

WAS WOMEN'S VOTE THE SECRET WEAPON ?

Observers of the December 5 elections have remarked not only on the high turn out of voters but also the visible presence of unusually large numbers of women at the polling stations casting their votes. For whom did they vote is the question. In the absence of any gender-based statistics on how women voted or any pre-election polls on how they intended to vote, one can only surmise that many of them voted for the party that made women's issues a key component of its election strategy.

The Cat's Eye column has, since 1997, been urging politicians in Sri Lanka not to forget the fact that women are over 50% of the electorate and that by paying heed in the legislature to women's demands, they would reap the rewards at election time. As Cat's Eye wrote in May 1997 on the USA and British elections:

Clinton won the hearts and votes of women and achieved a 17 point gender gap in his favour (in 1996)... Tony Blair (in 1997) learned much from the US election.

Blair not only increased the number of women candidates, leading to victories for 120 Labour women, but he also appointed a record 19 women Ministers and Junior Ministers. This paid dividends in the next election of 2001 when Labour easily romped home.

Women in Parliament

In Sri Lanka ten women have been elected to parliament—an increase of one. Women's representation remains under 5%—still below the South Asian average of 7%. Here are the details:

Women MPs

- UNP Chandrani Bandara (Anuradhapura)
Chitra Manthilake (Kandy)
Mary Larine Perera (Puttalam)
Amara Piyaseeli Ratnayake (Kurunegala)
- PA Ferial Ashraff (Digamadulla)
Somakumari Tennekoon (Kurunegala)
Sumedha Jayasena (Moneragala)
Pavitra Wanniarachchi (Ratnapura)
Mallika de Mel (Matara)
- JVP Anjan Umma (Gampaha)

While several well-known faces from the UNP lost — Renuka Herath, Sunethra Ranasinghe, and Shanthini Kongahage — two new women MPs are from the UNP (Manthilake and Perera). The four PA women MPs were in the old parliament and two PA women

candidates Surangani Ellawela and Yvonne Sriani Fernando lost. What is interesting to note is that nine of the ten elected women are from constituencies outside the Western Province. No women won from Colombo, and except for Anjan Umma, the Western Province has no elected women. Half the elected women are from the North Western and North Central Provinces while the Northern Province remains a male bastion.

Women's Manifestos

The UNP campaign was marked by a head-start on the issue of gender equity. Nearly a year ago — during the 2000 general election 12 women's groups issued a *Women's Manifesto* outlining women's demands on political participation, law reform, health, education, the economy, media representation and ethnic conflict as well as changes in customary laws, harmful cultural practices and traditions oppressive to women. The *Manifesto* was widely advertised in the media in three languages and was sent to politicians and opinion-makers. While many commented on the *Manifesto*, a young MP, Milinda Moragoda, took it up, tabled it in parliament at the last budget and spoke on the issue, criticising the Ministry of Women's Affairs for its lack of dynamism. At the recent election many candidates took up the 'woman question' and Ranil Wickramasinghe made a direct appeal to women voters in his election speeches. This was a unique feature of the 2001 election. In previous years, the women's lobby had urged politicians of all parties to take up gender issues, but to no avail.

What is more, in a blaze of publicity, the UNP issued a *Vanitha Diri Maga* — also called the Women's Manifesto of the UNP — spelling out promises for women including women's shelters in every electorate, women's police units, medical clinics, legal advice centres, day-care centres, 25% women in decision-making bodies of political parties, 25% women in local election nominations and the establishment of a Women's Council of 50 members to promote legislation on women.

Other candidates followed the leader and the personal propaganda handouts of many UNP candidates had sections devoted to promises to the women voters. This new factor in Sri Lanka's political culture seems to have paid dividends.

Ignoring the Natural Advantage

The PA in contrast, in spite of having the 'natural advantage' of a woman leader, chose to ignore the issue, apart from a few references in its party manifesto to taking on the needs of

women and children. It now looks as if they made a huge mistake. Given that the high cost of living is a *real* women's issue, the PA failed to counteract this with attention to other *real* women's issues like domestic violence, economic exploitation, discrimination and the lack of women in parliament and local bodies.

This leads us to the question, why are women leaders not conscious of the power of the women's vote, which is half the electorate? Why don't they do more for women when they are in power, and grasp the chance to become the voice of women? Very few, if any, of the women leaders of the Asian region have been gender sensitive, perhaps in the misguided belief that they would thereby lose the men's vote. Or is it that women in power become token men and don't want to hear about women's demands? Is it that they (mistakenly) fear that the label "Feminist" would be disadvantageous? The Sri Lankan election result proves that the women's vote could be crucial for electoral victory and that

campaigning for women does not alienate men, but might win their support.

Lessons of the Election

There are many lessons to be learnt from the election results. We feel that two issues predominate. One is that ignoring gender equity and failing to take on the cause of half the population may be a recipe for defeat. The other is that falling into the trap of communal/racist politics and failing to tackle the problem of peace, devolution and the minorities may turn off the voters. The Sri Lankan voters are wise and mature. They are not moved by anti-minority rhetoric and may have even been heartened that the elephants and tigers were getting together and thought that this was a good omen for peace! In short we believe that those who resort to ethnic chauvinism and male chauvinism do so at their own peril. ■ Courtesy *Cat's Eye* 12 Dec.2001

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