Strengthening Support Networks and Solidarity for Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka

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by

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Acknowledgements

Table of Contents

1. Introduction

Sri Lanka is one of the poorest performing countries with regard to women's representation in politics. Despite introducing universal suffrage in the country in 1931 and having the world's first woman prime minister (i.e. Sirimavo Ratwatte Dias Bandaranaike in 1960), the overall participation of women in all levels of politics is abysmal when compared to other South Asian countries in the region (World Economic Forum 2019, 23). While this issue has attracted a large amount of research, there has been minimum effective intervention. The introduction of a quota system in 2017 at the local government (LG) level boosted women's representation statistically from around 2 percent to 29 percent (Vijeyarasa 2020). However, this has not reduced the challenges and the broken pathway that women have to face and traverse when entering politics. The challenges range from pervasive patriarchal values, such as those that deem politics an unsuitable career for women, to barriers to securing sufficient finances to contest, as well as corruption in politics. Even though the numbers have increased at the LG level, it is doubtful whether women politicians are able to participate fully within the political spheres. This working paper stems from the findings of a recent study titled, 'Joining the Race: Pathways to Politics for Grassroots and Development-sector Women in Sri Lanka' conducted by the Australian National University (ANU), University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia (USU) and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), which identified the importance of support networks and solidarity among women to enable better representation of women in politics, both statistically and substantially (see Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023).

This is a preliminary scoping study that was designed to survey the available literature on solidarity and networks and to explore the knowledge gaps. Since this theme was highlighted in the previous study, we wanted to explore the nature and scope of different types of networks available to aspiring women and incumbent women politicians and what perceptions these women held with regard to the role networks and solidarity played in their pathways to politics.

The present study was conducted from December 2022 to April 2023 in Sri Lanka. A literature review was developed to assess the knowledge gaps in this area of study and key informant interviews (KIIs) were conducted to get an initial and general

idea of the situation. While the literature review and key informant interviews are used to discuss findings and present conclusions and recommendations, it should be noted that this is a working paper and further research is needed to substantiate any claims.

This working paper comprises a literature review and a discussion of findings from qualitative research. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2, which is the literature review, begins by briefly exploring what support networks are and how they could potentially aid women's political participation. The section then looks at the current context of networks and solidarity among women in Sri Lankan politics and outlines the knowledge gaps. Section 3 of the paper outlines its methodology. Section 4 details the findings and focuses on how the study participants perceive support networks and solidarity in their political life, perceived benefits of and barriers to effective networking and solidarity, and suggested recommendations to improving networks and solidarity as a measure for the meaningful political participation of women. Section 5 constitutes the conclusions drawn from the literature survey and preliminary fieldwork.

2. Literature Review

2.1 What are social networks and how can they support women's political participation?

In the context of the current study, the concept of network can take many different forms. Women aspirants entering politics can have myriad forms of networks, both formal and informal (Crossley 2007; 2010). Formal networks may include acquaintances within one's party, women's wings of political parties, one's constituency, international diplomatic connections, membership in various committees and so on. These networks may form organically or as a result of a person's activities in politics. More informal types of networks may consist of connections with one's immediate family and extended family, other relatives and friends, relationships formed through grassroots social activity, membership in social and religious organizations, and so on. While formal networks can be hierarchical, informal networks are more community oriented. However, both types consist of individuals and social organizations, and cooperation and exchange of resources.

Literature shows that networks are a significant part of political activity. Crossley (2007) shows the importance of social networks in extra-parliamentary politics in terms of allowing activists to find one another and join forces, offering incentives for participation, keeping activist commitments alive during periods of latency, and providing crucial resources for mobilization (p. 234). McClurg (2003) posits that interaction within social networks has a strong influence on the individual propensity to participate in politics. More specifically, McClurg argues that having social networks 'creates opportunities for individuals to gather information about politics that allow them to live beyond personal resource constraints' (McClurg 2003, 449). McClurg's study also focuses on two types of networks: formal (members in civic groups, workplace, etc.) and informal (family and friends). The conversations that occur in these networks can potentially expose its members to politically relevant information, desirability of political participation, mechanics of electoral politics, the ways to support candidates, reasons for supporting particular candidates, the execution of political campaigns and many other valuable learnings (McClurg 2003, 454). In relation to the current study, creating such networks or being a part of such networks can be beneficial to women political aspirants in

terms of promoting one's political ambitions and garnering support that may not be possible in the absence of such networks.

Social networks are also associated with social movements, whereby the level of coordination between actors needed for social movement can only be achieved through sustained interactions that are found in networks (Krinsky and Crossley 2014, 2). For example, most of the women who contributed to the women's movements in many countries around the world were socially embedded in social and political networks prior to the protests (Passy 2003; Siegel 2009). The benefits of such social networks include social capital, a greater number of ties among members, increased solidarity, trust and mutual support, and shared identity. The involvement of a large number of people can facilitate nonmainstream values and greater commitment to the network's cause (Krinsky and Crossley 2014). All these benefits and functions are important and have the potential to be strengthened and utilized in the case of women's participation in formal politics.

2.2 What do networks and solidarity look like for women engaging in politics in Sri Lanka and how do they help?

This section outlines different types of networks that are already available in the current political landscape that can be reinforced, and how these networks can be spaces for strengthened solidarity among women and lead to a more effective political representation. We discuss formal and informal networks that are developed through (1) connection to a male politician, (2) family connections, (3) involvement in civil society organizations, (4) a supportive constituency, (5) local government quota, (6) the role of NGOs, (7) women campaigners, (8) and building secondary leadership.

The study 'Joining the Race: Pathways to Politics for Grassroots and Development-sector Women in Sri Lanka', conducted by the Australian National University (ANU), University of Technology Sydney (UTS), Universitas Sumatera Utara, Indonesia (USU) and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), identifies the importance of networks and solidarity as a valuable resource and framework for women to enter politics in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. In reality, however, these networks are lacking or underutilized, and solidarity among women is often weak and unexplored. The study shows that, where cross-party coalitions have been

built, they have helped to advance a particular agenda at a given moment in time, but have not necessarily been a sustained and embedded long-term structure in the political process. Furthermore, some politically-active women and scholars remain skeptical about the suitability of such networks across party lines. A key finding from this research was the importance of networks and solidarity for aspiring and incumbent women politicians.

Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera (2022) argue that, in the political sphere, it is the common challenges that women face when entering and engaging in politics that can form the basis for women's solidarity and drive support for each other to overcome these issues. The authors further suggest that solidarity can go a long way in identifying women's interests and concerns that are often neglected or dismissed in the patriarchal political spaces, as well as offering genuine friendships, celebrating success, mentoring each other, and coming together to address common concerns. The overall assumption here is that meaningful participation in these different forms of formal and informal networks would lead to strengthened solidarity among women and women politicians – grassroots women, activists, political aspirants, incumbents, and retired politicians – that would eventually strengthen women's political representation in Sri Lanka. The recent study by the Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) (2021) shows that solidarity can counter practices of exclusion, discrimination and violence against women in the political space. Further, the function of solidarity is identified to be twofold; to facilitate mentorship, and to unite women politicians. Solidarity is also found to occur at two levels: between junior and senior women politicians within a political party (vertical solidarity), and among peers (horizontal solidarity) with networks formed organically and facilitated by civil society. The Women Parliamentarians' Caucus and Women's Wings of political parties are examples of formal networks of women politicians that have had success (DLP 2021).

2.2.1 Connection to a male politician

One notable support network that Sri Lankan women who enter politics draw strength from is the elite-driven connection to a male politician (Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023). This has been the case since Adeline Molamure and Naysum Saravanamuttu were elected via their family legacies in 1932 and 1933 respectively. Even though this South Asian phenomenon of widows,

wives and daughters coming into politics 'over the dead bodies' of their male relatives (Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003, 24; Kodikara 2009, 15) has both merits (Vijeyarasa 2022) and limitations (Kodikara 2009), it is still the most prominent way in which women enter parliament in Sri Lanka. Of the 12 women Members of Parliament (MP) who currently hold office in the Sri Lanka parliament, seven women have entered through the legacy of a male relative (either deceased or active in politics) (Hannan 2020). In contrast, Jeevanee Kariyawasam, a former Urban Council member for Chilaw in the North Western Province from 2011-2015, gained support through female family members active in politics (Perry 2018).

While these types of support networks are limited to the 'elite', those who do have this support have been able to go a long way in politics. For example, Ferrial Ashraff, a former Member of Parliament, shares, 'If it wasn't for my husband, the political path may not have opened out for me. Going into that setup as a Muslim woman is not easy – the way the community is, even talking to men is not accepted' (Perry 2018). Even Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga (who was the first woman president in Sri Lanka in 1994 and was re-elected in 1999) were successful in their political careers as a result of the support derived from a network loyal to their family name. Heritage determined their status and legitimized their political role (Attanayake 2008, 261).

2.2.2 Family connections

Networks in the form of family connections seem to be prominent for the women who have been successful in entering formal politics in Sri Lanka. Family name, the political legacy of that name and wealth provide the much-needed community networks and campaign support that are essential to win elections (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019). These can be both formal (a network of constituents loyal to a political name and party support) and informal (support of family members) structures that strengthen women's political participation. However, it must be noted that these types of networks and support are limited to women of 'elite' and dynastic backgrounds.

At the same time, an informal support network in the form of family is deemed important for women of any level to enter politics. First and foremost, one's family's support provides a base of voters and a network of campaigners (Jakimow

et al. 2023). The support of the family is also important to boost confidence and elicit courage to walk the broken pathway to politics. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga recalls how she and her siblings supported her mother's entry into politics, 'We were very supportive of her... It was a big decision after father had been assassinated, but although we were children, I remember among us a sense of something akin to duty' (Wilson 2005, 91). Moreover, given the patriarchal culture and traditional attitudes towards women in the country, support from family members plays a decisive role in the successful entry of Sri Lankan women into the legislature (Attanayake 2008, 260–61).

2.2.3 Involvement in civil society organizations

Literature shows that for many women, involvement in civil society organizations, welfare organizations, feminist activism, and other such activities are beneficial in political apprenticeship and to be influential in their formal political agendas (Cornwall and Goetz 2005; Jakimow et al. 2023). Attanayake (2008) argues that creating women's networks in professions, businesses, governments, trade unions and women's organizations is an essential tool for change as it enables sharing experiences, building a common knowledge base, and forging solidarity. At the same time, the author points out that women's organizations are a major route for the entry of women into public life including indirect participation in political processes (Attanayake 2008, 269–70).

In fact, involvement in such organizations and activities for a significant period of time (at least four years) has been seen as a prerequisite for women to enter formal politics (Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023). It is important to note that involvement in such organizations or activism does not occur in isolation, but in the company and collaboration of likeminded women and networks. While these collaborations can develop skills, knowledge, experiences and resources essential for formal politics, they are also an important means of building support networks and solidarity. According to White and Aspinall (2019), one aspect of a 'good woman' candidate is having 'a strong base of community support through leadership in organizations of various sorts...' (p. 3). This resonates with the above argument of the importance of community involvement and activism. Both theories point to the need for networking and collaborating with the communities and using these networks as a support structure when transitioning to formal politics.

2.2.4 Supportive constituency

Jakimow et al. (2023) argue that having a supportive constituency is a critical prerequisite to running for office as candidates cannot expect people to just vote for them. The authors argue that a first step towards creating such a constituency goes beyond being known to a particular group of people and extends to having an emotional connection with them through long-term community engagement and rapport-building. At the same time, the authors outline challenges and propose recommendations to alleviate these issues.

A notable example can be drawn from the life of Sirimavo Bandaranaike. While belonging to an elitist and powerful family in the country, her engagement and rapport with the village level communities began at an early age. Echoing the importance of an emotional connection with one's constituents, Jirasinghe (2010) notes how Sirimavo '…cared about the villagers just as much as they did about us… We were all "people of the place"' (p. 79).

While such a constituency can statistically enhance a candidate's election results, this support network can also provide labour for campaigning, mobilize voters, engage in promoting the candidate through their own personal contacts and networks, provide advice and encouragement, and also support with other election necessities such as media engagement, campaign management, budgeting, research and analysis (Jakimow et al. 2023). In the absence of large sums of personal finances to fund election campaigns for women, these support networks provide an efficient alternative. Support networks for solidary was also emphasized, especially in terms of giving confidence and courage to the women apprentices to take the pathway to politics.

