-edged: while intended to challenge gendered exclusion, they can inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchies when inserted into institutional structures that remain fundamentally patriarchal (Benjamin 2025).

Across South Asia, gender quotas have been implemented in diverse ways, illustrating how institutional design shapes both representation and legitimacy. In India, the 33% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj (local government) institutions has increased women's political visibility and contributed to gradual shifts in community attitudes, though proxy representation where husbands or male relatives act as *de facto* decision-makers remains a challenge (Rai 2005; Mangayarkarasu 2011). In Pakistan, reserved seats for women in national and provincial assemblies have existed since 2002, but these are filled by party appointment rather than direct elections (Rai 2005; Khan and Naqvi 2020). This system reinforces loyalty-based inclusion and limits women's autonomy, with quota-elected women often labelled "second-class members" or "charity seat" occupants (Khan and Naqvi 2020; Rai 2005).

These South Asian cases demonstrate a common tension: while quotas can expand women's presence, their transformative potential is frequently curtailed by party-controlled selection processes, patriarchal norms, and institutional designs that differentiate quota-elected representatives from those elected through general processes. This regional pattern provides an important comparative foundation for understanding how Sri Lanka's quota system has functioned in practice.

Sri Lanka's experience with gender quotas closely reflects these regional dynamics. After decades of advocacy, a quota for women at the local government level⁹ was introduced in 2016, with implementation beginning in 2018. However, the quota did not emerge in isolation; it was the outcome of a series of electoral reforms enacted between 2012 and 2017 (Vijayarasa 2020).

The first reform was the Local Authorities (Elections) Amendment Act No. 22 of 2012, which established a hybrid electoral system combining First-Past-the-Post (FPTP)¹⁰ and Proportional Representation (PR)¹¹ for local government bodies. The significant change made by this reform was the abolishing of the existing 40% mandatory youth quota (in place since 1990) and replacing it with a discretionary provision stipulating that "25 percentum of the total number of candidates and additional persons whose names appear in each nomination paper ... may consist of women and youth", but the combined and voluntary nature of this provision rendered the measure largely ineffective (Vijayarasa 2020).

9 Sri Lanka's local government system constitutes the third and lowest tier of governance, following the central government and provincial councils. Local government bodies, which are known as local authorities, comprise Municipal Councils for larger cities, Urban Councils for medium-sized cities, and Pradeshiya Sabhas for rural areas. There are 341 local authorities, each of which is divided into electoral wards. These may be either single-member wards or multi-member wards. In a single-member ward, one representative is elected to the relevant local authority. Multi-member wards may elect two or three representatives and are typically established where Sinhalese, Tamil, or Muslim communities constitute a minority within a ward but have a sufficiently large population to warrant separate representation.

10 In this system, voters are presented with a list of candidates contesting from a constituency, either as representatives of political parties or as independent candidates, and cast their ballot for one candidate. The candidate who receives the highest number of votes is elected, even if they do not obtain more than 50% of the total votes cast. For example, a candidate can win with 40% of the vote if all other candidates receive fewer votes.

11 Under this system, voters cast their ballot for a political party and seats are allocated to parties in proportion to the share of votes they receive within a multi-member electoral district. Unlike FPTP, where only the candidate with the most votes is elected, PR aims to ensure that the composition of the elected body more closely reflects the preferences of the electorate, allowing smaller parties and minority groups to gain representation according to their level of electoral support.

The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 1 of 2016 substantially increased the total number of seats by one-third, reserving all additional seats exclusively for women on a separate list. This list, commonly referred to as the “independent group list,” was intended to create new entry points for women and can be categorised as a legislated reserved seat quota. The subsequent Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 16 of 2017 further clarified the quota, mandating that “not less than 25 percent” of members in each local authority be women, while also requiring that FPTP nomination papers include at least 10% women and PR lists include not less than 50% women, thus reflecting a legislated candidate quota (Vijayarasa 2020; Athukorala et al. 2021).

Under this system, 60% of seats are filled through the FPTP system, while the remaining 40% are allocated through PR. This means that only the elected members represent specific wards, while those appointed through the PR list do not have a ward-based constituency (Vijayarasa 2020; Athukorala et al 2021).¹²

Accordingly, each political party or independent group is required to submit two nomination papers: one for candidates contesting at the ward level, of which at least 10% must be women, and another for the PR list, which must include not less than 50% women. Where a party becomes entitled to more seats than it has secured through the FPTP system, it is able to nominate additional candidates through the PR list (Vijayarasa 2020; Athukorala et al. 2021).

These reforms resulted in a dual-track system in which women could enter councils as either elected representatives via the FPTP system or appointed members through the women’s list under the PR system. This distinction became significant in practice, as many women appointed through the PR list were selected by party leadership rather than chosen by voters, which shaped their relative power and autonomy within councils (Athukorala et al 2021; Kanold 2020).

¹² During the 2018 local government election, each political party and independent group nominated candidates to contest in each ward. Although voters cast a single vote for a political party or independent group, that vote served two functions. First, it determined the winning candidate in each ward, with the candidate representing the party or group that received the highest number of votes in that ward being elected under the FPTP system. Second, votes were aggregated across the local authority area to determine each party’s overall share of seats, with additional seats allocated through the PR system and filled from the party’s additional nomination list.

However, there were two exceptions to this reform. Firstly, if a political party or an independent group has an overhang where the number of members elected to a local authority exceeds the apportioned number of seats, the quota does not apply. Secondly, if a party or group receives less than 20% of the total votes in a local authority and obtains fewer than three seats, then the quota likewise does not apply for the relevant local government body (Athukorala et al 2021).

Despite the intention to strengthen women's representation, the legal framework created a "highly complicated and little-understood" quota system. Even months after the 2018 elections, stakeholders continued to disagree on the provisions, and inconsistencies persisted in official records. The requirement to submit two lists, contributed to ongoing confusion (Local Authorities [Amendment] Act, No. 16 of 2017) (Vijayarasa 2020). However, the 2018 elections resulted in women constituting 23% of council seats, with 95% of local authorities meeting the 25% quota requirement (Athukorala et al. 2021).

Although the quota resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of women elected, it simultaneously produced a symbolic divide between "regular" and "quota" representatives. Almost all women were elected through the newly created PR list rather than through competitive ward-level contests. Only 6.2% secured seats under the FPTP system (Kodikara 2016, 15; Vijayarasa 2020). This bifurcation reinforced perceptions that quota-elected women were less legitimate, less powerful, and not "real politicians." Informal party and council norms deepened this devaluation (Kodikara 2016; Vijayarasa 2020). As scholars note, the diminished credibility attached to the PR list is one of the most significant barriers to the quota's transformative potential (Vijayarasa 2020). Furthermore, from a democratic perspective, the design of the quota presents limitations, as only 10% of ward nominations are mandated for women, while the majority of seats are allocated through the PR list. This means that women elected through the PR list do not represent a distinct constituency of their own, which can make it more difficult for them to make meaningful contributions and to secure re-election based on their own political standing (Vijayarasa 2020).

Compounding this, the revised laws, which ensure that the bulk of the quota is fulfilled through the PR list, grant party organisers "unrestricted discretionary powers" in selecting candidates for these seats, leading to the nomination of

relatives of party members, commonly described as the “widows, daughters, and wives syndrome” and favouring of women who were perceived to be easily controlled (Vijeyarasa 2020; Manuratne et al. 2024; Kodikara and Samuel 2018). Such practices sidelined experienced women and preserved patronage networks, limiting the quota’s ability to challenge entrenched power structures (Vijeyarasa 2020). This dynamic reflects and reinforces a gendered institutional logic that positions women as political outsiders rather than mainstream actors (Vijeyarasa 2020).

Despite strong advocacy from women’s organisations, political parties in Sri Lanka have often demonstrated ambivalence or outright resistance to increasing women’s representation. While manifestos pledge support for quotas, most senior leaders often dismiss them as “impractical,” while women elected through quota seats face the stigma of being labelled “free-riding members” (“pin members”). This undermines their legitimacy and restricts their ability to carry out substantive work such as infrastructure projects (Manuratne et al. 2024).

Parties routinely comply with quotas in ways that blunt their transformative potential, such as nominating women to unwinnable seats, excluding them from campaign funding, and assigning them “soft” portfolios (Manuratne et al. 2024; Naseer et al. 2023; UN Women 2021; Herath 2021). During the 2018 elections, many women were placed in wards that party organisers believed their parties would lose. These candidates were derogatorily referred to as “Bili Girls”,¹³ a term that is particularly revealing, as it suggests these women were viewed as expendable, included only to meet quota requirements before being “sacrificed” in the electoral contest (Manuratne et al. 2024). This reflects a classic form of tokenism, where institutions meet formal requirements while leaving underlying patriarchal power structures intact (Kanter 1977).

Compared to India and Pakistan, Sri Lanka’s quota system is distinctive in that it created *new* seats for women rather than reallocating existing ones. This design choice deepened perceptions of separation and hampered women’s integration into mainstream political power (Kodikara 2016). Furthermore, according to Kodikara (2023), quotas are generally expected to allocate at least 30% of seats in order to constitute a “critical mass” capable of enabling more substantive and

13 A term that is loosely translated to ‘sacrificial girls’.

transformative change. In the Sri Lankan context, where the quota is currently set at 25%, this threshold has not yet been fully realised, raising questions about the extent to which the quota can achieve its intended outcomes. This Sri Lankan experience also raises broader questions about whether the introduction of a numerical quota without corresponding shifts in party practices or informal norms can meaningfully alter the gendered logic of candidate selection.

Without structural change within political parties and local councils, quotas risk reinforcing rather than dismantling the institutional inequalities they were designed to challenge. This tension between formal reforms and informal resistance provides a crucial lens through which the experiences of women elected to local government in 2018 can be examined, and informs the methodological approach adopted in this study.

Chapter 4

Methodology

Building on this conceptual lens, this study examines how tensions between formal institutional reforms and informal practices are experienced by women in local government. To capture these dynamics, the research adopts a qualitative approach, drawing on in-depth interviews with twenty-six women councillors across ten districts, supplemented by fourteen key informant interviews with academics, activists, and civil society representatives to explore how women elected to local government in 2018 navigate and respond to gendered institutional constraints.

The research participants were selected using a purposive sampling approach, focusing on women elected to local government following the introduction of the 25% gender quota, while a maximum variation strategy was adopted to ensure diverse representation across districts and ethnicities, as shown in Table 3, as well as across different political parties. The sample includes women who entered local councils through both ward-level electoral contests and proportional representation lists, reflecting the multiple pathways through which women gained access to political office in the post-quota context. All councillors were interviewed in person, whereas some key informants, particularly those overseas, were interviewed via Zoom. The interviews were conducted between 2023 and 2025.

Table 3: Distribution of Interviewed Women Councillors by District and Ethnicity

District	Sinhalese	Tamil	Muslim	Other	Total
Baddulla	2	1	0	0	3
Batticaloa	0	2	1	0	3
Colombo	1	0	2	1	4
Galle	2	0	1	0	3
Kandy	1	1	1	0	3
Kegalle	0	0	1	0	1
Mannar	0	3	0	0	3
Polonnaruwa	1	0	0	0	1
Puttalam	0	2	1	0	3
Ratnapura	1	1	0	0	2
Total	8	10	7	1	26

A semi-structured interview guide with open-ended questions was adopted to encourage participants to freely discuss their experiences during election campaigns, post-election challenges, and their perceptions of the quota's impact on substantive political participation. These narratives offered nuanced insight into the complex realities of women's engagement with local government institutions, and the multiple layers of discrimination and resistance they encounter. The interview data were analysed thematically, guided by key concepts from feminist institutionalism, to identify recurring patterns related to institutional barriers, informal practices, and gendered power relations.

Due to the sensitive nature of the data, all participants have been anonymised. Female councillors are referred to using district-based codes (e.g., Colombo 019; Badulla 021), which do not correspond to ward numbers or individual identifiers and are used solely for data management purposes. Similarly, key informants are identified using alphabetical labels (Key Informant A–N), with only broad job descriptions and location descriptors provided. This strategy helped ensure confidentiality while allowing the analysis to highlight patterns and experiences across different districts and parties.

Drawing on these interview narratives, the analysis that follows explores how women navigated the tensions between formal inclusion and informal constraints within local government institutions in practice.

