TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL SRI LANKA

a nation that upholds integrity

A STUDY ON CAMPAIGN FINANCE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN CANDIDATES IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA

FEBRUARY 2026

A STUDY ON CAMPAIGN FINANCE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN CANDIDATES IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA

FEBRUARY 2026

TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL SRI LANKA
a nation that upholds integrity

A STUDY ON CAMPAIGN FINANCE CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN CANDIDATES IN MINORITY COMMUNITIES IN SRI LANKA

Research by: Social Scientists' Association

Design: Haritha Dahanayaka

Transparency International Sri Lanka
366, Nawala Road, Nawala,
Rajagiriya,
Sri Lanka.

Phone: +94 11 4 369 781
Fax: +94 11 2 865 777
Email: tisl@tisrilanka.org
Web: www.tisrilanka.org

Twitter: twitter.com/tisrilanka
LinkedIn: lk.linkedin.com/company/tisrilanka
Facebook: facebook.com/tisrilanka
Instagram: instagram.com/transparency_sri_lanka
YouTube: youtube.com/tisrilankatube

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL) is an independent, non-governmental, non-profit and nonpartisan organisation with a vision of Sri Lanka in which government, politics, business, civil society and the everyday lives of citizens are free from corruption. As the fully accredited national chapter in Sri Lanka of the Berlin-based Transparency International (TI), TISL partners and works with TI and its chapters world-wide.

Contents

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Sri Lanka is often cited for its early milestones in advancing women's political rights. The country granted universal suffrage in 1931, among the earliest in Asia and made global history in 1960 by electing the world’s first female Prime Minister. Despite these symbolic achievements, women’s substantive participation in political processes has remained limited for decades.

A notable policy shift occurred in 2016 with the introduction of a 25% mandatory quota for women's representation in local government bodies. Implemented during the 2018 local elections, this reform led to a significant and unprecedented increase in the number of women entering local politics. In numerical terms, the quota was successful in opening the doors of political offices to thousands of women, many of whom were contesting elections for the first time.

However, the increased representation at the local level has not translated into meaningful political empowerment. Emerging evidence suggests that women politicians, particularly those from marginalized communities continue to face significant structural and practical barriers that affect their ability to campaign effectively and exercise real influence once elected (International Foundation for Electoral Systems [IFES], 2022). Among these, access to campaign finance stands out as a critical yet underexplored factor.

Campaigning, even at the local level, entails a range of financial demands: printing materials, organizing meetings, transportation, and mobilizing support networks, among others. Male-dominated party structures, limited access to political financing channels, and socio-cultural restrictions on women’s mobility and public engagement all contribute to the financial disadvantages faced by women politicians. For many, the lack of campaign resources not only undermines their electoral competitiveness but also acts as a deterrent to entering the political arena altogether.

This study also paid attention to a major legislative development, the Campaign Finance Act passed in 2023. This law introduced mandatory caps on campaign spending and requires all candidates to declare and report their campaign expenditures. While this reform aims to promote a level playing field, as well as greater transparency and accountability in electoral processes, its impact on candidates with unequal access to resources particularly women from marginalized communities remains unclear.

In this context, this study attempts to examine the campaign finance challenges experienced by women from marginalized communities contesting at the local government level. By exploring the interplay between gender, finance, and political participation, the study aims to generate insights that can inform policy and advocacy efforts toward fostering a more equitable and enabling environment for women’s political engagement in Sri Lanka. It is also important to note, however, that this study has focused primarily on marginalized women, those disadvantaged by financial weakness, ethnicity, or restrictive cultural norms. The findings may therefore not fully extend to women who are better positioned within the political culture and who, over time, have managed to carve out more successful political trajectories.

EVALUATION METHODS AND LIMITATIONS

This study adopts a post-positivist research approach, which acknowledges the existence of an objective reality while also recognising the value of subjective experiences in understanding complex social phenomena. This paradigm is particularly well-suited to exploring the gendered dimensions of political participation and campaign finance, where lived experiences and contextual factors play a critical role.

The research design integrates qualitative methods to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the challenges women politicians face in accessing campaign finance at the local government level. The study comprises three main phases:

Desk Research

The study began with a comprehensive review of academic literature, policy documents, and civil society reports related to women's political participation and campaign finance in Sri Lanka. This stage was critical in establishing the contextual framework and identifying key themes to guide the empirical phase.

Empirical Data Collection

Two primary qualitative data collection methods were employed:

In-Depth Interviews (IDIs): Conducted with politicians including both women and men. These interviews focused on personal narratives, campaign experiences, funding strategies, and perceived barriers in accessing financial support.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs): Held with political analysts, civil society representatives, and members of women's rights organisations. These interviews provided broader insights into the structural and institutional factors influencing women's access to campaign finance, complementing the individual-level data gathered from politicians.