Having networks and being a part of these networks provide women candidates with a platform to practice their leadership and public speaking skills, learn to mobilize people, hone their problem solving abilities, acquire social and political knowledge, engage in project implementation, acquire a better understanding of finance management, and connect with a wide range of people including leaders and grassroots communities (Jakimow et al. 2023). Research shows that, in the Sri Lankan political culture, women are not necessarily invited to political spaces with open arms, but rather women need to carve a place for themselves using the

support networks and solidarity they have built through years of community work. At the same time, rather than parachuting into formal politics with no experience of connecting with different types of people, these networks provide an important opportunity for women candidates to practice their skills and knowledge. Women accede that through their engagement in village-based societies, they have gained skills and built networks necessary to participate in politics (Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023).

Case Study 1: The Lanka Mahila Samiti (LMS)

Sirimavo was enrolled in several women's organizations, some of them affiliated to politics, soon after her marriage. The Lanka Mahila Samiti (LMS), a pioneer rural development organization run by women, is one such organization that gave Sirimavo a crucial opening to connect with the village and the disadvantaged. As a part of its drive for rural development, the work done by the LMS included maternal health, malaria eradication, sanitation, food production, weaving and cottage crafts. Her role as treasurer of the LMS gave Sirimavo significant opportunities to generate and manage finances, collaborate with international funding organizations, coordinate committee members, and manage the publicity of the organization, while also creating a bond with the rural populations (Jirasinghe 2010, 83). Sirimavo's accounts further show how closely involved she was with paddy farming and farmers, popularizing new equipment and ideas, and experimenting with new strains of paddy which resulted in abundant yields. All these experiences at the grassroots level gave her 'deeper insight into the life of the average villager of the remote areas' (ibid, 86). It later benefited her political career as Sirimavo used this understanding of rice cultivation and the farmers' deep-seated connection to it to stand against the opposition's reduction of the rice subsidy in 1966, which led to another landmark victory for Sirimavo in 1970.

Sirimavo details the range of different people she was able to meet with who made up her grassroots social network, such as 'MPs of areas,

Government Agents and Assistant Government Agents, district headmen, doctors, engineers, school principals and teachers, farmers and their wives, businessmen and others…' (Jirasinghe 2010, 86). She appreciated the personal skills she was able to develop by being exposed to the village women and their confidence through the LMS, 'I owe my own beginning as a public speaker to the Samiti' (ibid, 86). The author also notes how Sirimavo was able to mobilize an 'unprecedented high turnout' (ibid, 89) of rural women, a feat not seen among women politicians both then and now. While her popularity and entry into formal politics can be attributed to the success of her husband's political career, her survival and conduct in it were clearly influenced by her role as a social worker at the village level. Sirimavo's life history demonstrates the importance of engagement in community activity for a considerable period of time and developing strong formal and informal networks for successful political representation.

Case study 2: The Sri Lanka Youth Parliament

The Sri Lanka Youth Parliament is a formal platform that has the potential to promote women's political representation. The Youth Parliament provides a space for the youth in the country interested in politics to develop skills and knowledge to enter formal politics. The forum brings together youth from all over the country, providing them with an opportunity to take part in simulated parliamentary sessions. The Youth Parliament consists of 23 ministries, such as Education, Health, Environment, International Solidarity, and all members are elected through an election process (One Planet 2022). Engagement in this forum also facilitates pollical networking opportunities and members are often given direct invitations from political parties to contest in local government elections (Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023).

Case study 3: Sri Lanka Women Parliamentarians' Caucus

The Sri Lankan Women Parliamentarians' Caucus is a key group that exists within the parliamentary structure for women parliamentarians to band together across party lines to increase visibility on common issues. For example, the Caucus in 2021 came together without party affiliations to publicly extend support for the first ever female Deputy Inspector General (DIG) of Police in Sri Lanka who was facing backlash from her male counterparts in the police force against her rightful appointment (ColomboPage News Desk 2021). Following the success of sustaining the appointment of the first female DIG, three more women police officers have since been promoted to the same title, marking a historic moment of gender equality and solidarity in the country (Hamza 2021).

Hirunika Premachandra, a former parliamentarian, talking about the solidarity in the Women's Caucus says, '… we sit together, we talk about our general problems, the problems we face as women politicians. And I remember that all the women politicians from all the parties, we got together and we talked about our problems, and if something happened to another woman parliamentarian we always stood up for her…' (Brunch LK 2022b). However, she also says that such solidarity is not always seen among women politicians and that it is important that the prominent female political personalities act as role models of solidarity for the others.

Case study 4: Women's coalitions/ wings within political parties

Women's coalitions/ wings provide a platform for women members to network and carve their political mandates within parties (Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023). Women's wings or sections in political parties have been maintained for years. For example, the UNP (United National Party) formed an All-Ceylon Women's Union of the party in 1949 (Kearney 1981, 732). More recently, the electing of

women through the quota system has enabled the initiation of women's organizations or committees within parties that did not have such entities before (Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera 2022). For example, the Progressive Women's Collective (PWC) of the National People's Power (NPP) political party has successfully advocated for the nomination of women's candidates at parliamentary elections (ibid). A more informal coalition in the city of Kurunegala shows the capacity for all women politicians to come together without party affiliation to not only debate opposing ideologies but to also share genuine friendships (Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera 2022). However, the function and effectiveness of most of the existing women's committees is questionable.

2.2.5 Local government quota

With the introduction of the local government (LG) quota, a substantial number of women have now entered politics at the local government level in Sri Lanka. Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera (2022) raise the question whether these women have the potential to develop solidarity and support networks within their own parties. Now that a large number of women are already in office, banding together to support each other and address common issues seems viable. This could also be an initiative towards grooming secondary leaderships (see below) for upcoming elections. However, the reality is that, although informal coalitions between women politicians in local government exist, they do not have the capacity, resources or the visibility to make significant changes (see also Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) 2021).

2.2.6 The role of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

Networks established by NGOs and civil society have the potential to unite women politicians across geographic and party boundaries and promote meaningful networking and mentorship. The training programmes and networking events organized by NGOs provide a space for women politicians from different parties to come together, share experiences, and meet their counterparts (Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera 2022). While there are certain limitations (see section 2.3) in the

capacity of NGOs, they nevertheless are responsible for opening up opportunities for collaboration which can help form friendships and build solidarity in the long term. Solidarity is understood to 'require sustained, ongoing commitment' (Hooks 1986, 138) and therefore the continuity of these programs and spaces is key.