Chapter 5

Challenges Faced by Women During the 2018 Election

The implementation of the 25% quota in 2018 was widely regarded as a historic step towards improving women's political representation in Sri Lanka. In theory, quotas are intended to dismantle barriers to entry and create more equitable opportunities for women in politics (Bystydzienski 1995). Yet, while the quota opened doors for many women who might otherwise have been excluded, their experiences reveal that entry into politics was far from straightforward. As Key Informant M observed, *"While we fought each step of the way to implement this quota, it has not been a bed of roses; women continue to struggle substantially."*¹⁴ This statement captures a recurring theme in the research: although the quota significantly increased women's numerical representation, it has not yet fundamentally altered the deeply entrenched institutional and cultural norms that structure Sri Lanka's political system.

From the perspective of feminist institutionalism, the quota represents a 'formal rule' that was layered onto pre-existing institutional spaces, including political parties and local councils as formal political arenas, and family and community as informal institutional arenas. However, these formal changes often collided with informal practices, gendered norms, and patriarchal power dynamics, limiting women's ability to participate fully and equally. In many cases, the same institutional frameworks, such as gender quotas that were meant to empower women, simultaneously reproduced their marginalisation.

The significance of this marginalisation becomes even more apparent when considered in the context of the role played by local government. Although political discourse in Sri Lanka is largely centred on parliamentary and presidential elections, local authorities constitute the level of government with which citizens interact most directly in their everyday lives. As one councillor observed, *"Local councils are needed for everything from a resident's birth to death. Even before one is born, they need the services of the local council, as it is central to pregnancy and prenatal care"*.¹⁵ This observation highlights the central role of local authorities in delivering essential public services from sanitation, roads, and urban planning to health and

14 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

15 Colombo 019, Colombo district, 22 November 2023.

social welfare. It also reveals why women's meaningful participation within these institutions is critical. Barriers that restrict women's ability to participate fully, therefore, have implications not only for women's political representation but also for their ability to participate meaningfully in decisions that shape the everyday lives of the communities they represent.

The challenges documented in this study thus span the entire political lifecycle, from before nominations to the campaign period and after entering office. Women reported struggling to secure resources and party backing, facing hostility and discrimination within councils, and managing the double burden of domestic responsibilities alongside political life. To better understand how these challenges emerge and operate, the following analysis is organised around three key institutional spaces that shape women's political experiences: political parties, local councils, and the family and community. Examining these spaces together helps reveal how both formal political institutions and broader social structures interact to enable, constrain, and regulate women's participation in local governance.

5.1 Gatekeeping and Marginalisation Within Political Parties

Globally, political parties are recognised as the keystone of modern representative democracy, as they provide citizens with a platform for active political participation and representation within the formal political system (Siriwardhana 2023). However, in the Sri Lankan context, political parties have become increasingly masculinised, informal, and a difficult space for women to navigate (Peiris 2014; Peiris 2018; Uyangoda 2018). They have also been criticised for reinforcing the public–private divide and reproducing gendered divisions of labour within the political arena (Peiris 2014, 49), often confining women to organisational roles such as campaigning, fundraising, and mobilising support (De Silva 1995; Kiribamuna 1999; Liyanage 2018).

Prior to the enactment of the quota, the transition from grassroots civic engagement, such as participation in rural development societies, funeral committees, or Samurdhi organisations, to electoral politics remained rare for women (Uyangoda and de Mel 2012, 22). This suggests that while political parties serve as gateways to political representation, they can simultaneously function as institutions that restrict women's access to political power.

The following section, therefore, examines how such institutional dynamics within political parties are reflected in candidate selection processes, where tokenistic nominations and informal party practices shape women's entry into electoral politics and their survival thereafter.

5.1.1 Candidate Selection and Tokenism

While the quota was introduced with the intention of increasing female participation at the local government level, the reform was often treated by political parties as a “tick-the-box exercise” rather than a substantive commitment to gender inclusion. Women were disproportionately nominated to the 50% bonus seats under the PR list, rather than being nominated to contest the more competitive FPTP seats. As key informant K observed, women's inclusion was thus framed as filling “tokens,” “free seats,” or “bonus seats”, terminology that further diminished their legitimacy and reinforced perceptions that they were present only because of the quota.¹⁶

This tokenistic framing was closely tied to the broader resistance that many political parties expressed towards the quota from the outset. According to Key Informant D, several party leaders operated under the assumption that the quota would never become law, with one leader openly stating that “*our women are not going to be involved in politics*”.¹⁷ Even when informed that failing to include women would invalidate nomination lists, some leaders had insisted they could prevent the quota from being legally enforced or believed they would be able to interfere with its implementation.

As a result, candidate selection frequently occurred at the last minute. Once parties realised they were legally compelled to meet the 25% requirement, they hastily included the names of daughters, wives, or other female relatives of party members, rather than the women who had been working tirelessly for the party at the grassroots level. As Key Informant D noted, these parties sought “placeholders” rather than strong female candidates, because capable women were seen as long-term threats to male dominance within party structures.¹⁸

16 Gender Researcher based overseas, 20 November 2023 (*Online Interview*).

17 Advocacy & Policy Specialist at an INGO based in the Western Province, Colombo district, 16 November 2023.

18 Ibid.

The absence of transparent selection criteria further complicated these dynamics. Merit, education, political experience, or community engagement had little influence over women's nomination prospects, leaving many female party workers with no clear mechanism to request or secure nominations. Even when competent women were nominated, male seat organisers continued to manipulate the process in ways that disadvantaged them. Several key informants described cases where women who had worked for years in their constituencies were denied nominations because organisers feared they would emerge as strong contenders, potentially threatening their own future candidacies. Consequently, experienced women were frequently replaced by politically inexperienced newcomers who posed no challenge to existing hierarchies.

While political parties ultimately complied with the legal requirement to nominate more women, compliance did not fundamentally alter the informal practices governing candidate selection. Instead, parties adapted to the quota in ways that preserved existing power structures. This was evident not only in decisions regarding who was nominated but also in where women were required to contest and the conditions under which they entered politics.

One strategy adopted by political parties was to assign women to unfamiliar or unwinnable wards. By placing women in constituencies where they lacked established community ties or electoral support, parties significantly reduced their chances of success. According to Key Informant M, one councillor from the Colombo district was assigned to a ward with predominantly English-speaking residents, a language she did not speak, precisely because the seat organiser intended to ensure her defeat. Even then, this assignment occurred only after the organiser blocked her initial nomination, prompting party leadership to intervene and place her on the additional list, which she then had to petition in order to be able to contest.¹⁹

Collectively, these practices demonstrate how tokenism functioned in practice during the 2018 election; parties formally complied with the quota while maintaining the patriarchal structure of political institutions by systematically placing women in what party organisers themselves referred to as “unwinnable wards.” Key Informant M also highlighted how parties justified their reluctance to

¹⁹ Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

nominate women by claiming a lack of “dinana jokiyo” (දිනන ජොකියෝ).^{20 21} This logic is not limited to internal party discourse but has also been articulated by senior political actors even prior to the implementation of the quota. For instance, former President Maithripala Sirisena²² remarked that political parties are not concerned with gender equality but with “who can win elections,” suggesting that there are no “winning horses” among women (Kodikara 2023).

In these instances, the term “jokiyo,” derived from horse racing, was employed derogatorily to depict women as performers expected to “deliver wins,” while simultaneously asserting that such women did not exist in sufficient numbers. In practice, this notion of a “winnable candidate” is shaped by criteria such as having a recognisable name, financial resources, muscle, and family connections to party leaders, as well as active involvement in maintaining patronage networks between the party and the constituency (Kodikara 2009; Liyanage 2018a). This justification perpetuated a cycle in which capable women were denied nominations, parties instead fielded inexperienced female relatives, and the subsequent electoral failures of these candidates were then cited as evidence that women should continue to be channelled through the additional list, thereby undermining their legitimacy.

These assumptions about “winnability” are also reinforced through gendered perceptions of women’s capabilities. As one male local councillor remarked, *“Women are not courageous, nor are they committed enough; they just enjoy their subordinate positions in this patriarchal culture and confine their lives to families/homes. They must take the challenge to win the elections and to survive in the political world”* (Liyanage 2018b). Such views not only reproduce stereotypes about women’s lack of suitability for politics but also shift the responsibility for overcoming structural barriers onto women themselves.

Beyond shaping which women were nominated and the conditions under which they contested, party practices also influenced the terms on which women entered politics. Interview data revealed that, in several cases, women’s entry into electoral politics was mediated by male relatives, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions that

20 This term, when loosely translated, gives the meaning “winnable horses.”

21 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

22 This statement was made by Sirisena when he was the General Secretary of the United People’s Freedom Alliance during a popular TV talk show called ‘Sammuthiya’ in 2009. He later went on to serve as the seventh President of Sri Lanka from 2015 to 2019.

men's political authority could be transferred to women. These cases suggest that although the introduction of the quota created new opportunities for women to access political office, the process through which they entered politics often remained governed by informal patriarchal practices rather than direct engagement with women as independent political actors.

One councillor explicitly stated that she entered politics because her husband was already involved in politics, noting that she received the opportunity because of his political connections. She further explained that she joined the same political party as her husband in order to avoid disagreements within the household, explaining;

*“Within a household, the husband and wife should agree on what political party to support. This should not lead to a disagreement because that causes problems. So, because he was a member of that party, I also joined the same party.”*²³

What was particularly significant about her justification for selecting her political party was that, instead of presenting this as a decision that was forced upon her, the councillor framed political alignment within the household as both natural and desirable, illustrating how informal gendered norms can become normalised and reproduced within family relationships.

Field notes from the interview also noted the husband's continued involvement in her political activities, observing that he was present during the interview, frequently referred to financial matters, and at times answered questions on her behalf, with the councillor subsequently agreeing to his responses.²⁴ While this does not necessarily indicate an absence of agency on the part of the councillor, it does suggest the continuing influence of male family members in shaping some women's political participation beyond their initial entry into elected office.

A similar dynamic emerged in another interview where a councillor explained that her nomination was initiated by her husband before she was even aware that she was being considered as a candidate. According to her account, when party representatives contacted the household seeking a female nominee, her husband accepted the nomination on her behalf and assured party officials that he would handle the matter without even discussing it with her. It was only afterwards that

²³ Polonnaruwa 032, Polonnaruwa district, 13 November 2023

²⁴ Ibid.

she was informed that she would be contesting the election. Reflecting on her eventual success, she attributed her victory primarily to the popularity of a former president, whose party she belonged to, rather than to her own political platform or campaign.²⁵

What is particularly significant about this account is not the fact that the husband accepted the nomination on her behalf, but that the political party never appeared to engage directly with the prospective candidate herself. Her lack of involvement in the nomination process highlights the extent to which entry into politics could be negotiated through existing household power structures rather than through direct engagement with women as independent political actors. This also illustrates how the boundaries between the private and public spheres became blurred in women's political participation, with decisions regarding entry into formal political institutions frequently mediated within the household. Consequently, these cases highlight how informal gendered power relations operating across both the family and the party continue to shape women's access to political office despite the introduction of a formal institutional reform.

In some instances, however, male relatives did not merely facilitate women's entry into politics but effectively exercised political authority through them. Key Informant H described a case of a woman being nominated as a proxy for a male relative in the Kandy district, where a 19-year-old woman was nominated and financially supported by the party, but her brother ran the campaign, canvassed for votes, and retained control over political activities; votes were cast for him rather than her.²⁶ Rather than serving as an independent political actor, the woman functioned as the formal candidate while political authority continued to be exercised by her brother. Such cases illustrate how the quota could be implemented in ways that reinforced patriarchal control rather than advancing women's political agency, allowing women to formally occupy candidacies while political authority remained in the hands of male relatives.

Taken together, these findings reveal how increasing the number of female candidates did not necessarily transform the conditions under which women entered politics. While the quota expanded women's descriptive representation,

²⁵ Colombo 020, Colombo district, 21 November 2023

²⁶ Executive Director of a women-based organisation in the Central Province, Kandy district, 12 January 2024.

candidate selection and, in some instances, the exercise of political authority remained shaped by informal practices that privileged male relatives, established patronage networks, and existing party hierarchies. From a feminist institutionalist perspective, this illustrates how formal institutional reforms such as quotas may be accommodated within informal institutions, allowing parties to comply with legal requirements while preserving existing gendered power structures. As Key Informant M reflected:

“By bringing in this quota we didn’t want to bring in women just to fill party lists; we wanted women to be in positions where they can make decisions. If they cannot express ideas or make decisions, then there is no point to this quota and we will not see a difference.”²⁷

As this section has shown, tokenistic nominations, the exclusion of experienced women, the mediation of women’s entry through male relatives, and the nomination of proxy candidates collectively limited the transformative potential of the quota. Rather than challenging the informal institutions that governed political recruitment, these practices enabled parties to comply with the formal requirements of the quota while preserving existing patriarchal hierarchies.