A total of 36 interviews were conducted:

- 24 interviews with women local government politicians,
- 7 interviews with men local government politicians (as a comparative baseline),
- 6 interviews with women key informants and experts,
- 3 interviews with men key informants and experts.

Interviews were carried out in Colombo, Batticaloa, Jaffna, Badulla, and Moneragala, selected to reflect regional diversity in terms of ethnicity, political context, and socio-economic conditions. These districts also allowed for a comparative lens across different minority and majority communities.

Data Analysis

All interviews were analysed using a combination of thematic analysis and narrative analysis techniques. Thematic analysis enabled the identification of recurring patterns and barriers, while narrative analysis allowed for deeper engagement with individual experiences and strategies employed by women to navigate financial constraints.

Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into the campaign finance challenges faced by women in local government politics, several limitations must be acknowledged:

Scope and Scale: The study is limited to 36 interviews across five districts. While this allows for depth, it may not capture the full diversity of experiences across the entire country, particularly in areas with distinct political or demographic characteristics not represented in the selected locations.

Sensitive Nature of Topic: Discussions around campaign financing, especially informal channels, party dynamics, and internal discrimination can be sensitive. Some participants may have been hesitant to fully disclose information, potentially limiting the completeness of the data.

Despite these limitations, the study contributes valuable insights into the financial barriers that constrain women's political engagement at the local level in Sri Lanka. By focusing on diverse regions and incorporating the perspectives of both candidates and key stakeholders, the research offers a grounded and context-sensitive understanding of the campaign finance landscape for women from marginalized communities.

DESK REVIEW

Introduction

Women in Sri Lanka, particularly those from ethnic and religious minority communities, face a complex set of structural and systemic barriers when seeking entry into electoral politics. Among the most pressing yet understudied challenges are those related to campaign finance. Economic inequality, limited access to party funding, opaque nomination processes, and broader patterns of structural exclusion significantly constrain the political participation of minority women. These challenges are further reinforced by Sri Lanka's deeply embedded political culture characterized by clientelism, patriarchal norms, and loyalty-based networks which tend to exclude those outside established power structures.

Kodikara (2011) famously described a "paradox" in Sri Lankan gender politics: despite significant gains in women's education, health, and literacy, political representation remains among the lowest in South Asia. This contradiction reflects the limited impact of formal democratic institutions on achieving inclusive participation, particularly for women (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara, 2012; IFES, 2022). As of 2022, women held only 5.3% of seats in Parliament and less than 2% of local government positions, placing Sri Lanka behind regional peers such as Nepal and Bangladesh in gender parity indices (IFES, 2022). However, the 2024 parliamentary election signaled a modest shift. The National People's Power (NPP) coalition secured a historic 159-seat majority—alongside the highest-ever number of women MPs, with 21 women directly elected and a few others appointed via the national list, pushing total female representation to around 9.8% (Department of Elections, 2024).

This desk review critically examines how the intersections of gender, economic marginalization, political party practices, and political culture shape the campaign finance landscape and the electoral prospects of minority women in Sri Lanka.

Historical Overview of Campaign Finance in Sri Lanka

The roots of Sri Lanka's campaign finance practices can be traced back to the colonial period, when representative democracy was first introduced under British rule. Formal regulations concerning electoral finance were established with the Ceylon (Parliamentary Elections) Order in Council of 1947, which laid the groundwork for parliamentary elections in the post-independence era. In the early stages of electoral democracy, campaign financing was a modest affair. While political parties provided some logistical support, most candidates relied primarily on personal resources to fund their campaigns.

Woodward's (1969) seminal work offers valuable insight into the early dynamics of campaign finance in Sri Lanka, highlighting the highly personalized and fragmented nature of political funding in the country's nascent democratic period. At the time, both major political parties, the United National Party (UNP) and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) relied heavily on individual wealth rather than organized, institutionalized sources of campaign finance. For the UNP, despite being comparatively better resourced, financial support was far from uniform. Woodward notes that except in the Colombo districts and a few other areas of the Western Province, UNP candidates had to rely upon their own organization (1969). This suggests a decentralized and uneven system in which personal financial capacity and local networks determined a candidate's ability to campaign effectively.

The SLFP operated with even fewer institutional mechanisms for financial support. Campaign funding in its early years was largely underwritten by S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's private fortune.

Central party coordination was minimal, as Woodward states that the central office could do little more than provide candidates with copies of the manifesto (1969). This reliance on personal resources and the absence of centralized financial infrastructure underscore how early campaign finance practices were shaped by elite wealth and informal arrangements rather than systemic party support.