2.2.7   Women campaigners

In addition to the networks established by civil society and NGOs, other networks formed by women at local levels also exist. These are the women's groups that canvass on behalf of political parties or for male politicians. A documentary presented by Women and Media Collective and the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (2011) shares experiences of women engaged in political campaigns. Nanda Dissanayaka (Hali-Ela) says, 'It is mostly women who carry out political campaign work, 90% of those involved are women. We work tirelessly during election campaigns. It is women who go from house to house distributing leaflets, etc.' (ibid). Badra Malani (Kataragama) shares, 'They [male politicians] approach us during election times and say: "Badrakka [=sister Badra], do this work for us." Then we immediately build our team, and they [women team members] are ready to even die for the cause' (WMC and ICES 2011). Chandane Weliwita (member of Uva Provincial Council) shares, 'Women carry out an enormous amount of work to ensure the victory of male politicians... Women have the capacity to change the way people vote' (ibid). The solidarity among grassroots women and the power that stems from such solidarity is visible from these grassroots testimonies. The missing piece is harnessing these capacities to strengthen women's own political representation.

2.2.8 Building secondary leadership

Another missed opportunity highlighted by Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam (2023) is the underutilizing of retired and incumbent women politicians to mentor and promote the new women who enter politics. Drawing from their recent study, the authors point to the need for promoting 'secondary leadership', where the women in office mentor and openly advocate for aspirant/s to enter politics in the next election. Mentoring by senior women politicians is important as they can share lived experiences of politics that may help newcomers face similar challenges more effectively and practically. While the pathway to politics

is broken and intimidating, success stories of women politicians can offer courage, power, and confidence for aspirant women (ibid). In line with these findings, Hirunika Premachandra shares that, 'In my case, now I'm 34, and I have five or six twenty-five-year-old or twenty-year-old girls to whom I give opportunities – I have made them a path to get into politics, even in my electorate. Because I don't want them to face what I have experienced, it's very unfair… So I have already a few girls to contest, that's how we should open paths for them' (Brunch LK 2022b). Similarly, Sudarshini Fernandopulle says, 'Always support another woman. As a woman, it is our responsibility to empower another woman, so support women' (Conversations with Alanki 2020).

This kind of practice can not only increase women's statistical political representation, but also enhance agency and pave the way for greater solidarity among women politicians. At the same time, the existing nature of party politics may hinder such solidarity and support among women politicians. Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera (2022) offer the alternative of using retired women politicians to enhance such mentorship and solidarity. However, greater understanding and promotion of these mechanisms is needed to ensure long-term benefits for women in politics.

2.3 Barriers to building support networks and solidarity among women politicians in Sri Lanka

One notable issue highlighted by Jakimow et al. (2023) with regard to support networks and solidarity among women politicians in the Sri Lankan context is that competition among women is more common in formal politics, making the solidarity visible in community activism limited in these formal spaces. The mentorship and sponsorship of newcomers or apprentice women politicians by senior politicians are also not widely present. Vanniasinkam and Gunasekera (2022) point out that party politics and loyalties, a lack of knowledge about mentoring, and indifference towards women's challenges to entering politics may restrict women in office from extending support to newcomers or aspirant women.

Similarly, Sudarshini Fernandupolle, incumbent MP and state minister, says that during her second parliamentary election campaigns, 'Sometimes you have to fight with women too, and it's very unfortunate. Within parties, you have women's

organizations, but these organizations do not do much to empower women or bring more women. They also try to work and get a man elected' (Conversations with Alanki 2020). Such reflections show not only the barriers that women politicians face, but also the ground realities of a lack of solidarity among women within a political party.

According to Hirunika Premachandra, who has years of experience in the political space, 'There are very few women politicians, but the experienced women politicians – they are a bit insecure when newcomers come in and when [the newcomers] have the limelight, and it's very common and normal… When I was in my twenties, I worked with older experienced women politicians and I was cornered – I felt very uncomfortable, sad, and frustrated.' (Brunch LK 2022b). While the literature points to the benefits of solidarity and while women politicians may even articulate these ideas, the ground reality could be harsh indifference.

While appreciating the role of women's organizations, including informal political processes, in creating solidarity and providing a way for women into public life, Attanayake (2008) is skeptical about the role and scope of existing women's organizations. For example, the author points out that most of these women's organizations are more focused on the upliftment of social-economic and moral standards in rural areas through welfare activities. Training programmes in the fields of weaving, sewing, home gardening, self-employment projects, and reproductive health seem to be at the forefront of many of the formal and informal women's organizations including NGOs, and what is missing is encouraging women's participation in politics. Further, he is critical of the presence of elitism in leadership roles of these organizations, stating that 'most of the women's organizations are for the poor and not by the poor' (ibid, 269), pointing out that this could deter women from banding together in solidarity.

A similar issue brought to light in recent research is that most often these civil society organizations work separately and on a project basis, and therefore the attempts at building networks and solidarity are short-lived (DLP 2021). For example, the trainings organized by One-Text Initiative (OTI) in partnership with the Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance has set up a network of 130 LG women politicians that operate via WhatsApp (Juhola 2022). Similarly, the trainings organized by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems in 2018 also provided space

for a women's network of 100 members irrespective of political party affiliations (IFES 2018). The two projects mentioned are independent initiatives and there is no evidence of collaboration or long-term sustainability. Therefore, stronger coalitions incorporating formal and informal networks at all levels of government are needed to sustain these networks and achieve long-term success.

Another criticism shared by Attanayake (2008) is that the network of Sri Lanka women's movements has not managed to break the traditional and continuing unequal kinship ties and dynastic politics. Further, the author argues that the pressure generated by the existing women's groups towards political decision-making is uneven and that they have not tried to change historical patterns of political representation through radical movements. Therefore, the role and strength of the existing women's networks are questionable and could form a barrier to effectively supporting women's political pathways.

2.4 Knowledge Gaps

There is an overall lack of knowledge of the concepts of networks and solidarity in the political space in Sri Lanka. Except for the recent studies mentioned in this report, these topics have not been the focus in Sri Lankan scholarly literature. A gap exists in our understanding of the precise nature and role of networks, their current existence among women in politics, practicalities, women's perceptions of these concepts, and the means through which networks and solidarity can be strengthened in order to facilitate women's journeys into politics.