5.1.2 Financial Barriers During Campaigns

For many women, the first hurdle of political life arose long before ballots were cast, as financial exclusion shaped women’s entry into politics at its very roots. Across interviews, women councillors repeatedly described how they were compelled to fund their campaigns almost entirely on their own, in stark contrast to their male counterparts, who could draw on established networks of party organisers, businessmen, and wealthy patrons. Political parties rarely provided substantial backing, leaving women to shoulder the burden of campaign costs such as printing posters, banners, and covering travel expenses.²⁸

Rather than reflecting isolated individual struggles, these experiences point to deeper institutional patterns within political parties. From the perspective of feminist institutionalism, this financial disadvantage is not simply a matter

²⁷ Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

²⁸ Badulla 015, Badulla district, 08 December 2023.

of individual hardship but a structural outcome of institutions that distribute resources unevenly, privileging men while sidelining women (Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Within party structures, access to campaign funding, financial networks, and other material resources was frequently mediated through informal relationships and patronage systems that tended to favour male candidates. These informal resource networks often determined which candidates were able to run competitive campaigns, placing women at a significant disadvantage from the outset.

In the absence of institutional or party support, many women turned to deeply personal and precarious coping strategies. A striking pattern emerged across districts of pawning gold jewellery to raise funds. A councillor from Badulla recalled pawning her jewellery to meet campaign demands, while a representative from Puttalam shared a nearly identical account.²⁹ These were not isolated stories but part of a wider pattern, underscoring how women's political participation was often underwritten by their personal sacrifices.

The decision to pawn jewellery, rather than accessing loans or institutional credit, can be better understood when placed in the broader context of the structural economic disadvantages women face in Sri Lanka. Women often earn less than men, possess limited access to capital, and lack collateral, since land and other significant assets are typically held in the husband's name. In some instances, legal consent from the husband is even required to engage in commercial transactions. Consequently, women are "prevalingly poorer than men" and are "less inclined to set aside scarce resources for a career in politics" or risk family capital (Kanold 2020; Women's Environment and Development Organisation 2007). These gendered structural constraints, therefore, help explain why pawning jewellery became the only feasible financial strategy for many women.

This act of pawning jewellery to finance one's campaign is particularly striking when viewed through a cultural lens. In Sri Lanka, gold jewellery holds immense symbolic value in the lives of women (Samarakoon et al. 2022). From the moment a girl is born, her parents begin collecting gold as an investment in her future, a tangible dowry meant to secure her marriage. Upon reaching puberty, she is adorned with jewellery to mark her transition into womanhood (Winslow 1980). In

29 Puttalam 037, Puttalam district, 28 November 2023.

arranged marriages, especially, gold serves as a public display of familial status and the bride's worth. Among some Sri Lankan Muslim communities, the controversial "virginity test" on the wedding night is followed by celebratory rituals where gold is presented, marking not just her "purity," but also her successful entry into married life (Muslim Women's Research Action Forum 1999). In these contexts, gold is more than an ornament; it is currency within a patriarchal economy, a symbol of obedience, virtue, and matrimonial readiness.

It is therefore deeply ironic that this same gold steeped in patriarchal tradition became, for many women, the only form of capital they could access to enter the political arena. Denied financial backing by political parties, marginalised by institutional gatekeeping, and navigating a male-dominated landscape, these women turned to their last remaining asset, the jewellery once meant to tether them to domesticity. They pawn necklaces given at puberty, bangles collected since birth, and heirlooms passed down through generations not to secure marriage, but to claim a seat at the table of governance. In repurposing this symbol of submission into a tool for political resistance, these women redefined its meaning. Gold, once the marker of a bride, became the currency of a female politician.

For others, financial survival during campaigns depended on turning to husbands, relatives, or friends for support. This reliance not only reinforced women's economic dependence on male family members but also undermined the very spirit of the quota, which was designed to expand women's political independence. Yet even when women sought alternative avenues of fundraising, they were constrained by gendered norms of "respectability."

Key informant M highlighted that male politicians could easily secure support by hosting parties, providing alcohol, or entertaining party members, seat organisers, and potential funders.³⁰ This observation, however, must be understood within the broader gendered cultural context in which alcohol operates in Sri Lanka. Women's relationship to alcohol is shaped by deeply gendered and patriarchal norms that are marked by contradiction. At the village level, women have historically been involved in the production of alcohol, particularly toddy, which is often prepared and managed within domestic or community-based settings. Yet despite this involvement in production, women's visible engagement with alcohol, especially

30 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

its sale, consumption, or presence in social spaces associated with drinking, has long been socially stigmatised and morally policed.

These norms were previously reinforced through formal legal restrictions, which prohibited women from purchasing alcohol and working in establishments involved in the manufacture, bottling or sale of liquor. Although a government gazette issued in July 2025 formally removed these discriminatory provisions, reversing restrictions rooted in the 1979 Excise Ordinance, legal reforms have not dismantled the informal moral codes that continue to regulate women's behaviour in practice (Verité Research 2018).

This contradiction becomes particularly significant in the context of electoral politics, where alcohol plays a central role. While it is commonly stated that winning elections in Sri Lanka requires “money, power, and muscle,” interview data suggest that alcohol constitutes an additional, often indispensable element of political mobilisation (Kodikara 2009; Liyanage 2018a). Alcohol-centred gatherings function as key sites of informal negotiation and alliance-building, spaces in which male politicians cultivate symbiotic relationships with benefactors. Because women's participation in such settings risks reputational damage, these arenas remain structurally skewed in favour of men. Alcohol is also routinely used as a bargaining tool to secure attendance at rallies and political meetings, further ingraining it within the informal mechanics of campaigning. These practices reproduce a masculinised political culture in which access to alcohol-fuelled networks becomes a prerequisite for political viability, thereby creating an additional, informal barrier to women's participation and influence.

One female politician described how, during her campaign, a supporter brought three bottles of arrack to her house and suggested that they be distributed to those attending her meetings. Unwilling to do so herself, she explained that she asked her husband, “*Without me knowing, as if you are giving, give those people who have come.*”³¹ While she was careful to stress that this was an isolated incident and contrasted her approach with that of male contemporaries who relied heavily on alcohol throughout their campaigns, her account illustrates the extent to which women must negotiate informal campaign expectations indirectly, often through male intermediaries, in order to preserve their respectability.

31 Colombo 021, Colombo district, 21 October 2023.

Such practices are therefore not only about material exchange, but are in reality mechanisms through which political loyalty, trust, and networks are produced and sustained. According to Key Informant M, female politicians, however, cannot engage in such practices without risking their reputation or inviting rumours that would damage their credibility.³² In effect, they are barred from manufacturing the kinds of social spaces that are essentially a part and parcel of the Sri Lankan political landscape. This double bind not only restricted women's access to funds but also reinforced the gendered norms of respectability that policed their behaviour in both private and public spheres.

As scholars such as Shvedova (2005) have argued, these practices are part of a broader “masculine model of politics,” where parties and political life are organised around male norms, values, and lifestyles; late-night meetings, informal decision-making processes, drinking, and gambling. Such environments function as gatekeeping spaces, ensuring that those who cannot (or will not) participate in these rituals are excluded from the real centres of power.

For women, participation in this model is doubly fraught. Not only do they risk losing credibility or being branded “immoral” if they attempt to join these spaces, but they also face domestic consequences, as late nights or public socialising can spark family conflict or accusations of neglecting household responsibilities. This often discourages women from self-selecting into politics in the first place, as entering the field requires negotiating with practices that are structurally hostile to their presence (Shvedova 2005).

Moreover, these male-dominated networks are becoming increasingly central to party functioning, as parties shift away from structured membership mobilisation toward more fluid, relationship-based modes of operation. For women, who are already constrained in building these networks, this trend creates an even steeper barrier to entry. The masculine working patterns of parties also carry over into legislative bodies, where unsupportive structures for working mothers and female councillors further exacerbate the difficulty of sustaining a political career (Shvedova 2005).

As de Alwis (1995) reminds us, women are always under the patriarchal gaze of the nation, compelled to be “respectable” in order to enter politics, yet unable to

32 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

maintain that respectability once inside a political field structured by patronage and masculine practices.

In some cases, these gendered constraints were not just restrictive but coercive. Key informants revealed that individuals, at times, demanded sexual favours in exchange for campaign financing.³³ Such unethical demands illustrate how financial dependency can create conditions for exploitation, adding a layer of gender-specific vulnerability that male politicians do not face.

However, while financial exclusion was the dominant pattern across interviews, a small number of women described more supportive party structures. A member of the Kattankudy Urban Council in Batticaloa, for instance, explained that her party covered all her campaign-related expenses. However, she acknowledged this was an exception, noting that many of her colleagues from other parties were required to finance their campaigns personally. Even within her party, she observed gendered disparities in resource allocation, stating:

*“If the men received a full allocation, the women would get less than half”.*³⁴

Her account reinforces feminist institutionalist arguments that financial resources within political institutions are never neutral, but are distributed through gendered logics that tend to privilege male candidates, who are often perceived as more ‘valuable’ political investments (Duerst-Lahti 2008).

At the same time, patterns across parties varied. While most parties often select and nominate candidates based on their ability to self-finance their campaigns, one party, the National People’s Power (NPP) adopted a practice of funding all its candidates. This approach contrasted with the practice of either privileging those with existing economic resources or the dominant model of resource allocation and raised broader debates about fairness and competitiveness. Interestingly, Key Informant M viewed this approach critically, arguing that it created an uneven playing field by insulating NPP candidates from the financial burdens experienced by women contesting under other parties. In the informant’s view, this raised

33 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

34 Batticaloa 016, Batticaloa district, 15 November 2023.

questions about whether these candidates faced the same structural barriers encountered elsewhere.³⁵

However, the more critical question is whether it is truly ‘unfair’ for a party to support its candidates, or whether the structural problem lies in other political parties’ failure to provide systematic financial or organisational backing to women. The absence of institutional support in most parties should not render those that provide support as exceptional or problematic. Instead, the broader issue remains the deeply uneven distribution of campaign resources across Sri Lanka’s party system, which continues to disadvantage women in the majority of political organisations.

When analysed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, these narratives reveal the interconnected barriers that structure women’s political exclusion. Economic constraints such as limited capital and collateral, combined with the notion of respectability that is uniquely imposed on women, and which becomes impossible to uphold if they attempt to engage in patronage practices like men do, together with coercive exploitation in the form of demands for sexual favours, all intersect to shape women’s limited access to campaign resources. Institutions, including political parties, tend to operate through homosocial networks where resources circulate among men, excluding women from legitimate access to campaign financing and decision-making processes (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016; Manuratne et al. 2024). These informal rules, while technically outside formal law, deeply shaped who receives support and who does not. The result is a political playing field in which women are systematically forced to pawn their personal assets, their reputations, and even their bodily autonomy in order to compete.

5.1.3 The Cost of Representation in Office

The financial pressures that defined women’s campaigns did not fade after elections; rather, they followed them into office, often with greater weight. Interviews revealed a striking continuity, the same lack of party and institutional support that forced women to pawn jewellery or depend on husbands during campaigns now shaped their everyday responsibilities as councillors. A recurring theme across accounts was the expectation for the councillors to secure constituent loyalty through direct,

³⁵ Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

material assistance. This ranged from distributing groceries to struggling families, purchasing school supplies for children, to financing funerals. While such activities resembled forms of social service, many councillors stressed that they were perceived as “obligatory” by the public and considered an essential part of their role.^{36, 37} In reality, they are a part and parcel of the Sri Lankan political landscape. Yet political parties offered no financial backing, leaving women to absorb the costs personally.

