



International Foundation  
for Electoral Systems

# An Assessment of Women's Political Representation through the 25 percent Quota in Sri Lanka: Impact and Lessons Learnt





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by

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# List of abbreviations

<b>ACMC</b>	All Ceylon Makkal Congress
<b>CAFFE</b>	Campaign for Free and Fair Elections
<b>CEDAW</b>	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
<b>CEPA</b>	Centre for Poverty Analysis
<b>CMEV</b>	Centre for Monitoring Election Violence
<b>CMU</b>	Ceylon Mercantile, Industrial and General Workers Union
<b>CPSL</b>	Communist Party of Sri Lanka
<b>CBOs</b>	Community based organisations
<b>CSOs</b>	Civil society organisations
<b>FGDs</b>	Focus Groups Discussions
<b>FPTP</b>	First-Past-the-Post
<b>ICCPR</b>	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
<b>IFES</b>	International Foundation for Electoral Systems
<b>INGOs</b>	International Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>KIIs</b>	Key Informant Interviews
<b>LG</b>	Local government
<b>LSSP</b>	Lanka Sama Samaja Party
<b>MMDA</b>	Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act
<b>MMPR</b>	Mixed Member Proportional Representation
<b>MP</b>	Member of Parliament
<b>NGOs</b>	Non-Governmental Organisations
<b>PAFFREL</b>	People's Action for Free and Fair Elections
<b>PR</b>	Proportional Representation
<b>PRC</b>	Public Representations Committee
<b>SLFP</b>	Sri Lanka Freedom Pa.rty
<b>SLILG</b>	Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance
<b>SLPP</b>	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
<b>TSMs</b>	Temporary Special Measures
<b>UNP</b>	United National Party
<b>UPFA</b>	United Party Freedom Alliance
<b>VAWE</b>	Violence against Women in Elections
<b>WMC</b>	Women and Media Collective

# Executive summary

This study examines the 25 percent quota for women mandated through the Local Authorities (Amendment) Act, No. 1 of 2016 and electorally implemented through the Local Authorities Elections Act No. 16 of 2017. The quota increased women's representation in local authorities from two percent to nearly 23 percent. After a term of being in operation, there is a pressing need to assess the outcomes of the quota, and this study does so by examining them against the policy context and the discourses that framed it. It explores the process of drafting and implementing the policy in three stages: the initial policy drafting stage; the policy implementation stage; and the post-election stage. This study examines the influence and interests of three main stakeholders who played a key role during the three stages of the policy identified above: women's rights groups, political party actors, and women councillors who were elected through the 25 percent quota. It traces the competing interests and discourses that influenced the policy, the political bargaining that took place during its implementation, and the experiences of successes and failures after the election of female local government (LG) councillors. As a qualitative study, it emphasises experiences, narratives, memories and retrospective reflections on the 25 percent quota. The data was collected through key informant interviews (KIIs) with political party leaders, women's rights activists, and government officials involved in the process, and focus group discussions (FGDs) in both rural and urban areas and among women from different class and ethno-religious backgrounds.

The key findings of the research study are:

1. The numerical representation of women at 25 percent in local governance was the only common consensus among the different stakeholders who supported the quota. As a result, the quota was not designed to address entrenched gendered inequalities within the political system, lack of democracy within political parties and LGs, and general bias against women in society.
2. Women's groups had advocated for increased women's representation for over two decades. The policy context was shaped by the ideologically driven expectations of the quota on the one hand and the pragmatic and competing interests of various stakeholders.
3. Despite strong support and opposition from different interest groups, several key individuals were catalysts in ensuring that the quota was introduced.
4. The quota broke the glass-ceiling for women with long-standing experience in political parties or community-based organisations to get elected or appointed as councillors.
5. Women councillors who had undergone training by state and civil society organisations found that these trainings empowered them, but also that the existing situation of power imbalances between male and female members in LGs demanded reater training linked to gender-sensitisation, democratisation, and inclusivity for both men and women.
6. Female councillors and candidates experienced gender-related violence and intimidation which indicates that legal frameworks and media practices were insufficient to protect them.
7. Once elected, women councillors had to work within a non-inclusive LG system that was designed to facilitate male councillors in its formal and informal structures.
8. Women councillors developed strategies to deal with the rigid and abusive structures including by forming cross-party alliances.



**The recommendations made in this report are:**

1. Ensure that the numerical representation of women in LG bodies remains at least at the currently stipulated 25 per cent by taking necessary measures so that this commitment is met fully.
2. Develop gender policies within political parties in order to ensure gender-sensitive participation, power structures, processes, and promotion of women.
3. Encourage cross-party consensus-based quotas for women so that parties can collaboratively implement quotas instead of being competitive.
4. Ensure there is knowledge about the complexities involving converting a demand to a policy, and build consensus among proponents of affirmative action, so that the process of legislation is not limited by the immediate interests of political parties or key individuals.
5. Ensure that elections are held under the Provincial Councils Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 17 of 2017 so that the 25 per cent quota is met at the Provincial Council level and introduce a quota of at least 25 percent for women at the parliamentary level.
6. Extend the current gender sensitization training as well as skills-oriented training provided to female councillors to male councillors as well.
6. Strengthen inclusive norms (granting equal access to opportunities and resources) in and practices in media (including social media) when reporting on political themes and develop strong and accessible legal frameworks that can hold perpetrators of gender-based violence and discrimination against women effectively accountable.
7. Reform the LG system to make it more participatory, inclusive, and democratic.
8. Promote cross-party alliances and agreements that will enable women councillors to function more effectively.

The 25 percent quota for women at LGs has been implemented for only one term, in a very volatile and socially polarising situation. Over time, continued studies are required to assess the impact and resultant changes.



# INTRODUCTION

**T**he 2018 local government (LG) elections mandated Sri Lanka’s political parties to field over 17,500<sup>1</sup> women candidates, a task for which political parties were little prepared. Nearly 2000 women got elected as councillors in that election. This was an increase from nearly two percent to over 22 percent of women in local governments, and a hard-won battle for women’s groups and other advocates of what literature on quotas calls Temporary Special Measures (TSMs).<sup>2</sup> This study looks at how the women’s quota was drafted and adopted, how relevant stakeholders see it today, and what lessons can be learnt about introducing affirmative policies for increasing women in decision-making in Sri Lanka. It examines the experiences of political party leaders, women’s rights activists and advocates for the quota, government officials who were involved in the process of drafting the policy, and the women who secured seats in local governments as a result of the quota.

## 1.1. Background ↗

Despite high social indicators in areas such as health and education, Sri Lanka’s levels of representation of women in parliament are among the world’s lowest (Kamdar, Bjarnegård, Håkansson & Zetterberg, p. 42). This situation was worse at the LG level, where women accounted for 1.9 percent of elected members prior to the 2018 LG elections. Sri Lanka is one of the last countries in Asia to introduce a political quota for women (Vijayarasa, 2020, p.12).

Quota systems have challenged barriers to women’s active engagement in politics across the world. As Drude Dahlerup points out, “The introduction of quotas challenges previous theories about the level of women’s representation: the theory that women’s representation in politics is highest in the most industrialised and richest countries is no longer valid” (2021, p. 17). The last two decades have seen progressive reforms in ensuring women’s participation in decision-making not only in higher-income economies, but also in countries in lower income brackets. Yet, progress has not been constant or linear. Currently, the highest female participation of 61 percent in a national legislature is seen in Rwanda (IPU, 2023). Over 120 countries have adopted some form of a quota system for women to be elected as people’s representatives in national or subnational legislatures (IDEA, 2023).

Sri Lanka’s national legal frameworks, international commitments, and pursuit of sustainable development goals provide a strong case to increase women’s representation in governance

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<sup>1</sup> Strengthening Women Participation in the Political Decision Making Process at the Local Level: [https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/sri-lanka/commitments/LK0015/#\\_edn199](https://www.opengovpartnership.org/members/sri-lanka/commitments/LK0015/#_edn199); Sri Lanka vote: New law sees more women standing: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/2/10/sri-lanka-vote-new-law-sees-more-women-standing>.

<sup>2</sup> TSMs are proactive affirmative action measures to design policies and allocate resources to reduce gender disparities, in economic, social, and political spheres.

structures. This includes the national legislature/parliament, provincial councils (PCs) and LGs. For instance, Sri Lanka ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1980. Article 25 of the ICCPR guarantees the rights of all citizens to “take part in the conduct of public affairs” and “to vote and to be elected at genuine periodic elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret ballot, guaranteeing the free expression of the electors.” No discrimination on the basis of sex is permitted under the ICCPR in the exercise of the rights to vote and to participate in public life (Democracy Reporting International, 2021).

Furthermore, in 1981, Sri Lanka ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). CEDAW attributes a positive obligation on member states to take all appropriate measures to end women’s discrimination. Article 4 promotes the adoption of special temporary measures with the purpose of ensuring de facto equality between men and women. Sri Lanka has also incorporated the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into its national policy framework. SDG 5 aims to “ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life”. One of the indicators the United Nations adopted as a benchmark for progress on this front is the proportion of seats held by women in national and local governments (Democracy Reporting International, 2021).

After decades of contestation surrounding affirmative actions to promote women’s greater participation in decision-making, Sri Lanka also established a ‘highly complicated and little-understood’ (Vijayarasa, 2020) quota system for women under a two-step process. Legislative changes over 2016 and 2017 introduced a two-pronged quota that comprised of (i) a mandatory reserved seat quota of 25 percent for women in 2016, and (ii) instructions to political parties to nominate women on both first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR) electoral lists, by way of electoral regulations in 2017. As a consequence of the negotiations that led to these two reforms to the electoral system, the number of seats in LGs was increased by over 35 percent. LG elections in February 2018 marked the inaugural implementation of these measures at the LG level.

## 1.2. What the quota means and how it translates to seats [↗](#)

The women’s quota was introduced by Local Authorities (Amendment) Act, No. 16 of 2017. The Act inserts the following section to the Local Authorities Elections Ordinance (Chapter 262): 27F. (1), which states that “Notwithstanding any provision to the contrary in this Ordinance, not less than twenty-five *per centum* of the total number of members in each local authority shall be women members.”