The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs in strengthening support networks and solidarity among women needs further investigation. While the literature shows that CSOs and NGOs have a major role to play in supporting women's pathway to formal politics, the ground realities could be different. Perry (2018) argues that lack of support from CSOs for women political aspirants is a major disabling factor. Moreover, the lack of collaboration between different CSOs and independent projects targeting women's political representation also needs greater scrutiny. The absence of collaboration could be due to the fact that different organizations are unaware of who has done what. Whatever the reason may be, this lack of collaboration could also lead to the breaking down of women's informal networks when a training workshop ends. A database on past and present

initiatives might be useful for facilitating better links between projects and using already established networks to sustain coalitions among women.

While involvement and participation in social service activities is seen as an 'essential component of the model of an enlightened woman' in the South Asian context including Sri Lanka (Attanayake 2008, 264), the same woman's political participation is not easily accepted (see also Tadros 2014, 9). The secretary of Ekamuthu Rural Development Society in Hali-Ela, Sri Lanka shares that, 'In our community associations, women's participation is very high. However, in our local councils, there is not a single woman' (Groundviews 2011). Therefore, while appreciating the importance of community involvement as a precursor to formal political participation for women, it is also important to further investigate how a smoother transition can be achieved. More specifically, more insight is needed to understand how collective agency can develop an individual's political autonomy. Rosy Senanayake, a former Sri Lankan parliamentarian, shares in an interview that 'politics have become something that is not attractive for people to make a change… There are a lot of women on the ground, we have a strong women's movement, but you invite them to get into politics and they say no that's not for me… It's very sad actually…' (Daily Mirror Online 2021). In light of the previous arguments on the role and strength of women's networks, it is not clear to what extent women's networks currently support participation in formal politics.

On a similar note, the existence of women's formal and informal networks is also ambiguous. A previous argument by Attanayake (2008) elaborated on the nature of civil societies and networks focused on women's wellbeing and how these are not aligned with strengthening women's political participation. At the same time, the author points to organizations such as Women in Development (WID) which focuses on income generation for women, and the coalition of 12 women's organizations that released the Women's Manifesto-2001 calling for the minimum reservation of 30 percent for women in all legislative bodies. Therefore, it is important to further map and scale the existing women's networks and analyze which type of networks can better support the issue of women's lack of political participation.

A view shared by Harini Amarasuriya is that, 'I don't see it [becoming a formal politician after a period of activism] as a switch from activism to politics, more in terms of whether to be in politics full time or not. For me activism was also very

political' (Brunch LK 2022a). It is important to unpack this further as it delineates the different perceptions that women may have in terms of community involvement and formal politics. For some women, activism in the form of social work may be more 'political' than entering formal politics. In such a case, we need to explore in more depth whether having support networks is truly a pathway to formal politics or to more informal radical social change.

While the Women's Parliamentarians' Caucus was identified as a key avenue where women from different parties could form solidarity and share support networks, additional investigation into their role, capacities, agency, attitudes, and perceptions is needed to better understand the potential and implications of such networking mechanisms.

The lack of support from women voters is an area that needs deeper understanding. While we explore the support networks and solidarity of grassroots women, it is important to investigate whether women vote for female candidates and the reasons if this is not the case. Mobilizing women voters to support women's political representation can prove effective, both in terms of statistics and strengthening women's solidarity.

3. Methodology

The study used a qualitative methodology. The methods used in this study are a desk review of existing literature and key informant interviews. Altogether 15 key informant interviews were conducted from different districts in Sri Lanka from February to March 2023. Interviews were conducted in both Sinhala and Tamil languages and then translated to English for analysis.

The interviews were conducted to gather information on the following broad themes:

1. Journey into politics and resources needed to enter politics.
2. Perceptions of formal and informal networks.
3. Perceptions of solidarity among women politicians, and between women politicians and women constituents.
4. Personal experiences of networking and solidarity, including opportunities and constraints.
5. Recommendations on strengthening networking and solidarity among women.

The data gathered from the key informant interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis and the main findings are presented in the discussion section below.

4. Discussion

The analysis of findings from the key informant interviews is discussed in this section. The section starts with the background information of the respondents and with a summary of their entry into politics in order to understand the contexts of those who provided data for this study. The themes discussed later in this section are (1) understanding 'support networks' and 'solidarity', (2) perceived benefits of networks and solidarity, (3) perceived barriers to effective networking and solidarity, and (4) recommendations for improving networks and solidarity.

The key informant interviews were conducted with 14 incumbent women politicians and one former woman politician. They were from Galle, Ampara, Kurunegala, Rathnapura, Hambantota, Kegalle, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Puttalam districts in North, East, South, Sabaragamuwa, and Northwest provinces in Sri Lanka. The incumbents are either in local or provincial governments. The participants were selected from previous contacts and snowballing methods. We ensured that women from across the major ethnic groups were interviewed and therefore the participants included 10 Sinhalese, 3 Muslims, and 2 Tamils. The political parties represented are United National Party (UNP: 5), Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP: 2), Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB: 2), Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP: 2), Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP: 1), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC: 1), Tamil National Alliance (TNA: 1), and All Ceylon Makkal Congress (ACMC: 1).

Of the 15 women interviewed, 10 stated that they had male relatives in politics. These included fathers, brothers, husbands and other relatives who have helped the women candidates' pathway to politics. The remaining five women politicians indicated that they joined formal politics after years of engagement in community work and only three women of the total said they joined as a result of the quota system. These backgrounds resonate with the analysis in the literature review, as it is clear that, despite criticisms, male connections in politics is still the most prominent support network that enables women to join politics. Further, it is notable that activity in the community is the next most effective way to develop formal and informal networks that support women to enter formal politics.

My political journey began with years of community service I have started to do. But I was completely out of politics at that time. (LG member, Trincomalee District, ACMC)

I worked in village committees and groups from a young age. During those times, a representative in our village invited me to engage in politics related work. I joined politics because I can help the villagers more. (LG member, Ampara District, SLFP)

The respondents were asked what they thought were the three most important resources that women needed to enter politics. This question was posed to see if 'networks' or 'solidarity' would come up organically. However, according to the analysis, a majority stated that either good character or good reputation or good social status was one of the most important assets. Financial stability was indicated only by five women out of the total, but this was a resource greatly emphasized in the previous ICES collaborative study (see Vijeyarasa, Gunasekera, and Vanniasinkam 2023). Six women said that family support was needed and only four mentioned networks. These perceptions give a sense of how the political environment operates in the country and what women perceive to be important in this particular environment.