One interviewee described borrowing funds from her husband, while another, from Kandy, revealed pawning not only her own jewellery but also her children’s to help community members in need. She lamented that she still had *“fifteen to twenty pounds of gold in the bank”* that she could not reclaim.³⁸ She summed up her experience, saying:

*“We thought by entering the council we could do everything, but there are many laws inside, so we can’t do what we think. If you want something to be done, you should approach the minister. We are very small individuals who are working under the minister”.*³⁹

These stories illustrate how care and sacrifice, traits that Jayawardena (1986) long associated with women’s roles in the private sphere, were transposed into politics, where they became a financial liability rather than a valued contribution. These expectations that were placed on these women are rooted in deeply gendered informal institutions where women are expected to embody care, selflessness, and moral responsibility, traits that are feminised and undervalued in the political sphere. Feminist institutionalism shows how such norms interact with formal roles, placing invisible yet tangible gendered costs on women’s participation.

This burden did not diminish once councillors formally assumed office; in fact, it often intensified. As one former councillor from Badulla explained:

36 Badulla 014, Badulla district, 17 January 2024.

37 Mannar 030, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

38 Kandy 026, Kandy district, 28 February 2024.

39 Ibid.

“I did not receive any financial aid. I had many plans in my mind, but I did not get any financial support to implement them”.⁴⁰

Her words echoed a wider frustration of women being left to navigate their public duties with little institutional or party support. The formal position of councillor thus came with invisible, gendered costs that undercut the very purpose of representation.

5.1.4. Insufficient Training and Institutional Support

Many of the women elected through the 2018 quota entered local government as first-time candidates with limited knowledge and experience in formal political institutions. Given that political parties had nominated large numbers of new candidates through the quota, they bore a corresponding responsibility to provide adequate political orientation and training. However, female councillors repeatedly stressed that political parties provided minimal preparation, with training sessions held as infrequently as once a year. Without proper orientation on council procedures, proposal drafting, or the legal and administrative responsibilities of elected representatives, women were left to perform their roles with little institutional guidance. This suggests that many political parties viewed their responsibility as ending with women’s nomination rather than ensuring they were equipped to participate meaningfully once elected. As a result, many turned to external organisations, particularly civil society organisations, for capacity-building support that their own parties failed to provide.

This persistent lack of training is not merely an administrative oversight but reflects a deeper institutional reluctance to invest in women’s substantive participation. The systemic underinvestment in women’s political skills positions female councillors as passive placeholders who fulfil quota requirements rather than as empowered actors capable of shaping governance.

Feminist institutionalism sheds light on how this neglect is not coincidental but a product of deeply embedded patriarchal structures within political parties. Political parties, as gendered institutions, are structured around patriarchal norms that operate through informal systems of power. These systems are often driven by

40 Badulla 013, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

patronage, clientelism, and homosocial networks that privilege male dominance and routinely marginalise women (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016; Lovenduski 2005). Thus, even though the quota (a formal institution) enabled women's entry, informal institutional practices such as the lack of training, limited political exposure, and exclusion from internal decision-making effectively undermine their capacity to become substantive political actors.

Key Informant B described political parties as “*patriarchal, violent, corrupt and masculine*” environments that actively resist women's empowerment. According to the informant, women who questioned party leadership or challenged established hierarchies were often “ousted” or labelled as “unwanted”, leading the informant to characterise political parties as “cults” that “do not listen to women.”⁴¹ These accounts highlight how women's exclusion is actively enforced through party cultures, rather than being a passive by-product of weak institutional support.

Key Informants A⁴² and J⁴³ similarly noted that political parties in Sri Lanka are predominantly male-headed institutions. Even where parties maintain women's wings, these structures rarely facilitate women's entry into decision-making spaces. Instead, women are often relegated to subordinate tasks such as grassroots campaigning, rally mobilisation, and logistical work, reinforcing their peripheral status within party hierarchies. Both informants emphasised that parties “do not want women to be independent thinkers,” preferring instead that they “blindly follow the leader.”

Key Informant C further observed that women within local councils are frequently assigned marginalised roles, expected to focus only on matters relating to women and children, while male councillors oversee major issues such as the economy, infrastructure, and security.⁴⁴ By combining insufficient training with the unofficial assignment of gendered responsibilities, parties and councils effectively reproduce the gendered ‘logic of appropriateness,’ limiting women's ability to exert influence even after they have been elected.

41 Peace and Women's Rights activist based in the Eastern Province, 25 October 2023 (Online Interview).

42 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

43 Women's rights activist and a director of a women's rights organisation based in the North Western Province, Kurunegala district, 21 December 2023.

44 Women's rights activist, researcher and co-founder of a women's rights organisation based in the Western Province, Colombo district, 11 December 2023.

Collectively, these dynamics demonstrate that inadequate training is part of a broader pattern of institutional exclusion: women are admitted into political spaces through formal rules such as quotas, but informal practices ensure that they remain symbolically present rather than substantively empowered.

5.2 Gendered Power Dynamics Within Local Councils

Although the introduction of the gender quota has increased women's numerical representation within local councils, the lived experiences of women councillors demonstrate that these institutions remain deeply gendered. Across the interviews, women described persistent patterns of exclusion, delegitimisation, and resistance that continued to undermine their ability to exercise authority after entering political office. Far from being incidental, these practices reflect what feminist institutionalists describe as the "gendered logic of appropriateness" (Chappell 2006), whereby leadership, authority, and political competence are coded as masculine, while women are systematically pushed to the margins. The following sections examine three interrelated mechanisms through which these gendered institutional dynamics were reproduced: silencing and exclusion within councils, delegitimisation through quotas and gendered labels, and unequal access to resources.

5.2.1 Silencing and Exclusion within Councils

Female councillors consistently described their entry into councils as encounters with a hostile institutional culture, where their presence was tolerated, but their voices were not. Many recounted being ignored, interrupted, or openly silenced during meetings. A councillor from Galle, who had served as president of the Local Government Councillors' Forum in her district for two years, revealed that despite this leadership role, she and other women were routinely shouted down or told to sit down by male colleagues, effectively denying them equal opportunities to participate. Another councillor echoed this experience, remarking:

*"Speaking as a woman member in the council posed its own challenges."*⁴⁵

45 Badulla 013, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

She described how male politicians regularly dismissed proposals by women, particularly those focused on basic services such as pre-school facilities, on the basis of the proposer's gender.⁴⁶ Key Informant F reinforced this point, noting how female councillors were often subjected to verbal abuse and intimidation, with comments such as:

"You came by quota, so shut your mouth".⁴⁷

These experiences reflect what scholars describe as the "gendered logic of appropriateness" (Chappell 2006). Political actors, traditionally men, have long operated as if sex and gender are mapped neatly onto each other, with men seen as naturally rational, authoritative, and fit to govern, while women are cast as fragile, dependent, or suited only for supportive roles (Lovenduski 2005). Within this logic, when female councillors sought to exercise their right to speak or propose initiatives, they transgressed these entrenched norms and were treated as 'deviants' who had to be disciplined back into silence, through ridicule, verbal abuse, or procedural exclusion. The persistence of such "sticky" gender norms (Chappell 2006) explains why women's entry into councils through the quota did not automatically translate into equal participation. Instead, their very presence disrupted institutionalised hierarchies that continue to privilege men as the rightful custodians of politics (Chappell and Waylen 2013).

The discrimination these women experienced also extended beyond verbal harassment and routine belittlement into institutional procedures. In budget discussions in the Western Province, women reported being granted only three minutes to speak, while men were allowed five to ten. This unequal treatment was based on the widespread assumption that women lacked experience and had little to contribute. This is another example of "gendered logic of appropriateness", a set of institutional expectations and norms that position authority and decision-making as inherently masculine traits, thereby marginalising women (Chappell 2006). This logic is rooted in broader societal beliefs. As reflected in the accounts of Key Informants F and A, respectively, women were frequently told that "politics

46 Badulla 013, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

47 Executive Director of a CSO based in the Uva Province, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

is for men”⁴⁸ and were stereotyped as “emotional” or “fragile,” and therefore incapable of leadership.⁴⁹

Exclusion also extended into everyday council practices and infrastructure. One councillor explained that her council lacked separate restrooms for female members, stating that:

*“If a woman needed to use the restroom, she had to wait until a male member finished, and assign another woman to guard the door”.*⁵⁰

What might appear as a mere logistical oversight illustrates how institutions are physically structured to prioritise male comfort and participation, embedding exclusion into the very architecture of political space (Chappell 2006, 225).

Institutional obstruction also took more targeted forms. One councillor recounted a situation involving a public water tap that was used by a low-income family. Although the community had collectively covered the water bill, she attempted to formalise the arrangement to safeguard the family’s continued access. However, a male councillor had intervened and blocked her initiative. As a result of this institutional stalemate, the tap was eventually closed.⁵¹ Another described how her name was removed from a development project once funding was secured and replaced with that of a male colleague.⁵² Such acts exemplify how gender bias operates through everyday institutional practices (Chappell 2006). These seemingly minor but persistent obstructions accumulate, signalling to women that they are not equal participants within the system even when they attempt to address community needs.

Resistance also surfaced when women attempted to establish women’s committees within their councils. Although such committees were often approved by higher authorities such as the Divisional Secretariat, male councillors frequently opposed them as unnecessary.⁵³ Within local councils, committees play a central role in

48 Executive Director of a CSO based in the Uva Province, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

49 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

50 Galle 024, Galle district, 13 March 2024.

51 Ibid.

52 Mannar 031, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

53 Galle 024, Galle district, 13 March 2024.

decision-making and governance.⁵⁴ Prior to 2018, however, there was no dedicated committee at any of the councils to address gender-specific concerns. Following the increase in women's representation, many female councillors began to advocate for the establishment of such committees, but these efforts were consistently met with resistance. A councillor from Galle recounted her struggle to establish such a body, though she eventually succeeded, earning praise from another councillor from the opposition party, who remarked:

*"She managed to accomplish tasks that male councillors couldn't through this committee."*⁵⁵

Similar resistance was also noted in the Moratuwa Municipal Council, where male members questioned the need for a gender-specific body, arguing that male councillors were equally capable of addressing women's issues and that these issues can be addressed under any one of the existing committees. In this instance, while a separate women's committee was not established, the existing Public Utilities Committee was renamed to include women and children, reflecting a partial and negotiated accommodation rather than full institutional recognition that women's issues should be prioritised.

As one interviewee observed, such opposition was often rooted in concerns that women's committees would enable female councillors to consolidate influence within the council.⁵⁶ What is particularly striking, however, is how male councillors reacted in remarkably similar ways across different councils and provinces when confronted with efforts to establish such committees. Such uniform resistance suggests that formal institutional reforms like quotas or women's committees are frequently undermined by entrenched informal norms, which contradict formal equality measures and devalue women's political participation and contribution (Helmke and Levitsky 2006).

These patterns of silencing, procedural marginalisation, physical exclusion, institutional obstruction, and resistance to reform across districts and councils

54 Local councils operate through a system of standing committees that are tasked with overseeing key areas of administration such as finance, public utilities, health, waste management, commercial land etc. These committees are led by an appointed chairperson and composed of councillors from both the ruling party and the opposition. The number of committees tends to vary depending on the type and size of the council.

55 Galle 023, Galle district, 17 January 2024.

56 Colombo 019, Colombo district, 22 November 2023.

highlight that these challenges are not isolated but systemic and structural, embedded within institutional culture. Taken together, they illustrate what Lovenduski (2011) describes as the emergence of a “gender regime” within institutions, where men dominate, and women must navigate a structurally hostile terrain.

5.2.2 Delegitimisation through Quotas and Labels

Beyond institutional silencing, women councillors also faced systematic efforts to delegitimise their presence in politics. They were frequently referred to as “list people,” implying that their election was undeserved and attributable solely to the quota system rather than to their own political abilities or electoral legitimacy. Key Informant J also revealed how female councillors were frequently accused of having offered “sexual bribes” to secure nominations,⁵⁷ with such allegations constituting a form of character assassination that sought to undermine their credibility and legitimacy as elected representatives. These dynamics echo Franceschet and Piscopo’s (2008) concept of the “label effect,” where women elected through quotas are perceived as less competent or as “proxy candidates” lacking agency (Kanold 2020).

Ironically, these assumptions persist in political institutions long plagued by nepotism, corruption, and dynastic politics, which are features often associated with male politicians. Yet, only women elected through quotas faced intense scrutiny. As Key Informant A noted, the consensus is that:

“You have to be a very strong man with a big personality to be a leader; women just cannot do a good job”.⁵⁸

While male newcomers are often mentored and protected by senior party members, women are forced to continually prove their legitimacy. This disparity illustrates the deeply gendered nature of political institutions, where informal norms and biases continue to marginalise women despite formal inclusion through quotas.

