

WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT—TWO STEPS BACK

Parliament has become more than ever a 97% Boys Club, with its macho culture, and sexist humour, with women few and far between. From the time the first woman entered the State Council in the early 1930s, when there were two out of 50 elected members, the proportion of women in the legislature has hardly changed. Today instead of an increase, we see an alarming drop in the actual number of women members of parliament from 11 to 9. The last parliament had 4.8% women. Now its 3.5%. We used to be 97th in the world in terms of women MPs. We must have fallen to the bottom now. Several prominent women MPs and ministers of the last parliament lost their seats. They are the Minister and Deputy Minister of Womens Affairs (Hema Ratnayake), and Nirupama Rajapakse), Srimani Athulathmudali the one time Minister of Transport, as well as Sumitra Priyangani Abeyweera, Renuka Herath and Mrs.Pulendran.

Of the nine women in the new parliament, three have been appointed ministers. Five of the women MPs are newcomers, and two have made history by becoming the first Muslim women to enter parliament. There were unfortunately no women on either the UNP or PA national lists, and the three womens names that were on the original PA list, vanished. But a new face is Anjan Umma, from the JVP national list, who has been in the Western Provincial Council and in J.V.P. politics since 1971. Her elder brother and husband were also in the J.V.P. and influenced her politically. She was educated up to 'A Levels at the Minuwangoda Maha Vidyalaya.

Women Ministers

While the number of women MPs has declined the number of women ministers has marginally increased. They are the minister for Womens Affairs, Sumedha Jayasena, MP for Moneragala, who won the seat for the PA with 33,946 votes, coming second in the list. She was the Minister of Social Services in the last parliament. A 'political widow' she was elected to 1989 parliament after the death of her husband through illness, taking his place in the Moneragala district elections.

Pavithra Wanniarachchi, the new Minister for Plan Implementation, who topped the P.A. list in Ratnapura with 108,324 votes, was deputy minister of Health in the last parliament. She is a lawyer who was active in probing human rights violations of the last government, especially the investigations at Suriyakanda.

Also a new minister is Ferial Ashraff, who was first in Digamadulla, on the PA list, with 85,353 votes. She is the widow of M.H.M. Ashraff, the founder of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC). Today, along with Rauf Hakim, she is the co-leader of the National Unity Alliance (the successor to the SLMC). Ferial Ashraff is the Minister for Development and Reconstruction of the East, and Rural Housing.

Other women MPs from the PA are Soma Kumari Tennakoon, the daughter of veteran politician the late Mudiyanse Tennakoon. She has been SLFPs Nikaweratiya organiser since the late 1980s. Elected to the North West Provincial Council in 1999, she enters parliament from Kurunegala, obtaining 49,476 votes.

Sriyani Yvonne Fernando, is another PA member of parliament from the Puttalam district, where she got 28,636 votes. She is the widow of Godfrey Fernando, who died in a car accident soon after he was elected to parliament in 1994 as a PA MP from the Puttalam district.

Another new face is Surangani Ellawala, nee Tennekoon, the widow of the radical SLFP MP, Nanda Ellawala who represented Ratnapura from 1970-77. She is the mother of Nalanda Ellawala who was gunned down during the local elections of 1997. She was elected to the Sabaragamuwa provincial council in 1999, and at the recent October elections obtained 54,518 votes.

The UNP have only two women MPs. One is Amara Piyaseeli Ratnayake who was first elected to parliament representing the UNP from the Wariyapola electorate in 1977 after the killing of her husband. She held the post of State Minister Home Affairs under the Premadasa government. In this election she was returned for the Kurunegala district with 51,498 votes.

The other UNP MP is Chandrani Bandara a lawyer in her mid-thirties practicing in Anurdhapura. Her late father Chandra Bandara influenced her and she was involved with her fathers political work since she left school. She now enters parliament for the Anurdhapura district, obtaining 41,874 votes.

It is interesting to note that all the women MPs have come from 'political families', where the woman candidate has come forward to contest after the death, usually violent) of a husband, father or son. The nationalist JVP woman MP is also from a family where the males were in politics. This raises the whole issue of women in politics. Can a woman who is not from a national dynasty, local dynasty or political family hope to achieve a place through the electoral process?

The constraints of women entering politics are mainly lack of nomination by the parties and the disapproval of male family members (usually father, husband and son). Where males in the family are already in politics, the women are expected to work hard at election time (from their childhood onwards), canvassing, mobilizing, fund-raising, and entertaining supporters and voters. When the male dies or is assassinated, the woman steps in. Today, there is the additional factor of violence in politics that is used to dissuade women from contesting elections.

So what is the solution? We feel that for all its weaknesses, a quota system has to be supported for a decade or so and more women

should be included on the National List. Political parties could also be rewarded financially (as recently proposed in France) or with a bonus seat if they field a proportion of women candidates (as a lawyer has suggested). The Womens Manifesto, - supported by 12 womens groups - issued during the October election, makes the following suggestions in respect of women in politics.

1. a) A minimum 30% quota of women at local government level, i.e., in Pradeshiya Sabha, Municipal and Urban Councils, and Provincial Councils.
b) A minimum 30% quota of women in Parliament, and 50% of those appointed to the National List should be women.
2. More women Ministers, Junior Ministers and Cabinet Ministers, as well as Secretaries to Ministries, and heads of institutions and the judiciary.

3. A minimum of 30% of nominated women candidates at all levels by political parties.
4. Adequate training and other support for women candidates.
5. Research and other support services for women in Parliament and local bodies to enable them to function effectively.
6. Caucus of women in the law-making bodies cutting across party politics " in order to focus on womens issues.
7. A national campaign to promote more women in politics, and in decision-making positions.

Courtesy Cat's Eye Island 25th October, 2000.

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