4.1 Understanding 'support networks' and 'solidarity'

The interviewees were asked to explain what they understood by the terms 'support networks' and 'solidarity'. Findings show that support networks are understood as groups of people and social relations that are around oneself that help achieve one's goals. Solidarity, on the other hand, is understood as helping each other in a network, being united and working towards a goal with integrity. These perceptions are important as further analysis of the interviews shows that, while there are many forms of networks around women politicians that have the potential to be further developed, it is solidarity and motivations for solidarity that seem to be lacking among women politicians, and between women politicians and women constituents.

Reiterating the importance of having previous connections in politics, a majority of respondents said that a network developed by a family member in politics and

support from senior politicians as formal support networks had helped their political careers. Others mentioned support from an NGO, support from the party, and support from constituents loyal to the party.

> *My brother and his political connections were the main networks that supported me. During the elections, they helped me a lot with many things. Even after the elections and in the council, many people helped me based on my brother's connections. (LG member, Rathnapura, UNP)*

At the same time, more than half of the respondents also mentioned networks developed from community work and personal careers (such as teachers, fisher communities, and Samurdhi[1] officers) as informal networks that helped their political career. This is important, because it shows that, while having connections in politics is a major asset, these women also engage in community work that seem to sustain their political careers. While many findings point to the importance of family connections as an entryway to politics for women, more information is needed on how networks developed from community work can advance and sustain their political careers. For example, many women talked about their involvement in village committees, women's organizations, volunteer work, social services, teaching, Samurdhi services, youth services council, and other groups as informal networks that helped their political journey. As the below quotes show, the community-level networks seem more closely connected and more enduring than the formal networks that support these women.

> *The contacts with parents that I developed when I was a teacher helped me a lot during election campaigns. It is through those contact networks that I continue my political work. (LG member, Kurunegala, UNP)*

> *The main reason for my success is the people of my region. The communication between them and me is the most important network. My people accepted me as a politician. I have also done many things for people like self-employment, awareness for women. (Provincial council member, Jaffna, TNA)*

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[1] The main social welfare program implemented by the Government of Sri Lanka .

Similarly, family is another informal network that respondents highlighted. When talking about family, many expressed that having one's husband's or parents' support is key. In contrast to the other forms of networks - such as political connections or even community connections - family support seems to be the starting point for women to enter politics. Only one mentioned social media as a support network.

And my husband is the key figure. Without my husband's support, I would never have entered politics. I was reluctant to enter politics as an ex-combatant. My husband encouraged me every time. He gave me complete support to conduct election campaigns. And my parents were very supportive of me. (Provincial council member, Batticaloa, UNP)

My family has been my absolute support throughout my life. For a woman to enter politics in Sri Lanka, family support is essential. Family was the main support for me to participate in politics and succeed and later serve the society. (Provincial council member, Jaffna, TNA)

And I have many friends on social media. So social media helped me a lot to get into politics. I love the collaboration of women on social media. (LG member, Puttalam, SJB)

The overall findings suggest that there are various types of formal and informal support networks that women can develop and utilize to enter politics. While having family connections in politics seems important, it is not clear whether they can sustain a woman's political career in the absence of strong community connections. Even if women's entry into politics relies on having the backing of a male member in politics, their social work and community networks are significant. Similarly, the study also proves that family is the most essential network - whether it is via a male politician or simple encouragement - that women need to enter and continue in politics. It would be interesting to do a comparative analysis and explore further how important family support is in other aspects of a woman's life such as education, employment, and community work and to what degree in relation to her political participation. The benefits of social work and community activity also need to be further understood, in terms of how they can develop and

sustain women's political careers, and how this may or may not differ from men's political careers.

4.2 Perceived benefits of networks and solidarity

The respondents shared many thoughts on the pros of having support networks and solidarity. The idea that it could encourage newcomers to politics came up quite frequently in the interviews.

Yes, absolutely. If there is such a strong women's network, a lot of women can enter politics without fear. Then they also get the self-confidence that they are not alone. (LG member, Kurunegala, UNP)

According to my long political experience, only unity and networking among women politicians can increase women's political participation. Otherwise, there will be a situation where fewer women will enter politics, even with the 25 percent quota system that we have got. (LG member, Puttalam, SJB)

As the above quotes show, the women in most of our discussions do understand and recognize the potential of support networks and strong solidarity among women. The need to unite as women, to speak up as women, and to use these avenues to not be alone in a masculine world were also highlighted in the discussions.

But when we do something together with women, we can do it completely. And there is no need to be subservient to men. It is a great strength when women come together. That solidarity will help us to continue to do many things. Such a mindset is what motivates women to build solidarity and network. (LG members, Trincomalee, ACMC)

Women who engage in politics can gain a great strength from that [networks and solidarity], because they get the chance to face even the personal problems they come across as a group. (LG member, Hambantota, JVP)

When it comes to the common problems that women face, it [networks and solidarity] helps women to form a common opinion about those issues. (LG member, Galle, UNP)

The above thoughts show that there is a real need for women to band together, even though it does not seem to happen to a desirable extent. Being subservient to men, facing problems alone, women's issues and voices being unheard, protecting women's rights, the potential to be stronger as a group and many similar notions surfaced throughout analysis. In addition to this collectiveness that the women seek through networks and solidarity, they also shared other benefits such as being able to share experiences, ideas and knowledge, get advice from others, form new connections, and get support from senior politicians.

Resonating with the above perceptions, some women also talked about networking and solidarity as an asset to countering negative perceptions people have about electoral politics and women occupying these spaces.

> *The attitude towards women who engage in politics in areas such as ours is not good. If there is coordination among all women in the country, people will start losing those bad attitudes. (LG member, Kegalle, UNP)*

> *I think it [networks and solidarity] can dissuade wrong attitudes about women in politics. (LG member, Hambantota, JVP)*

These perceptions point to an important barrier that discourages women from entering formal politics in Sri Lanka. As previous research shows, women are enthusiastic about engaging in social work and community activism and making powerful contributions, but are reluctant to enter politics due to the negative sociocultural connotations that it entails (Jakimow et al. 2023). Therefore, it is important to recognize solidarity as a tool that can be used by all women, both now and in the future, to challenge these adverse perceptions.