Over time, as the political system matured and electoral competition intensified, campaign financing evolved into a more decentralized and competitive enterprise. Both political parties and individual candidates began independently mobilizing funds, often through informal and opaque channels (Welikala, 2015). The introduction of the Proportional Representation (PR) and preferential voting systems through the 1978 Constitution brought a significant shift. Not only did elections become more competitive, but the focus of campaigning also changed. Candidates were no longer only competing against rival parties but were now also in competition with fellow candidates within the same party for preferential votes (Peiris, 2023).

This intra-party competition significantly increased the costs of campaigning. Attractive and visible campaigns became essential, not just to promote the party, but also to enhance personal vote bases. This dual incentive structure of strengthening the party's performance while also maximizing individual preferential votes intensified the need for personal financial investment in campaigns. As observed by Peiris (2023), the competitive personalization of politics under PR transformed elections into high-stakes, high-spending contests, leading to the monetization of the political process.

The economic liberalization reforms introduced in 1977 further complicated the electoral finance landscape. With the opening up of the economy, vast amounts of private capital entered the political sphere, often through corporate sponsorships, patronage networks, and unofficial donations (Venugopal, 2011). These developments made campaign finance not only more competitive but also increasingly susceptible to corruption and clientelism. The lack of a transparent regulatory framework further facilitated the use of unaccounted funds, thereby creating significant disparities between wealthy candidates and those with limited access to financial resources (Transparency International Sri Lanka, 2015).

This evolution has had profound implications for political representation. The escalating cost of running a campaign has made financial capital a de facto prerequisite for securing party nominations and electoral success. Candidates with wealth and access to patronage networks are preferred by party elites, making it exceedingly difficult for newcomers, especially women and minority candidates to enter the political arena (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012). As noted by Wickremasinghe and Kodikara (2012), the structural transformation of electoral districts into larger administrative units under PR has made canvassing more resource-intensive, a challenge for all candidates but one that is particularly burdensome for women, who generally possess lower levels of economic capital and fewer institutional connections.

As a result, Sri Lanka's campaign finance system today reflects a long history of institutional evolution, political competition, and economic transformation. What began as a relatively modest, personalized mode of campaigning has grown into a high-cost, high-stakes contest dominated by wealthy political elites. The consequences of this shift are especially pronounced for women from marginalized communities, who remain systematically excluded from both party structures and financial support mechanisms.

Economic Inequality and Financial Insecurity of Women

A major and persistent barrier to women's political participation in Sri Lanka is their limited access to financial resources, which significantly constrains their ability to contest elections and sustain political engagement. As several scholars have observed, economic capital is not just a logistical requirement in electoral politics but often a prerequisite for visibility, legitimacy, and success in a political landscape that increasingly rewards wealth and patronage (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012; Welikala, 2015).

Women in Sri Lanka remain disproportionately disadvantaged in terms of economic participation. According to the Department of Census and Statistics (2022), only 32.1% of women participate in the labor force, compared to 70.5% of men. Moreover, the unemployment rate for women hovers around 6.5%, nearly double that of men (Census and Statistics, 2022). Even among those employed, women are often concentrated in low-wage, informal, or precarious sectors such as garment manufacturing, domestic work, and plantation labor, which offer little opportunity for income accumulation, savings, or financial independence (Gunatilaka, 2013; Jayawardena, 1986).

This economic vulnerability is compounded by gendered norms around property ownership and inheritance. Women are less likely to own land or high-value assets, which are often prerequisites for obtaining loans, securing campaign donations, or being considered serious candidates by political parties (de Mel, Peiris, & Gomez, 2013). Many women also bear the burden of unpaid care work, further limiting their ability to engage in income-generating activities or invest time and resources in political campaigns (Kottegoda, 2023).

These economic inequalities are even more acute among women from marginalised ethnic and religious groups, particularly Tamil, Muslim, and estate Tamil communities. Structural discrimination, historical marginalization, and geographic isolation have limited their access to both public and private sector employment, financial services, and education. Estate sector women, for instance, are among the lowest-paid workers in the country and face linguistic, spatial, and social barriers that severely restrict their mobility and participation in civic life (Jayawardena, 2017). This intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class creates multiple layers of financial exclusion that are difficult to overcome without targeted structural interventions.

As a result, women, especially those from marginalized ethnic and working-class backgrounds struggle to meet the high costs associated with electoral politics, including printing promotional materials, organizing meetings, hiring campaign staff, and traveling across large constituencies (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012). These financial barriers are compounded by limited access to party funds, business donor networks, and informal patronage channels, which remain largely male-dominated. The political system's growing reliance on privately sourced campaign finance therefore deepens existing inequalities, disproportionately disadvantaging women, as their access to personal and party resources is constrained by persistent gender inequalities (Athukorala, 2021; United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA], 2025).

