

How Did Women Vote?

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Women's organizations have highlighted the political exclusion of women from power in Parliament, Provincial Councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas (local bodies) for many years. The scandalous state of affairs is reflected in the statistics. Women form over 50% of the population and 51% of the electorate, but since 1931 the proportion of women in the State Council (1931-1947) and subsequently, Parliament (1947-2015), has stagnated under 6%. Today it is 5.8%, an abysmally low figure compared to our neighbours India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh which have quotas for women in elected bodies. Research has shown that women in Sri Lanka are active at election time, canvassing and voting with enthusiasm. When it comes to nomination for elections, however, women are mainly excluded by the parties, and those who do contest are subject to character assassination and violence (Peiris, Jayawardena & Padmasiri [unpublished]). Elections thus become a masculinized space dominated by patriarchal practices and attitudes.

The January 8th, 2015 Presidential election results, which saw the defeat of the incumbent Mahinda Rajapaksa, has raised questions about the extent of women's participation in the event. Some women such as Amita Arudpragasam, in a report entitled "Maithripala Sirisena's victory: Winning the hearts of women" (2015) drew attention to the critical role that women had played in Sirisena's victory. Local feminists were asked by Indian friends the truth of this news; there is no doubt that while minorities felt aggrieved by the policies of the regime, gender also played a role in the vote against Rajapaksa.

There were a number of reasons for the swing towards Maithripala Sirisena. For one, an influence on women was a leading politician and former President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga – the main player in the cross-over to the Maithripala side. She is a strong, charismatic personality and a forceful speaker. People, especially women, were also no doubt horrified when S.B. Dissanayake, the Minister for Higher Education (no less!) made a scurrilous threat, not for the first time against former President Kumaratunga. This type of misogynistic, obscurantist abuse, in order to shame women, angered women voters and the failure of former President Rajapaksa's government to elicit an apology did not go unnoticed by women voters who used their ballot to express their disgust.

Other strongly-worded interventions on TV on behalf of Sirisena by women in public life such as Rosy Senanayake, MP, and Hirunika Premachandra, MP captured women's attention stressing the *dhushana* (corruption) and *bishana*

(terror) of the regime and the demands of women for liberation from this political oppression and violence seen all over the country. "We need a Change" (*Venasak Karanna Oney*) was one of the catchiest and most forceful slogans of the Presidential campaign. Mahinda Rajapaksa had been President from 2005 to 2015, until he decided to cut short his presidency (under astrological advice), two years in advance, and contest again, hoping for another five years in power. Apart from agreeing that change is welcome after so long in power, women had many other reasons for being attracted by the slogan of "change". Their lives were not only affected by price increases, but also by fears concerning the increased violence, sexual harassment and rape, as reported extensively and daily in the national press. Women certainly also need many changes to enable them to lead peaceful, contented lives, and large numbers would have hoped that Maithripala Sirisena was the catalyst for change – the light at the end of a long, dark tunnel, so to speak.

Over the years, Women's Manifestos have appeared at election time listing the demands of women. The Gender Unit of the SSA organized several women's groups in 2005 to launch a Manifesto in all three languages. The Manifesto drew attention to nine different themes – Peace, Politics, Economics, Law, Health, Education, Culture, Violence, and Media. The Unit then utilized newspaper and TV advertisements to popularize the document. Similar manifestos developed by women's groups were used in the campaign for Maithripala Sirisena's candidacy during the 2015 Presidential election campaign.

The recent Presidential contest resulted in the development of several Women's Manifestos that were circulated in all three languages. Sirisena's first pledge in "A New Sri Lanka for Women" was to tackle the "mounting sexual offences, including rape, sexual abuse, and harassment against women and children" through an "effective system of law enforcement". His other pledges were to increase women's economic rights through secure employment, tackle unemployment, set up schemes to redeem debts, provide support for women working in the Middle East, women in the garment sectors and domestic workers. He also promised an allowance of Rs. 20,000 at childbirth, a reduction of food prices, and increased provisions for the education and health sectors. The most important promise however was an increase in women's political representation in local authorities and Provincial Councils to 25%.

Another Manifesto (sent to all politicians) was issued by the Women's Political Academy founded by Nimalka Fernando and Sharmila Daluwatte. It listed seven themes: political representation, economic rights, violence and sexual

harassment, peace and reconciliation, religious and ethnic harmony, women-sensitive disaster management, equal rights and cultural vision, and the alienation of poverty. A specific request was made that within 100 days of being elected the President would

1. Establish an independent women's commission
2. Introduce a 25% quota for women in Parliament, Provincial Councils, and local bodies
3. Make a speedy grant of Rs. 20,000 to mothers at child birth
4. Cancel 50% of debts from women in agriculture
5. Increase wages for garment sector workers
6. Appoint a special task force comprised of gender and human rights experts as well as migrant returnees to make the Bureau of Foreign Employment more gender sensitive
7. Establish a special fund on International Women's Day to assist war widows.

These initiatives reflect the needs and aspirations of women that were unaddressed by the previous regime. They also emphasized the hope that the vulnerability that women experienced in general would be addressed by the new President.

Though Sirisena's election manifesto promised much in this regard, it is questionable as to whether his regime has been able to make any actual progress apart from introducing a mandatory 25% quota for women in Local Government.

Additionally, there still remains the issue of viewing women within the stereotypical gender parameters and making policy prescriptions accordingly. While it is true that solutions should be devised for problems that exist (thereby necessitating the demands that have been voiced above), it is also equally true that some long term envisioning and planning is urgently due in order to afford women more options in life, thereby breaking away from gender stereotypes.

An acutely threatening environment conditioned women to make their electoral choice at the January 2015 Presidential Election. The space opened up by the change they (together with all those who voted for a new regime), brought about should now be negotiated carefully and intelligently to ensure that a society conducive to transcending and transforming gender stereotypes is ushered in.

References

Arudpragasam, A 2015, 'Maithripala Sirisena's Victory: Winning the Hearts of Women', *Groundviews*, 10 January, viewed Jul 28, 2016 <http://groundviews.org/2015/01/10/maithripala-sirisenas-victory-winning-the-hearts-of-women/>

Now Online: ssalanka.org/ssa-talks/

IN CONVERSATION WITH DR. S. SIVASEGARAM ON THE LEFT AND TAMIL POLITICS

Dr. Sivasegaram talks about a series of critical issues relating to the Sri Lankan ethnic conflict. As an academic inspired by Marxist thought, Dr. Sivasegaram reflects on the importance of a class-based analysis of the conflict, the impact of Leftist-thinking on Tamil politics and his belief that the Sri Lankan Left still has a progressive role to play in bringing about a just settlement to the conflict. Dr. Sivasegaram also analyses the territorial claims made by nationalist groups, the dilemmas of nationalism, and the demand for self-determination. The conversation ends with a brief discussion on political proposals and the possibilities of adopting a political solution to the conflict in Sri Lanka.