57 Women’s rights activist and a director of a women’s rights organisation based in the North Western Province, Kurunegala district, 21 December 2023.

58 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

Sexualised discourses further ingrained the delegitimisation of these female politicians. A particularly striking example following the 2018 local government elections was the use of the derogatory label ‘*Hansi Manthrini*’ (හාන්සි මන්ත්රිනි).⁵⁹ This term suggested that women secured their nominations through sexual favours rather than merit, contrasting them with the so-called ‘*Mahansi Manthrini*’ (මහන්සි මන්ත්රිනි), women perceived as having earned their place through hard work. Male organisers used this discourse strategically to discredit women councillors, discourage others from defending them, and normalise the idea that their political presence was illegitimate. Interviewees also indicated that party hierarchies are aware of such coercive practices, yet these are tacitly normalised and rarely addressed.⁶⁰

While the female politicians interviewed did not report being propositioned for sexual favours, key informants indicated that such forms of sexual coercion are prevalent within party structures and are often left unaddressed by party hierarchies. Sexualised discourses such as the “*Hansi Manthrini*” label highlight how women’s political participation is delegitimised through insinuations of sexual impropriety. This dynamic was further reflected in the way some women themselves narrated the issue of sexual abuse. One female councillor, while acknowledging that “*sexual abuse is another issue that women in politics may encounter*,” framed the solution as women maintaining “*their integrity and goodwill*” and avoiding being “*swayed by monetary incentives*”.⁶¹ This framing is telling: rather than placing responsibility on male perpetrators or political institutions to prevent exploitation, it locates the problem within women’s behaviour and morality. From a feminist institutionalism perspective, such narratives demonstrate how deeply the “gendered logic of appropriateness” is internalised, even by those who experience its effects. Women are expected to uphold a standard of purity and restraint, while men’s coercive behaviour is normalised, overlooked, or tacitly tolerated within party structures. By individualising the issue, suggesting women must resist temptation, the systemic responsibility of parties to safeguard women and discipline perpetrators is obscured. This not only reinforces patriarchal power relations but also limits the space for women to demand institutional accountability for harassment and abuse.

59 This derogatory term literally translates to ‘lying on your back’, and is directed at female politicians who are perceived as having gained political entry through the exchange of sexual favours with party organisers rather than through their own merit.

60 Political Activist based in Western Province, Colombo district, 25 June 2025.

61 Badulla 014, Badulla district, 17 January 2024.

Similarly, women who entered office through the proportional list system were pejoratively called '*Pin Manthrini*' (පින් මන්ත්රිනී),⁶² implying that they were token appointments rather than genuine political actors. These labels reflect how quotas, though intended to expand women's participation, became grounds for delegitimising their authority. From the perspective of feminist institutionalism, such discourses illustrate how informal institutions operate to maintain male dominance; even when women enter office formally, they are undermined through language that delegitimises their authority.

Nomination practices further reinforced these exclusions. Party organisers frequently prioritised wives, daughters, or wealthy associates over women with grassroots political experience. This meant that many women were selected as symbolic candidates to fulfil quotas, while real decision-making power remained with men. Moreover, successful women were sometimes prevented from re-contesting, as organisers feared they would outshine male leaders. These practices show how quotas, while formally inclusive, are subverted by patriarchal gatekeeping that limits women's autonomy and reinforces their dependency within political institutions.

5.2.3 Unequal Access to Resources

Unequal access to resources extended well beyond the campaign phase, continuing to shape women's ability to perform their roles effectively once elected. While many of these inequalities originated within party structures, they were reproduced within local councils, where both formal procedures and informal practices intersected to advantage male members. Consequently, women encountered additional institutional barriers that limited their access to the financial and material resources necessary to carry out their responsibilities as elected representatives.

These inequalities were particularly evident in the allocation of development funds within local councils. A councillor from the Colombo District explained that development funds, allocated by central or provincial governments, were often distributed at the discretion of the chairperson. This practice favoured members

⁶² This term, used in a derogatory manner, loosely translates to 'free-riding members' and is applied to female politicians who are perceived as having entered politics not through their own effort or merit, but due to perceived 'good karma' or favourable circumstances.

from the ruling party and sidelined opposition members, many of whom were women. In the Moratuwa Municipal Council, most funds went to ruling party men, while women received only meagre allocations of five to ten lakhs compared to the far larger sums secured by male councillors. These disparities were underpinned by a widespread perception that women were incapable of managing large-scale projects, a bias that not only reduced their access to funds but also restricted the scope of their political visibility.⁶³ Another councillor echoed this experience, observing that while development funds were available within councils, they were seldom allocated to female councillors.⁶⁴

Key informants confirmed that such disparities were systemic. According to Key Informant C, female councillors often received significantly less funding for their projects compared to male councillors and in some cases, women's project proposals were outright rejected or appropriated by male councillors, undermining both their work and their credibility. This restricted access to resources meant that women were often confined to undertaking smaller, less visible projects. Ironically, this lack of visibility was then used to reinforce harmful stereotypes that '*women don't work*' or are inactive in their roles. ⁶⁵ This illustrates how institutional exclusion generated self-reinforcing narratives of women's political inadequacy: women were denied the resources necessary to undertake visible projects, and their resulting lack of visibility was then cited as evidence that they were ineffective representatives.

However, not all councils followed this exclusionary pattern. A representative from the Chilaw Urban Council described a more equitable approach in her council, where funds were allocated by division rather than by individual councillors. This system promoted collaboration among members, male and female alike and significantly reduced internal competition and conflict.⁶⁶ Such examples demonstrate that exclusionary practices were not inevitable but contingent upon institutional arrangements governing the allocation of resources. When resources were distributed according to transparent and equitable procedures, opportunities for gendered exclusion were significantly reduced.

63 Colombo 019, Colombo district, 22 November 2023.

64 Galle 023, Galle district, 17 January 2024.

65 Women's rights activist, researcher and co-founder of a women's rights organisation based in the Western Province, Colombo district, 11 December 2023.

66 Puttalam 035, Puttalam district, 28 November 2023.

This unequal access to resources was echoed across districts. A councillor from Puttalam noted how initial party support faded over time, leaving her sidelined:

*“Currently, we are not receiving any support from them, and it raises concerns about whether they even remember the presence of women members in their party.”*⁶⁷

She also noted that male colleagues deliberately monopolised council allocations, sidelining women and reinforcing their marginalisation. Reflecting on these challenges, she shared that the lack of party support had soured her political experience to the point that she was considering leaving politics altogether.⁶⁸

This experience was not isolated. Key informant C noted that women often face a dual struggle to establish themselves, having to navigate both council hierarchies and party networks. The informant described this environment as a *“fight within political parties”*, explaining that party structures remain dominated by a *“boys’ club”* mentality, where male leaders control the essential networks, *“contacts, connections, commissions and contractors”* that determine access to influence and resources.⁶⁹

Women’s unequal access to resources also extended beyond development funding, affecting opportunities for professional development that often sustain political careers. A councillor from Kandy recounted how she was invited to a mayoral conference in Japan, but unlike her international counterparts, whose councils covered the costs, she had to fund the trip herself. In contrast, the male chairperson of her council, who also attended, relied on funds obtained through informal commissions from approving construction projects. This highlights how institutional corruption and access to informal financial networks systematically favour men by generating opportunities that remain largely inaccessible to women.⁷⁰

Viewed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, these stories illustrate how informal norms, unspoken hierarchies, and gendered power structures within both party systems and local councils operate as mechanisms that reproduce gendered

67 Puttalam 036, Puttalam district, 28 November 2023.

68 Ibid.

69 Women’s rights activist, researcher and co-founder of a women’s rights organisation based in the Western Province, Colombo district, 11 December 2023.

70 Kandy 027, Kandy district, 28 February 2024.

hierarchies. They preserve male dominance and limit women's access to real influence and authority (Chappell and Waylen 2013). Even after gaining office, women often remain "gendered outsiders" (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016), present in formal positions but peripheral in decision making and access to resources, elected but excluded. Until these informal norms and exclusionary practices are challenged, women's political representation will remain symbolic rather than transformative (Kanold 2020; Zetterberg 2009).

5.3 Negotiating Politics Within Family and Community

Beyond political parties and local councils, women's political participation was also shaped by the broader social context in which they lived. In Sri Lanka, family and community continue to play a central role in regulating gender roles and expectations. Although the quota expanded women's formal access to political office, their participation remained closely tied to expectations within their families and communities, where patriarchal norms continued to define appropriate roles for women. Alongside navigating formal political institutions, women were required to negotiate these expectations, often having to justify their presence in a space that is still widely perceived as male-dominated. Entering politics therefore required women to step beyond socially prescribed gender roles, exposing them to heightened scrutiny, resistance, and expectations. These pressures operated across both the public and private spheres: within communities, women's political participation was frequently questioned, while within the household they continued to be expected to fulfil traditional domestic and caregiving responsibilities.

The following sections examine these dynamics by focusing, first, on the forms of resistance and expectation encountered within communities, and second, on the tensions women face in balancing political life with family responsibilities.

5.3.1 Navigating Community Expectations and Scrutiny

Resistance towards increased female political representation was evident even prior to the implementation of the quota. Parliamentary debates surrounding the quota were often marked by hostility, with parliamentarians openly questioning its necessity (Kodikara 2023). Against this backdrop, it was not surprising that women's entry into politics was met with suspicion and ridicule at the community

level during and after the nomination process. Kodikara (2023), for instance, documents how a Muslim cleric, Niyaz Maulavi, circulated a video on social media launching a vitriolic attack against Muslim women candidates. In another widely shared clip, a man states that he cannot find his cow, while another replies that the cow must have gone to submit nominations because of the 25% quota, reflecting the ways in which women's political participation was trivialised and delegitimised.

Such attitudes were not limited to online spaces or distant observers but were also present within women's own communities, where resistance was often rooted in cultural and religious norms. For instance, after entering political office, one councillor noted that although the council chairman eventually came to acknowledge their contributions, other male members continued to dismiss them solely on the basis of their gender.⁷¹

These attitudes inside council chambers were mirrored in their constituencies, where women continued to face resistance and marginalisation in their political work. Several councillors described how elders in their constituencies opposed women's participation in politics. One councillor reflected:

“The challenge was exacerbated by the lack of support from women themselves, as many were against women entering politics.”⁷²

She recounted that during the election, a female candidate in her area received only 300 votes, despite there being 2,000–3,000 women voters in that ward.⁷³ This phenomenon, of women not voting for other women, was echoed during the key informant interviews. While Key Informant E linked it to the public perception that politics is an unpleasant space for women,⁷⁴ Key informant A attributed it to the general belief that women are inherently less capable.⁷⁵

These accounts illustrate how community-level attitudes reproduce gendered hierarchies, a dynamic that can be understood through the concept of internalised misogyny. Internalised misogyny occurs when women absorb and reproduce

⁷¹ Batticaloa 016, Batticaloa district, 15 November 2023.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Research consultant specialising in Gender and Peacebuilding based in Western Province, 28 October 2023 (Online Interview)

⁷⁵ Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

patriarchal norms that privilege men while marginalising women, thereby reinforcing their own subordination (Findlay and Piggott 2005). Consequently, this dynamic restricts women's access to resources, leadership roles, and decision-making spaces (Evtееva, Burges and Gelabert 2024).

From the existing literature, it is apparent that internalised misogyny is not an individual failing but a structural outcome that emerges from living within and navigating gendered institutions. As Evtееva, Burges and Gelabert (2024) emphasise, the reproduction of patriarchal norms by women reflects the power of institutional socialisation, where even those disadvantaged by the system may uphold and defend it. Through this lens, women's distrust of female political actors and their tendency to conform to male-dominated norms can be seen as part of a broader process that reinforces the "gender regime" within institutions (Lovenduski 2011).

For Muslim councillors, these challenges intersected with religious and cultural expectations to create additional layers of marginalisation. Several described how their entry into politics was met with rumours or outright resistance from religious leaders who insisted that a woman's place is in the home, caring for her husband and family.⁷⁶ Yet, over time, some communities began to accept them, recognising the benefits of their leadership. Another Muslim councillor from the Southern Province shared a similar experience, noting that while religious leaders opposed her involvement in politics by saying that politics is no place for women, the wider community supported her because they believed her presence would benefit them.⁷⁷ These accounts highlight the importance of an intersectional approach, showing how gender discrimination intensifies when coupled with cultural and religious norms (Kenny 2007).