The examples of collaborations that the respondents shared show that networks and solidarity do exist, but not at a desirable level. However, is it encouraging to see that women in politics have tried to break boundaries and form connections to address issues that their communities face. These examples also show how external actors, such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), can play a role in strengthening these practices.

Yes. I work together with many female members. Organizations like UNDP conduct many workshops for us. In such cases, we work together with women from all political parties. I also do social services and participate in workshops while engaging in group activities and working with women members of different ethnicities and politics. My view is that working together is key to success. (LG members, Trincomalee, ACMC)

Yes. I have worked with women politicians for many purposes. I have worked for many projects on topics such as struggles against sexual violence and increasing women's rights. I have also worked with many women politicians in the North and East with the aim of bringing young women into politics. (Provincial Council member, Puttalam, SLMC)

Yes, there were many activities. Once, all of us women politicians got together without any party difference in order to submit proposals and to have money allocated for welfare activities of the women in urban council. (Former LG member, Matara, SLPP)

We have done a lot of work. In those activities, us women politicians work a lot and well without any party difference. Once we initiated a grocery shop called 'Rasa Waadiya'. We collected funds for that by all of us women politicians getting together. (LG member, Galle, SJB)

All these quotes on networking and collaborative efforts show that women politicians get together to address issues pertaining to women, such as sexual violence, political participation, and welfare for women. They indicate how women can band together as politicians and foster solidarity with women at the grassroots levels as well. However, certain collaborative efforts also reveal that women politicians are often not allocated appropriate funds to carry out their work. Although women politicians seem to make the most of this deficit, the political parties and the administrative mechanisms of the state need to provide easier access to funds and opportunities for women to work towards desired goals.

Overall, it is clear that women perceive and understand the benefits of strengthened networks and solidarity. Their examples of collaborations show that women politicians use their existing relationships to further women's voices and causes.

However, there is an inadequate acknowledgement of their efforts and abilities, especially by the political parties and the state mechanisms. Providing more funds and opportunities for women politicians through their parties or councils could help them develop community initiatives more easily and work with larger groups of women constituents.

4.3 Perceived barriers to effective networking and solidarity

Despite the plethora of benefits of increased networks and solidarity, the current situation seems dire. The issues of party politics and patriarchal political structures were highlighted by a majority of women respondents who expounded that party and patriarchal ideologies restrict women politicians to their own parties with no avenues to connect with those on the outside. Even if an issue that impacts all women is raised, women politicians have to confine their opinions and interventions to their respective political parties and male leaders.

No matter how much women participate in politics, we are all subordinate to male leadership. For example, in parties, everything, like budgeting, policy formulation and decision making, is done by men. Parties don't value us much as members. It seems to exist only in name. We have very few opportunities to act on our own. In that way, the parties themselves are an obstacle in creating unity and networking among women members. (LG member, Trincomalee, ACMC)

Also, women consider the opinions of the male leaders as their own personal opinions. (LG member, Hambantota, JVP)

These perceptions are deep-rooted in Sri Lankan politics and are common among both men and women politicians. It is unfortunate how this political culture impacts women's agency as well. A question arises as to why women are unable to get together and stand up against patriarchal values as they often do when it comes to women's rights, displacement issues, disappearances, and other matters.

The economic issues faced by women is also a considerable barrier that interviewees mentioned. The interviewees explained how women in villages always expect monetary compensation to take part in networking initiatives or other campaigns.

It is women who feel the household economic problems the most. Therefore, they try to somehow find a relief to these problems, and even engage in politics related work with this aim in mind. Even if we try to connect and develop relationships with these women on other meaningful matters, these efforts become unsuccessful due to that problem [economic issue]. (Former LG member, Matara, SLPP)

One of the main problems the constituents face is the economic problem. So, whatever the way we talk about women, they always expect financial help. This is the main challenge we face. (LG member, Ampara, SLFP)

These economic constraints could be worse now with the current economic crisis, and an updated survey of needs and practices should be undertaken. Some of the other barriers mentioned were lack of knowledge and motivation for women to enter politics, racial and language barriers, and lack of communication between women. Women not supporting women was also highlighted by many respondents, but there is no clear information as to the reasons for this. However, this points to the gap in solidarity among women in the political space in Sri Lanka. Despite the existence of networks in their various forms - such as women's wings, parliamentary caucus, women's organizations and councils, networks developed by the quota system, networks developed by external actors and so on – a genuine sense of unity and solidarity as women occupying a masculine space or women standing together for a common goal is absent.

4.4 Recommendations for improving networks and solidarity

The recommendations suggested by the interviewees point to the socioeconomic realities of present-day Sri Lanka. When asked how they thought it would be possible to improve networks and solidarity, many respondents suggested that women need to come together with the aim of providing solutions to the problems faced by women. Even when designing future awareness raising programs or networking campaigns, these underlying objectives could prove beneficial to achieving strengthened solidarity.

If we are to get the cooperation of women in these rural and poor areas, we have to initiate programs that can be beneficial to them. If not, no matter

how positive the purpose is, you cannot gain the solidarity of women. (LG member, Kegalle, UNP)

I think introducing practical solutions to the problems that women face is important to develop solidarity with them. (LG member, Galle, SJB)

These remarks also point to the vulnerabilities and needs of the grassroots women constituents. As mentioned before, the economic concerns of constituents are central. The basic needs, such as food, livelihoods, childcare, and economic stability must be addressed along with any commitments towards political solidarity. It is important to note that women politicians already perceive that any attempts at networking and solidarity should be beneficial to all the actors involved, and not be a mere campaign to secure votes. These recommendations must also be at the core of research and interventions. The practicalities and contexts of the women involved need to be understood before designing effective interventions. Rather than preaching solidarity or pleading for women's votes during election times, being truly connected to the grassroots can progressively reinforce connections among women of all levels.

Another important aspect highlighted in the discussions was that networking and solidarity can be achieved by focusing on issues that go beyond party constraints.