Political parties and independent groups are required to prepare two lists of candidates: one for those contesting at the ward level with a 10 percent requirement for women, and another known as the additional persons list with a 50 percent requirement for women. On election day, voters can vote for a political party or group, and the one party or group with the most votes in a ward gets their candidates elected.

The number of members each party or group is entitled to is determined by dividing the total votes received by the number of members for each local authority. If a party secures fewer wards than



entitled members, they can select additional members from losing candidates or the additional persons list. To meet the 25 percent women's quota, the Elections Commissioner considers the number of women elected at the ward level.

In cases of an "overhang" (more members elected than calculated from a party or a group), without women members, representation is achieved through proportional representation seats from other parties. Parties with less than 20 percent of votes and entitled to fewer than three members are exempt from appointing women from the additional persons list.

### 1.3. Theoretical framework [↗](#)

Quotas are understood as a tool to address various aspects of under-representation in its broadest sense (Sawer, 2000). They are frequently introduced to (i) address women's right to participate in equal numbers with men; (ii) play a symbolic role, i.e., to advance the status of women as a group and their aspirations; (iii) promote a "woman's perspective" in politics, i.e., to ensure the representation of women's interests; and (iv) they are driven by the 'role model effect', i.e., an increase in the pool of talented women who have the capacity to continue to participate in politics in the future. Yet, it is far from a guarantee that quotas can achieve these multi-pronged aspects of representation (Bari, 2005; Bird, 2004; Childs & Krook, 2006).

Dahlerup (2021) points out that most understandings of the quota system rely upon its numerical quality. He emphasises how contemporary studies point to the need to move beyond this paradigm of "numerical representation" to a more qualitative study of types of quotas that are introduced and how they affect change in different types of bodies (Dahlerup, p. 5). While the argument for numerical representation is powerful and points to the proportionate nature of representation, it is not always useful to examine how effective a quota system is. This is because it does not examine numerical representation against the context of the larger socio-cultural and political picture within which a quota is introduced and implemented, as discussed by Dahlerup (p. 11).

In the case of Sri Lanka, literature on the quota (see Annex 1 of this report) tends to see the quota as a failure, i.e., as a system that did not achieve what was envisioned. Such literature, however, does not take into consideration the prevailing policy context and the policy implementation process. For a more qualitative analysis of the quota system, then, it is necessary to examine in-depth how the election reform that implemented the quota system was understood and articulated by women's rights groups, subject to competing interests of political parties, and how discourses surrounding the quota affected the way the quota was adopted by different political parties and other stakeholders.

Thus, this study asks what specific targets policymakers set when implementing the quota (both in the actual policy, but also the way they spoke about it) and how these original targets were compromised or not in the way the quota was actually drafted and implemented. We examine how far the quota's temporary character transformed into what its goal was: whether it was to build a critical mass of women's representatives as originally identified by the Beijing Platform for Action (Dahlerup, p. 26), or to appear as being a more 'democratic country' in keeping with the then regime's rhetoric of good governance, or policymakers being motivated by other expedient interests. In other words, how does the thinking surrounding the policy point to how far it was understood as a tool to accelerate women's representation at the local levels?

The large body of literature on women's representation in Sri Lanka shows some key trends. Studies prior to 2016 strongly articulate the need for increased participation of women in elected offices, while highlighting prevailing weaknesses of the political party system. Around 2016/17, as the women's quota was introduced, the discourse shifted to note the controversies that emerged among political parties, established systems, women's rights advocates, and the media space. This can be attributed to how proponents of the quota, now in retrospect, through awareness and lived experiences, responded when the prevailing and established system pushed back against the quota. While some studies scrutinise how implementation of the quota was resisted and how its impact was diluted (Pieris and Lecamwasam, 2021), our study further argues that elite contestations played a key role in determining the final outcome. We pay attention to these, as it is against the outcome of these contestations that the effectiveness of the quota should be assessed.

### 1.3. Research design and data collection ↗

In this study, we try to understand the context in which the 25 percent quota exists by exploring the process of drafting and implementing the policy in three stages: the initial policy drafting stage, the policy implementation stage, and the post-election stage. The study is primarily organised around the experiences during and reflections on these three stages of the policy. Its data is derived from interviews with three groups of stakeholders: women's rights groups, political party actors, and women councillors who were elected through the 25 percent quota. In addition, government officials who were involved in the process of drafting the policy were also interviewed.

#### The research questions this study asks are:

1. What were the expectations and interests of those who pushed for the women's quota and those who drafted the policy, and how did they shape the policy that was passed?
2. What were the challenges and politics involved in how the policy was implemented by political parties and local councils?
3. How did the quota manifest and shape the functioning of LG authorities and how were these outcomes experienced by women councillors?

Data collection was conducted using three methods. During the interviews and FGDs, qualitative data collection and analysis was employed. Qualitative approaches built into the methodology were considered as crucial to drawing out the narratives related to the policy in its advocacy stages, to the formulation of policy, and the implementation aspects of it.

1. Source texts, including Parliamentary Hansards, newspaper, social media, and other text-based data to contextualise the moment of introduction and implementation.
2. KIs with the following: legislators, policy implementers, and civil society activists, including women's rights activists.
3. FGDs with LG representatives representing rural and urban communities, ethnic minority groups, and members of both major political parties as well smaller parties. FGDs were held in Galle, Badulla, Jaffna, Kurunegala, and Puttalam

Because a study of \*this nature is not easily quantifiable, this study employs narratives and retrospective reflections to understand the interactions among key stakeholders, tracing how they negotiated, compromised, and bargained. The study, therefore, relies less on numbers, but uses a broad spectrum of experiences that point to how the quota came to be, and what its impact was. The key informants were selected based on their level of involvement with advocating for the quota in the long term. Political party leaders who supported the quota during the 2015-2018 period and a few who, at the time felt the quota was not going to be effective or practical, and government officials who were involved in the process of drafting the quota were also informants.

A key component of this study is the FGDs with former women councillors. The majority of the women who participated in the FGDs were from rural areas, with a few from urban areas, representing main political parties, parties representing ethnic minorities, as well as relatively smaller parties. Many of them were highly politically active before, during, and after their tenure as LG councillors. While their voices are not meant to be numerically representative, this study treats their experiences as crucial to assessing the impact of the quota. Their voices are meant to challenge the more elite-oriented and Colombo-oriented voices that tend to dominate discussions about the quota. The semi-structured FGDs allowed corroboration and triangulation of what was said during the discussions, with these former women councillors agreeing and disagreeing at different points of the discussions.

In addition, source texts were not subjected to a systematic study (as this would be a separate study of its own) but were used to corroborate information and triangulate data gathered through the interviews and FGDs.



# DATA ANALYSIS

**T**he data in this section is presented and analysed based on the three-stage structure we adopted for this study. However, wherever relevant, we have included experiences and analyses and deviated from the strictly chronological to add perspective and commentary on the relevant themes. The section titled ‘Policy drafting stage’ approaches the chronology of the policy drafting through two temporal frameworks that correspond to the two broad categories of people who enabled the introduction and implementation of the policy:

- (i) women’s rights groups who advocated for the quota for over two decades, and other CBOs and NGOs who laid the groundwork for the quota through trainings and advocacy; and
- (ii) political party actors and government officials who worked together to pass and implement the 25 percent quota from around 2015/16.

The section titled ‘Implementation stage’ explores how the policy was implemented through the lens of three processes: trainings, nominations, and challenges of women candidates during campaigning. The next section titled ‘Post-election experiences’ explores the experiences of LG women councillors from the angles of forming women’s committees, the experiences of ‘ward’ vs. ‘list’ members, the various religious, social, and cultural inequalities that framed their experiences as candidates and councillors, and women councillors forming cross-party alliances. In the final section, several related topics that emerged during interviews and FGDs are discussed in order to delineate the possible futures of the policy as well as the effective implementation of it.

## 2.1. Policy drafting stage [↗](#)

Two broad categories of people contributed to making the 25 percent quota for women representatives a reality: women’s rights activists and CBOs and NGOs who had actively promoted increased representation of women in governance, and political party actors who were involved in the drafting and negotiating processes of the quota and its implementation from around 2015. Below, we record and analyse their narratives, experiences, and retrospective reflections on the quota. We examine how the quota went from an idealistic demand to a pragmatic point of contestation and bargaining during its drafting stage.

### 2.1.1. Women’s groups’ intervention in the debate [↗](#)

The women’s rights activists interviewed for this study placed the origin of the thinking about the 25 percent quota variously. They situated their increasingly concentrated efforts to bring the quota within a broad timeline. Starting from the 1970s, early milestones were the 1992 youth quota that inspired women’s groups to see the possibility of a quota for women, which was manifested



in the Women's Charter of 1993,<sup>3</sup> and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Afterwards, Commonwealth pressure and India's 30 percent women's quota for the *Panchayat* system also inspired these groups. One activist, Ms. Kumudini Samuel (who wished to be identified by name) mapped out key milestones and continued engagement with political parties: "There was an understanding that half that quota of youth would be given to women, but it did not work that way eventually." She pointed out that these early demands translated to an increase in women's representation during the 1994 election when the first female president was elected in Sri Lanka. Women's rights groups also lobbied political parties to field women candidates under the youth quota for LG elections (Participant 6, civil society). Another milestone she remembered was the post-1995 Sri Lanka Women NGO Forum, which developed 12 action points for increasing women's representation.

By 1998, women's rights activists were discussing "affirmative action" – "I don't know why we use the word 'quota'. There are different forms of affirmative action...". Then by 2001, women's groups demanded 25-30 percent representation, because "there was a global consensus on the idea of a 'critical mass'. Somehow the Sri Lankan government was only concerned with 25 percent." This indicates that the 25 percent number did not originate with the women's groups, because they drew on the discourse surrounding a critical mass that can be traced back at least to the Beijing Platform. However, all the women's rights activists we interviewed expressed a clear sense of ownership of the effort to formulate the demand for the quota in Sri Lanka. (See Kodikara, 2016, for a detailed discussion of the history of women's rights groups' engagement with the demand for women's representation).