In sum, the intersection of low labor force participation, income inequality, limited asset ownership, and exclusion from political finance networks severely curtails women's capacity to enter and sustain political careers. Unless these economic barriers are addressed, financial insecurity will continue to serve as a gatekeeper, preventing women, particularly those from marginalized communities, from participating meaningfully in electoral politics.

Structural and Cultural Barriers

Beyond economic inequality, structural and cultural barriers rooted in patriarchy, social conservatism, and gendered power relations significantly impede women's access to campaign finance and political participation. These constraints are deeply embedded in Sri Lanka's political culture and societal norms, which collectively reinforce the perception of politics as a male domain and marginalize women from both formal institutions and informal networks of power.

Patriarchy and Gender Norms

The enduring influence of patriarchal structures in Sri Lanka plays a central role in shaping women's exclusion from political finance (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012). Drawing on feminist institutionalism, scholars such as Krook and Mackay (2011) argue that informal institutions, such as male-dominated political networks, patronage systems, and cultural expectations about leadership operate alongside formal rules to constrain women's political agency. These informal norms dictate who is seen as a "credible" candidate, often privileging men with access to financial capital, elite networks, and political family legacies.

In the Sri Lankan context, patriarchal norms are not only institutionalized within political parties but also operate through community and family structures (de Mel, Peiris, & Gomez, 2013). Women are often discouraged from engaging in public life, especially in conservative regions. In the Northern and Eastern Provinces, decades of conflict, militarization, and cultural conservatism have further limited women's mobility, public visibility, and access to campaign-related resources (Bandarage, 2010).

The Role of Social Conservatism and Regional Variation

Social conservatism also plays a significant role in reinforcing gender norms, particularly in rural and post-war communities (de Alwis, 1995). In such settings, public leadership roles are often seen as inappropriate for women, particularly those without familial or political lineage. These cultural expectations restrict women's ability to campaign freely, speak in public, or solicit funding from community networks that are often male-dominated. As Goetz (2003) argues, cultural ideologies of respectability and gendered morality limit women's political agency by subjecting them to socially constructed standards of behavior and moral scrutiny, which can influence both voter perceptions and financial backing.

Moreover, the post-war political environment in regions like the North and East has created specific challenges for women. Women from these areas often assume leadership roles out of necessity due to the deaths or disappearances of male relatives but are then stigmatized or perceived as symbolic rather than substantive political actors (Sritharan, 2024).

Intersectionality and 'Double Discrimination'

The experiences of minority women illustrate the importance of an intersectional approach to understanding structural barriers. The concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), emphasizes how overlapping identities such as gender, ethnicity, religion, and class compound marginalization. In Sri Lanka, Tamil, Muslim, and estate Tamil women face what can be termed "double discrimination": exclusion based on both gender and ethno-religious identity. These intersecting forms of marginalization manifest in limited educational opportunities, lower employment rates, restricted mobility, and exclusion from political decision-making spaces (Wickramasinghe & Kodikara, 2012).

Dynamics of Political Parties and Candidate Selection

Opaque Internal Governance and Informal Selection

Political parties in Sri Lanka play a central, yet often opaque and exclusionary role in shaping access to electoral politics. While the country formally adheres to democratic norms, internal party governance remains largely non-transparent and unregulated. Candidate selection is not typically guided by codified or standardized procedures but instead hinges on the discretion of party leaders and executive committees (Liyanage, 2018). Most major parties lack internal voting mechanisms or formal selectorate structures. As a result, aspiring candidates must navigate informal pathways, such as cultivating personal relationships with party elites or demonstrating fundraising capacity and public visibility, to secure nominations. These informal processes allow party leadership to exercise considerable control, often based on implicit yet widely understood criteria. According to Siriwardhana (2022), candidates are evaluated primarily on their loyalty to the party leadership, their ability to contribute financially to the party, their access to influential donor networks, and their capacity to run media-savvy campaigns. These unwritten rules prioritize candidates with financial resources and elite social capital, often at the expense of political competence, grassroots legitimacy, or substantive policy engagement (Bjarnegård & Kenny, 2015).

Gendered and Intersectional Exclusion

This system of informal and financially driven selection disproportionately disadvantages women, especially those from ethnic and religious minority communities. Due to their limited access to campaign financing, male-dominated political patronage networks, and prevailing gender biases, many women are systematically filtered out at the nomination stage (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012).

