report

Minority Rights Group

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Between tokenism and invisibility: Minority women's political representation in Sri Lanka

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A Muslim woman holds a placard as she takes part in a demonstration demanding the rights of ethnic and religious minorities, outside Independence Square in Colombo, Sri Lanka. 5 March 2022. *Credit: Ishara S. Kodikara / AFP via Getty Images.*

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Abbreviations and terminology

ACMC	All Ceylon Makkal Congress
ACTC	All Ceylon Tamil Congress
AITC	All India Trinamool Congress
CWC	Ceylon Workers' Congress
DPF	Democratic People's Front
EPDP	Eelam People's Democratic Party
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
ITAK	Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
NPP	National People's Power
NUA	National Unity Alliance
NUW	National Union of Workers
OISL	Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Investigation on Sri Lanka
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna
PA	People's Alliance
PLOTE	People's Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam
SJB	Samagi Jana Balawegaya
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMC	Sri Lanka Muslim Congress
SLPP	Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna
SLPFA	Sri Lanka People's Freedom Alliance
TPA	Tamil Progressive Alliance
TELO	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TU	Tamil United Front
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UNF	United National Front
UNP	United National Party
UPFA	United People's Freedom Alliance
UCPF	Up-Country People's Front
UNFGG	United Front for Good Governance
UN HRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
WPF	Western People's Front

Terminology

An introductory explanation of the terms used in this report may help the reader to understand the early sections of the report.

National mainstream parties: these are the major national level political parties that usually contest elections in all parts of Sri Lanka, such as the United National Party (UNP), the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and its fronts, and the newly formed National People's Power (NPP). Since independence, the two main parties, the UNP and SLFP, and their various alliances and fronts have dominated Sri Lankan politics at all levels. In 2024, the NPP won an epic victory, defeating these parties and capturing two-thirds of the seats in parliament, which is considered a supermajority in the Sri Lankan context, enabling constitutional change. The reference to the *old guard of national mainstream parties* is to these major parties but excludes the NPP.

Ethnic minority parties: these are political parties representing different ethnic minority communities. These include parties such as the Ilankai Tamil Arasu Kachchi (ITAK) (*Sri Lanka Tamil State Party*), Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) and others.

Minority political representation: refers mainly to electoral representation and in the context of this report, to parliamentary and local government elections.

Executive summary

They treat us as if we are curry leaves, put into a curry to make it tasty but spat out and not eaten. This is how women are included in politics.
– Minority woman political activist in northern Sri Lanka

Minority women in Sri Lanka face multiple forms of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization, as their ethnic, religious and caste identities intersect with gender to obstruct their entry and success in electoral politics in Sri Lanka. Through tea exports and remittances, Sri Lanka's economy depends on the labour of minority women, some of whom have risen to leadership roles in sectors, including the media, law, civil society and education, but who remain largely invisible in politics. Since independence, of the 154 parliamentary seats held by women, only 11 have been from ethnic minority communities, and in the current 225-member parliament there are only three minority women out of 22 women and 51 minority representatives.

Except for isolated cases of minority women who have entered parliament through the legacy of their husbands, women are used symbolically to present mainstream national parties as diverse and inclusive or to fill a mandatory quota of 25 per cent women's representation introduced in 2018. This tokenistic approach does not extend to substantive representation for minority women, nor does it enable them to rise to leadership levels within politics. Within the old guard of national parties (UNP, SJB, SLFP and SLPP), minority women must compete with minority men for representation and political office, making it almost impossible for them to enter and climb the party ranks.

The NPP's 2024 victory, which swept two-thirds of parliamentary seats, brought about a dramatic change in women's representation, fielding 20 of a total of 22 women MPs. Yet only three of the NPP's women MPs are from minority communities. The NPP primarily functions in the majority Sinhala language, which discriminates against Tamil-speaking minorities. It is too early to determine how much space the NPP affords minority MPs to raise issues relating to their own communities in parliament. Leftist parties such as the People's Struggle Alliance (PSA) have also given minority women equal opportunity to minority men and women from the majority community to participate in electoral politics.

Minority ethnic parties, on the other hand, have few women in their leadership structures and continue to be dominated at the national and local levels by men. Minority women face serious structural and everyday religious, cultural and gender barriers to entering and advancing in politics within these parties.

A crucial finding of this report is that minority women unanimously identified their own community as presenting the greatest obstruction to their political careers. Patriarchal barriers and gender norms within family, society and political parties intersect with minority identities to discriminate and exclude women from politics. Many wanted to enter politics specifically to advance the position of women in their own communities but found their identity, culture and religion were used to subjugate them and prevent them from succeeding. Minority women are targeted for their ethnic, religious and gender identities in the media, including facing racist and sexist abuse in social media. They are affected by gender, election-related and specific forms of ethnoreligious violence.

Yet irrespective of these barriers, minority women continue to assert their right to engage in politics. They defy patriarchal and ethnoreligious barriers, join political parties and successfully navigate party structures. These minority women are slowly, but remarkably, changing the face of their own communities and of politics itself.

1 Introduction

> *Being a Tamil woman means I face two kinds of discrimination: gender and ethnicity. I'm judged for being a woman, and also for my background. That makes it even harder to find space and respect in politics.*
> – Focus Group Discussion Participant, Kandy, November 2024

Sri Lanka was among the first countries to establish universal suffrage and gained global recognition as the first nation to democratically elect a female head of government; Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first woman Prime Minister in 1971. A constitutional change in the early 1980s created the powerful role of Executive President, which from 1994 to 2005 was also held by a woman, Sirimavo's daughter, Chandrika Kumaratunga. The second most important political position, the office of Prime Minister, has been held by a woman on two other occasions: Bandaranaike was re-appointed, holding office from 1994 to 2000; and, in 2024, the NPP appointed Dr Harini Amarasuriya to the position.

However, these milestones have not translated into meaningful representation for women in formal politics, either at the national or local levels. Representation of minority women in parliament or in the cabinet has been notably poor. Until 2024, just 132 women had ever been nominated or elected to Sri Lanka's independent parliament. A miniscule number of them have been from minority communities: six Tamil and two Muslim women. At least four of them have been elected for two or more terms. Since independence, only four minority women have held positions in cabinet. Women have averaged around five per cent representation in Sri Lanka's parliament until 2024, when this doubled to 10.7 per cent with 22 women elected to office, with 20 of the 22 female MPs being from the NPP.[1] Of these 22, the three Tamils are all from the historically marginalized Malaiyaga Tamil community – this is the first time Malaiyaga women have been elected in the country's history. This improvement in parliamentary representation has not, however, resulted in a significant change for women in the executive. The NPP appointed only two women, including the Prime Minister, to their cabinet of 22 ministers.[2] This has been the average number of women within the executive since the 1980s.

This report investigates the specific challenges faced by minority women in electoral political representation. It is part of a two-year programme of activities aimed at increasing the political representation of minorities and marginalized groups in Sri Lanka and is the second of two research projects as part of this programme.[3] The first explored issues affecting minorities in relation to political representation. Findings were published in *Divided and weakened: The collapse of minority politics in Sri Lanka* on 11 June 2025.[4] In the present report our aim is to focus on minority women to understand how the intersection of minority identity and gender affects their representation in politics. As the previous report provides a broader and more detailed analysis of minority political representation, this one omits the historical and contextual background of minority politics in general and group details of each community. Due to limited publicly available data on religion, ethnicity is the main category of analysis in this report.[5] The research was unable to capture gender identities beyond the male/female binary as this was too sensitive to discuss in interviews, so the report analyses only the experience of minority women. There are four national elections in Sri Lanka, at the presidential, parliamentary, provincial and local government levels. Since the Executive Presidency was introduced to Sri Lanka in 1978 and the first election was held in 1982, there has not been a single minority woman who has contested it. Provincial elections have not been frequently held in the country, and there is insufficient ethnic and gender disaggregated data on these. Therefore, the analysis in this report is confined to parliamentary and local government elections.

This report uses mixed methods and gender, minority rights and intersectional lenses in its analysis and commences with a chapter explaining these. It proceeds to provide a synopsis of the history and context of political representation for women, drawing on the findings of our previous report to focus on the unique situation of minority women. The next chapters present our main findings which are analysed through the intersections of minority ethnic and religious identity with gender, then looking at the other side of the coin to unearth the material barriers, themselves inflected by these intersections, to minority women's full political participation. It concludes by identifying the transformation brought about through minority women's political participation and makes recommendations to key stakeholders.

2 Methods

2.1 Data gathering

The research for this report was guided by the following question: what are the challenges minority women face in entering politics and holding political office? There were three main approaches that shaped the design and conduct of the research and analysis of findings. The first was a feminist approach, which centres the voices, experiences and agency of women: identifying, investigating and challenging patriarchal power structures (systems of male dominance), including in knowledge production. In addition to putting women at the forefront, such an approach challenges concepts of supposed neutrality in research. It does so by foregrounding methods that interrogate and understand patriarchy, encourage the reflexivity of researchers, recognize the politics of the everyday and empower women. This approach was deemed necessary to enable a deeper understanding of structural factors that inhibit women's political participation and strengthen existing policy responses to women's political participation.

Much existing research on women's political representation in the Sri Lankan context is limited to the experience of women from the majority community, so an intersectional and minority rights approach was used in research and analysis. An intersectional approach recognizes that issues are shaped by more than one identity factor and aims at understanding how that intersection contributes to violations and oppression.[6] Intersectionality is necessary to explore the specific experience of minority women, which cannot be understood through the lens of either gender or ethnoreligious identity alone. Such an approach also helps to uncover the multiple and simultaneous forms of discrimination at work in Sri Lanka, such as on the grounds of gender, ethnicity, religion, caste and social class. A minority rights approach gives importance in the research and analysis process to minorities, their issues and their rights. It seeks to understand an issue from a minority rights perspective, to interrogate how the numerically smaller, non-dominant status of the group and their different identity shape the problem.[7] Researchers and participants were all from minority communities, and the research sought to unearth specific issues that affect women in these groups, including within their own communities.