Another early manifestation of women's groups' attempts to increase representation was the formation of an independent group of women led by Dr. Nimalka Fernando. This group contested from an all-women list tendered by an independent group for the Colombo Municipal Council in 2002. Unfortunately, they did not secure any seats. In her interview with us, Dr. Fernando claimed that this led women's groups to realise that calling for women to vote for women does not ensure women's representation. Thus, the conversation shifts from around this time to the push for electoral reforms. For example, Kodikara (2009), says, "since 2003, the demand for a quota for women in Sri Lanka has been linked to the electoral reforms process, particularly at local government level".

## Working with political parties

One inference our study makes is that ambitions among women's rights groups to bring about the quota developed also out of their broader engagement with political parties. As one participant put it, the quota "came into existence" because of their long-term lobbying with political parties (Participant 1, civil society). While this is a positive trend, it also points to how much, ultimately, even the most passionate activists were limited to what they could negotiate with political parties at a more informal level. The interest among political parties in increasing women's representation had been nominal at best at the time. These negotiations were also not equal. The voices of

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<sup>3</sup> "3. The State shall take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their State at the international level and to participate in the work and activities of international organizations" (Women's Charter (Sri Lanka), 1993, p. 3).



activists often went unheard, even though they worked closely with political parties to ensure that women were nominated for elections. For example, during the 2011 LG elections, women's rights organisations sent lists of young women (under 35 years) to political parties to be considered for nomination. One civil society participant recounted that political parties often gave "first preference to men" during nominations. An added problem was that, often, women's rights groups could seek women's entry to nominations of political parties through the youth quota, since that is where space for new entrants to nominations remained. However, this meant that more experienced women over the age of 35 could not be nominated due to the age barrier of the youth quota. This shows that women's groups were not only lobbying for political representation, but were also trying to find ways to work through existing policy limitations and the disinclination of parties to nominate women.

## Building up resilience

One participant pointed out that women's groups had built resilience because of the lack of support for more women's representation across the party spectrum, including the left. For example, the LSSP and the CPSL had been very resistant towards female politicians including Vivienne Goonewardene's participation in groups such as the Women's Action Committee because they felt that such groups were too feminist: "They thought we were going to destroy the working-class element of the struggle" (Participant 1, civil society). She went on to claim that trade unions led by Bala Thampoe were an exception, but overall, political parties had been resistant to women's groups. This resulted in increased resilience within women's groups to their cause, which helped them through the contestations regarding women's representation.

Thus, the women's quota, at least from the angle of women who had already been fighting for their rights for decades, was not a new conversation that appeared around 2015, when the *Yahapalana* government came to power.<sup>4</sup> These long and unfruitful struggles likely frustrated these activists to the extent that when in 2016, a quota seemed possible, demands for prolonged and more nuanced deliberations on making improvements to the quota system were less forthcoming.

Despite enthusiastic responses about these important measures on the part of both local and international NGOs and women's groups, the interviews also revealed a certain sense of unpreparedness among the latter which were, moreover, sometimes divided on how exactly women's representation should be increased. This ambiguity indicates that the conversation about the quota included other alternative suggestions. Even those who supported the quota unequivocally at the time felt, in hindsight, that what the women's rights groups had wanted was just to have the quota in place somehow. They had not thought through what its final shape should be, or how it should be implemented. As another women's activist said: "Women's groups didn't have a clear idea of the 25 percent quota [how and why it came about]. Even today if you ask them what the quota is, they wouldn't be able to tell or understand. I challenge you" (Participant 6, civil society). Thus, although women's groups supported the idea of the quota, there was a sense that they had not thought through what the final outcome should be and how its implementation must look like.

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<sup>4</sup> The Yahapalana government refers to the government formed in January 2015 with the election of President Maithripala Sirisena (representing a breakaway faction of UPFA) with the UNP as the main party in the coalition. UNP's leader Ranil Wickremasinghe was appointed as Prime Minister immediately following its formation.



Working hard and tirelessly, going to the ministry every day, organising public hearings, discussing with ministry officials, attending meetings at parliament, etc., all depicted how far women's groups had engaged with the process. An activist spoke of how "Almost all the civil society organisations had many consultations around the country. We have gone everywhere" (Participant 3, civil society). But she felt that, ultimately, the quota was a failure because not enough planning had gone into the process of drawing it up. She particularly mentioned how lists had been drawn up outlining criteria on who could contest and what their qualifications should be. She described how a list of 30 criteria had been cut down to five, and how herself and other women's rights activists had been sidelined from discussions, even though they persisted in trying to participate in discussions and push for the quota.

For example, she said that a senior ministry official spoke about women's rights groups in the following manner: *'oya genuth ekka kayiwaru gaha gaha mewa karanna gijyoth hondata hityi'* (if we try to do these things chit-chatting [with women], this will not happen). As a result, some women's groups felt that they were insufficiently engaged and involved in the policymaking process. The above activist continued: "One of the major flaws of the process followed by the Ministry of Local Government was not conducting technical discussions after public consultations had been conducted... Even when conducting technical discussions was attempted, many professionals did not turn up calling them women's problems. This led to the absence of a proper action plan" (Participant 3, civil society). This participant said, "this had a 'political agenda'. They said they want to somehow put the women in," and that what she would have liked to see was the conversion of the current quota into an "'organic quota' for women's representation". Such statements, on the one hand, show that the quota is seen now as being inadequate as a political instrument to bring real political change, but on the other hand, they also point to how there is no consensus on what kind of outcome the quota was meant to achieve except ensuring that there was 25 percent women's representation in local governments.

Before the introduction of the women's quota, a wide variety of organisations including civil society organisations (CSOs) and election monitoring organisations were actively involved in increasing the numerical representation of women and strengthening the capacity of women members. In the 2000s, there were approximately two percent women in LG councils. Some women's groups and activists worked hard to support women's wings in political parties. During the 2011 LG elections, women from all political parties were trained mainly by these donor-funded women's groups. For example, EU funds were raised for a project titled "Women's Political Academy". Such developments show how the persistent advocacy by women CSOs and activists laid the groundwork and built relationships to ultimately ensure a women's quota.

### 2.1.2. Legislators and ministry officials' role ↗

Political party leaders and representatives and government ministry officials (bureaucrats) involved in the process of drafting the policy are the second group of people who were instrumental in introducing the quota. Some among them lobbied for it and enabled its introduction. This group's interest in the women's quota was relatively new. However, they played a critical role in shaping and passing the quota during the time of the 2015-19 government. Below, we examine how their contestations and bargaining processes may have shaped the policy context and influenced what one women's rights activist described as a "half-baked cake."



President Maithripala Sirisena came to power in 2015 on a platform of good governance via a broad coalition that promised to end corruption, strengthen inclusion, and democratic processes. Reforming the election process was at the top of the newly elected Sirisena government's priorities list in 2015, but the enthusiasm waned over time. One participant described the enthusiasm with which the electoral reform process began, with the support of the president, prime minister, and other political actors involved in the electoral reform process: "That was the time when the then-Prime Minister, Ranil Wickremesinghe, brought in a motion in parliament to say that the entire parliament would sit for an assembly to bring about a new constitution and there was a steering committee formed for that" (Participant 3, legislator). As the process of electoral reforms dragged on and pressure on the government to hold the LG elections mounted, this enthusiasm waned.

Several officials of the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Governments pointed to the way the process leading to the implementation of the women's quota was too rushed and without proper piloting. When one ministry official was asked what he would have done differently, in hindsight, he said he would have run the pilot first to see how it worked before its full implementation: "This quota was initially discussed with various stakeholders at different forums, such as the Parliamentary Women's Caucus. At those forums, we also talked about running a pilot to rectify potential defects and technical flaws" (Participant 7, policy implementer). Like the women's rights activists quoted in the previous section, this official too felt that the process was too rushed. It was beset by various forms of bargaining on the part of the elite political party leaders. This process of contestation and bargaining is discussed next.

## Pretext for postponing elections

The LG elections, scheduled to be held in 2015, were postponed and not held until February 2018. The women's quota was introduced in the interim period and the delay was caused both by delimitation work related to the 2012 electoral reforms<sup>5</sup> as well as the introduction of the women's quota, and subsequent electoral delimitation. Given the Sirisena government's waning popularity among the majority Sinhalese since 2016 (due to various events such as the 2015 Bond Scam and reconciliation initiatives) and given the general electoral advantage the Rajapaksa political camp (SLPP) enjoyed among the majority Sinhalese, postponing LG elections was in the interests of the Yahapalana government. As one key policy implementer said, if the UNP-led government wanted to postpone the elections using the women's quota and the electoral reforms as a pretext, it provided them with what they wanted (Participant 5). The same participant said, "Parallel to all of this, the government was looking for various ways and means to postpone LG elections. The excuse they gave was that the LG electoral system which existed back then was not inclusive of women" (Participant 3, legislator). In this rare and candid interview, this participant admitted that there was a sense that the women's quota was or was seen as an excuse to postpone elections, from the perspective of some political actors.

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<sup>5</sup> Following the 2012 LG election reforms, a delimitation committee was appointed to redraw the boundaries of the wards and electorates. The report of this committee was completed in June 2015, two months after the term of the LGs ended (The Sunday Times, 2015; SC FR No. 35/2016, p. 13).

A group of former local authority councillors filed a fundamental rights application when the election was postponed, seeking a Supreme Court determination that their fundamental rights were violated by the absence of the LG election, and that LG elections be held. The Chief Justice ruled that “Although Local Authorities (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 2012 was enacted in 2012, up to now, it is not possible to hold elections under that as the necessary requirements to hold elections are not fulfilled... it is not possible to hold elections until and unless the delimitation process is concluded” and that the “Petitioner’s fundamental rights are violated by the state” (SC FR Application No. 35/2016).