The 2024 parliamentary elections offered a rare breakthrough in this regard. The successful candidacy of Ambika Samuel, a Malaiyaha (estate Tamil) woman, exemplified the deeply embedded challenges of intersectional exclusion. Estate Tamil communities have historically faced socio-economic marginalization and political neglect (Uyangoda, 2012), and Samuel's campaign confronted severe financial constraints and institutional skepticism. Her election was made possible largely through the targeted inclusion policies of the National People's Power (NPP), whose institutional support played a critical role in overcoming structural exclusion (Skanthakumar, 2014). This case demonstrates how proactive party-level interventions can create meaningful opportunities for marginalized groups (Kodikara, 2010).

Party Gatekeeping and Masculinized Leadership Norms

Beyond the nomination process, political parties also serve as gatekeepers of public legitimacy and electability. The informal norms governing candidate selection tend to reinforce patriarchal values that associate leadership with masculinity. As Bjarnegård and Kenny (2015) highlight, individuals with financial independence, elite credentials, and patronage ties are privileged within party structures, marginalizing those who do not conform to these norms. Women are often perceived as lacking the strategic aggression or social capital necessary for electoral success, thus reinforcing a gendered hierarchy within political recruitment.

Strategic Tokenism and Weak Quota Implementation

Although some parties have introduced gender quotas or promoted women politicians to appeal to donors and the electorate, these measures often amount to symbolic inclusion. Women are frequently assigned to unwinnable constituencies, deprived of campaign financing, or replaced shortly before elections, practices that reflect the instrumentalization of gender inclusion rather than a genuine commitment to equity (Wickremasinghe & Kodikara, 2012). As Krook and Mackay (2011) argue, such strategic tokenism may help parties satisfy external pressures for inclusion while maintaining entrenched power asymmetries. Without institutional reforms, quotas risk reproducing the very inequalities they are intended to dismantle.

Limits of Legal and Policy Frameworks

Despite growing concerns about the influence of money in Sri Lanka's political processes, the country has historically lacked a comprehensive and enforceable framework governing campaign finance. A Draft Campaign Finance Bill introduced in 2019 sought to address critical issues such as donor disclosure, spending limits, and penalties for violations. While revisions in 2022 included improvements, most notably, a requirement for candidates to submit post-election financial returns within 21 days, the bill remained unenacted due to repeated parliamentary delays and an evident lack of sustained political will (Transparency International Sri Lanka [TISL], 2016; Centre for Monitoring Election Violence [CMEV], 2017; TISL, 2023).

Civil society organizations, including CMEV, viewed the draft legislation as a potent mechanism to investigate political financing and promote transparency. However, the Bill's prolonged dormancy, coupled with the treatment of campaign finance documents as confidential rather than public, severely limited accountability. Until recently, no binding legal framework existed to regulate contributions to candidates or political parties, and there were no enforceable limits on campaign expenditures (CMEV, 2017). These gaps undermined fair electoral competition and entrenched inequalities in political participation.

This legislative landscape shifted in January 2023 with the enactment of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023, the first binding legal framework on campaign finance in Sri Lanka. The Act introduced several key provisions:

• Spending Limits: The Election Commission is mandated to fix an "authorized amount" per election, calculated based on a per-voter rate and the number of registered voters, within five days after the close of nominations.

• Donation Restrictions: Political candidates and parties are prohibited from receiving donations from government entities, foreign organizations, companies with 50% or more foreign ownership, and anonymous donors.

• Financial Disclosure: All candidates, political parties, and independent groups are required to submit detailed, audited returns of campaign contributions and expenditures within 21 days of the publication of election results (TISL, 2023).

Complementing this, the Anti-Corruption Act No. 9 of 2023, enacted in August, made it mandatory for all candidates to submit Declarations of Assets and Liabilities at the time of nomination (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2023). These two Acts together represent a significant legal advancement in regulating the role of money in politics.

However, critical implementation challenges persist. Although the Election Commission now plays a central role in setting expenditure limits and receiving financial disclosures, its enforcement powers remain weak. The Commission is limited to referring violations to law enforcement agencies (police) (Perera, 2024; TISL, 2023). Additionally, third-party and digital campaign spending remain unregulated, and there is no legal requirement for real-time or pre-election disclosure of donations. Financial returns, while legally required, are not automatically made public, hindering transparency and civic oversight (Hattotuwa, 2024).

A particularly contentious issue is the level of the official campaign spending cap. According to a gazette notification dated August 16, 2024, each presidential candidate is permitted to spend up to Rs 109 per registered voter, amounting to approximately Rs 1.86 billion (around US$5 million) per candidate. Critics have argued that this sum, unprecedented in Sri Lanka's political history, is excessive and undermines the reformist spirit of the legislation. Hattotuwa (2024) describes this as a "mockery" of the 2023 law, contending that such high ceilings entrench a political culture that privileges the wealthiest individuals while excluding reform-minded and grassroots candidates. In his view, this effectively precludes the possibility of meaningful systemic change as envisioned during the 2022 Aragalaya movement (Hattotuwa, 2024).