The research applied mixed methods which included key informant interviews, focus group discussions and an element of participatory research. These methods were selected to capture the wide spectrum of minority women's lived experiences, across ethnic and religious divides and at local as well as national levels. The Lead Researcher, Dr Farah Mihlar, worked with 12 minority women activists in the north and east and eight in the Central Province to develop research skills and practices in line with the above methodological approaches. Six women from each group agreed to conduct further interviews and discussions with three other women in their locality, contributing to a total of 18 participatory interviews. In addition, the 20 women who participated in the workshop discussed their own experiences with the research assistants to generate further information on the topic. Two focus group discussions were conducted with minority women who had experience contesting or attempting to contest in local government elections, one in Kandy with 12 participants, and another in Batticaloa with eight. The focus group discussions enabled participants to draw on their shared experiences and identify recommendations collectively. Key informant interviews were conducted with 27 minority women involved in national, regional and local politics in the districts of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Mannar, Vavuniya, Killinochchi, Jaffna and Colombo. These included minority women who have contested in parliamentary elections or served in cabinet positions.

2.2 Analysis and framing

The findings of the research were thematically coded, and analysis was developed in response to the core research question: what are the challenges minority women face in entering politics and holding political office? The research found that minority women bracketed their experiences in relation to the following categories: family, society and party. Analysis of the findings was divided based on their experience of contesting for and that of serving in political office. Based on the methodological approaches and in keeping with these categorizations offered by women of their own experiences, the following analytical frames were developed:

i Issues relating to patriarchal and gender structures, systems and norms and their intersection with other forms of minority identity – ethnic, religious, caste and language.
ii Material barriers to minority women's political participation, such as funding, media exposure or skills development.
iii Local–national trajectory: there were fewer minority women who contested in parliamentary elections at the national level, and there was significant divergence in their experiences compared to those who competed at the local government level.

Whilst there is some overlap between these frames, they provide an analytical basis in keeping with the approaches identified above to more deeply understand the research question and build practical and policy recommendations. Most interviewees differentiated issues in frame one from frame two, which also helps with the process of developing clearer recommendations (see report conclusion), though, as our analysis will show, the ways in which these material barriers manifest has everything to do with the intersections of gender inequality, ethnic inequality and the fusion of gender norms with minority identity. Meanwhile, frame three is utilized throughout our analysis, to expose why and how minority women are not making it to national-level politics. In keeping with the methodological approaches, the report aspires to use the voices of minority women themselves to make arguments and hence offers several original quotes from interviews and focus groups, though many of them did not wish to be named in the report.

2.3 Challenges and limitations

Numerous methodological challenges were encountered during the research and writing of this report. The participatory component did not transpire as envisaged in the design stage: 18 participatory interviews were arranged; however, due to delays in the research process caused partly by the calling of presidential, parliamentary and local elections within a short span of time, the research team was unable to mobilize the trained women, and consequentially only four participated, contributing a total of eight interviews to this report. The responses gained through the participatory research were also short and lacked sufficient depth for a complete analysis; nevertheless, this component was retained to gain a better understanding of issues from the local to national level.

There were also challenges in obtaining and conducting key informant interviews at the local level. Interviewees were often extremely busy managing domestic, social and political work and did not find it easy to make time for the interviews. Some women were reluctant to speak openly about the societal and party challenges they faced; they provided short answers and hesitated to offer details and examples. Neither of these were issues in key informant interviews at the national level. In the north in particular, there were trust issues, and, on a few occasions, interviewees sought extensive details about the backgrounds of the research team to ascertain their political neutrality. Part of the research took place during campaigning for the 2025 local government election which contributed to some of the above issues and posed other limitations. There was added caution among interviewees, and many were too distracted by daily events to provide reflective and analytical accounts of their experiences. There was a notably higher level of procedural checks with the NPP where women candidates who were interviewed had to receive permission from local leaders to participate and generally appeared more reluctant to be open in their interviews compared to other candidates. NPP interviewees were observed by the research team to be uncritical of their party compared to women from other parties.

Finally, there was little or no reference to caste-based discrimination in the interviews, and it was difficult to ascertain the layers of marginalization and discrimination women from non-dominant castes face in politics. In relation to caste, whilst partners implementing the programme from which this research stems reported such discrimination at every level of society among the Sri Lankan and Malaiyaga Tamil communities, interviewees for this report did not refer to it. When directly asked, participants denied or downplayed caste-based issues. This challenged the intersectional approach employed in this research and has limited the analysis on the effects of caste on minority women.

Similarly, the analysis was unable to capture a broad range of intersecting factors. Some women, such as indigenous women, women with disabilities, or those from stateless or undocumented families, face compounded exclusion as 'minorities within minorities'. Their voices are often missing even within the broader minority rights discourse in Sri Lanka. As these groups are some of the most marginalized in Sri Lanka, and as this research was conducted among women who have made an entry into politics, or have at least been able to attempt one, the perspectives of these 'minorities within minorities' were necessarily less represented.[8]

In relation to data analysis the main issue was the difficulty in obtaining disaggregated data. The Sri Lankan parliament website occasionally provides the religious identity of MPs but not their ethnicity. Ethnic identity is usually ascertainable by name, but this is not possible in

relation to religious identity, especially with the country's Christian population which is found in majority and minority ethnic communities alike. Resultantly the report was unable to generate sufficient inter-minority analysis beyond the three main minority ethnic groups as recognized by the Sri Lankan census: Sri Lankan Tamils, Malaiyaga Tamils, and Moors (Muslims). As explained in the introduction, gender identity is not openly discussed in Sri Lanka beyond the male-female binary, so it was not possible to fully capture the intersection of minority identity with gender.

3 History and context

3.1 Background – Sri Lanka's minorities

Sri Lanka has a plural society. The majority group, the Sinhalese, speak Sinhala and are mainly Buddhist. There are two groups of Tamil speakers: 'Sri Lankan Tamils' (also known as 'Ceylon' Tamils) and Malaiyaga Tamils (also but increasingly less frequently known as 'Up Country', 'Indian' or 'estate' Tamils), who are descendants of recent immigrants, including labourers brought to the island by the British to work on tea plantations. Both Tamil groups are predominantly Hindu with a small percentage of Christians.

Muslims (including Sri Lankan Moors, Malays and other smaller religious sects like Bhoras and Khojas) live in the north and east, particularly the latter, where they constitute about a third of the population. The remaining Muslim community is dispersed throughout the urban centres of Sri Lanka. Muslims speak both Tamil and Sinhalese depending on the area where they live. Muslims in Sri Lanka now rarely identify as Moor or Malay, although the census department continues to use these categories, instead frequently identifying themselves simply as Muslims.

The forest-dwelling Wanniyala-Aetto comprise a very small community of indigenous people. The entire community is in danger of extinction. Sri Lanka also has other, smaller communities, such as the Burghers who are of Dutch and Portuguese origin. The north and east of the island are the traditional homelands of Tamils and Muslims.

Religion is intrinsically linked to ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Buddhists are mostly Sinhalese, Hindus are mostly Tamil, and to be Muslim is both an ethnic and religious identity. The Christian community, comprising Roman Catholics, traditional Protestant Christians and non-traditional or evangelical Christians, encompasses both Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups.

Sri Lanka's religious minorities face violations in many forms of their constitutional right to religious freedom, including hate speech, discriminatory practices, threats and intimidation, destruction of property as well as physical violence. Hindus, Muslims and Christians, who together make up just under 30 per cent of the population, are affected to varying degrees. Other religious minorities, including Parsis and Baha'is, are also present in the country in smaller numbers.

Post-independence, Sri Lanka's 75-year track record on protecting and upholding minority rights has not been a positive one. Decades of oppressive policies and practices by majoritarian governments since independence led to thirty years of armed conflict. These policies included: undermining the linguistic, cultural and religious rights of minorities; making communities stateless; and reducing employment and education opportunities for them. The country's armed conflict (the Sri Lankan civil war) saw widespread human rights violations committed against minorities, and two subsequent UN investigations found the state military, which ended the war in 2009, responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting minorities. The bitter legacy of this decades-long conflict is particularly felt in the north and east of the country, where a large proportion of the country's Tamil minority reside. Over years of fighting between the forces of the Sinhalese majority government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), these regions experienced huge upheaval due to large-scale violence, multiple waves of displacement, thousands of extra-judicial killings and increasing militarization – some of these issues still affect daily life in these areas today. While the civil conflict was primarily between the majority Buddhist military and Tamil militants, Sri Lanka's Muslim community was also deeply affected. Northern Muslims were forcibly evicted by Tamil militants in what was the country's largest single case of ethnic cleansing during the conflict. Since the end of the conflict, a hate campaign led by Buddhist extremist organizations has targeted Muslims, focusing particularly on the community's religious and social practices, such as their dress codes, prayer rituals and halal slaughter methods. These groups also instigated several violent attacks on Muslim businesses and neighbourhoods in 2018 and 2019.

Specific issues facing minority women in Sri Lanka include: domestic and gender violence within minority communities; socio-economic disparities; alcohol abuse and gender discrimination in education faced by Malaiyaga women; income generation and security and justice claims of north-eastern women; and the specific violence and racism as well as gender discrimination in education, employment and family faced by Muslim women.