Secondary literature corroborates the claim that there was a public outcry about the postponement of elections, particularly emanating from the joint opposition. In a press conference, Opposition MP and Chairperson of the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), G. L. Peiris, would declare that “there is no country in the world that has not held local government elections in two and half years” (Divaina, 2017, p. 9) and joint opposition MP Dulles Alahapperuma stated that “this government devalued the Supreme Court and its supremacy. It took over the Supreme Court’s judicial power [...] The way it was done can only be described in village language not as showing the younger sister and giving the older sister in marriage but showing the younger sister and giving the grandmother in marriage (September 23rd, 2017, Divaina, p. 9). Such sexist language of opposition politicians shows that they were on a powerful footing to challenge the government on the postponement of LG elections and that there was a general sense that the LG elections were postponed on illegitimate grounds in an illegitimate way. The pressure on the government to hold elections was very high. This was exacerbated by the severity of the dengue epidemic at the time, for which LGs were held responsible, as they are directly involved in maintaining public health.

## **The committee-fication of the decision-making process**

An interesting narrative emerged regarding how “rushed” the electoral reforms were. While rights groups and ministry officials felt that the policy drafting was rushed, political party leaders felt that it was too slow and dragging. Between February, 2016 and August, 2017 when the two related bills were passed, there was a window of 18 months to deliberate on a suitable electoral system to implement the women’s quota. There was consensus among the two main political parties within the government (UNP and SLFP), as well as the breakaway faction led by Mahinda Rajapaksa (which went on to form the SLPP), that the broader model of elections should be based on the electoral framework of Local Authorities (Special Provisions) Act No. 21 of 2012. There really did not appear to be much disagreement regarding the electoral system of Mixed Member Proportional Representation (MMPR). The delay in determining the specific electoral system and composition was an outcome of multiple committees conducting consultations with political parties, electoral officials, and civil society. Multiple committees were appointed by the government, including the Asoka Peiris committee that was mandated to look into the concerns of political parties regarding the demarcation of electoral wards (Sunday Observer, 2017, p.8). However, key officials, such as those in the Asoka Peiris committee, publicly criticised the government for not being forthcoming in holding LG elections (Daily Mirror, 2017).

Such “committee-fication” (rule by an inundation of committees) of decision-making processes generally causes long delays. Several participants described meetings with committees where “a lot of political parties opposed the reform” (Participant 5, policy implementer) and one female

politician who participated in this study pointed to how even senior politicians of the party proposing the electoral system reform opposed the quota “referring to its impracticality at the actual electoral level” (Participant 7, legislator). What can be inferred from various retrospective comments is that political parties took a long time to agree upon the electoral system. This left little time for technical discussions and for working out the details of the policy. For example, as quoted above, both government officials and women’s rights activists felt that adequate technical details had not been addressed, including piloting and working out criteria for nomination. Such dragging reflects the competing interests at work and the slowness of the process. This long-drawn period was also marked by an increased public awareness and demand for the women’s quota. For example, public parades led by government ministers were staged in support of the 25 percent quota. It was clear that the quota was receiving support from the highest level of government. Moreover, government officials were supporting the quota fully. The line ministry organised consultations in all provinces in the country in collaboration with CSOs to raise awareness about the quota and to consult potential candidates of the problems they might have, if they are to contest elections under the new quota system. A publication titled ‘Enhancing Women’s Political Participation in Sri Lanka’ incorporating ideas generated during consultations was presented to the President in a public event. If committee-fication helped leading political actors get more time, public parades such as the above provided an opportunity to divert attention from delaying elections. Yet, these processes increased the buy-in and commitment to increasing women’s political participation, within political parties and in the society at large.

## Alignment of different political interests

Meanwhile, there were others who saw the moment of introducing the women’s quota as a “very strong political game”, and perceived it as something done for “personal glory” (Participant 3, civil society). The political moment of introducing the women’s quota was determined by the alignment of different political interests, and only the SLPP seemed to be the major force that had nothing to gain from delaying the LG elections. All the major political parties in the government would have benefited from a delayed election that was understood to be favourable to the SLPP.

As stated above, the main partners of the coalition government were criticised for delaying the elections by nearly three years. The UNP, as the main partner of the government, was seen as a key actor in causing the delay. The UPFA, reduced to a relatively small party after the SLPP split, obtained around 12 percent of the total vote. As one of the key legislators who led the electoral negotiations for UPFA at the parliamentary committee on electoral reforms said, “We agreed to this electoral model, because it was the best model for us to get more seats [...]” (Participant 1, legislator). These two main parties clearly had much to gain from a new electoral system in an election unfavourable to them. Several concessions, such as not mandating that a woman be appointed if the party only received two seats, discarding the 5 percent minimum qualifying bar, were made to smaller parties in order to get their consensus on the reform (Participant 5, policy implementer).

Other parties had worked from the assumption that the 25 percent quota would not be implemented at all. Some participants (legislators) admitted that their party had opposed the move. As one secretary of an ethnic minority political party put it, “The quota system for women came as more of an external compulsion than coming from the people per se. This quota system became a nuisance for political parties because most of the political parties did not have enough women in them. Even



out of that, a very few of them had contested and won elections” (Participant 3, policy implementer). Thus, simply assuming that the quota would not happen, they were taken by surprise at the last minute, when they had to field a large number of female candidates (see section 2.2. below for more details).

## The role of key individuals

In this context, where political parties were not fully amenable to increasing women’s political representation, a set of different political aspirations, personal convictions, political commitments, and political opportunism of individuals, as well as political parties, aligned with the introduction of the 25 percent quota. Some thought that certain individuals were directly responsible for the introduction of the quota, while others thought that it had met the political interests of their respective parties. One participant pointed to the role of key individuals in the context of the policy drafting process, describing how the then-Prime Minister asked a women’s group activist on how they wanted the formula for women’s representation to be. She claimed that he had suggested various formulas for the quota to reserve seats, rather than reserve nominations, and that she felt, at that point, that he had been thinking seriously about it (Participant 6, civil society).

This narrative by a women’s rights activist was corroborated by several other participants, who brought up the same names. Everyone agreed that the then-Prime Minister and his wife (a senior academic who is known for her work on gender studies) had played a key role in getting the government to pass a quota for women. Moreover, the legal officer (female) of the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government, Gayani Premathilaka, was also acknowledged by many. During our interview with her, when asked what had inspired her, Ms. Premathilaka said, “I attended so many meetings at the Pradeshiya Sabha level. They only had men. I got tired seeing only men there.” Her presence at these meetings, because of her position as a key official in the designing of the quota, had a positive impact during the drafting process.

Despite the seemingly progressive thrust of this narrative about individuals with power and the commitment to bring about change, such narratives are also symptomatic of the individual-oriented nature of the Sri Lankan political system. Such personalist and individual-driven policymaking fail to take into account the structural problems within the system and ultimately fail to build a broad consensus on how the policy can be implemented. It is also true that without such high-level clearance and support, the policy would not have come into being at all. Thus, the quota policy was caught between more ‘progressive’ individuals (as opposed to multi-party consensus) and a political party system resistant to change but was passed as it was backed by powerful individuals, and some of the party level interests coincided. The party’s interest, then, was not the expected outcome of the quota, but the relative advantage it can gain from it.

## Limitations at the drafting stage

Another limitation of the policy was that it failed to recognise the challenges that women elected through the quota would face. The enormous powers of the chairperson of the LG and other formal and informal non-inclusive power arrangements were at the heart of such challenges. The designing and implementation of the quota system lacked sufficient safeguards on inclusion and transparency that would enable women councillors to function effectively in an exclusionary system.



For instance, appointing members to the Finance Committee of the LG council is at the discretion of the chair. Unsurprisingly, women were rarely appointed to such decisive committees that deliberate on expenditure and are left out from processes of decision making. Across the system, there was not a single female chairperson appointed to an LG, while only a single woman councillor had been appointed as a deputy chairperson. Quotas cannot fully address such structural weaknesses of the system and basic democratic safeguards need to be in place to ensure that LGs are more inclusive spaces of decision-making, in which affirmative action such as the women's quota can achieve outcomes more than the nominal representation of women.

The lack of internal democracy and transparency within political parties was also a barrier that was overlooked during the policy drafting stage. Because political parties operate with immunity—both in terms of violating democratic structures and not maintaining financial transparency—there is always the potential that any progressive reform could be undermined. In this case, for example, the policy itself mandated only 25 percent of seats. However, the political parties had authority over the selection process, the way nominations were given, fielding candidates, resource distribution to female candidates, the networks, who contacted them, what understanding the party had with the female candidates, etc. Ultimately, the party's existing political culture and practices determined the way that the policy would be implemented. As one women's activist put it, "I think where we went wrong was with political parties. It is a very patriarchal system that you find in political parties driven by men" (Participant 5, civil society). Another activist put it, "We must beg political parties to nominate women, as it is a Proportional Representation System. No party has had a closed list" (Participant 6, civil society). Such practices were not countered through the policy itself, which undermined some of its original intentions and limited its outcome only to the increase of the numerical representation of women.

Another point of contention related to the quota was how long it was expected to be effective. While some participants in the study felt that the quota should be subjected to a sunset clause, others felt that it should be in effect for as long as necessary to bring about substantive change, with the quota expected to give an opportunity for women politicians to build trust among the public that women too can be successful in politics. As one senior female politician argued, "The quota is a temporary measure so that people can see that women can also deliver." (Participant 7, legislator). Such expectations assumed that the quota would lead to more inclusive shifts within the political system that would create an enabling environment for women to contest in elections on an equal footing.

Some politicians criticised the quota claiming that it was a result of Western agendas, rather than a political move that addresses local needs. One senior male politician argued that the demand for the overt representation of women does not take into account the latent power women have in societies through property rights and how these societies have long been matriarchal, in terms of passing down of property rights, etc. He was specifically referring to women in the Eastern Province. He also suggested that interest in the quota prevents discussions on serious land issues that exist in the East, and the ethnic politics linked to such issues that are not directly linked to gender. He argued that if quotas are introduced, minority communities, particularly native indigenous communities who are struggling, must be given priority, because the problems that affect them will shape the future of politics (Participant 3, policy implementer). Another politician from the East pointed to the way cities such as Kattankudy are heavily congested with a very high population



density, creating serious hygiene issues. Such claims point to the latent cultural politics that must have shaped the discourse at the time that the quota was proposed, and how the quota must have been viewed by politicians in general as something that does not address the actual problems of society or women, in particular.