Beyond electoral dynamics, community-level resistance also shaped how councillors carried out their daily work. In many villages, women reported that female community members approached them for assistance with issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse and underage pregnancies. One councillor explained that women who were unable or unwilling to seek help directly from state authorities often felt more comfortable turning to female representatives. In

⁷⁶ Kegalle 041, Kegalle district, 13 May 2024.

⁷⁷ Galle 024, Galle district, 13 March 2024.

such instances, councillors would liaise with the relevant officials to ensure that appropriate action was taken.

However, this councillor went on to note that some men objected to these interactions, insisting that their wives should “*stay at home, cook, and wash clothes*” rather than engage with political actors.⁷⁸ These objections reveal broader cultural anxieties about women’s public authority and the formation of gendered support networks outside male supervision.

The councillor emphasised that challenging these assumptions formed an integral part of their political role, noting “*we entered the council not just to build roads or fix lights, but to identify problems in the village, support women, and connect them with the divisional secretariat.*”⁷⁹ The overall resistance these women faced, from moral scrutiny to the policing of their community interactions, demonstrates how cultural norms constrain not only the political legitimacy and effectiveness of female councillors but also the ability of other women to exercise agency within their communities.

The moral scrutiny that shaped women’s interactions within their communities also extended to how they presented themselves in public. Many of the women interviewed spoke in detail about how they carefully managed their appearance after entering local councils in order to appear “professional,” with many opting to wear white or light-coloured sarees. One councillor went on to explain that they dressed as though they were “going to the temple” (පන්සල් යන විදිහට ඇඳගෙන යාම),⁸⁰ suggesting that respectability and public legitimacy were closely tied to a very specific type of feminine presentation.

While this may appear to be a form of self-policing, feminist institutionalism suggests that such practices are shaped by broader informal gendered norms that define what is considered appropriate behaviour for women in politics. Women often regulate their appearance not simply as a matter of personal preference but in response to expectations regarding how female politicians should look and behave in order to be viewed as respectable and legitimate public representatives. The interviews suggest that for many women, political legitimacy was tied not only

78 Galle 023, Galle district, 17 January 2024.

79 Ibid.

80 Kandy 028, Kandy district, 25 October 2023

to their ability to perform their duties as councillors, but also to their ability to embody culturally accepted notions of femininity, modesty, and respectability.

This was evident in the interviews. One councillor from Rathnapura explained that she preferred to maintain a professional appearance rather than look like an “actress.”⁸¹ In contrasting councillors with actresses, she drew upon wider social distinctions between respectability and glamour, suggesting that women in politics were expected to embody a particular form of modest femininity. She further argued that dressing appropriately reflected their role as public servants and helped avoid “unnecessary family conflict,” indicating that women’s political participation continued to be evaluated through the lens of family and community expectations.

These findings can also be understood within broader South Asian constructions of female respectability. Women’s respectability has often been linked to ideals of modesty, virtue, and propriety, with traditional attire such as the sari serving as a visible marker of these qualities (Jayawardena 2002, De Alwis 1994). This was evident in the interviews, where the women rarely considered forms of attire other than the sari when discussing how a female politician should present herself. The findings may also be interpreted through what Obeyesekere (1984/1987) describes as *lajja-baya* (shame-fear), a process through which Sri Lankans are socialised to regulate their behaviour in anticipation of social judgement and disapproval. While applicable to both men and women, scholars have noted that women entering public life are often subject to heightened scrutiny and surveillance, making concerns regarding reputation particularly significant. This interpretation also resonates with Chappell and Waylen’s (2013) argument that those who fail to conform to prevailing gendered logics of appropriateness are often treated as deviants and subjected to ridicule or social sanction. Viewed in this light, the emphasis placed on modest and respectable dress may be understood not simply as a matter of personal preference, but as a strategy through which women seek to avoid criticism and maintain legitimacy within both political and social settings.

Importantly, the concern was not merely about individual reputation. Scholars have argued that for women, reputational harm often extends beyond the individual to affect the perceived honour and standing of the family (De Alwis

81 Rathnapura 040, Rathnapura district, 31 October 2023

2002; de Silva 2005; Hewamanne 2008). This may help explain why some of the women interviewed connected their appearance to avoiding family conflict. Their comments suggest an awareness that their conduct and presentation in public were not judged solely as individual politicians but also as representatives of their families and communities.

Interestingly, the emphasis was not simply on wearing a sari, but on wearing white or light-coloured sarees. The fact that women repeatedly referred to white attire suggests that respectability was associated not only with traditional femininity but also with modesty, restraint, and moral authority. White clothing, particularly in the Sri Lankan context, is often associated with purity, respectability, and religious observance. Several women, therefore, appeared to adopt a style of dress that would minimise scrutiny while reinforcing their legitimacy as public representatives.

These expectations also appeared to extend beyond individual choices and become embedded within institutional practices. Although no formal council regulations governed the colour of councillors' attire, one councillor noted that the chairperson of a council in Badulla distributed white sarees to female councillors annually.⁸² The absence of any formal rule, coupled with the existence of this practice, illustrates how informal gendered expectations can become institutionalised and reproduced within political spaces. Such examples demonstrate how women continue to navigate unwritten rules regarding appearance and respectability even after formal barriers to political participation have been addressed through mechanisms such as gender quotas.

5.3.2 Balancing Domestic Responsibilities and Political Life

A recurring theme that emerged across the interviews was the ongoing struggle to balance domestic responsibilities with political life. While some women had informal support networks that enabled their political engagement, the burden of household duties, such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, was still overwhelmingly borne by them. This double workload often meant that political responsibilities had to be fitted around their primary role as caregivers. One councilor illustrated this vividly by recounting how her duties as a mother often took precedence over her political role:

82 Badulla 015, Badulla district, 08 December 2023

*“My main focus was on household responsibilities. I went to the council once a month for the committee meetings..... At home, I primarily took care of my children, and my mother handled all the cooking. When my baby was just three months old, I would go to the council, sign the necessary documents, and then return home within about 15 minutes to feed my baby. I continued this routine for two years. Eventually, I began staying at the council until the end of meetings.”*⁸³

These personal accounts reflect broader gendered norms in Sri Lanka, where women are culturally expected to take full responsibility for children, elders, and household tasks while men are positioned as the primary breadwinners. From preparing meals to managing schoolwork, looking after the sick, and attending to domestic chores, women’s unpaid care work remains invisible yet essential. These responsibilities are often framed not as labour, but as obligations rooted in love, duty, or cultural expectation, part of what it means to be a woman (Kottegoda 2023).

The societal expectations fostering this gendered division of labour were captured vividly during a capacity-building workshop, where a female politician shared how, when invited to participate in late-night political talk shows, she and other women were often asked whether they had *“put their children to bed”* before attending these shows.⁸⁴ As she pointed out, this was a question that would never be posed to a male politician. Others in the room agreed, pointing out that such comments revealed how, even in formal political spaces, women were still viewed through the lens of their domestic roles. These remarks, though seemingly innocuous, served to subtly reinforce the idea that caregiving is a woman’s duty and that her presence in the public sphere must be justified in terms of her private responsibilities.

These gendered expectations shaped how many councillors approached their daily routines. Several interviewees described completing all domestic responsibilities, including preparing meals, sending children to school, and organising the home, before attending council meetings or engaging in political activities. In one particular case, a representative from Badulla shared how she brought her infant to council meetings, relying on her mother to care for the child during the proceedings,⁸⁵ a

83 Galle 024, Galle district, 13 March 2024.

84 Observation made by the researcher during a capacity-building workshop for female politicians, Colombo, 13 June 2024.

85 Badulla 013, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

decision that reflected both her commitment and the lack of structural support for working mothers.

Throughout the interviews, many women acknowledged the encouragement they received from their spouses and extended families when they entered the political arena. However, a closer examination revealed that practical assistance varied widely. Support from male partners was often symbolic or moral, while the bulk of practical childcare and household support typically came from female relatives. Mothers, mothers-in-law, and sisters were often the ones who stepped in to shoulder the domestic load, thereby enabling these women to attend meetings, engage in campaigns, or travel for political purposes.

As one representative noted:

*“My mother-in-law was very supportive of me, and we both shared household chores equally. Because of her I was less involved in household responsibilities, but I fully bore the related expenses and took care of the house, children, and husband. Meetings usually finished by 1:30 p.m. or 2:00 p.m., after which I would return home to do housework.”*⁸⁶

However, these accounts of family “support” often contained subtle but significant elements of control. One councillor explained that although she received support from her family, her brother instructed her to limit her political career to one term (four years), a suggestion she accepted. She also noted that she never travelled to political events alone, attending all meetings and obligations only with her husband or sister.⁸⁷ Such conditions complicate narratives of familial support and suggest that women’s political participation is frequently conditional, monitored, and circumscribed by male relatives.

This pattern of symbolic spousal support becomes even more complex when contrasted with instances of active male gatekeeping. One interviewee observed that some husbands determined whether their wives could participate in politics at all, with several women refusing to attend training programmes due to their husbands’ disapproval.⁸⁸ These examples illustrate how the permission of male

⁸⁶ Mannar 031, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

⁸⁷ Galle 024, Galle district, 13 March 2024.

⁸⁸ Galle 023, Galle district, 17 January 2024.

gatekeepers continues to shape the extent of women's political engagement, even when families outwardly present themselves as supportive.

Taken together, these accounts highlight how patriarchal norms are institutionalised within both family and political structures, forcing women to negotiate the balance between political and domestic responsibilities within an unequal system. While husbands often provided verbal encouragement or "permission," very few shared the actual domestic workload, leaving female relatives to absorb the burden. The result is what Hochschild and Machung (2012) describe as the "second shift," where women undertake unpaid domestic labour after formal political work, producing chronic "time poverty" (Ranatunga and Dunusinghe 2021). Political engagement is thus made possible not by institutional reform, but by the unpaid or unrecognised labour of other women within their families.

These gendered expectations are not only culturally reinforced but structurally embedded within political institutions themselves. As Key Informant A observed, political parties in Sri Lanka are often "*inherently nationalist, chauvinist, and anti-feminist.*"⁸⁹ Rather than accommodating women's realities by, for example, allowing children to be brought to meetings, parties typically expect women to find their own care solutions. This reinforces the assumption that caregiving is a woman's personal responsibility, not a collective or institutional concern that they are obliged to support.

This framing reflects a broader issue of women often being excluded from paid labour altogether when they are unable to delegate or manage unpaid care work, a status referred to as being "economically inactive", even though these women may be working full days in the home (Kottegoda 2023). In political life, the result is similar. Women are expected to participate without complaint, without structural support, and without disrupting patriarchal assumptions about who should manage the home. Their participation becomes contingent not on equal opportunity, but on their ability to navigate and absorb the hidden costs of exclusion, reinforcing the idea that their political engagement must never come at the expense of their domestic roles.

89 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

Key Informant A argued that while cultural change is a gradual process, it can be catalysed through economic restructuring. As the key informant pointed out, real progress cannot rely solely on personal sacrifice. She emphasised the urgent need for systemic interventions, including state investment in affordable childcare, elder care, and social protection to reduce the disproportionate burden borne by women and allow for more equitable participation in public life.⁹⁰ Without such change, the participation of women in politics will remain precarious, conditional, and constrained by the invisible labour that sustains both their homes and, indirectly, their public roles.

This analysis illustrates vividly that the introduction of the quota, while a significant milestone, remains insufficient to transform the deeply gendered nature of local political institutions. For many women, entering political office is only the first hurdle that they must overcome. Once elected, they are forced to navigate more discrimination, exclusion, financial pressures, and institutional resistance that undermine their authority and restrict their participation in decision-making. These patterns clearly highlight the gap between formal representation and substantive political empowerment.