3.2 Background – women's political participation

Sri Lanka's anomalous history of insignificant female political representation despite women having become heads of state has led women's groups to demand a quota for women in elections. Decades of such campaigning led to the *Local Authorities Election (Amendment) Act No. 16* of 2017, which introduced a mandatory quota, ensuring that 25 per cent of elected representatives at the local government level are women. Under the quota, 50 per cent of the total list for proportional representation (PR) seats must be allocated to women as well as 10 per cent of the direct ward (first past the post, FPP) list. There is a dual electoral system of FPP and PR: 60 per cent of the council is appointed through FPP, and 40 per cent through PR. If women are not sufficiently elected through these allocations to make 25 per cent of the local government body, then the election commissioner appoints women from a list.[9,10] The first test of the quota system in the 2018 local government election resulted in widespread chaos, along with the mistreatment of women due to the unwillingness of political parties to include them, and a lack of understanding of the complicated nomination and reservations system among women, civil society and administrators, including officials of the Election Commission.[11] Consequently several women were nominated late and not supported by their parties to canvass or participate in elections. In effect, they were set up to lose. If they were able to secure seats despite these odds, they were then systematically discriminated against and sidelined. [12,13]

Nevertheless, the quota system is broadly held to be a 'game changer' that broke the 'glass ceiling' and enabled some 2,500 women, including those from minority communities, to enter politics at the local level where they continue to play a significant role.[14,15,16,17] Having previously contested and held office, many women contested the 2024 local government elections with more confidence, but they reported that openness to their candidature within political parties had not significantly improved. Loopholes within the legislation remain a problem; parties or groups with less than 20 per cent of the total vote in a particular ward do not have to meet the quota, and the difference in the allocation of seats through PR and FPP voting remains an issue, as 60 per cent of all seats are allocated through the latter, which then only provides for 10 per cent representation for women.[18] The system is further limited in that it is only applicable at the local government level. All these factors impede the bill's goal of increasing the number of women elected to local government bodies. Moreover, Sri Lanka has not succeeded in advancing beyond the 2017 Act and its quota system to increase women's representation in parliamentary elections and other political bodies. The NPP, through an exceptionally concerted and systematic effort, ensured an increase in women's representation to parliament in 2024, but there is little evidence of other parties making similar efforts. This report will show how within minority parties too, there are significant problems with regards to advancing women in politics. Indeed, overall, there is little or no focus on increasing minority women's political representation at any level of politics in Sri Lanka.

3.3 Placing of research

3.3.1 Challenges to minority politics

This research explores the specific issues faced by minority women and seeks to understand their differential position compared to women in general and minority men in politics. It follows our report *Divided and weakened: The collapse of minority politics in Sri Lanka,* which argued that the minority politics that Sri Lanka has experienced since independence is disintegrating, crushed by structural majoritarian nationalism and stunted by a lack of vision, identity and leadership within minorities' own political parties. The report found that the old guard of national political parties with a history of fielding minority candidates has, in the recent past, shifted to form alliances and coalitions with ethnic minority parties and offer less space inside their own parties for both minority representatives and minority issues. The NPP, which rose to power with a landmark electoral majority in 2024, emphasizes policies of equality and diversity, but little is known on their position in relation to resolving ongoing conflict-related grievances or on justice for war atrocities in the minority homeland of the north and east.

An important finding of *Divided and weakened* was also that minority electoral representation cannot be separated from minority rights. The unaddressed concerns of all ethnic minority communities remain a significant justification for the existence of minority politics. The failure of national parties to address these grievances, with or without ethnic minority parties, is a major contributing factor to the crumbling of minority electoral representation. Majoritarian nationalism within national parties and their failure to resolve rights and justice issues for minorities is undoubtedly the most prominent issue affecting minority politics.

3.3.2 Challenges to women's representation in politics

Much of the existing analysis of the challenges to women's representation in Sri Lankan politics neglects

a minority minority-specific lens. The focus of this report therefore sits between the challenges to minority political representation, mainly articulated by men, and women's experiences of contesting for and being elected to political office.

Legislation and policy are problematic, as identified above regarding the quota system. There are no significant policy initiatives that complement the local government quota provisions, such as strengthening representation of women with the Election Commission or in political party leadership positions. Political parties continue to maintain structural, policy and practical barriers to women entering and participating in politics. These include undermining their candidacy through nomination procedures, for example by listing them to contest in an area they are not from or known in; sidelining them at campaigning meetings, without giving them opportunities to address audiences and seating them away from party leadership; and excluding women from party leadership positions.

Women overwhelmingly reported financial limitations as a major constraint to their political representation. Political parties do not adequately support women with the necessary finances to run campaigns nor are they included in the political and social networks through which funds are raised. Women were often found to be using their own resources to conduct election campaigns, sometimes across vast geographical areas and competing with men who have access to large funds, including for online advertising.

Available data refutes dominant narratives that women are insufficiently formally educated to enter politics; however, they do struggle with a lack of political experience.[19] Significant international funding has been invested in training women for political life, especially after the quota system was introduced, but there was consensus in the literature and from among those interviewed for this report that whilst these trainings increased knowledge of political systems and practices, there was an absence of skills development, especially on fundraising and engaging with the media. The latter is especially important since mainstream and social media alike afford little attention to women's politics and often engage in discrimination against and the vilification of female candidates. Combined with the exclusionary practices within political parties, this results in a near blackout of women's political participation and activity. The exception to this is gendered and violent attacks against them, especially online, including negative characterizations and attacks on family backgrounds.

Violence has also been repeatedly identified as a deterrent to women entering politics (though they are slightly less likely than men to face election violence), and there is a gap in understanding and responding to gendered election violence.[20] The legal framework is inadequate to act on abuse of women candidates on social media. Police and other relevant officials are not sufficiently aware that the violence women face during elections constitutes a violation of election law rather than merely of individual rights.

Finally, encompassing all these factors are patriarchal and gender norms and structures in politics and society that prevent women from entering and participating in politics. Even with women successfully leading at the highest level, politics is seen to be a space for men in which women are not considered to be effective. Having overcome numerous challenges, once elected, women tend to challenge the rigid patriarchal structures blocking their way but continue to be marginalized by political parties and male colleagues - preventing larger political or societal change.

3.4 Politics and minority women

Minority politics in Sri Lanka has largely been a male-dominated sphere. Lady Naysum Saravanamuttu, a Sri Lankan Tamil, was the second woman to be elected to the first State Council of Ceylon in 1931. She was involved in promoting Tamil language and culture in education as part of early Tamil nationalist struggles prior to independence.[21,22] Tamil nationalist groups that gained political strength after independence were led by men, who formulated a vision of Tamil nationhood including its development into secessionism through militancy. At that time, patriarchal and gender norms in Tamil culture included relegating women to the private sphere and ensuring obedience to male members of society.[23]

The figure of the mother is recognized as highly symbolic in Tamil culture and not always compatible with women's struggles for liberation. For instance, the dual role of 'moral' and 'social' mother, the former willing to sacrifice her child for political autonomy and self-determination, in contrast to the latter, symbolizing the peace maker, has been identified in Tamil society.[24] Yet the prominence given to women as combatants with the LTTE significantly changed the role of Tamil women in the north and east. Subramaniam Sivakamy, better known as Thamalini, was head of the women's wing. Adele Balasingham, the Australian wife of the LTTE negotiator and strategist Anton Balasingham, also had a prominent public role within the movement. The LTTE also reportedly gave women leadership roles within its political and social wings. As women gained stature at various levels within the organization, including by sacrificing their lives to assassinate major political figures including India's Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Sri Lankan President Ranasinghe Premadasa, the LTTE offered women a platform and space to challenge

traditional gender norms, including how women were seen within nationalist struggles.

Nevertheless, it has been argued that Tamil nationalism, as a totalitarian and violent ideology, is inherently hierarchical and not a route to women's liberation, while the LTTE practice of using women as suicide bombers has been condemned as fundamentally anti-feminist.[25,26] Indeed, the military defeat of the LTTE in 2009 was marked by killings, rapes and violence targeting women, and the position for women changed dramatically in the north and east in post-war Sri Lanka, with close to 25 per cent finding themselves primary income earners and carers for their families.[27] Post-war, women have been at the forefront of justice struggles including on enforced disappearances, socio-economic rights, gender-based violence and political representation.[28,29] Women combatants who had commanded a powerful role during the militancy have faced a role reversal, rejected by the community and discriminated against at multiple levels. The structural exclusion and discrimination they face affects their long-term reintegration and in turn has a damaging effect on Tamil women's political representation. Today, politics in the north and east continues to be controlled by men. Prominent ethnic Tamil parties such as the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP), Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF), Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) are led and controlled by male former militants, some of whom have been accused of committing serious human rights violations including war crimes, and giving little space for women, even former women combatants.[30]

Women from the Malaiyaga Tamil community have contributed significantly to the country's export sector through work in the tea plantations of Sri Lanka.[31] Though only ten per cent of the community still works on tea plantations, Malaiyaga women continue to face structural barriers, such as limited access to land ownership, insecure housing and the continuing implications of historical gaps in citizenship and documentation, all of which intersect with their political exclusion. In spite of this they have long been active in social movements and trade unions, and many have taken on leadership within cooperatives, women's societies and informal networks. However, these contributions are often unrecognized in formal political narratives, rendering their leadership invisible. Deeply entrenched patriarchal values, combined with caste and class hierarchies, further reinforce women's exclusion from political spaces within this community. Even within community decision-making, women's voices are often marginalized despite their significant national economic role.

In 2000, following the unexpected death of M. H. M. Ashraff, founder and leader of the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC), his widow, Ferial Ashraff, became the first Muslim woman to lead a political party and assume a cabinet position. She was successfully elected in two subsequent national elections and carved out a unique position of a Muslim political figure who mobilized votes from the majority Sinhala community. There has only ever been one other Muslim woman politician, Anjam Umma, who was nominated by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, predecessor of NPP) to parliament in 2004. Hampered by lower levels of education and obstructed by conservative religious and cultural norms and practices, Muslim women have struggled to access the public space let alone take on positions of political leadership. With the end of the conflict in 2009, Muslims became a target of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist forces, and Muslim women, who were more easily identifiable through their hijabs, were subject to direct and indirect discrimination as well as violent attacks in the public sphere. This has impacted their advancement into prominent positions. Nevertheless, in the last three decades more and more Muslim women have defied male elites to break through such barriers and emerge into leadership roles in several sectors including education, civil society, journalism, law and business.[32]

3.5 Why do minority women want to join politics?

Minority women interviewed for this report were very clear about their motivation and objectives to enter and succeed in politics. Their positions were distinct from male politicians interviewed for the previous report, and this was firmly articulated as such by the women. Most interviewees already in public leadership positions in fields such as social work or education recognized electoral politics as essential for their personal and professional advancement. Many interviewees expressed frustration at both the failure of male political leadership and the political culture it has created, and saw their own entry into politics as an opportunity to challenge this. They identified their political leadership and culture as one of service, benefiting the public and most importantly wiping out corruption. Clear about the reasons for the failure of existing political processes, they considered their own experiences, rooted in social activism, as important to usher in transformative political and social change:

> *I got into politics because I saw how our estate people suffer to get even small services. No one was helping us. That made me want to stand up and do something. I could see the struggles people went through just to get basic services, and that motivated me to take action.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Local Council Member of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

Politics is seen as a dirty game, and we are encouraged to do other types of activism not get into electoral politics. After the Aragalaya, *we thought that those with a genuine vision must stand for politics, particularly women. We can't ask other people to do it and not do it yourself.*
– Swasthika Arulingam, Tamil lawyer, trade union leader and activist involved in the *Aragalaya,* Colombo, November 2024[33]

Significantly, minority women identified the need to advance the rights of their own ethnic or religious communities, and especially the rights of women within them, as a reason to enter politics. As the following quote explains, many who were interviewed drew on their own personal experience of ethnic violence or discrimination to develop a vision to serve their community better:

The main background is… I was in Mullivaaikal. During the war in Mullivaaikal,[34] we went through the worst situations and sorrows that any human can face. It created a deep impact on us and strengthened our resolve to fight for our ethnic freedom to this day. I didn't even believe that I would survive… It all began there. Since that time, I've had the thought that if I survived, I must definitely stand up for my community and our ethnic freedom. That is what led me to get involved in politics when I got the chance over time.
– Anonymous, TNP Former Local Council Member, Jaffna, May 2025

Many women interviewed for this report voiced frustrations with male political leaders who had failed to address issues affecting women in their communities. Their analyses demonstrated a strong understanding of the specific challenges faced by minority women, including those rooted in patriarchal communal structures, and emphasized the importance of addressing these issues within political spheres. Importantly, this research found that women considered their own experiences as embodiments of political and social transformation. They viewed themselves as standard setting, breaking existing power hierarchies and patriarchal barriers to embody normative and practical transformation for women. They also considered their lived experience as providing an example for other women from within their community and expressed a strong commitment to facilitating the political and leadership advancement of younger generations of minority women:

My husband and close friends encouraged me, because I am a Muslim woman. Many Muslim women are afraid to participate, even though they have the ability and talent, because of concerns about what society might say. They encouraged me to break that norm, especially since I was already involved in social service. Others felt they needed support and guidance from me, as I was seen as brave for taking the initiative.
– Anonymous, SLMC Candidate for Municipal Council, Puttalam, 2025

4 Gender, patriarchy and minority identity

4.1 Gender norms and patriarchal structures

As identified in existing academic and policy literature reviewed above, gender norms and practices were presented by interviewees as a major factor affecting minority women's political representation. Interpretations and applications of these norms and practices differed between ethnic and religious groups resulting in notable differences in their effects on women. Gender norms and practices are based on social constructs of what it means to be a man or woman. Broad examples of such norms are beliefs that women are softer, gentler, maternal, emotional and caring, while men are seen as stronger, powerful, providers and rational. In Sri Lanka, like most of South Asia, gender norms are shaped by a combination of ethnoreligious cultural traditions and values as well as colonial legacies, which emphasize women's roles as primary caregivers, moral guardians and preservers of family honour. Though female gender norms among Sri Lankan communities are closely interconnected, some notable inter-ethnic variations exist. Sinhalese gender norms emphasize modesty, obedience and some level of moral guardianship; Tamils share these, with caste-based variances, but additionally stress family honour. Muslim culture observes a stricter sense of modesty and at times seclusion for women.[35] Women have successfully challenged many of these norms to enter roles outside of those seen as 'traditionally' acceptable and rise to leadership levels in different sectors, including politics. Nevertheless, national, provincial and local electoral politics continue to be shaped by gender norms. Politics is seen as one of the main bastions of patriarchy in Sri Lanka where such systems and structures are deeply entrenched:

> *Society expects political leaders to be male, and there is a belief that only men can do more in politics. This mindset is opposed to women participating, as people believe it will encourage women from their own families to enter politics, which goes against traditional norms.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

Many women expressed that one of their main challenges is the persistent perception that politics is not a space for them. The qualities, traits and skills typically associated with political success are often viewed as incompatible with traditional notions of femininity or are not attributes women are commonly believed to possess. Yet, most of the women who participated in this research had already defied gender norms – actively engaging in social work or holding leadership roles across various sectors. Many were clearly politically engaged, advocating for diverse social and community issues. Despite this, the idea of formally entering the political arena – contesting elections or seeking office – was still seen as socially unacceptable or beyond the boundaries of what was expected or permitted for them:

> *Many people in my community still think women should stay home, not be in politics. I've been insulted just for being a woman in politics. I've heard people saying, 'what does she know about leadership?' or 'she should be cooking at home'. Sometimes they don't even talk to me in meetings.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Women's Coordinating Officer, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

Gender norms also shape politics as a space where experiences, traits and skills associated with women are not valued or recognized. Many interviewees referred to the lack of respect and recognition they received in the political arena and their parties despite having gained recognition in other areas of work:

> *We organize everything at village level, protests, relief, childcare, but when we enter politics, we are made to feel unqualified.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Local Council Member of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, February 2025

When asked about her experience in politics prior to entering parliament, Vijayakala Maheswaran, one of only three Tamil women to have held a cabinet position, clarified whether the question referred to formal politics or informal politics. Maheswaran explained how she supported her husband throughout his political

career: hosting meetings in their house, discussing and negotiating with political leaders, and organising his work. However, all of it was done informally. Following the assassination of her husband, she decided to contest elections, and she believed she was already experienced despite not having formal evidence of it. 'When I entered parliament, it was a new experience, but all the faces were old, I already knew most of them,' she said. Yet Maheswaran's skills and experience were not valued in formal politics. This was a repeated theme among interviewees who felt frustrated and dejected at the lack of recognition for the specific experience and skills they brought to politics as women.

4.2 Intersection with minority identity

Gender norms are frequently used to enforce patriarchal systems and structures, which our findings revealed as another major factor affecting women's political representation. In this report patriarchal systems and structures are those that privilege men and enable them to dominate over women. Patriarchy frequently intersects with ethnoreligious identities to keep minority women out of politics. The cultural and traditional norms and values of all Sri Lanka's main ethnoreligious communities maintain patriarchal structures through, for example, patrilineal inheritance and family and community systems that privilege men. Leadership roles in all the main religions are almost exclusively held by men. The caste system and dowry practice in the Tamil community maintain male hierarchy and control over women. Muslim women do not sign their own marriage contract under the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act (MMDA), which also provides for polygamy, entrenching patriarchal systems of control within the community.

4.2.1 Within the family

Patriarchal systems and structures are firstly felt in the family, where unlike men, women cannot enter politics without the approval and support of male family members including fathers, brothers, husbands and sons. Women entering politics is seen as a digression from gender norms as well as a challenge to patriarchy – since the former are used to maintain the latter. As is broadly the case for women irrespective of their minority status, political roles come in addition to their domestic role, which must be fulfilled alongside the demands of entering politics. Women, unlike men, are expected to first prove that they can and will maintain their role within the family before considering entering politics:

> *Some men didn't think I could manage both housework and political work. They didn't tell it straight to my face, but through their comments, I knew they doubted me. They would say things like, "How will you manage your children and home if you go to meetings?" It was clear they thought a woman can't do both.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Pradeshiya Sabha Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

Socio-economic class and caste can intersect differently in this context where minority women, more likely to be from poorer backgrounds, have fewer resources to get additional childcare support. Often, they need to depend on extended family who may not see their political role as necessary or useful.

For minority women to contest elections, the backing of their own family members is critical, as politics is seen to be an arena dominated by men. Every woman who attempted to enter politics at the local level was only able to do so with such support, and those who did not have all their family members behind them faced serious difficulties:

> *I discussed first with my husband, I spoke with him and said I got this opportunity, do you genuinely like this opportunity or not? I can't face political pressure without family support. I can't fight publicly and at home. I did say I want to face more elections so he promised he will be with me, otherwise, I can't imagine how I could be in politics without family support. My parents, husband, daughter all gave me a backbone.*
> – Umachandraa Pragash, SJB Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) candidate at the time of interview, now member, November 2024

Family backing was often contingent on working with the political party affiliated to the family. Interviewees did not easily possess the freedom to engage with a political party of their choice; they were concerned that doing so would cause conflict within the household and deny them crucial extended family support. The intersection of these patriarchal positions with minority identity related to decisions for women on whether they joined national parties, where they may enjoy more freedom, or stay with minority parties that were generally seen to be more restrictive to women:

> *To gain the family support we have to be in and support the party which the family supports. If we consider the party that provides good service, I can't do that, they have to be in the party that* [is] *supported by family.*
> – Anonymous, former ACMC Member, Puttalam 2025

In many communities, people expect women to support the same religious or political party. If a woman chooses a different path, she can face hate, gossip or even threats. This makes it harder for her to be independent and take her own stand in politics. Especially because some people said I was 'wandering behind a Muslim' since I am a Hindu. They would say, 'see, she is following a Muslim'.

– Anonymous, ACMC Tamil Candidate for the Urban Council, Mannar 2025

After entering politics, our interviewees reported that pressure was exerted by male members of the family through various means, including financial or career benefits offered to male family members, to influence women to step aside. For minority women, this familial pressure is often based on ethnic and religious grounds that underpin gender norms and patriarchal structures, such as ideas that 'in our religion women have to listen to men, and you should tell your wife what to do' and 'it is her religious duty to be a good wife and mother not get into politics, why aren't you enforcing that'; or by fearmongering that women who enter politics affiliate too closely with the 'male other' (men from another ethnic or religious group). Due to such ethnoreligious gender norms, minority women also face internal stigma and barriers to socializing with men from the majority community that make it even more difficult for them to join and engage with national parties, either at the local or national levels.

Interviewees also provided examples where political opponents defamed them through false allegations, sometimes sexual in nature, sent to their husbands and other male family members attempting to damage family relations and pressurize them to leave politics. These shaming tactics, through the instrumentalization of male family members, reinforce systems of patriarchal control:

As I started a protest with other women to close a liquor bar, the other party male member sent a message to my husband which portrayed me in bad light, and on the other day the same message has been sent to my other council members as well, but thankfully my husband and my family supported me to get through it, and they supported me to go forward in politics.