## 2.2 Implementation stage [↗](#)

The policy implementation stage was the period between August 2017, when the Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 16 was passed, and February 2018, when the elections were held. The data collected for this study suggests three main themes to the implementation of the policy that need to be addressed: trainings for women, the nominations process, and a legal framework to protect candidates (particularly female candidates) from harassment and violence. During this period, there was some attention paid to the process of education of the candidates and future female LG councillors. Yet, the problems linked to the three areas mentioned above persisted and became crucial during the implementation stage.

### Trainings for women

The content of the training provided to current and future women councillors by local and international NGOs and civil society was twofold. First, before the quota, they trained women to become candidates and get elected via campaign building and leadership programmes. Second, after the quota was implemented, there was a spurt of training on how the LG councils operated, while the previous type of training also continued. Around 2020, there was a feeling that training women alone was insufficient because the environment in which they have to work needs to be more inclusive overall. So, the need to train men in the councils as well emerged. Currently some of the training reflects this shift.

The interviews conducted for this study indicate that some attention was also paid by the state to provide training to future female LG councillors, due to a dominant narrative that women were less educated than their male counterparts. These training, provided soon after LGs were established, were aimed at building awareness on LG procedures. One interviewee pointed to the way a conducive environment for women to operate in LGs was facilitated by the subject ministry, through consultations, awareness raising programmes, etc., with support of foreign aid agencies and local universities, rather than state funding. The Sri Lanka Institute of Local Governance (SLILG) received cabinet approval to implement the women's quota project and received funding from the government, but these funds were often not necessary as external funding was available. While one interviewee (Participant 2, policy implementer) recalled these training initiatives having the full support from the Minister of Local Government at the time, others contested this claim. What is clear is that local and international NGOs played a key role in facilitating the training.

The need for training was framed through the assumption that many women lacked formal education. The way that even progressive proponents discussed the training was symptomatic of this assumption. They claimed that uneducated women who were entering LG councils must have felt intimidated, especially because there was no orientation and the one organised by the ministry had been inadequate. The booklet which was distributed among trainees was also criticised for its 'inaccessible' language, according to one participant (Participant 3, civil society). However,



the data shows that there was a wide variety in the educational level of LG women councillors. Those interviewed for this study ranged from engineers to tea pluckers, and media personalities to teachers. Therefore, the dominant narrative that women were less educated than their male counterparts is not generalisable. It is more plausible to argue that women councillors who were elected to LGs had been largely kept out of the functioning political system and needed training in the local governance system and the way that the LGs functioned, because they entered the LG system for the first time. It might be more productive for those providing training to study the strategies used by women councillors to navigate the system and identify their training needs, without making assumptions that they were uneducated and illiterate, because the latter can lead to further stereotyping of women LG councillors.



## Nominations process

The nomination of women under the new system remained completely in the hands of political parties. While the quota mandated 25 percent seats, it did not mandate a democratic process for the selection of candidates or giving them nominations. In this section, we discuss the various problems faced by women in the process of receiving nominations.

The nomination process was rushed for several reasons: (i) Political parties were unprepared to field the large number of female candidates necessary for the election as mandated by the quota; (ii) Political parties did not have adequate internal structures that could ensure a democratic and transparent selection process; (iii) Political parties did not have sufficiently strong women's wings that enabled them to choose from a pool of already trained and experienced women. The latter point must be especially emphasised. The major political parties that contested for the elections have been in operation for a long time, and to not have a readily available set of women who can contest, representing the party is a telling detail that reflects the patriarchal and non-gender sensitive nature of the political system in Sri Lanka. When the policy was finally in place, political parties rushed to recruit female candidates, and party organisers had to face the issue of who would contest which wards, because they were reluctant to compromise what they thought would be easy victories for their male members. This ad hoc process, stemming less from the quota and more from the lack of democratic processes within political parties, nevertheless, created a rush, where parties would attempt to find candidates using various democratic and undemocratic ways. Presented below is an analysis of the related narratives that emerged from this study's data.

Most parties worked from gendered assumptions that women cannot win in wards and that women would address only issues that affected women. The proponents of the quota had attempted to draw up a list of qualifications for women who would be given nominations, which itself was a fraught process and was unsuccessful. In a few examples, women began to be pushed towards wards that party organisers believed the parties would lose anyway, and local organisers or other party individuals had the power to determine which women would be given nominations. Whenever they knew an electorate could not be won, a woman was put to contest: she would be called a "billie girl" (meaning a "sacrificial girl" (Participant 5, policy implementer), available to be sacrificed in unwinnable wards. The language was telling, as this meant that some women were available, only to be sacrificed. However, 535 women did win their wards, and that was slightly above the 10 percent of the number of all wards in the LGs, nationally.

Gatekeeping by party seniors at the LG level disproportionately impacted women candidates. Many women who wanted to contest had to engage aggressively with local leaders and party structures politically to get nominations. The gatekeeping process that occurs at the lower party levels became patently visible with the women's quota. In many instances, women candidates were sidelined to give preference to a male candidate. Women were put on the list and asked to help the men. In other instances, women were disqualified based on their place of origin or caste. One woman councillor pointed to how she had been denied nominations because she was originally not from the area as she had married into that particular village. There was already a male member that the party wanted to field, and she lost her candidacy. Another woman described how she was asked to contest from a different LG because of her caste, in order to prioritise another male member (Galle FGD). In such instances, political parties became the gatekeeping mechanism that kept women out of the process at the nominations stage.

Narratives about women who were given nominations by political parties often claim that parties gave existing members' family, or relatives nominations in ad hoc ways. This narrative, which feeds easily into the idea that the purpose of the quota was defeated by the selection of "unqualified" women who were given nominations for extra-political reasons, in fact only tells part of the story. It does not take into account how the existing political structures were manipulated by political parties themselves, and how they further entrenched their patriarchal bias. For example, one political party representative, after admitting that it was difficult to gauge the exact process through which candidates were selected, pointed out that it is very difficult to find female candidates who are not related to political families. As a party, their primary concern was winning as many votes as possible for the party (Participant 1, legislator). This shows that parties tended to rely on their existing political links to field candidates and fell back on the system linked to political families, which dominates the Sri Lankan political system in general. This was seen as being inevitable because those were the women the parties could contact easily. Even ministry officials felt that the quota "played into the hands of wives, daughters, sisters and relatives of male politicians" (Participant 7, policy implementer). Such narratives must be treated with moderation because they tend to shift the weakness in the policy and party system itself onto the women who were elected or appointed and further stereotype both female LG councillors and the quota.

The stereotype that inexperienced women who were family members of local politicians became LG councillors was challenged seriously by the women who participated in the FGDs. When we asked them why they thought they were given nominations by their party, many of them pointed to their being politically active within their communities. In the local political setting, being linked to a patronage network such as family was not necessarily seen as significantly negative. Many women engaged in social and community activities due to their proximity to local politicians. Often, these politically connected women had been active members in their communities, trained during the war and after the tsunami, and had already been mobilised as active organisers by community-based development initiatives. Almost all of them brought around a decade of experience (sometimes much more) with them into the party. Even in instances where they were not highly educated, they were picked for a reason and their level of education did not seem to always affect their performance. Some political party leaders interviewed for this study admitted that when they did give nominations to women active in the community who they had brought into their parties, they did well. One participant said, "I am reluctantly compelled to admit that it brought about enthusiasm

and acceptance amongst the community” (Participant 2, legislator). This study concludes that the struggles of such women escape the dominant narrative, and that their achievements and challenges are underrepresented, or are seen as merely exceptions when describing the selection of candidates for nominations.

Women candidates were also affected by national-level political campaigns and the authority of national-level political figures that often override LG-level politics. One MP interviewed shared how during the 2018 LG election, some candidates “did not even put their photos on campaign materials, [and] instead put their party leader Mahinda’s photo (Participant 3, legislator). He pointed to the way people voted only for the party and not candidates, and how this election was slated as “the stepping stone to bring Mahinda back into office”. He said that in the Ella local council, “a candidate passed away three weeks before the election but still won the election. People voted for him because they wanted to bring Mahinda [Rajapaksa] back to power” (Participant 3, legislator). Thus, the party’s national-level support and voter base had a deep impact on the LG elections, and rural candidates, especially if they were women, did not have the opportunity to develop what literature on the quota calls the “role-model” effect (see section 1.2 of this report for an explanation of this term). Instead, candidates were expected to rely on the party’s and national level leaders’ charisma, and the individual candidate did not seem to matter much, for example, as the participants in the Badulla FGD pointed out.

In the areas where FGDs were conducted, participants revealed instances where the process of nominating women was ad hoc. The following quotation gives insight on how complicated making a decision to run is for many female candidates and how political parties were completely oblivious to the fact that they could not force nominations on women in the last minute:

These politicians did not realise if they did not nominate enough women, they would not be able to contest. It hit them at the last minute. At that last minute only they begged women to come and contest [...] Next day morning was the nomination, they would come and ask us to contest in the afternoon. These women needed to prepare the family, they needed to get the support of their family. All this time they got trained but they never thought which political party to choose. Will my family support the political party that I choose? Is my brother in the same political party? [...] The bottom line was that women needed support from their families. You cannot give them eight hours to make a critical decision and the next morning you come for signatures. I think that was the point at which things started going downhill. Then these parties started randomly putting women on their lists. So many of these women did not even know why they were put on a list [...] How dare they ask us women to make such decisions in less than 24 hours? How much time must they have taken to make those decisions? (Participant 5, civil society).

In other places, parties finally made concessions to women who had been sidelined by the party for decades. For example, in the Galle FGD, one long-term party member described how she had been subjected to severe physical harm, verbal abuse, and to threats to life during the 1987-89 period because of her affiliation with the party, but was never given nominations until the introduction of the quota. In narrative after narrative, women spoke about how they had been sidelined by parties, showing how the claim made by political parties that there were not enough “good” women to field



as candidates was not only untrue but also unfair. The nomination process was rushed, it appears, only because the parties were unwilling to put in place a democratic and transparent selection system to identify suitable women.