Organizations such as TISL and CMEV have consistently pointed out weaknesses in the existing law and called for enhanced public access to campaign finance information. A main structural weakness pointed out is that neither the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023 nor the Anti-Corruption Act No. 9 of 2023 establishes a mechanism for auditing the financial or asset declarations submitted by candidates. As a result, candidates may submit inaccurate or misleading information with little or no risk of detection. Without stronger auditing provisions, enhanced public access, and greater investigative authority for the Election Commission, the effectiveness of the current legal framework remains fundamentally compromised (CMEV, 2017; TISL, 2023). Furthermore, another most important weakness is that the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No.3 of 2023 does not include any requirement for candidates or political parties to channel all campaign-related income and expenditure through a dedicated campaign bank account. In the absence of such a provision, tracking financial flows becomes difficult, creating opportunities for transactions without any records and enabling candidates to obscure the true scale and source of their spending (TISL,2023).

Quota Reforms and Symbolic Representation

The Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act, No. 16 of 2017, introduced a 25% mandatory quota for women in local government bodies. This was widely seen as a breakthrough in a context where women had historically been excluded from formal politics. The 2018 local elections marked the largest numerical increase in women's representation in Sri Lankan history, with over 2,000 women elected to municipal bodies. However, the impact of this quota has been largely symbolic due to the absence of institutional and material support. As Peiris and Lecamwasam (2020) argues, without internal party democratization, political education, and capacity-building, quotas risk becoming symbolic gestures rather than genuine instruments of empowerment. Many elected women have reported being sidelined in council proceedings, receiving fewer resources, and facing hostility from male colleagues.

Furthermore, the quota system has not been extended to national-level institutions. Parliamentary representation for women remains significantly low, just under 10% as of the 2024 elections, despite the recent gains achieved through the National People's Power (NPP) party (Department of Elections, 2024). Calls for a national-level quota have repeatedly stalled due to a lack of cross-party consensus and entrenched resistance from party elites (Muragala Foundation, 2024).

Comparative Literature

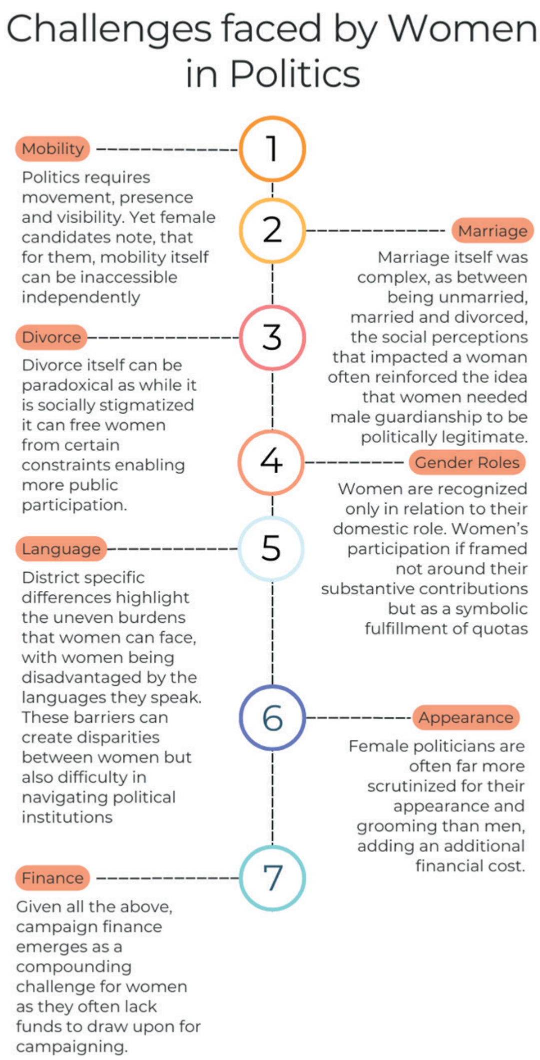
Scholarship increasingly treats women's political participation not merely as a question of representation but as an outcome of entrenched political-economic structures that reproduce gendered exclusion through campaign finance and party gatekeeping. Krook (2010) argues that male-dominated patronage networks and institutional norms shape candidate selection, privileging those with established access to financial and symbolic capital. Empirical studies show that informal campaign-funding systems across the region, characterized by opaque donations, elite-controlled patronage, and kin-based clientelism create structural disadvantages for women (Agrawal, 2021; WEDO, 2007). The vast majority of political donors are men, which limits women's capacity to mount competitive campaigns and makes them reliant on personal savings or ad hoc NGO support (Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012; WEDO, 2007). These fiscal constraints intersect with patriarchal norms, electoral violence, and biased media framing, all of which further constrain women's visibility and viability as candidates (Bjarnegård & Zetterberg, 2020). Consequently, as Jalalzai (2013) and Nazneen (2018) note, women's limited participation is not due to lack of political ambition but rather to the structural exclusion embedded in South Asia's political economy of elections.