90 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

Chapter 6

Negotiating Barriers and Challenging Resistance

The implementation of the 2018 gender quota was ideally supposed to pave the way for women to enter politics, making them feel welcome in an arena which, up to then, had largely been out of bounds except for those women coming from elite and privileged backgrounds. However, as illustrated in the previous chapter, women's entry into politics through this quota has been anything but straightforward. Women had to fight to secure nominations, campaign effectively, and eventually survive in office. Rather than entering a welcoming political environment, they often found themselves navigating a hostile one, where they received little support either from their political parties or from the local councils that were supposed to accommodate them. Yet despite these challenges, the interviews revealed that women did not remain passive in the face of these barriers. Throughout the course of the interviews conducted, it became evident that many women developed different mechanisms to confront the very system that was supposed to welcome them. Exploring these experiences highlights the strategies they employed to negotiate institutional barriers, challenge resistance, and ultimately sustain their very presence within local politics that attempted to exclude them.

6.1 Building Knowledge to Challenge Exclusion

Many women addressed the challenge of being ignored or silenced in council meetings by actively equipping themselves with knowledge of governance procedures and council regulations. One councillor revealed how she spent over a month studying how to conduct herself in council meetings and familiarising herself with the relevant regulations and ordinances, ensuring that her speeches aligned with legal procedures. By doing so, she sought to minimise opportunities for male members to challenge or dismiss her contributions.⁹¹

Similar experiences were shared by another councillor, who described how she studied local council laws and procedural rules in order to ask informed questions and participate more confidently in council discussions.⁹² This preparation was

⁹¹ Colombo 019, Colombo district, 22 November 2023.

⁹² Mannar 029, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

often necessary in an environment where women felt that their competence was frequently questioned.

To prevent being shouted down or interrupted, many women emphasised the importance of entering council meetings thoroughly prepared, often with detailed notes and a clear understanding of the proposals they intended to present. Such preparation enabled them to defend their ideas more effectively and resist attempts to undermine their participation. One councillor described how she learned to assert control over her speaking time, telling male members, *“Please keep your mouth shut. This is my time,”* to prevent them from interrupting her while presenting proposals.⁹³

These strategies illustrate how women actively negotiate the gendered norms embedded within local political institutions. As Feminist Institutionalists argue, institutions are not static and monolithic but rather dynamic entities that can be reshaped by political actors (Chappell 2006, 224). Through such actions, actors can recast the gendered character of these institutions by introducing new practices that challenge the status quo (Beckwith 2005, 132–3).

6.2 Informal Resistance and Cross-Party Solidarity

Throughout the course of the interviews conducted with female politicians, it was evident that they lacked support within their parties. Yet, in the absence of formal support, it was interesting to observe how women often developed informal networks of solidarity to bridge these institutional gaps. In many councils, female councillors exchanged information and advice across party lines, creating informal support systems. As one member explained:

*“The women members in the council shared details about what happened in the council, including discussions that took place and whether proposals were accepted or not.”*⁹⁴

Another representative from Ratnapura echoed this sentiment, stating that female councillors from other parties were often more helpful and supportive than male colleagues from her own party:

⁹³ Kandy 028, Kandy district, 25 October 2023.

⁹⁴ Kandy 026, Kandy district, 28 February 2024.

“Despite being the only Tamil female member among Sinhalese members, I experienced no discrimination and received support from all.”⁹⁵

In some instances, this solidarity also took a visible and collective form. In the Badulla Local Council, for example, female members stood together in support of those women who were publicly criticised or reprimanded by senior male politicians, even wearing black stripes as a symbolic gesture of their opposition to such treatment.⁹⁶ Such acts of collective resistance demonstrated how women attempted to challenge the hierarchical and gendered culture of local councils through mutual support.

Women also continued to assert themselves within council processes, particularly in areas traditionally perceived as male domains, despite the hostilities they faced. Several councillors highlighted how they played an active role in budgetary matters, challenging the common misconception that women lacked political knowledge or technical expertise. In Ambalangoda, for instance, women councillors played a key role in scrutinising the council budget and were instrumental in the eventual failure of the proposed budget after identifying procedural irregularities. As one councillor explained, female members insisted on reviewing audit reports and financial documentation before approving the budget, leading them to discover that audit reports were prepared only for the first year and not the second, causing them to reject the budget.⁹⁷

Beyond individual councils, women also created broader networks of support at district and provincial levels. In Mannar, for example, female councillors established a District Local Council Women Members’ Union with the support of the Chrysalis organisation. This platform brought together twenty-one women councillors from different political parties and backgrounds, enabling them to meet regularly and discuss common challenges without divisions based on caste, religion, or party affiliation. Even after leaving office, some members continued to remain active in these networks.⁹⁸

95 Ratnapura 038, Ratnapura district, 22 March 2024.

96 Badulla 013, Badulla district, 14 January 2024.

97 Galle 023, Galle district, 17 January 2024.

98 Mannar 029, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

Councillors also revealed how WhatsApp and Facebook groups were commonly used at district and provincial levels to maintain communication, share administrative information, and circulate important updates among female members. These platforms provided women with an alternative and informal channel for exchanging knowledge and maintaining solidarity across institutional boundaries.^{99 100}

However, these narratives of cross-party camaraderie stood in stark contrast to the experiences many women faced within their own parties. While informal collaboration among women fostered a sense of solidarity and mutual support, the internal political culture often remained deeply competitive and exclusionary. Many women found greater support across party lines than within them, yet efforts to engage with members of other parties were frequently met with suspicion or hostility. One councillor, for example, was accused of disloyalty by male colleagues simply for speaking with opposition members and was later publicly reprimanded by party leadership. Although her party occasionally offered symbolic gestures, such as assigning someone to walk her home or visiting when she was ill, she noted these actions lacked genuine substance.

“The support was insufficient; if it had been sufficient, we could have done more within those years. We would have gained strong trust among the people if we had sufficient support.”¹⁰¹

These accounts are consistent with what Feminist Institutionalists describe as the “constantly repeated processes of exclusion” (Lovenduski 2005). Political parties may outwardly support gender equality, but their internal cultures, dominated by men, tend to withhold information, resources, and leadership opportunities from women, thereby positioning them as the “outsiders” (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016).

Interview with Key Informant A confirmed that within parties, women are frequently relegated to subordinate roles of mobilizers, caretakers or campaign organisers, while decision-making spaces remain male-dominated. As Key Informant A held, parties *“want women’s votes and visibility, but not their presence in leadership.”¹⁰²*

99 Colombo 019, Colombo district, 22 November 2023.

100 Mannar 031, Mannar district, 07 June 2024.

101 Kandy 026, Kandy district, 28 February 2024.

102 Gender Specialist and Politician based in Western Province, Colombo district, 06 November 2023.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Although Sri Lanka has achieved notable progress in several dimensions of gender equality, particularly in female literacy and women's participation at the community level, these gains have not translated into increased representation within formal political institutions. Women constitute the majority of active members within community-based organisations (CBOs), and women's societies operate in nearly every village across the country. Yet, women remain persistently underrepresented in elected office, highlighting a longstanding disconnect between women's participation in community life and their inclusion within formal political decision-making.

This contradiction is further highlighted by Sri Lanka's frequent invocation of symbolic milestones, including the election of the world's first female Prime Minister in 1960 and the appointment of the country's longest-serving female President in 1994. Yet, despite these high-profile examples, women remain significantly underrepresented in elected office, particularly at the local level, even though women constitute the greater portion of the population.

It was against this backdrop that the 25 per cent quota was introduced at the local government level in 2016 and implemented in 2018. While intended to transform women's political participation, this study examined whether it resulted in substantive empowerment or remained largely symbolic, drawing on the lived experiences of women elected through the quota.

The findings reveal that women continue to face persistent and deeply gendered barriers across political parties, local councils, and socio-cultural contexts, limiting their ability to function as effective political actors. Party gatekeeping, lack of institutional support, and resistance from male party members significantly constrained women's participation, while the unequal burden of unpaid care work further restricted their engagement. These dynamics demonstrate that entry into politics through quotas does not automatically translate into inclusion, influence, or authority.

Collectively, the findings demonstrate that women's political participation was shaped across three interconnected institutional arenas. Political parties continued to operate as gatekeepers through tokenistic candidate selection, unequal access to opportunities, and limited institutional support. Within local councils, unequal access to resources and informal exclusion from decision-making constrained women's substantive participation after election. Beyond formal political institutions, gendered expectations within families and communities continued to regulate women's political engagement through unpaid care responsibilities, social scrutiny, and traditional norms surrounding women's public roles. Taken together, these findings demonstrate that women's political participation was shaped not by a single institution but by the interaction of multiple formal and informal institutions operating across political, institutional, and social spheres.

Viewed through the lens of feminist institutionalism, the findings highlight how ostensibly gender-neutral institutions are supported by informal norms, including patronage networks, gender stereotyping, and party hierarchies, that continue to restrict women's access to power. As such, increasing women's numerical presence alone does little to disrupt entrenched institutional practices, raising important questions about the limits of formal reforms in the absence of broader structural change.

Accordingly, while the quota has increased the numerical representation of women at the local government level, it has not yet translated into substantive political empowerment. Women continue to be framed as 'quota women' or 'Pin Manthirini,' and are often perceived as lacking legitimacy within both political and community settings.

However, this should not be understood as a failure of the quota itself, but rather as reflective of the longer and more complex process of institutional transformation. As feminist scholarship suggests, such transformation unfolds over time. In this sense, quotas can be understood as operating in two phases: the first aimed at increasing women's numerical representation, and the second at transforming institutional norms and practices to enable substantive participation. The Sri Lankan experience indicates that while the first phase has made measurable progress, the second remains ongoing and contested.

This study contributes to that understanding by illustrating how formal institutional reforms and informal institutional practices interact to shape women's political participation following the introduction of quotas. By examining women's lived experiences across political parties, local councils, and family and community settings, the study extends existing scholarship beyond questions of descriptive representation to illustrate the mechanisms through which informal patriarchal norms continue to constrain substantive political participation.

Nevertheless, the study is not without limitations. Its scope was limited to a relatively small sample and did not fully explore long-term political trajectories or institutional change over time. Future research could therefore benefit from longitudinal approaches that track women's political careers over time, as well as comparative analyses that incorporate perspectives from party leadership and male councillors. This study also pointed to important variations in women's experiences, particularly along the lines of ethnicity and religion, with some groups facing heightened forms of resistance at the community level. Future research should therefore explore how ethnicity, religion, and other intersecting identities shape women's political experiences, contributing to a deeper understanding of intersectional inequalities within political institutions which can ultimately lead to more inclusive policy design and implementation.

In conclusion, while gender quotas are a necessary mechanism for addressing women's historical exclusion from politics, they are insufficient on their own as they represent only the first step in a longer process of change. Meaningful institutional transformation requires sustained and multi-level reform that addresses both formal rules and informal power structures. Ultimately, women's political participation must be recognised as a democratic necessity, rather than a concession or temporary experiment and political institutions must be reconfigured in ways that enable women not only to enter political office but to exercise power meaningfully and on equal terms.

Chapter 8

Recommendations

Across this research, it became apparent that the challenges faced by female councillors were not isolated incidents. Rather, the consistency of these experiences across different wards, districts, and even provinces points to deeper structural inequalities that require deliberate and sustained action. These challenges are rooted in institutional and socio-political dynamics, and range from gendered exclusion within political parties to persistent marginalisation within local councils.

They are further aggravated by the pressures women face within their own families and communities, where, instead of receiving support and encouragement, many encountered both overt and subtle forms of resistance for stepping beyond traditional gender roles. These barriers, therefore, cannot be addressed overnight, but instead require coordinated and sustained action by multiple actors across different levels of the political system.

The following recommendations thus outline the areas where such action is necessary, and identify the government, political parties, local councils, the Election Commission, and civil society organisations as the actors responsible for their implementation. Alongside these institutional interventions, it is also important to recognise that meaningful change requires shifts in gendered attitudes and norms, both within the education system and in society.

8.1 Recommendations to the Government

8.1.1 Enhance the Existing Quota System

While there have been many criticisms of the quota system, particularly questions regarding its effectiveness, abandoning the mechanism at this stage is neither practical nor desirable. Philosophically, the quota is intended as a temporary measure designed to rectify the historical exclusion of women from public and political life, creating an artificial but necessary entry point through which women can participate on a more equal footing. However, findings of this study suggest that such an approach may be premature in the Sri Lankan context. Several women interviewed expressed the view that the quota should be a permanent measure,

given the persistence of structural and institutional barriers that continue to limit their political participation.