## Preventing and responding to violence against women in politics

Sri Lankan politics have long been steeped in violence with assassinations and attempts on the lives of politicians, be they men or women. However, the study was able to uncover gendered forms of violence such as online and offline verbal abuse, and threats to life and family. Several women candidates described how they were subjected to online and offline gender-based violence and harassment. Although there are several domestic and international laws pertaining to violence against women, once women began campaigns, online slander and hate speech targeting women (and women from cultural minorities) became difficult to contain. This proved the weakness of the law enforcement systems that prevailed at the time. Many women described how they had been slandered, had social media campaigns launched against them, and had even been physically threatened sometimes. One woman explained, “I was told that if I campaigned, they would attack my family. There was a lack of support from the media, but male candidates were supported” (Jaffna FGD). The legal instruments that could prevent harassment and violence against female candidates were also absent. The lack of a proper mechanism to liaise with Facebook to prevent the viral spreading of hate speech inciting violence was highlighted when anti-Muslim violence erupted in Digana in March 2018. The absence of proper domestic mechanisms, even after this episode, hampered effective responses to online slander and character assassinations of women candidates during the 2018 LG elections. This was aggravated by the lack of training and knowledge on the part of candidates and their support networks, and also by the long delays and automated and rigid ‘community standards’ protocols maintained by social media platforms.

There was also a lack of clarity regarding whether the violence and harassment against women carried out during the campaigns should be treated as a violation of individual rights or as a violation of the election law. Generally, such violence was dealt with as an election violation rather than a harassment issue, and they were often dismissed (Participant 4, policy implementer). This shows that although there are laws against harassment and violence during elections, these could not provide sufficient protection to women candidates.

Despite these difficulties experienced by female candidates during the nominations process, they shared how they found their election campaigns as a remarkable learning experience. They also recognised the difference between how they were treated before and after their election, particularly by general society. Thus, while the campaigning process was difficult for female candidates, as political parties and the legal framework for protecting them barely existed, participants’ narratives pointed to how the women had capitalised on the opportunities they were offered both during and after elections. Their experience challenged the claim that the quota had been compromised. The women who came through the quota applauded it and felt that it gave them an opportunity that they would not have had otherwise. They spoke hopefully and with vision, several claiming that they will go on to contest parliamentary elections with the training and experience they had received. They did not feel that the quota was a failure, and they did not see it as having been compromised.

## 2.3. Post-election experiences [↗](#)

Five years have passed since the introduction of the 25 percent quota for women at the LG level and the debate about the effectiveness of the quota is still being discussed. This section looks at this issue from the perspective of former women councillors, activists, and policymakers. This section also maps what holds for the future of the present quota in terms of improving it further, and changes or adjustments that can be anticipated.

### ‘Ward’ and ‘list’ members

Once appointed to office, many female LG councillors had to contend with the realities of Sri Lanka’s patriarchal and violent political culture (Jayasundara-Smits, 2022). If they had been initially unprepared to attend meetings and conduct themselves productively, they seem to have gained this experience and learned from the process as well as the training. However, the violent culture of the LGs and their targeting of women were apparent in the following description by a women’s rights activist. After pointing out that women councillors were not allowed to speak, she stated that “several male members would call female members [who were appointed as part of the quota] “*pina* members” (loosely translated to “free-riding members”). The latter refers to what is often perceived as a “free-riders’ list”, derogatorily known in Sinhala as “*Pin-Layisthuwa*” (freely-given/charity list), implying that women nominated through the list are free-riders. There is an added element to this dynamic. A lot of women councillors are “list women”, and in many places, there is a preference for the member selected from the ward rather than the list member to be given infrastructure development work contracts. (Galle FGD). When infrastructure development projects are distributed among LG members, there is a preference for ‘list members’ in many LGs. There is a long-term impact also associated with this differentiation, as members who do not have a ward find it impossible to nurture a constituency that would support the member’s candidacy at the next election.

In principle, the LG law does not distinguish between ward members and list members. Moreover, once elected, they are also not recognised officially to be representatives of particular political parties. Ideally, this should ensure the parity between list members and ward members and frame all members as being equally entitled to their rights. In practice, however, the stereotype of “free-riding” members leads to the idea that ward members are somehow more legitimate and deserving than list members. This is further solidified by the contradiction in the electoral system that has both the ward and list system, making some more “representative” than others. This is also linked to the idea that each ward has to have a councillor who is responsible for the ward and its people. This notion of representation stems from the MMPR electoral system adopted in the 2018 election. At the core of this prejudice about ‘list members’ lie two unreconciled tenets emerging from the principles of local governance where councillors are considered equal, versus the electoral assumption that a member elected from a ward is more responsible to their ward than others.

### Political financing and patronage

The election financing system in Sri Lanka operates outside the reported financial expenditures of political parties or candidates. Most of the women LG councillors interviewed said that their party had not supported them with budgetary allocations to run their campaigns. It is unlikely that their



male counterparts received budgetary support for their electoral campaigns either. However, it is true that some candidates received support from their local leaders as part of being a member of a certain patronage network, such as family or business connections. Although some women candidates may also benefit from such networks if they themselves come from political backgrounds and connections, women who do not have such connections are at a greater disadvantage than men who are in the same situation. Given the male-dominated culture of such patronage systems, it is easier for men to politically network than women. Such network membership is currently more prevalent among men than women. Moreover, even when women do belong to such networks, they may not be given preference over male members from the same network. When candidates are not members of such networks, they have to mobilise their social capital or their own financial means. Moreover, in Sri Lanka's prevailing governance structures, proximity to political leadership determines access to political patronage and avenues for political corruption (Peiris, 2022; Kadirgamar, 2010). A leadership-centric and patronage-oriented political culture prevails throughout the LG system, and the system is generally viewed as a site of resource distribution among lower rungs of the political party system. This is a challenge for both men and women outside the patronage circles. However, women are subject to gatekeeping more than men, and left out of these legitimised patronage structures, unless they were close to local or national level leaders. Participants in the Kurunegala FGD revealed how the system facilitated corruption and patronage to go hand in hand. According to them, some councillors, in collaboration with officials, launder local infrastructure development projects through local CBOs, which do not have the capacity to implement such projects. CBOs (for instance, farmer organisations or elder's societies) are given infrastructure projects, but it is the councillors who actually implement them through their crony contractors. The CBOs get two to five percent of the total contract, and the councillor becomes the real contractor (Kurunegala FGD). As these patronage networks involve many stakeholders in a male-dominant culture, women find themselves excluded from access to decision-making.

## Formation of women's committees

Setting up Women's Committees at LGs was not part of the original planning of the drafters of the quota system, nor did it figure in the planning of the civil society advocates. As a way of creating more space for newly appointed women members, some activists contemplated the idea of setting up women's committees. However, this idea was met with continuous resistance and the unfavourable context persisted. Women's committees were established quite late and in only a few LGs. They came at a time during 2019-2021, where OGP (Open Government Partnership) had another commitment to make committees more transparent and open. Even in places where there was an interest in establishing women's committees, there was bureaucratic resistance as well as resistance from chairmen. Only about 60 women's committees were eventually established, and they were established relatively late during the post-Covid period. The budget mechanisms, including how allocations were made to these committees, were also not transparent. A woman councillor in one FGD shared how: "There is a committee of women members, but it is not given any funds. The Chairman is from SLPP, and he does not share any funding with women members of other parties" (Galle FGD).

The Local Government Act No. 15 of 1987 requires each LG authority to set up a minimum of four committees including a committee on finance. However, this provision has often been implemented in a way that only four committees were formed as opposed to a minimum of four committees, in



a majority of the LGs. As a result, some LGs resisted establishing a women's committee claiming that only four committees were specified by law. Some civil society activists lobbied the ministry to encourage the setting up of Women's Committees so that women could be actively involved in even selected activities in their constituency. As a response to the requests from civil society, the Secretary of the subject ministry issued a circular on November 8, 2021, requesting LGs to set up Women's Committees. Even after this clarification, many LGs did not set up women's committees, citing various reasons. For example, an LG commissioner from Gampaha responded to the request by the Secretary, sharing the prevailing misconception that the act enabled only four committees. Even in places where there was an interest in establishing women's committees, there was bureaucratic resistance as well as resistance from chairmen. Only about 60 women's committees were eventually established, and they were established relatively late during the post-Covid period. When asked what the women's committees achieved, the main response was some collaborative work during Covid-19, such as community kitchens. It is clear that like most other aspects of the LGs, these women's committees did not have sufficient power or backing to support female councillors, or to introduce a women-oriented view of politics.



### **Lack of political trust**

The relationship between CBOs and political parties can have a profound impact on how electoral systems work at the LG level. However, given the growing mistrust towards political parties and their notoriety with regard to corruption, there is a reluctance on the part of many CBOs to engage directly with political parties. Particularly at the local level, where location-specific power connections play a big role, such reluctance to engage with political parties can have long-term repercussions. For example, several women complained that once they had run for elections from a particular political party, they could no longer return to their work with the CBOs because these organisations did not wish to be associated with political parties or politicians. In the long run, where women LG councillors must build progressive relations with the grassroots, losing such links can become quite tenuous for their political future. This is a problem of political culture and lack of trust between political parties and CBOs.

### **Gendered expectations and lack of clarity regarding the of role of women councillors**

There is a general expectation that quotas would lead to women working on matters that engage and centre women and women's issues more (Participant 2, legislator). Of course, such confusion about the exact role of elected women is parallel to the lack of clarity in the policy dialogue as well, where there was a consensus that women should be appointed to LGs, but not on their role. In one FGD, women entered into an argument about whether they should give priority to general infrastructure development or to women-oriented projects (Jaffna FGD). Some women argued that they should act like their male counterparts, particularly developing infrastructure in their wards. Others felt that they should pay special attention to the needs of women. The latter pointed to how they had built breast-feeding areas for women in public places such as bus stands. Sometimes, the gendered expectations of female councillors also fell back to social and communal stereotypes of what issues women should be more concerned with. Moreover, party leaders and secretaries often commented that women did not address issues that directly affected women, such as sanitation and hygiene, and others complained that women did not perform much despite being elected. One

party secretary even pointed out that the whole purpose of LGs was to address hygiene issues and that female councillors had failed to recognise that (Participant 2, legislator). Such disagreements and claims point to how although theoretically, women are expected to create more women-oriented politics, in practice, these can become enmeshed within existing gendered stereotypes and prevent women from becoming competitive candidates in their wards in future elections.