The financial penalty attached to campaign politics is particularly severe for women from ethnically, caste, or religiously marginalized groups. Studies of Dalit women in India reveal a "double burden" of caste discrimination and gendered under-funding that confines their political activity to lower tiers of government or reserved seats with minimal discretionary budgets (Paik, 2018). In Pakistan and Bangladesh, reserved-seat and quota mechanisms have improved descriptive representation but have not equalized financial access: women depend heavily on party elites for nominations and campaign funds, reinforcing dependency rather than empowerment (Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012). Across these contexts, scholars converge on the argument that meaningful inclusion requires coupling representational reforms with structural changes to campaign-finance regimes, introducing financial quotas, transparency and civic oversight to democratize political participation for women, particularly those from minority ethnic, caste, and religious communities (Agrawal, 2021).

FINDINGS

Challenges Faced by Women in Politics

Women entering politics in Sri Lanka face a complex set of gendered challenges that shape not only their participation but also their capacity to compete effectively within the political field. These challenges are filtered through local cultural norms, family structures, and social expectations, which differ across districts but consistently reveal how patriarchy and social control restrict women's political agency. Importantly, women are not a homogenous category: class, marital status, religion, language, and community background all mediate the obstacles they face and the strategies they deploy to navigate them.



Gendered Mobility and Moral Surveillance

Restrictions on women's mobility emerge as one of the most pervasive yet powerful constraints on political participation across Sri Lanka. Politics demands visibility, movement, and responsiveness, qualities that often clash with prevailing gender norms. In Moneragala, the findings highlight that political work entails constant presence: attending meetings, visiting households, distributing goods, and most importantly responding to emergencies. For women, however, movement in public spaces remains socially policed and morally charged.

As a man politician observed:

"It is very difficult for women to do politics because they cannot travel alone at night. There can be emergencies at night time and people expect your presence... Women should at least be able to ride a bike as a basic requirement."

Here, mobility is not merely logistical but moral. Unmarried women who move alone risk being stigmatized, while widows face even harsher scrutiny. As an expert from a regional women's rights organization in Moneragala explained:

"Even a small rumour about a woman is exaggerated into a big scandal. Widows, especially, are silenced completely; politics is simply not for them."

Marriage, in this context, becomes a double-edged sword. It can either confer legitimacy or impose restriction. A man politician compared two candidates:

"There were two young female candidates. One was married and the other one was not. The unmarried girl had no one to come with her for the campaign. She had to do everything within the limit that she can manage on her own. The other who won was married, and her husband would come with her to all the places she visits."

Female legitimacy thus often rests on the presence or endorsement of a husband, reinforcing patriarchal assumptions that women require male guardianship to navigate public life.

Regional Variations in Women's Political Agency

Jaffna: Conflict and the Transformation of Gender Norms

In Jaffna, decades of civil war and the prevalence of female-headed households have reconfigured gender relations. The prolonged absence of men during the war normalized women's participation in community life and public decision-making, creating conditions in which women are more accustomed to public visibility and leadership. A woman politician from Jaffna reflected on their collective efforts to resist party marginalization:

"Those of us who contested the 2018 election have now come together. This time, they tried to remove the older female candidates and bring in new ones, but we opposed it. We even held media discussions. The training we received after the war gave us the confidence and strength to speak up and fight for our rights."

Another woman politician from Jaffna explained:

"We have been doing social work in this area for years… long before we entered politics. People know us because we are always there when something needs to be done, whether it's helping a family in trouble or organizing community events. Even within the party, men sometimes try to push us aside or act as if we don't belong, but we don't stay quiet. We stand our ground and fight back. They know we can't be easily removed because the people trust us."

The war-induced restructuring of gender roles has thus created a social foundation for women's political participation in Jaffna, even as patriarchal attitudes within parties persist. Their narratives point to a form of assertive political agency, forged through conflict, community work, and collective mobilization, that contrasts sharply with the dependency and exclusion observed elsewhere.

Colombo: Class and Familial Power

In Colombo, women's participation is mediated less by moral scrutiny and more by class privilege and elite networks. Urban women local government politicians tend to come from politically connected or economically stable families, which grant them both legitimacy and protection.

As a woman politician from Colombo explained:

"My father helped politicians a lot. Although he did not contest, he was very much involved with politicians and helped their campaigns. After he passed away, I was asked to contest. I anyway had my father's business so I thought I should carry on what my father did. My husband is also my cousin; he supported this idea because he knows how involved my father was in politics."