– Anonymous, UPF Local Council Member of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

These were less important factors for those women who entered directly into parliament, enabled by the death or assassination of a closely related male political figure, as opposed to building their electoral careers from the local level. Minority women in these rare instances were swept into political office in most cases on the invitation of a government or party leader and through a whirlwind of sympathy votes over the loss of their loved one. Here too, however, political acceptance only comes after ethnoreligious gender practices are observed. For example, Ferial Ashraff was in *idda,* or the Muslim cultural mourning period for widows of four months and ten days, while she was elected to fill her husband's parliamentary seat. She was only able to take on the position formally after her mourning period ended.

4.2.2 Within society

At the societal level gender norms and practices differ among groups, but for all minority women the connection and enforcement of such norms and practices in line with ethnic and religious identity is a major constraining factor to their involvement in politics. Such fusion of gender and ethnoreligious norms is powerful and difficult to resist for minority women. Nearly every woman interviewed for this report identified the use of gender norms by their own community as being the biggest inhibitor of entering and succeeding in politics. This could be either by emphasizing that they are better suited for societal roles outside of politics or insulting their approach and role in politics. Women from the Malaiyaga Tamil community, for example, explained that gender norms are used against them where their expression of political opinion is sometimes labelled as 'disrespectful', and for this they are even accused of bringing shame or dishonour upon their families, making political work socially risky:

There are instances where even teachers and school principals say things like it's not good for women to be in politics like your mother is.

– Anonymous, UNP Women's Coordinator for Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

Muslim women, meanwhile, acutely experienced the connection between gender norms and religio-patriarchal structures, which work to oppress them and exclude them from politics via concepts like 'it is against Islam for a woman to get into politics' or 'your religious duty is to your family and God not at a public level'. Such ideas make it incredibly difficult for Muslim women to seek political office and remain in politics:

Once I was nominated in Vavuniya, Muslim men gave me a lot of problems. At a meeting they said we don't think it is right for a Muslim woman to come out [into political life] and they dragged [in] Islam to justify this.

– Anonymous, NPP Candidate, Vavuniya, November 2024

Every Muslim woman who participated in this research had examples of how religion was used to support gender norms and practices whilst patriarchal structures across family, society and party were used to enforce them. Muslim women interviewees referred to the pressure and harassment from within their community as excessive. They were criticized by male religious leaders publicly at meetings and on social media, where they were openly told they were defying their religion and failing their religious community. The challenge for Muslim women was that because the comments came from religious men of authority, it influenced much of the community:

> *I, as a minority community woman, had to face lots of defamatory speeches. Especially, mowlavis [religious leaders] used to insult us directly, saying things like 'is this needed for Muslim women? It is not acceptable in Islam'. They did campaigns [against us] as well because we are initiating [our political careers].*
> – Anonymous, SLMC Candidate for the Divisional Council, Puttalam 2025

This silencing takes place irrespective of class and social stature or the level of politics. When Ferial Ashraff was placed to take over her husband's political party, she was told by male leaders that Muslim clergy had passed a fatwa saying that in Islam a woman could not take on a political leadership role.

Dress code is another gender norm that minority women have to adhere to in entering politics, because for them dress is a key identity marker. For Muslim women this means they have no option but to observe a form of head scarf, without which it would be impossible to publicly and politically identify as a Muslim. Tamil women are pressured to wear a sari or dress in line with their ethnic identity. All women interviewed for this report adhered to such dress codes, they did not present this as a significant issue but raised it as a consideration to which they had no option but to adhere.

4.2.3 Within political parties

Minority identity also intersects with patriarchal structures and gender norms within political parties to limit and exclude minority women. Nearly all political parties have women's wings, within which women hold leadership positions; however, interviewees explain that these roles are used to bring in female voters rather than to enable women to advance into political representation. They can act as a structural tool of discrimination, presenting the party as inclusive while in reality confining and limiting women's space and growth in politics. Interviewees provided numerous examples of how women's wing leaders are sidelined or excluded at public and internal party meetings and are only consulted to organize women's day programmes or events for women voters:

> *They made a women's wing in the party, but we are not involved in big discussions. We are only called when they want us to welcome guests or do cultural programmes. We don't get any say in party matters.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

The NPP appears to be the only party that has allowed increased numbers of women to participate in national and local government elections through its women's wing. This research found that the NPP sought out minority women at the district and local level at the last two elections to contest through the party. This was partly because their principal constituent, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP, *People's Liberation Front*), was weak in minority-dominant areas. Minority women who joined the NPP reported that they were given equal treatment on the basis of gender, ethnicity and religion and were not discriminated against by men or women from the majority community. It is too early to assess how much space the NPP gives its minority MPs, and especially its minority women MPs, to raise issues that affect their own communities.

However, the NPP functions almost entirely in the Sinhala language, and it is exceptionally difficult for non-Sinhala speakers to operate in the party. Therefore, only members of minorities who can communicate in the majority language had this opportunity, which is a form of indirect discrimination. All mainstream national parties largely function in Sinhala, but the old guard have substantial cohorts of English language speakers who bridge the Tamil-Sinhala language barrier. The NPP core leadership, including its President, functions almost entirely in Sinhala. Indeed, in all mainstream national parties, minority women have to be able to communicate in Sinhala to function at even the most fundamental level. The old guard of mainstream parties appear to favour some minority women at the national and local levels. Minority women are invited to contest and supported by the senior leadership of parties. Tamil language skills in particular are mobilized to increase the Tamil and female voter base. However, patriarchal structures, intersecting with ethnoreligious identity, eventually relegate them to lower levels than majority women or minority men.

For example, Umachandraa Pragash, who belongs to the Tamil community, had a successful career in a leadership position of a popular news organization before entering politics at the local government level in 2018 through the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP). The SLFP was at the

time in a coalition government with the United National Party (UNP). With no major party support or experience in politics she worked her way into the capital city's local governing body, the Colombo Municipal Council and held office for three years. With the split in the coalition government, she eventually moved to the Samagi Jana Balavegaya (SJB), a breakaway of the UNP, where she directly negotiated her political role with the leader of the party. As part of a balancing act with other minority communities aligned with the party, Uma accepted decisions that were disadvantageous to her, such as contesting in the northern district of Jaffna, a place with its own unique politics and to which she had little connection. She also took on significant roles within the party, including being the first woman Tamil language spokesperson for any national party. Part of this compromise was on the assurance from the party that if she did not electorally succeed, she would be given a place in parliament through the national list. However, in the 2024 election, after several rounds of negotiations with the party, Uma did not get into parliament. She was sidelined by the leadership for a Tamil man. When in 2025 Uma wanted to contest the Colombo Municipal Council elections as she is resident in Colombo, her candidature was challenged again within the partly, mainly by minority men. 'They do not want me to strengthen my political base in Colombo because then they will have to compete with me for minority votes, they see me as a threat,' she explains. Uma's case offers a strong example of the multiple forms of discrimination and exclusion minority women face.

For minority women, joining an ethnic party is important. Within minority parties there is less competition for women, but their entry is not welcome and the space to succeed is limited. Interviewees found patriarchal structures challenging and generally parties were not open to women joining. Until the implementation of the quota system under the Local Authorities Election (Amendment) Act in 2018, ethnic parties had shown little interest in women joining their ranks. The quota forced them to try to find women from their communities to nominate. Even though the mainstream national parties had a poor record of including women, they were not starting from near zero, where minority parties found themselves. Interviewees discussed numerous problems with how women were included in lists: they were often not properly consulted; sometimes family members of male politicians were added simply to fill the gaps whilst those who genuinely wanted to contest were not given opportunities; and many were added in an otherwise tokenistic manner to make up the numbers. For northern Tamils these parties are aligned more closely with the ethno-nationalist politics to which some women subscribe. Malaiyaga Tamil and Muslim women are keen to serve their communities directly. However, these women found the glass ceiling was not yet broken; they encountered numerous challenges in entering and succeeding in politics. To that extent, the quota system did not provide a pathway to representation, as party support did not enable progress.

For example, Bisliya Bhutto contested under the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) in the 2018 and 2024 local government elections in the Puttalam district. She explained that she received no advice or support for her campaigning from male leaders within the party: 'When we get into politics, if you look at our party, from leadership to organizers, all are men!' She explained that when the party senior leaders visit local areas they mainly associate with male candidates and women like her had no access to leadership. 'Once I questioned why there are no women in the Puttalam national list nominations, and I was told by the party leader "we have all these problems because you women are coming into politics." He said this publicly at a meeting,' she said. Interviewees from other ethnic parties had similar experiences of being marginalized or sidelined by party leadership within ethnic parties:

> *Men get the big roles in the party. Even though I've worked for years, done field work, and helped with campaigns, when it's time to select leaders, they give those roles to men. They ask me to bring women, cook food, or arrange chairs, but not to lead a meeting or speak on stage. That hurts.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

Only two interviewees referred to caste-based discrimination, which was mainly discussed in relation to its social prevalence and how this results in the election of higher-caste people. One interviewee however referred to Tamil ethnic parties favouring candidates from particular castes and discriminating against Dalit candidates:

> *There is caste-based politics happening, especially during local government elections. Parties often appoint candidates based on the dominant caste in a particular area. For example, in places like Pannagam, Pallasutty, and Panippullam, each area is associated with different castes. When selecting candidates, the parties consider this and appoint someone from the majority caste in that area.*
> – Anonymous, TPNA ex-Provincial Council Member, Jaffna, 2025

As previously explained, local partners working on the implementation of the programme within which this research sits have discussed multiple forms of

discrimination faced by women including through caste. However, even when questioned in detail, interviewees did not refer to caste as a challenge to minority women's political representation. One of the programme partners provides the following explanation as a reason for this discrepancy among Malaiyaga Tamils:

> *Caste issues exist in plantation sector politics, but they are not openly visible, unlike in India. Some women do not talk much about caste, because they believe it is not an issue worth addressing, and some are not even aware that the political party operates based on caste. Many of them have still not realized this. In Sri Lanka, caste is mostly intertwined with personal life rather than public life.*
> – Logeswary, Director of Human Development Organization - Sri Lanka, Kandy, June 2025

This reflects a broader silence around caste in the plantation sector, where many community members either downplay its relevance or hesitate to acknowledge its role in politics. As a result, caste remains a hidden but influential factor, shaping experiences without being openly addressed.