There should be a common goal among women members. I think such a united goal will strengthen unity among women. There are many things that can be done in society so that all women come together as "women" regardless of caste, religion and language. (Provincial Council member, Jaffna, TNA)

The implementation of a program that is oriented towards goals that women can work together without party differences. Through that women can work without the negative influences of the parties. (LG member, Kurunegala, UNP)

These recommendations are commendable as women see solidarity as transcending the party and other divides such as ethnicity and language. Practical adaptations of these suggestions need to be analyzed further, especially with regard to women at

different levels of politics. The examples of collaborations discussed earlier show how women at the local government level work together. However, some instances of rivalry among women parliamentarians are disheartening. For example, the debate on taxing feminine hygiene products in 2019 was unfortunately between women parliamentarians, exemplifying party politics trumping women's solidarity (Kumarasinghe 2020). Period poverty is a crucial issue for women and poses a serious barrier to girls' education in the country. Despite its significance for all women regardless of ethnic or language differences, the women's parliamentary caucus could not stand in solidarity. Conversely, women parliamentarians coming together to defend the appointment of the first-ever woman to the post of Deputy Inspector General in the Sri Lanka Police is a historic moment in politics (ColomboPage News Desk 2021). Therefore, a better understanding of women politicians' positioning and motivations is needed to determine which efforts at solidarity could work and which could not.

The respondents also saw the need for nationwide programmes that include women from all levels of society and politics, and are not restricted to specific areas and levels.

> *The most important thing is to design a national centre involving all the women in politics currently. It needs wide coverage and other women should be made aware through this. (Former LG member, Matara, SLPP)*

The purpose of focusing on a nationwide program is to transcend sociocultural and political barriers that prevent women politicians from connecting with one another. Previous discussions showed how senior women were jealous of newcomers and how language could be a barrier for women from different regions to connect. A nationwide programme that includes all these differences can be beneficial to address these challenges. The literature review points to the fact that many of the initiatives are dispersed and abandoned when funding cycles end. There is no central organization or platform that consolidates the available networks and its members. The new projects start from scratch preempting the ability to go beyond previous achievements. Therefore, while producing new knowledge of these matters is crucial, it is also important to merge the available knowledge and maintain a hub that can be finetuned with updated insights and initiatives. Such attempts could sustain networks that are already in place and secure the momentum of solidarity.

Raising awareness of politics for women at the grassroots and village level was also highlighted. This is a recommendation that is made throughout past and present research as people in general (and not just women) do not have a positive attitude about politics in the country.

Awareness about human rights and political participation of women should be increased at the village level. (LG member, Trincomalee, ACMC)

Sensitize all other women to the importance of women entering politics. (Provincial Council member, Puttalam, SLMC)

These attempts at raising awareness need to be rigorous and sustained. As discussed previously, the negative attitudes attached to politics in Sri Lanka are a major determinant of women's lack of interest in engaging in politics. Therefore, it is important to continue to sensitize both women and men to the need for engaging in formal politics as both a human right and an imperative towards gender equality. Such continued knowledge sharing and discussions of topics on human rights and gender equality could make women of all levels more aware of why women need to come together in solidarity and support each other to realize everyone's full potential.

5. Conclusions

Networks and solidarity are a practical and valuable framework that women can develop in their pathways to effective political representation. Quotas, as noted from previous literature, while being an important mechanism to increase the numerical representation of women in electoral politics, do not necessarily ensure the quality of their representation and capacity to make change. In contrast, networks and solidarity form a more bottom-up process that relies on authentic unity and support of the people involved and can provide better opportunities for women to meaningfully engage in politics. It can also fend off criticisms of women entering politics that support male ideologies or party ideologies, as women will be more connected with the grassroots and better versed in local socioeconomic and political dynamics. Networks and solidarity would also ensure that women have the necessary support and courage to face challenges such as sexual harassment, violence, and public shaming.

The qualitative interviews and the literature review clearly point to the fact that people talk about the importance of support networks and solidarity for women's effective political participation, even though scholarly literature has not yet captured these phenomena. The women who are in politics understand the need for strengthening networks and solidarity among women, especially in a primarily masculine political space that presents a broken pathway to politics for women. Therefore, the significance of the study topic is clear but requires a better understanding of its nature and nuances for practical adaptation.

More evidence-based knowledge is needed to better understand what formal and informal support networks are, what solidarity looks like, their potential, barriers and practicalities in the current political context. It is important to explore how genuine support networks and solidarity can be developed and sustained. Findings suggest that networks are present in many different forms, from informal networks such as the family to formal networks like the parliament. Despite networks being present, solidarity among the members and capacity for collaboration are doubtful. There is a need for theory-based understanding as this is a new scholarly focus. Comparisons with other countries are also beneficial to explore whether these mechanisms are present, what they look like, and how they are approached and used for strengthening women's rights.

Findings suggest that women perceive networks and solidarity as a basis for a stronger women's voice, better political representation, and the development of initiatives that go beyond party affiliations. Women do engage in these activities despite the drawbacks they face. There is a lack of recognition and acknowledgement of the work that women politicians do through their political parties and councils. Cross-party collaborative efforts are present and need to be strengthened and encouraged by giving easier access to funds and opportunities. At the same time, is important to further investigate how networks and solidarity work, especially in terms of collaboration among women from different levels and socio-cultural backgrounds. As mentioned in the discussion section, even though formal networks such as the women parliamentarians' caucus exist, this does not automatically translate into women's solidarity. Therefore, a better understanding of women's positionings and motivations is needed.

The barriers and challenges to effective networking and solidarity that women politicians face need to be further analyzed in order to unveil their root causes and prevalence. An updated context analysis is also needed to determine the current needs and positionings of women (both voters and politicians). The recommendations suggested by the study participants are focused on addressing the everyday needs of the women who are targeted to be part of a network that helps each other. Women politicians do not see networks and solidarity as only a means to gain more votes or sustain their political careers, but also as an avenue to help grassroots women who are facing financial and other problems. Their notion of solidarity is one where women help each other, represent each other, speak up for each other, and stand up for each other.

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Strengthening Support Networks and Solidarity for Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka

Viyanga Gunasekera

This is a preliminary scoping study that was designed to explore the nature and scope of different types of networks aspiring women and incumbent women politicians draw from and what perceptions they hold with regards to the role networks and solidarity play in their pathways to politics. The study was conducted from December 2022 – April 2023 in Sri Lanka. Networks and solidarity come across as a notable and practical infrastructure that women can develop in their pathways to effective political representation. While there are limitations and barriers to developing networks of solidarity, the present study highlights the significance of this untapped resource, and calls for further understanding of its nature and nuances for practical adaptation.

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