## Lack of political experience

Another point raised during the FGDs was whether there was a difference between those who came into the process with previous political experience and those who did not. Women's rights activists and ministry officials felt that adequate time and study had not been devoted to defining what type of women would be elected through the quota, and as discussed above, felt that inexperienced, uneducated, or illiterate women entered local governance through the quota. In contrast, the FGDs showed that women who had wanted to enter politics were given an opportunity to run because of the quota, and that the ad-hoc way in which women were nominated actually worked to the advantage of some women. Because the parties drew up their lists at the last minute, women, whom the parties would not have otherwise given nomination to, were nominated. In one FGD, women councillors said, "next time, we won't have that chance" (Puttalam FGD). In understanding how they experienced life as a councillor, many of them shared their impression that, although it was violent and unequal in 2018, it has been much more amenable for women to run than before. Those who had experience of running for elected office before knew the difficulties and were thankful for the quota. Some of the empowerment which happened in the quota has made women politicians feel like they should start an all-women political party. Interestingly enough, most participants in the FGDs expressed an interest in entering national-level politics and serving in parliament.

There does not seem to be much of a difference between the performance of women who entered the LG councils with prior political experiences and those who did not. The data suggests that the newer women too learnt in the process, and that some of them were just as dedicated to their political career. Of course, this cannot be generalised without further, more quantitative research and a wider sample. In one FGD, the women councillors shared how, when the composition of the LG included a majority of new male and female members, they felt less excluded because everyone was new, and everyone was learning (Jaffna FGD). But they felt that with time, when exclusionary practices became more entrenched, things became more challenging for them. This echoes the sentiment expressed by some women councillors, who felt that they would not be nominated again and that parties would prefer to field women candidates who are more obedient to the party.

In places where there were greater hierarchies built around experiences, male members tried to undermine the skills and knowledge of female members. One member claimed that their chairman was not even literate and could not keep up with the knowledge that the women had, even though they were new (Puttalam FGD). Another former LG councilwoman said that she had experience in the media, and therefore knew how to find the relevant information and knowledge (Participant 3, civil society). When she and another female member wanted to be trained on the issue of garbage management, their council refused to support them. She said that in response, they raised funds to undertake a trip to Japan and learnt about the subject, all the while posting their experiences on social media. She said that after their return, no one challenged them, because they were now knowledgeable about the subject and they had proven their dedication to their job. Such narratives



show that female LG council members did not consider their lack of experience as a drawback but found ways to navigate challenges and equip themselves with the necessary skills and knowledge. Many had familiarised themselves with the LG elections by-laws, and felt that they knew enough about the law to challenge their male counterparts and fulfil the requirements of their role.



Women councillors shared stories of how they had at times not been allowed to speak in some LGs or sign documents, being told that the letters and documents would be sent home for them to learn—essentially being treated as second grade members. One participant shared how women councillors were routinely insulted and addressed in very disrespectful ways by male counterparts: “Because of the way the women are treated, they are so silenced, terrified, and cornered” (Participant 3, civil society). For example, the chairman of the local council of Kundasale was convicted of 14 criminal offences and was known to make inappropriate remarks about all female members (Participant 3, civil society). Moreover, women’s proposals presented to councils were not taken seriously, and not given due recognition or consideration. One woman councillor described how she had attempted to submit a proposal: “Because I am a teacher, I submitted proposals related to controlling the drug menace and improving education. But they did not take my proposals seriously” (FGD, Jaffna). When we asked what other changes she had wanted to bring to education, she said she had wanted to teach about reproductive rights to girls. Such women contradict the general stereotype that women LG councillors were inactive and inarticulate, and show, instead, how their own vision and understanding of society was undermined by the patriarchal and biased structures of the situation in the LG councils.

Women councillors countered such discriminatory treatment, as above, by working across party lines, educating themselves on council matters, and learning the rules of the game and adapting very fast. Some women councillors developed strategies of ‘getting things done’ by working through and working with the system (examples are women leaders who encouraged male counterparts to make joint proposals at the councils, or women councillors who deliberately invited their male chairman or powerful male councillors to join the women’s committee). In Puttalam, the women competed with their male counterparts, and identified the ways in which men used informal social structures to get what they wanted (Puttalam FGD). Thus, despite the narrative that “unqualified” women had been given nominations and that the intentions of the quota had been compromised, women politicians exercised considerable agency after their election. In the midst of a chaotic implementation, women used their agency to get their nominations, and to negotiate their positions vis-a-vis the parties but also the communities they contested in.

## 2.4. Looking forward ↗

The 25 percent women’s quota has been in operation for one term. In the last few years, the country’s political culture has changed so much that economic reforms are at the forefront of the reforms discourse. In this context, women’s quota has also been the target of some negative narratives as discussed elsewhere in this study. In this section, some justifications of quotas, and options for improving women’s participation in decision-making are discussed.

## Alternative models to ensure women's representation

There are several modes through which a women's quota can be implemented. The first, the model currently in use in Sri Lanka, appoints women based on the number of seats the political party gets; the second model dedicates either certain seats or slots on the nomination list to women. Since such seats or slots are declared based an alternating pattern, this model is often referred zebra models. At the electoral systems negotiation stage, Sri Lankan political parties have preferred prevailing model, zebra models were advocated by some women's groups. In the FGDs, women councillors in Badulla, Kurunegala, and Galle were clearly supportive of the current system of the quota, over others. It is thought to contain a certain predictability for anyone to build their own campaign and gives a better chance for meritocratic candidates. A zebra model, although simple and easy to implement, would be more arbitrary and discourage politicians (both male and female) from building political careers.

## Recognition of the need for more affirmative action

The need of quotas to address some systemic and entrenched lack of representation at grassroots level has been recognised in the mainstream political discourse. For example, in 2016, the Public Representations Committee (PRC) on Constitutional Reform began inviting submissions from the public. The PRC's recommendation was that the quota system be introduced at the local level for very specific, political reasons:

The *Grama Sabha* system should be designed to enable participation in local governance, through compulsory representation by means of a quota for women, the local minorities (both ethnic and social), the youth and the poor. This is very important to prevent the capture of *Grama Sabhas* by village elites, ruling party agents and political brokers, as happened under the *Gramodaya Mandala* system (PRC report, 2016, p. 78).

Not only did the PRC report point to the need for quotas, but it identified what would eventually become a key problem for the women's quota as well: local level nepotism and elite interests. This shows that representations that provided insight into the local level power structures had been made at the committee. As one participant pointed out, "I remember writing extensive submissions...Most groups were reluctant as they said they didn't know the law, etc.," and she said that her group went around the country urging women's groups to go to the commission. She recounted, "then, these women's groups mobilised extensively, and made a range of demands, representation being among them" (Participant 6, civil society). The PRC noted the large number of representations made by women's groups. That the women's quota should be mentioned in this specific context shows that adequate demands had been made for equitable representation. The committee recommended that an Affirmative Action Commission should be established.

## Youth quotas

Following the largely youth-led 2022 anti-government mass protests, there is a growing consensus that youth must have greater representation in governance. Five hundred youths have been listed to be consulted in various sectoral oversight committees in the parliament (President's Office, 2023) and private member motions have been submitted to parliament to introduce a youth quota. There



is a common misconception that the women's quota was introduced at the expense of a youth quota. This misconception arises from the fact that the first youth quota implemented through Local Government Elections Act No. 254 of 1990 was made non-mandatory by the 2012 LG electoral reforms. This was before the women's quota was introduced and occurred during the Rajapakse government. The women's quota would not be introduced until 2017. This first youth quota was the first affirmative action that gave political representation to a major demographic group in Sri Lanka's history. It inspired women's rights groups to demand for affirmative action (discussed above) and they saw it as an opportunity to front women for candidacy. Thus, the political push for the youth quota that could entail a push back on the women's quota, must be read against this longer history, when the two were not seen as mutually exclusive and one need not come at the expense of the other.

### Criteria-based recruitment

Another point of contention among proponents of the quota was whether criteria-based recruitment of women councillors should be introduced. Criteria-based recruitment and nominations is a contentious idea that has the potential undermine the spirit of inclusion. One participant pointed to how women's groups had started with 30 criteria to be included in the legislation for the quota, which had been eventually reduced to five (Participant 3, civil society). However, ministry officials pointed out that such criteria-based recruitment would be constitutionally discriminatory. Expecting women to be recruited based on a higher bar of qualifications would seem wrong and discriminatory, but, if introduced, would have to be finally referred to the Supreme Court for a determination of whether it violates fundamental rights. Another way criteria-based recruitment could be implemented is through the political parties who ultimately nominate women candidates, thereby imposing limitations on who could ultimately be elected to an LG. Nevertheless, to have such criteria only for women would be discriminatory but extending them to men will require a broader political process and technical fine-tuning.

### The issue of delimitation and the women's quota

In the interviews with legislators, a relationship between delimitation and women's quota emerged implicitly in the way they narrativised the history of the quota. Delimitation and the MMP electoral system had already necessitated increasing the number of LG members, but it is often misperceived that the women's quota was solely responsible for the increase in the number of members. As one women's rights activist stated, "We were dealing with many issues, including delimitation which could compromise the quota. Delimitation is another process we need to watch, as it can reduce the constituencies" (Participant 6, civil society). A legislator also pointed out that delimitation may lead to larger wards, making it harder for women candidates to run their campaigns effectively in larger areas (Participant X, Lasantha). Therefore, it is important to emphasise the history of delimitation and its link to the quota, outlined in greater detail below.