The 2025 local government elections saw women use their previous experience and actively participate in elections. Though structural issues remained, political parties appeared better prepared and demonstrated marginally more willingness to include and support women to fill the quotas. However, under the electoral system, the decision on seat allocation lies with the party, and at the time of writing it is not clear if minority women who contested would eventually be selected by the party to hold office.

4.2.3.1 In leadership structures

> *It's not just men or just the party, it's everything. From school to marriage to politics, everything teaches us that women can't lead. That mindset is everywhere. When I tried to stand for local council, men laughed and women gossiped.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

The association of political representation with public leadership presents another layer of the fusion of gender norms with ethno-religious culture and identity, contributing to the undermining and sidelining of minority women in politics. This was evident in several ways, for example some male voters refused to accept women in leadership roles, fearing asking a woman for support with community issues. In such contexts, women struggled to gain support from men in their own communities, especially as voters, to elect and appoint them into leadership roles:

> *Whoever brought me to this level was Sinhalese and Tamil; it was the Muslims who brought us down. In our party there is space to bring issues for all groups without discrimination. Muslim men have an issue supporting women, they feel inferior, they are embarrassed and jealous. They say: 'why should we be below a woman?'*
> – Muslim woman NPP Candidate in northern Sri Lanka, November 2024

Structurally, men retain hierarchical positions at many levels, including in most societal networks, which are difficult for women to break through. These patriarchal hierarchies include religious leaders who enforce ethnic and religious identities to challenge minority women:

> *If you go and talk to men, they will say they support the women but in practice they will do nothing. They will say they will give women equality, but they are not ready to give equal opportunity, because from birth they are learning women are lower and they don't want to lose their power, so women have to be in second place. Tamils use culture, Muslims use religion to oppress women, then through the patriarchal thinking processes women also think we can't be above men.*
> – Rajini Chandrasekeran, feminist activist, Jaffna, November 2024

Many women participating in this research supported this view that gender norms were not only enforced by men, but women also:

> *Even some women pull other women down. People still believe a woman's place is at home. In our area, many believe women should stay at home, look after the children, and be quiet. If we speak up or go for meetings, they say we're not good women. It's not just one person causing trouble it's how people think. From small children to elders, everyone believes women should only do housework.*
> – Anonymous, CWC District President, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

Even within trade unions, where Malaiyaga men have secured influential positions, women are often limited to passive roles or included only as a formality in public events. These leadership structures reflect patriarchal norms

that sideline women's voices, especially in key negotiations about wages, working conditions and social benefits, issues that deeply affect them but on which they rarely have a say:

> *When I talk in meetings, they ignore me. But if a man says the same thing, everyone agrees with him. I've seen this happen many times. I share ideas, give suggestions, but nobody pays attention. Then later, a man repeats what I said, and suddenly everyone supports it. It's like my voice doesn't matter until it comes out of a man's mouth.*
> – Anonymous, CWC Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

4.2.3.2 In political office

Despite the disorderly implementation of the quota system in the 2018 election, many women were given positions at local government levels, at least for limited periods of time. Minority women interviewed for this report discussed how important it was for them to take on these positions and seize the opportunity to achieve their objectives. Yet entering political office at the local government level does not result in the easing of discrimination and marginalization for the few minority women who do so. First, most parties maintain an arbitrary process of rotating women candidates for unspecified periods of times through the life of the council. This is presented as a means to give all women candidates (mainly those appointed through the list system) an opportunity to govern; however, the system presently operates in an ad hoc manner and is completely at the discretion of the party. Many parties rotate between women candidates every two to three years, meaning that any one woman does not hold office for the full period for which the local government functions, rather she is replaced after an arbitrary period. Minority women candidates, undervalued due to their limited prior formal political experience, are more likely to hold office for shorter periods of time under this unfair system. This informal practice maintains male power structures and control within parties over their women candidates and reinforces patriarchal structures.

Once in political office, minority women continue to face challenges. Nearly every interviewee who had held office at the local government level referred to continuous and systematic exclusion, undermining and marginalization, whether from inside or outside their party. Key examples include being left off of speaker lists in local councils, or council decisions being taken without consulting or including them:

> *They put women in meetings just for namesake not for real power. Sometimes they invite us just to show there's a woman on the committee. But when it's time to make a decision, they don't ask our opinion. We're just there to tick a box.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

> *Even inside my own party, some people didn't trust my leadership just because I'm a woman. They acted like I wouldn't be able to handle responsibilities or speak up. It was painful because the judgment came from my own side, not just the opposition.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Local Council Member of Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, February 2025

> *Usually, when a woman speaks up, men feel the need to dominate or suppress her. But I have always spoken clearly and confidently. I have a good reputation among the political parties. However, some people, especially those close to us, do not like to see me progressing. For example, once in Vavuniya, a man and a group of other men tried to stop me from speaking. But I boldly told them that I must be allowed to speak for at least 15 minutes, especially if the topic concerns women's issues.*
> – Anonymous, TNA Candidate for the Divisional Council, Vavuniya, 2025

For minority women who have entered politics directly at the national level, after the death of their politically well-established husbands, the situation is slightly different. Ferial Ashraff's ascendency to leadership was not without challenge; her husband's prodigy Rauf Hakeem and religious edicts passed by Islamic preachers eventually forced her to hand over leadership of the SLMC to Hakeem. She subsequently led the National Unity Alliance (NUA), a second party set up by her husband. Like many Muslim women attempting to enter and stay in politics, Ferial Ashraff's biggest challenge came from Muslim men and religious clergy. Ferial had the support of the leaders of all the parties she aligned with, especially former President Chandrika Kumaratunga, in whose cabinet she served for five years. A fluent Sinhala speaker, Ferial succeeded in developing a constituency that cut across ethnic divides. 'I was never treated as a particularly Muslim woman by the majority, never felt it, I was able to do whatever I wanted to do, I never felt discrimination being Muslim,' she says in reference to her early political years. Vijeykala Maheswaran, similarly to Ferial, entered politics after the killing of her husband T. Maheshwaran, and was elected as MP for Jaffna in 2010 and 2015. She served as Minister of Women's Affairs in the 2015 coalition government and in her interview referred to having the support of her party

leadership as well as governmental heads during her tenure.

The experience then of minority women at the highest levels of national politics both in entering and staying in politics can be different to those at the local level, most often as they enter through the legacies of their already well-established male members. Yet, despite enjoying a level of support alien to most minority women who enter at the local government level, former MPs like Vijeykala Maheshwaran and Ferial Ashraff had to contend with the challenges of being minority women representing majority parties in national politics. They had to carefully navigate the behaviour of men in their community and men and women from the majority community when they raised issues facing women in their community. For example, Maheshwaran had to withstand disproportionate scrutiny and critique of her party's failure to guarantee the rights of and justice for Tamil women war survivors, despite the fact that she had raised several issues concerning justice for women war survivors, including the enforced disappearances of northern women. It was also falsely alleged that she had ordered the release of the chief suspect in a case of gang rape and murder, an event she described in her interview as one of the most stressful moments of her political career.[36] In the latter part of her ministerial career, Ashraff was forced to contend with rising Buddhist extremism in politics, encouraged and supported by the government, which was increasingly targeting Muslims as the 'new enemy' following the end of the war in 2009 and specifically targeted Muslim women for their dress code and perceived social backwardness.[37,38]

5 Material barriers

The quota system has offered new opportunities for Sri Lankan women to enter politics at the local level, and many are now extending their gains to the national level. This proliferation of women in electoral politics has brought to light the numerous other practical challenges that minority women still face in comparison. The following section provides a synopsis of these.

5.1 Skills development

Minority women engaging in electoral politics require specific skills development to enable them to compete and succeed in a male dominated environment. There are two dimensions to this issue, the first is, as already highlighted, the lack of recognition of the specific experiences and skillsets women bring to politics. Whilst such changes are required in the medium-to-long term, women need to enhance the skills that can help them to enter and succeed in politics as the male domain it presently is.

These skills include communicating and engaging with male power hierarchies, fundraising, social and mainstream media engagement and networking with diverse stakeholders. Such training is particularly important for minority women who may have less experience working outside of their communities and at the local level are likely to have lower levels of formal education. Skills development programmes for minority communities need to be tailored to their specific needs and recognize the limitations candidates may have at the early stages of entering politics, such as limited exposure to public male spaces outside their own ethnoreligious community and the impact of the ethnoreligious cultural inhibitions imposed on them.

5.2 Care work

A notable finding was that a woman's role as carer within the family had to be retained even whilst in politics. Care work in Sri Lanka is extremely gendered. Whist ethnically disaggregated data is limited, national statistics suggest that, despite educational attainment, 73.5 per cent of women belonging to the working age population, compared to only 26.5 percent of men, were economically ineffective mainly due to their engagement in domestic work, including caring for children and the elderly.[39] While many highlighted the challenge of having to combine care work with the demands of politics, several among those interviewed were clear that it was important for them to be available to support and care for their parents, husband and children where necessary. In both contexts, whether carer roles are imposed or sought, women find their entry into politics challenges these responsibilities; when meetings are planned at party level or when women take political office, the ways of working do not help women balance their family and career. Interviewees explained how political party meetings and campaigning often take place in the evening or at night, when they are most needed within the family. Mothers of infants and small children discussed how political spaces do not offer the relevant facilities and are not conducive to including children whom they are not able to leave alone at home:

> *When meetings are planned at party level or when women take political office the methods, times are not conducive to help women balance their family/career roles. All the meetings are at night hours, so I had to leave the children, which led to a few conflicts.*
> – Anonymous, former ACMC Member, Puttalam, 2025

5.3 Language

Language remains a major issue for minorities wanting to enter and work with mainstream national parties. This is particularly an issue with the NPP where the leadership functions largely in the Sinhala language. Tamil-speaking communities have no option but to communicate in Sinhala to contest with these parties, even if they are seeking candidacy in an entirely Tamil-speaking area. This particularly affects minority women who have had fewer educational opportunities and exposure to Sinhala-dominated public spaces compared to men in their communities. Minority women are also likely to have not travelled far beyond their locality and may face cultural marginalization when they do, which impacts their ability to enter and succeed within national parties. Tamil women from the north and plantation areas, and Muslim women in rural areas have often only been educated in Tamil-language schools in their locality. Though they are

extremely active within civil society or in other professions, this is likely to be within a culturally and geographically confined area. Those who contested with national parties at the local government elections said they had little or no access to national-level activities and events and were passed over for consideration by men from their communities or women from the majority community.