This position reflects broader debates within comparative contexts, where the appropriate duration of affirmative measures remains contested. For instance, proposals in countries such as Kenya to introduce a 20-year sunset clause have been met with criticism on the basis that short timelines fail to account for the slow pace of institutional transformation (Obiria 2025). In light of these considerations, it is recommended that the quota be maintained, with periodic reviews to assess its effectiveness, rather than being treated as a strictly time-bound intervention. However, as the findings of this study demonstrate, numerical inclusion alone is insufficient to address the structural and institutional barriers women continue to face.

Accordingly, there is a need for supplementary measures such as the introduction of a “zebra list” system, which is widely used in several African countries. This is a candidate list where men and women are ranked alternately (M, F, M, F) to ensure gender balance and increase the likelihood that women are placed in winnable positions, rather than clustered at the bottom of party lists (Gouws and Madsen 2024). While Sri Lanka’s local government electoral system does not operate under a conventional closed-list proportional representation model, the underlying principle of “zebra lists” can be meaningfully adapted as one of these supplementary measures. In particular, political parties should be required to structure their additional persons lists using an alternating gender sequence (M, F, M, F), ensuring that women are not systematically relegated to lower-ranked or symbolic positions. Such a mechanism would limit party discretion, strengthen transparency in quota implementation, and reduce the practice of nominating women only to fulfil minimum legal requirements.

As Kodikara (2023) held, the quota should also be increased to at least 30% to achieve a critical mass capable of enabling more substantive participation. Key informants also called for an increase in the proportion of women permitted to contest elections, from 10% to 50%. They argued that this would provide a more equitable pathway for women to build constituencies, secure seats through their own vote base, and counter the stigma associated with being labelled “quota women” or “Pin Manthrini.”

Furthermore, when determining quota targets (such as the proposed 50%), the system must ensure meaningful representation across diverse and historically marginalised groups rather than limiting focus to “Sinhala women.” Integrating intersectional criteria within the quota, for instance, requiring representation of women with disabilities, Malaiyaha Tamil women, or those from other minority communities would ensure a more inclusive and equitable distribution of opportunities.

8.1.2 Government-Funded Social Care System

The findings of this study revealed how the unequal distribution of unpaid care work remains a significant structural barrier to women’s political participation. While some attempted to manage both roles independently, others relied heavily on unpaid support provided by female relatives, effectively transferring care responsibilities from one woman to another rather than reducing the overall burden of care. As responsibility for care cannot be addressed by women individually or by political parties alone, addressing this structural imbalance requires sustained government intervention through increased investment in social protection and the provision of accessible, affordable childcare and eldercare services.

Implementing such services would substantially reduce the gendered burden of unpaid care, allowing women more time and energy to engage meaningfully in political life. This could include state-funded crèche facilities, expanded childcare services within schools, and community-based eldercare programmes. In addition to supporting women in politics, these services would also create new employment opportunities for other women, contributing to broader socio-economic empowerment.

8.2 Recommendations to Political Parties

8.2.1 Establish Transparent and Merit-Based Nomination Processes

At the core of the challenges faced by women politicians, both before and after entering office, are decisions taken by political parties themselves. Beginning with the nomination process, parties must establish clear, transparent, and merit-based criteria for candidate selection, applicable to both men and women. Such criteria

should be grounded in skills, experience, and community engagement, rather than personal loyalty or familial ties. This would prevent the routine practice of fulfilling quota requirements by nominating female relatives of male politicians or individuals perceived as easily controllable, and instead ensure that nominations are based on standardised principles that all parties are required to follow. Political parties must also be held accountable for the individuals they nominate, particularly where nominations reproduce exclusionary or tokenistic practices.

8.2.2. Reform Internal Party Power Structures

Beyond nominations, parties must address their own internal power structures. To encourage more women to seek nominations and remain politically active, political parties need to actively dismantle their male-dominated and patriarchal cultures. This requires affirmative action within party hierarchies, including concrete measures to ensure that women occupy at least 50% of senior decision-making positions within party leadership structures. Without women's presence at these levels, decisions relating to nominations, resources, and party priorities will continue to marginalise women's interests and perspectives.

8.2.3 Provide Continuous Training and Institutional Support

Once women assume political office, parties have a responsibility to support their substantive participation rather than treating the election as the endpoint of inclusion. Regular and structured training programmes should be mandatory for all newly elected councillors, regardless of gender, with particular attention to first-time representatives. Rather than limiting training to infrequent or annual sessions, parties should provide orientation programmes prior to assuming office, followed by continuous capacity-building on council procedures, policy formulation, and governance. Such measures would reduce women's reliance on external actors and strengthen their ability to function as effective political actors within formal institutions.

8.2.4 Ensure Equitable Access to Campaign Finance

Unequal access to campaign finance remains another significant barrier for women within party structures. Despite the existence of campaign finance regulations,

women frequently face difficulties accessing funds from business networks and private donors that are more readily available to male politicians. To address this disparity, political parties should consider pooled funding mechanisms, whereby campaign funds raised through the party are centrally managed and distributed equitably among candidates. This would reduce reliance on informal patronage networks and help level the playing field for women candidates.

8.2.5 Adopt Care-Sensitive Party Practices

Finally, political parties must recognise that women's political participation is often sustained through precarious and informal care arrangements. Women frequently rely on paid caregivers or female relatives to manage unpaid care work, a system that is both stressful and unreliable. Parties should therefore adopt care-sensitive practices, including allowing children to be brought to meetings where appropriate, avoiding late-night meetings wherever possible, and providing transport support following late sittings. Restructuring party activities in this way acknowledges caregiving as a collective concern rather than an individual burden, and is essential to enabling women's sustained and meaningful participation in political life.

8.3 Recommendations to Local Councils

8.3.1 Address Harassment and Ensure Institutional Accountability

After assuming office, many female councillors continue to face harassment within council spaces, particularly in the form of verbal abuse during public meetings. Despite the frequency and severity of such incidents, perpetrators are rarely sanctioned, creating an environment of impunity that normalises hostility toward women in public office. To address this, local councils must adopt and enforce clear codes of conduct governing behaviour during council proceedings. Strong legal and disciplinary measures should be instituted, with explicit consequences for verbal abuse, threats, or sexualised attacks against female members. Such mechanisms are essential not only to protect women councillors but also to uphold the integrity and dignity of local democratic institutions.

8.3.2 Create Gender-Sensitive and Inclusive Council Infrastructure

Local councils must also ensure that their physical infrastructure is inclusive and responsive to the needs of women. Many councils continue to lack basic facilities such as separate and functional washrooms for women, reinforcing the perception that these institutions were not designed with women's participation in mind. Councils should ensure the availability of safe, hygienic washrooms for women, including spaces that allow for changing clothes or breastfeeding where necessary. Providing such facilities is a minimum institutional requirement and a tangible step toward making council spaces more welcoming and accessible for women, particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities alongside political work.

8.4 Recommendations to the Election Commission

8.4.1 Strengthen the Enforcement of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act

Although the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023 was enacted to impose spending limits on political parties and candidates, prohibit certain forms of donations, and require detailed financial disclosures to the Election Commission, the analysis reveals widespread and systematic violations of these provisions during election periods, particularly by male politicians. These violations undermine the intent of the law and reproduce structural inequalities in electoral competition, placing women candidates at a significant disadvantage.

It is therefore imperative that the Election Commission strictly enforce the provisions of this Act and adopt stronger punitive measures against offenders. Data collected during this research indicates that when violations are pursued through the courts, cases often remain unresolved for years. During this time, accused candidates continue to occupy elected office, and even when convictions occur, the completion of a full term in office effectively neutralises the punitive impact of the judgment.

To address this gap between legal accountability and political consequence, this research recommends that candidates found to have violated campaign finance regulations be disqualified from contesting elections for a minimum period of ten years. Such a measure would prevent violators from benefiting electorally from

prolonged legal proceedings and would serve as a meaningful deterrent against the misuse of financial power in elections. Stronger enforcement mechanisms are essential not only to uphold the rule of law, but also to create a more equitable electoral environment in which women candidates can compete on fairer terms.

8.5 Recommendations to Civil Society Organisations

8.5.1 Provide Regionally Accessible Capacity-Building

While civil society organisations have played a crucial role in conducting capacity-building workshops and training programmes for women politicians, these initiatives have largely been concentrated at the national level and have not consistently reached female councillors across all wards of Sri Lanka. As a result, many women, particularly those from rural or peripheral areas, remain excluded from such opportunities. Civil society organisations should therefore prioritise regionally based training programmes that are accessible to all women at the local council level. Expanding training beyond Colombo-centric or national forums would enable broader participation and ensure that women councillors across diverse geographic and socio-political contexts are adequately supported.

8.5.2 Promote Counter Narratives of Tokenism

A persistent challenge identified throughout the analysis is the widespread perception that female councillors were appointed merely to fulfil quota requirements and that they have not made substantive contributions. Civil society organisations are well positioned to actively challenge this narrative by systematically identifying, documenting, and publicising the achievements of women councillors. Highlighting successful initiatives, effective leadership, and community-level impact can counter claims that the quota has “failed” and disrupt both public and political party discourses that undermine women’s legitimacy as political actors.

8.5.3 Engage Communities to Challenge Gendered Power Hierarchies

In addition to working directly with women politicians, civil society organisations should engage communities through targeted awareness-raising programmes

aimed at dismantling deeply entrenched gendered hierarchies. Community-level dialogues, workshops, and public education initiatives can help challenge assumptions about women's roles, leadership capabilities, and participation in public life. Such interventions are essential for addressing resistance at the grassroots level and fostering social environments that are more supportive of women's political participation.

8.6 Cross-Cutting Recommendations

8.6.1 Incorporate Political and Civic Literacy into Formal Education

While Sri Lankan society remains highly engaged in political discussion, this engagement is accompanied by widespread disenchantment with formal political processes, rooted in the belief that individual voting choices are incapable of producing meaningful change. In this context, it is imperative to systematically incorporate voter literacy, political literacy, and education on local governance into the national school curriculum. Early exposure to these concepts can cultivate a more informed citizenry that understands democratic participation as an active and ongoing process rather than a symbolic act.

Such education should aim to foster a sense of political agency among citizens, emphasising that power ultimately rests with the electorate and that political actors can and should be held accountable for their promises. By encouraging critical engagement from a young age, this approach can contribute to challenging entrenched cynicism and the normalisation of so-called “dirty politics.”

8.6.2 Mainstream Women's Political Leadership in Educational Content

The Sri Lankan education system should also be revised to meaningfully highlight women who have played significant roles in politics and leadership, areas that are currently represented in predominantly male-centred ways. Incorporating examples of women leaders into textbooks and classroom discussions can help normalise female leadership and disrupt the perception that political authority is inherently male. Early and consistent visibility of women in positions of power is essential for reshaping gendered assumptions about leadership and public life.

8.6.3 Challenge Gendered Norms Surrounding Care Work and Political Participation

There remains a deeply ingrained belief that women are primarily caregivers, and that politics is a masculine and morally compromised domain, rendering it unsuitable for women. Addressing these norms requires continuous, long-term public awareness and educational campaigns that question gendered divisions of labour and challenge assumptions about women's social roles.

The persistent association of women's success with their marital or domestic status reflects a broader cultural logic of gendered labour, which contributes to both social and self-stigmatisation. For example, women who succeed politically are often judged negatively if they do not conform to expectations of a "successful" family life. Although shifting these attitudes is a very necessary but gradual process, sustained educational and cultural interventions are essential to transforming the social conditions that constrain women's political participation.

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Presence and Influence

Local Politics and Gendered Realities

Uvini Panditha

This report explores the lived experiences of women elected to local government in 2018 following the introduction of the 25% quota, drawing on in-depth interviews conducted across multiple districts. Their accounts reveal the complex realities of entering and navigating political spaces that remain deeply shaped by patriarchal norms and practices.

While the quota marked a significant step toward increasing women's political representation, the findings show that presence alone does not guarantee influence. Women councillors describe facing a range of challenges, from financial constraints and limited campaign support to gendered expectations, exclusion from decision-making processes, and resistance within male-dominated party structures and councils. These barriers often restrict their ability to participate meaningfully and exercise authority in their roles.

Building on a Feminist Institutionalism perspective, this report highlights how formal gains in representation are undermined by informal norms and institutional practices that continue to marginalize women. It calls for sustained reforms that go beyond numerical inclusion, urging a reconfiguration of political institutions to ensure that women are not merely present, but are able to participate fully, effectively, and on equal terms in local governance.



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