The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 2012 required the appointment of a delimitation committee to implement the newly formed MMP electoral system. That committee handed over its report in June 2015, two months after the expiration of local authorities that had been elected in 2011. The report identified 5,081 wards to be filled under the FPTP system, ensuring that each ward will have an elected representative at the local authority level. Out of the 5,081, 4,573

were to be elected from single wards, while 241 wards were to have two members each. Nine wards in Sri Lanka were to have three members each. These 5,081 wards would form the 70 percent FPTP component of the 2012 reform. Another 30 percent of councillors would be appointed through a list, which would increase the number of councillors by 1,525. This meant a total of around 6,600 councillors at the LG level.

The MMPR electoral system required a significant increase in the number of councillors—around 2,200 in comparison to the previous electoral system. However, the introduction of the women’s quota of 25 percent made it necessary to revise the proportionality of the MMPR system to 60 percent (FPTP)-40 percent (PR), as evidenced in the 2017 local authorities electoral reforms. This new system, currently in place, has been seen as favourable to smaller/alternative political parties as they do not have to face a high degree of competition within it. While examining this is beyond the scope of this study, such discourses must be dealt with proactively, because they will have long-term implications for the women’s quota.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations of this study are categorised by the three main sectors which are most closely associated, impacted, and influence the 25 percent women’s quota in its present and future forms. These are political parties, advocates of the quota (state/donors/ NGOs/CBOs), and Women Councillors/LGs.

Recommendation	Sector		
	Advocates of the quota (state/donors/ NGOs/CBOs)	Political Parties	Women Councillors/ LGs
1. Ensure that the numerical representation of women in LG bodies remains at least at the currently stipulated 25 per cent by taking necessary measures so that this commitment is met fully.	<p>Continue to lobby for the women’s quota identifying and emphasising its gains.</p> <p>Address technical errors within the existing quota.</p> <p>In the current context, with the anticipation that as the youth quota is likely to be prioritised, work proactively to find ways of protecting the 25 percent women’s quota</p>	<p>Encourage political parties to jointly start a programme within a collaborative governance model. Such a model must also include sufficient education and training opportunities for those outside the existing party system.</p> <p>Encourage political parties to establish mechanisms to reduce the prevalence and impact of nepotism in politics.</p>	Record and promote the gains of the quota.
2. Develop gender policies within political parties in order to ensure gender-sensitive participation, power structures, processes, and promotion of women.	<p>Encourage and facilitate political parties to develop gender policies, by lobbying them, and amplifying the voices of women within political parties.</p> <p>Strengthen monitoring systems for campaign financing.</p>	<p>Develop party gender policies, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strengthening internal complaints and grievance-handling mechanisms.</li> <li>• Transparent implementation of campaign finance and political party finances.</li> </ul>	Proactively engage political party leadership to strengthen their democratic structures.

Recommendation	Sector		
	Advocates of the quota (state/donors/NGOs/CBOs)	Political Parties	Women Councillors/LGs
3. Encourage cross-party consensus-based quotas for women so that parties can collaboratively implement quotas instead of being competitive.	Encourage and facilitate political parties to develop collaborative quotas. Raise awareness among political parties about cross-party consensus quotas in other countries.	Encourage political parties, and the Parliamentary Women's Caucus to implement consensus-based quotas at all levels of government.	Pursue cross-party alliances of women LG councillors and LG members (including male councillors) for increased gender representation, to increase the demand for cross-party quotas.
4. Ensure there is knowledge about the complexities involving converting a demand to a policy, and build consensus among proponents of affirmative action, so that the process of legislation is not limited by the immediate interests of political parties or key individuals.	Conduct civic education initiatives to strengthen understanding about the legal and political frameworks of the electoral system so that advocates can participate proactively in policy design.  Build consensus among NGOs, women's rights groups, and CBOs regarding the expectations of the quota and women councillors.	Introduce consensus-based criteria-driven nomination lists so that support for the quotas is not solely driven by immediate pragmatic concerns.	Share experiences of working in LGs widely so that there is a better understanding of how the LG system works, both in theory and practice.

Recommendation	Sector		
	Advocates of the quota (state/donors/NGOs/CBOs)	Political Parties	Women Councillors/LGs
5. Ensure that elections are held under the Provincial Councils Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 17 of 2017 so that the 25 per cent quota is met at the Provincial Council level and introduce a quota of at least 25 percent for women at the parliamentary level.	Have more clearly defined expectations and outcomes of the quota, and lobby for a women's quota at the provincial council level.		
6. Extend the current gender sensitization training as well as skills-oriented training provided to female councillors to male councillors as well.	Plan training programmes to develop a set of norms and guidelines that would model positive behaviour among both men and women.	Start political education programs and invest (financial and other resource allocation) in training, not only for women.	
7. Strengthen inclusive norms (granting equal access to opportunities and resources) in and practices in media (including social media) when reporting on political themes and develop strong and accessible legal frameworks that can hold perpetrators of gender-based violence and discrimination against women effectively accountable.	Engage media regulators to establish codes of ethics for reporting on women in politics.  Establish trusted reporting/redress channels/mechanisms for women politicians to get support against violations on social media.	Promote women politicians' activities, collectively and individually on social media.	



Recommendation	Sector		
	Advocates of the quota (state/donors/NGOs/CBOs)	Political Parties	Women Councillors/LGs
8. Reform the LG system to make it more participatory, inclusive, and democratic.	Education and continuous training should be designed and held for <i>all</i> political members of LGs, and not just for women councillors.	Make political parties more inclusive.	Establish women's committees at LGs and ensure that they are sufficiently funded.  Ensure all LG committees and budgetary allocation are diversity sensitive.  Implement the national language policy in full.
9. Promote cross-party alliances and agreements that will enable women councillors to function more effectively.		Strengthen the Women's Caucus in the parliament to provide training and provide campaign support to women councillors in LGs, as a way of legitimising campaign support.	



# CONCLUDING REMARKS AND LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

**T**he 25 percent quota provides an example of how affirmative policies are formulated and implemented in fragile democracies, where the ‘social contract’ is weak. One of the broader conclusions emerging from this study is that the effectiveness of affirmative action can be compromised when the broader inequalities already existing in the society, as well as weakened political systems, are not taken into consideration. Thus, despite the best of intentions, affirmative action will not be effective unless policymakers and those who draft policy do not take the broader social and political context into consideration. In the present study, it is clear that there was a clear difference between how the proponents of the policy imagined it and the way it actually manifested its outcomes. Therefore, such reforms need to be conceptualised and articulated in greater detail, paying attention to these contextual factors for them to be effective. In this case, the policy only targeted an increase in numerical representation and that is what it yielded. Today, as we hear the narrative that the women’s quota was compromised in an imperfect system, it must be recognised that its perceived failures can be traced back to the way the actual drafting and implementation took place. Shifting the blame to the stereotype of so-called inexperienced and inefficient women councillors masks the structural problems within the policy and its implementation. Proponents of the policy must think ahead of both antagonists and those who seek to use the policy for other political advantages; sometimes the latter may undermine the process intentionally or unintentionally.

Women’s rights groups worked with and tried to influence government policy to increase representation. However, the avenues to engage with political parties were limited, and even with awareness building, the receptivity of political parties has not been encouraging. This lack of understanding among key stakeholders partially explains the compromises the policy encountered at the drafting and implementation stages, when political parties, and their middle-level implementers, such as party organisers, subverted the purpose of the quota. Such compromises and subversions came in the form of gatekeeping against meritocracy, abusing the quota to expand family’s access, or personal benefits. At the same time, due to the design of the quota, some party leaders had to appoint new women councillors in place of party’s old members, in order to meet the requirement of the women’s quota. This meant that the quota’s burden was not equally shared among all political parties.

Sri Lanka's democracy is at a highly volatile stage and the gender-related affirmative policy process is still at its nascence. It is neither possible nor intelligent to think of reforms oriented through affirmative action as "tides that raise all boats". The elite contestations shaping the policy formulation and implementation process described in this study point to the kind of compromises that have to be made when political parties navigate the volatility and fragility of a highly fraught system. Nevertheless, political parties are significant players in changing political systems and cultures and disassociating from them or trying to divorce change from them cannot be successful. One of the limitations this study found in attempting to assess the impact of the quota is that the policy was implemented for only one term, and in a difficult and polarising political situation since 2018. As a result, women councillors elected through the quota had to perform in unprecedented times. Major socio-political disruptions took place, including the constitutional coup in October 2018 that paralysed the political system, the 2019 Easter Sunday attacks, the 2019 election of a president perceived as predominantly with the ethnic majority's mandate, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, the culmination of the 2022 economic crisis, and the popular protests that same year. This highly volatile time provided some women councillors with the opportunity to prove their worth through community building and leadership (such as by organising community kitchens during the economic crisis).

We would like to note two other key limitations encountered during the study. First, given that this was a qualitative study, we could not interview a range of people from within each category we had picked. For example, we did not interview representatives of all political parties or all women's rights groups. Thus, our findings do not reflect all the voices in the debate. This is limiting, as not everyone is recognised for their contribution, both positive and negative, in the report. Furthermore, because our preferred method for interviewing LG councillors was FGDs, the study was limited to five districts. Yet, we did our best to incorporate as much a range of voices as possible. In hindsight, we would like to note that the women who spoke to us were probably the more progressive and active ones, and that further studies will have to be conducted to investigate the stereotypes associated with women LG councillors, to understand the complexity of their experiences. Second, there is no aggregated data available on the number of women who have allegedly entered politics through family networks and other patronage structures as this was beyond the scope of the present study.

In writing this report, we had the privilege of hindsight to discern what worked and where the advocates and implementers of the quota stood strong or fell short. However, it is difficult to capture the nuanced and rich work that went into the tireless and consistent efforts of women's rights groups and activists over many decades that they shared with us, as well as the determination with which the women councillors entered a highly unequal political system and learn on the job, fully knowing how formidable it would be. In the end, this study points to the need to treat their voices and their evaluation of the quota as the point of departure for any future study. In the next terms of implementation of the quota, their choices and their negotiations with political parties will finally determine how far this affirmative action to introduce a quota will generate long-term and progressive political change.



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