5.4 Media

Minority women interviewed for this report at the local level all highlighted media prejudice as a major issue affecting their entry and success in electoral politics. Interviewees explained how the mainstream media do not give exposure to minority women. They are usually last in line for media attention, whether interviews or photo opportunities, behind minority male politicians and Sinhalese women candidates. Media advertising is expensive, and interviewees explained that they do not have the resources to be able to advertise their candidacy:

> *Without strong political connections or big-named backers, and economical support, it's hard for women to get media coverage through regular channels. Because of this lack of media attention, women candidates struggle to get noticed by the public, which weakens their influence and recognition.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Party Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

> *It's so frustrating how much media attention male candidates get, even when they're doing the same things as women. I work just as hard, but my achievements often go unnoticed. It's like the media doesn't even see the value in what women are doing in politics.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Local Council Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

This was less acutely felt by English speaking, well-educated minority candidates who contested elections at the national level. Swasthika Arulingam for example, speaks English and explained that she is frequently invited for media interviews and discussions, partly she believes to ensure greater diversity within their coverage.

Minority women candidates at the local level also faced numerous challenges with social media coverage. Almost every woman interviewed for this report had a negative experience with social media. They found it a threat to their political participation, and in many cases, they were emotionally and socially impacted by the nature of social media commentary, which on occasion was vilifying and sexually abusive. Minority women in such instances face attacks both for their ethnoreligious as well as their gender identity. Political opponents also use social media to specifically target minority women in ways that attempt to compromise their reputation on gendered and ethnoreligious grounds; one Muslim local government candidate in the north explained how her political opponent had young men follow her and try to pull off her hijab in public, so she could be photographed inadequately dressed whilst election campaigning. Tamil women had similar experiences:

> *I have been humiliated and criticized through an interview video exposure which is not true. A photo of mine was also morphed in a bad way with a terrible caption and shared widely, which is the worst thing any woman can go through. However, I move forward with my activities, not caring about such vilifications.*
> – Anonymous, TNP Former Local Council Member, Jaffna, May 2025

An SLMC candidate for Kalpitiya Divisional Council, Mohideen Mujeefa echoed this view: 'The support for women is still limited, and many women are afraid to take part due to the misuse of their images. I have experienced this fear myself because I have gone through it.' The implications of social media attacks are wide-ranging. For minority women who are already battling multiple forms of prejudice and discrimination, it can have a decisive societal impact. For example, voters can be influenced with claims of how a Tamil woman is a 'traitor' or 'morally compromised' because she is seen associating with Sinhala men, or questions regarding the reputation of a Muslim woman both as a woman and as a Muslim. According to those interviewed the impact of such negative social media coverage was most felt within the family, leaving close family members humiliated or hurt. Mothers were particularly concerned about the effect on their children, in school and among peer groups. This in turn hindered minority women from entering and participating in politics.

Political parties have not adequately responded to the gendered and racist attacks minority women face within social and mainstream media. In the 2020 parliamentary election, prominent Human Rights Commissioner and civil society activist, Ambika Satkunanadhan, a Tamil woman, pulled out of contesting for the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) having faced 'sexist, misogynistic, and abusive personal hate campaigns,' including from within the party.[40] The attacks were in social and mainstream media, including an instance when a Tamil TV channel broadcasted a skit falsely alleging that she was in a relationship with a Tamil politician.[41] None of the women interviewed for this report found there was adequate

systemic and structural support available legally, nationally or within their parties to address the gendered and racist attacks they faced in social and mainstream media.

5.5 Finance

A lack of financial and other resources has been raised in the literature as a problem affecting women in general, but minority women appear to be particularly hard hit. The former conflict and plantation areas, where minorities tend to live, are economically deprived. Minority women contesting elections from these regions find it harder to gather funds for election campaigns. Minority women in families and communities with strong patriarchal cultures are likely to have less access to family finances. Many women prioritize expenses for their children and parents over political spending, which men are reportedly less likely to do. These factors combined with the lack of financial resource allocation within parties affect minority women's ability to enter and stay in politics:

> *When I contested in the Parliament election once, I had to mortgage my land and gold, to get enough money to spend. Also, the party gave the male members 15 lakhs and the female members only five lakhs to manage election expenses. I didn't even know this discrimination happened within the party until later.*
> – Anonymous, ITAK Party's Women's Group Member, Jaffna, May 2025

> *In Sri Lanka, there are no proper limits on how much can be spent on elections. For someone like me, who had lost everything, it was very hard to win because those with more money could spend a lot and secure their victory. Even today, money plays a big role in deciding who wins. This makes it especially difficult for women, who often depend on their husbands or families for financial support, to enter and succeed in politics.*
> – Anonymous, TPNA, Ex-Provincial Council Member, Jaffna 2025

The key informant interviews revealed some exceptions in relation to financial challenges. Minority candidates within the NPP explained that the party locally fundraised for all their campaigns and that finances were allocated equally to all candidates irrespective of minority identity or gender. Minority women who got into politics from educated or professional backgrounds had social capital that gave them an advantage. Ferial Ashraff and Vijekala Maheshwari did not raise financial limitations as a major issue that affected their career whilst Umachandraa Pragash offered an example of how networking skills gained through her previous career in the media helped her galvanize donors from among the Tamil diaspora. This funding enabled her to build a three-storey party office in northern Sri Lanka.

5.6 Violence and targeting

Gender and election related violence has been highlighted across the literature as a major issue deterring women from entering politics. The threat of violence was raised as a major concern for minority women. In the north and east, women candidates faced threats to their lives and security from opponents, some of whom belong to militant groups and have access to arms. Violence needs to be interpreted broadly from a feminist and minority perspective to reflect and respond to the experiences of minority women; forcibly pulling down a woman's hijab for instance is a form of violence. Previous research for this programme has highlighted the importance of identifying the ethnoreligious dimension to election-related violence. This report seeks to extend this to minority women who face specific forms of gendered and ethnoreligious violence during elections. Verbal and emotional abuse, including on social media, often uses gendered and ethnic slurs, targeting women based on their multiple identities.

In March 2025, the Leader of the House of Parliament, Bimal Ratnayake, asked the Speaker to take action against the male Tamil MP Archuna Ramanathan for allegedly threatening sexual violence against female Tamil activist Swasthika Arulingam after Arulingam made the following post on social media: 'A Member of Parliament, Dr. Archuna Ramanathan, named a woman as a "prostitute" in Parliament. Did anyone oppose this in Parliament? Did anyone demand that the woman's name be struck off from the Hansard?' According to Ratnayake, the Prime Minister had also received a complaint on the gendered nature of the violent threats by the MP, but the Speaker only went so far as to remove some of his public privileges. Part of Ramanathan's attack on Arulingam was over her critical position on LTTE violence, which he combined with his gendered attacks on her through various other social media campaigns. This example demonstrates the intersectional complexity of the violence and media challenges minority women face in politics.[42,43]

Women who enter politics at the local level in the north include former LTTE cadres and activists who have been at the forefront of struggles for justice concerning atrocities committed during the conflict. These women face routine surveillance and interrogation by military intelligence agents and are often harassed or threatened by them:

Even now, the CID is still following me because I speak about Tamil nationalism, I believe this is happening because I am a female candidate. If a male candidate said the same things I have said, the situation would be different. For example, the Member of Parliament for Kilinochchi district, Mr Sridaran, often speaks about the national leader Prabakaran publicly, but no CID officers are following him, yet they continue to follow me.
– Anonymous, TNA Candidate for the Divisional Council, Vavuniya, 2025

In an electoral context, knowledge of such surveillance and interrogation can be manipulated by political opponents and increases the threat and risk for women who decide to enter politics. As with social media attacks, violence against minority women has wide ranging effects, including directly impacting on the support they gain from their family:

A letter was delivered to my house just after signing for the elections threatening my life and asking me not to enter politics. Because of that letter my father asked me not to step into politics, but my husband supported me to get over these kinds of issues, and he helped and supported me to get into politics.
– Anonymous, UNP Former Local Council Member of Wattegama, Kandy, January 2025

Interviewees and focus group discussions referred to instances where violence was threatened against children of female candidates. The implications of threats and acts of violence for women are far-reaching as they affect family and attach new levels of limitations to their political representation. There were also references in interviews to sexual bribery being an issue for women candidates, including among minority women, but substantive details were unavailable. Interviewees suggested that young women entering politics were forced into sexual relationships or encounters with male political elites and leaders in exchange for political roles within parties. It was unclear if this specifically affected minority women and much of the information provided on this was anecdotal and not verifiable. Sexual bribery is however a problem that has been compellingly reported and documented especially by widows in the north and east in post-war Sri Lanka.[44]

6 Transformation

6.1 How entering politics is changing minority women

Irrespective of the challenges and barriers women face when entering and participating in politics, there were very few interviewees who regretted the experience. Nearly every woman who participated in the research explained the transformative effect it had on them as a person:

> *I worked as the Deputy Mayor in the Municipal Council. This position gave me more power and more responsibility. I had to look at budgets, attend high-level meetings, and manage staff. It was challenging, but it helped me grow a lot as a leader.*
> – Yadharshana Puthirasigamoney, SJB Former Deputy Mayor, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

For many minority women, their engagement in politics significantly contributed to their personal and professional development. Participants described how the exposure, skills and experiences gained through political involvement facilitated meaningful self-growth. For most interviewees – particularly at the local level – the transition into politics from their previous professional or community-based roles marked a profound shift. They often entered unfamiliar political spaces with limited preparation, support or prior experience, yet emerged from these challenges with a strong sense of transformation.

Women who contested and were elected to local government positions for the first time in the 2018 elections frequently described the experience as entering uncharted territory, requiring them to adapt and learn rapidly on the job. They expressed a deep sense of pride in having sustained and succeeded in their political careers despite facing considerable obstacles and receiving minimal support, especially from their own political parties. Even those who were not elected regarded the experience of contesting as highly valuable, noting that it strengthened their resolve and confidence, despite the adversities and lack of institutional backing. Comments such as: 'I have become braver and have learned a lot through experience', or 'I am no longer afraid of anything. In the past, I was reluctant to approach government offices, but now I am very straightforward. I have improved myself a lot by exploring many things', indicate the confidence women gained through the experience.

Minority women described this exposure and experience as providing them with new skills and traits to which they did not have access previously. For some women, entering politics offered new perspectives and insights, better understanding and analysis of the issues on which they had been working for years. The leap from civil society or social work into politics provided a new lens of how problems develop and helped them see the challenges of responding to these: 'I am now able to understand society's perspective better', one interviewee explained. There was also a notable sense of increased confidence and knowledge in responding to and resolving issues:

> *Now I know exactly where to go, which government office handles what, and who to talk to for different community needs. I've learned to handle officers and powerful people, something I used to be very scared of. I go to meetings, I speak clearly, and I follow up until the work is done.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Former Local Council Member of Wattegama, Kandy, January 2025

Minority women also found that their political engagement gave them new levels of credibility and trust within the community as well as status and acceptance. For some this enhanced their ability to serve their community whilst gaining new meaning and purpose:

> *After coming into politics, I got closer to the people in my village. Earlier, I was just another person. But now, people come to me with their problems whether it's housing, school issues, or health and I try my best to help them.*
> – Anonymous, CWC Party's District President, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

> *Politics gives women a reason to get involved and help others. They don't just see themselves as housewives or mothers, they feel they can make a real difference in their community.*
> – Anonymous, UPF Former Local Government Member, Nuwara Eliya, March 2025

6.2 How minority women are changing politics and their communities

This research found that minority women politicians have broken through patriarchal structures and challenged stereotypes and norms, stemming from gender, culture and religion. They have defied ethnic, racial, religious and gender inequality and proven that they can be effective leaders. Many have forced male leaders and elites to accept and engage with them and in some cases even successfully garnered male votes. Through their own journeys and their active promotion of education for minority women, they are serving as powerful role models – motivating younger generations to pursue education, expand their opportunities and build meaningful careers. The research found that they also raise women's rights within their community from small discussion circles to higher political levels.

Minority women political candidates have played a critical role in bringing attention to issues that disproportionately affect women, both within their own communities and more broadly. Their participation in political spaces has been driven largely by a commitment to community development and a recognition that the concerns of minority women have often been overlooked – both by male leaders within their communities and by women from majority populations:

> *I focused on fixing roads, solving water problems, and improving toilets in my village. Many people in our estate didn't have clean water or proper drainage. I made these my priority. I also spoke about how women don't feel safe when they go out at night or use public places, and I kept raising this in every meeting until small changes were made.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Local Government Member for Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

> *The political system is full of men who don't want change. When I brought up issues like corruption or women's safety, they told me not to interfere. It's hard to change things when the whole system is built to support only men.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Local Government Member for Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

This is changing the political landscape, where issues affecting minority women were previously ignored but are now more frequently raised. Their political engagement goes beyond awareness raising to working with different levels of government to find responses and solutions to problems faced by women generally and in their own groups:

> *The political system is full of men who don't want change. When I brought up issues like corruption or women's safety, they told me not to interfere. It's hard to change things when the whole system is built to support only men.*
> – Anonymous, UNP Local Government Member for Nuwara Eliya, Kandy, January 2025

Minority women's entry and presence in politics have significantly diversified the political landscape. Though still limited within local government, some influential councils such as the capital city's Municipal Council now have minority women representatives. For example, in 2025, Vraîe Cally Balthazaar, a member of a religious minority, was appointed mayor of Colombo. Minority women are also diversifying the range of issues that are dealt with at the higher level of politics. Women are arguing that everyday socio-economic issues such as housing, education, health, income generation and livelihoods are as important as national security, infrastructure and economic development. This is particularly important for minority communities where the specific challenges faced by women are unlikely to be raised and resolved by women from the majority group or men from minority communities. Minority women are discarding their invisibility and raising their concerns at the highest levels:

> *Minority women contesting is important for gender and racism. For example, when majority women take up issues in relation to Muslim personal laws they do so by saying 'we need to protect Muslim women from very bad Muslim men'. It comes from a race superiority complex. Sinhalese women will speak and get excited when Tamil men rape Tamil women but when Sinhala forces rape Tamil women they don't want to talk about it.*
> – Swasthika Arulingam, Tamil lawyer, trade union leader and candidate for Colombo in the 2024 national election, November 2024

Interviewees discussed how they are determined to change the political culture, remove corruption, reduce violence and change the processes and systems that have been established for men but which do not work for women in their communities.

7 Conclusion

Minority women in Sri Lanka continue to defy deeply entrenched structures of exclusion, navigating layers of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion and class to assert their rightful place in the political landscape. This report reveals that minority women are not only marginalized by broader national and party politics but are also systematically silenced within their own communities through patriarchal and ethnoreligious norms. While the mandatory 25 per cent quota for women's representation in local government elections in Sri Lanka marks a significant legislative milestone, its implementation has not translated into meaningful political empowerment, particularly for minority women. In many cases, the quota is treated as a box-ticking exercise rather than a genuine effort to promote women's representation in politics. Minority women, even when elected through the quota, often face structural and cultural barriers within their own political parties. Power continues to be concentrated in male-dominated party hierarchies, where decision-making roles and political visibility are seldom extended to women. Many women councillors, especially from minority communities, report being sidelined, with limited access to resources, leadership roles or the ability to influence policy. This reality points to a critical gap between numerical representation and substantive participation. Across interviews, Muslim, Tamil and Malaiyaga women shared how patriarchal and ethnoreligious norms deeply embedded in their families, religious institutions and localities systematically discourage women from stepping into politics. Cultural taboos, religious restrictions, community gossip and fear of dishonour prevent even women already active in social work and informal politics from transitioning into formal political leadership roles.

Despite these challenges, minority women have emerged as critical agents of change. Their representation in politics, though still insufficient, is not merely symbolic: it is transformative. Whether through community organizing, standing for elections or holding public office, they are challenging normative barriers, building inclusive narratives and demanding accountability from both national and minority-led political structures. The testimonies and lived experiences of the women who contributed to this research highlight the urgent need for inclusive policy reform, structural transformation within political parties, and sustained investment in capacity-building and protection mechanisms. If Sri Lanka is to move forward as a pluralistic and just society, minority women must not be treated as 'curry leaves', included for flavour and discarded when inconvenient. They are not merely accessories to the country's democracy, they are essential to its strength, credibility and future.

8 Recommendations

To the government of Sri Lanka:

i Introduce legislation for a 33 per cent quota for women in parliamentary elections, one-third of elected seats, with at least 20 per cent of these allocated to women from minority communities.

ii Strengthen the current local government quota system to ensure that a minimum of 5 per cent of elected positions are for women from minority communities.

iii Provide budgetary allocations and, through relevant ministries and government departments, establish childcare facilities and safe transport links to parliament and provincial and local councils.

iv Ensure minority women are well represented in state structures, processes and mechanisms, especially those on transitional justice and peacebuilding.

To the women's caucus in parliament:

v Discuss the findings of this report and together with existing and past minority members identify additional steps that can be taken to strengthen women's political representation at all levels.

vi Initiate an all-party parliamentary mechanism to monitor, report and respond to the gendered, ethnic, religious and cultural abuse, harassment and stigma that minority women face at all levels of politics. This mechanism should have provisions for safe reporting of cases and offer legal and psychosocial support to women political representatives.

vii Appoint a sub-committee to identify the emerging and persistent intersectional issues identified in this report and make recommendations to government and political parties to resolve them.

viii Initiate a minority women's peer-group to support new and aspiring minority women politicians as well as to mentor and train potential new minority women candidates.

ix Work with civil society to set up programmes in schools, universities and vocational centres that teach young minority women about politics, leadership and civic engagement from an early stage.

To political parties:

x Ensure that at least 30 per cent of senior party leadership structures such as executive committees have women in them and that at least 10 per cent are minority women.

xi Develop and implement Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity (EDI) policies with the parties that specifically respond to ethnic, religious, cultural, caste and gender discrimination and marginalization.

Notes

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3 For details of the programme, see: Minority Rights Group, 'Minority Empowerment for Democracy and Pluralism in Sri Lanka'. Available at: <https://minorityrights.org/programmes/sri-lanka-programme/?>
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5 See limitations in methods section for more details.
6 For a good understanding of the concept of intersectionality see: Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', in the *University of Chicago Legal Forum,* Vol. 1989, Article 8, pp. 139-167.
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working to secure the rights of minorities and indigenous peoples

Minority Rights Group

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY

Between tokenism and invisibility: Minority women's political representation in Sri Lanka
Minority women in Sri Lanka face multiple forms of discrimination, exclusion and marginalization. Though some have risen to leadership roles in various sectors, including the media, law, civil society and education, they remain largely invisible in politics. This report reveals that minority women are not only marginalized by broader national and party politics but are also systematically silenced within their own communities through patriarchal and ethnoreligious norms.

Power continues to be concentrated in male-dominated party hierarchies, where decision-making roles and political visibility are seldom extended to women. Many women councillors, especially from minority communities, report being sidelined, with limited access to resources, leadership roles or the ability to influence policy. Minority women are targeted for their ethnic, religious and gender identities in the media, including facing racist and sexist abuse in social media. They are affected by gender, election-related and ethnoreligious violence.

Through participatory research and an intersectional approach, this report puts the voices of minority women politicians at the forefront. It illuminates how, despite many barriers, minority women have emerged as critical agents of change. Whether through community organizing, standing for elections or holding public office, they are challenging normative barriers, building inclusive narratives and demanding accountability from both national and minority-led political structures. The testimonies of the women who contributed to this research highlight the urgent need for inclusive policy reform, structural transformation within political parties, and sustained investment in capacity-building and protection mechanisms.

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