A representative from the Federation of Sri Lankan Local Government Authorities summarized this urban dynamic succinctly:

"In Colombo, politics is expensive and aggressive. The women who survive here have the money and the networks. They are powerful, but they come from powerful families."

In contrast to Jaffna's social legitimacy built through community work, women in Colombo tend to rely more on inherited capital and political lineage to access the field.

Batticaloa: Religion, Patriarchy, and Paradoxical Autonomy

In Muslim communities such as Batticaloa, women's political participation is constrained by both familial control and religious institutions. The intersection of religion, morality, and community surveillance produces a particularly restrictive environment.

According to a male politician in Batticaloa:

"It is challenging for women to engage in politics because of the mosque. At the same time, many women themselves are shy to enter politics. For example, women face big issues regarding how they dress. They are not allowed to enter some institutions if they cover their face. Very few women work in these places; it's mostly men. It's the same in politics; it's mostly men. Muslim women also cannot go canvassing or talk to men directly."

However, paradoxically, divorce or widowhood can open spaces of autonomy. A woman politician from Batticaloa shared:

"When I first entered politics, my family didn't approve of it. My parents could have been convinced, but my siblings were completely against it. I was married at the time, but later I had to get a divorce because he cheated on me. That's when I was really able to get involved in politics."

She added: *"Our religion says that we should serve society, but men don't like women getting involved in such matters. It's not the religion that says this, it is what men have made it into. After my divorce, I was free to do social work and to get involved in politics."*

Here, women's political agency emerges not through institutional support but through the breakdown of patriarchal marriage, illustrating the paradoxical routes through which autonomy can be claimed.

Badulla: Language, Education, and Emerging Visibility

In Badulla's estate areas, women's political participation is shaped by both patriarchal family structures and linguistic hierarchies. Political engagement often disrupts domestic expectations, creating tension within households. As one woman politician from Badulla recalled:

"My husband could not accept the way I had to be outside at work and always among men. Finally, we separated, but he came back after I won the election."

Political success, therefore, retrospectively legitimizes women's public roles, even as it initially destabilizes domestic authority. Historically, estate women were confined to private spaces with limited education and mobility. Yet generational change has begun to shift these boundaries. As a man politician from Badulla noted:

"Our mothers were not educated. But now there is a big difference in the new generations. The women from the estates are more exposed and educated, so they can handle these things. But it's something new that is happening."

A striking factor shaping women's entry into politics in Badulla is language. Fluency in Sinhala, the dominant administrative language functions as a decisive form of cultural capital. For Malaiyaha Tamil women, it has often been the main reason for being selected as candidates. A woman politician from Badulla explained:

"When villagers need to get something done from the local authorities, they come to me because I can talk in Sinhala. It's very important to know Sinhala if you want things done."

Another echoed:
"We are in the estate areas, but we always deal with Sinhala-speaking officers. Because I can talk in Sinhala, they [the villagers] always ask me to come with them. That's how people got to know me, and later I was asked to contest."

Their ability to converse in Sinhala not only mediates access to the state but also elevates them as indispensable intermediaries within their communities. Yet, this linguistic advantage underscores a deeper asymmetry, women's entry into politics is often enabled by their usefulness to Sinhala-dominant bureaucratic structures rather than by structural inclusion.

Symbolic Inclusion and Token Representation

Across districts, women's political inclusion often takes a tokenistic form. Quotas mandated by the state have increased the number of women politicians, but without altering patriarchal power structures. As a man politician from Batticaloa admitted:

"We don't expect women to come and work; they just need to fulfill the quota. It is our duty to not let them work and focus on their children's responsibilities and other household matters."

This view captures the hollow nature of formal inclusion, women may enter electoral lists, but decision-making power remains male-dominated. Thus, token representation seems to reproduce gender hierarchies at times under the guise of empowerment.

Threats, Harassment, and Uneven Risks

Women politicians also confront intimidation and violence, though its intensity and form vary across regions. In Batticaloa, several women reported receiving explicit threats for their political engagement:

"I received phone calls threatening me. They asked me to leave politics. Through friends and relatives, they sent me threatening messages to scare me and stop me from doing politics."

Such incidents were less common in Moneragala, Jaffna, or Badulla, where community-level gender norms rather than direct violence tend to regulate women's participation. However, in Colombo, the aggressive and highly competitive nature of urban politics exposes women to a different kind of hostility. Campaigns are often charged with intense rivalries, and women who enter this masculine political arena face not only verbal harassment but also physical intimidation.

A woman politician from Colombo recounted her experience of violence during the campaign:

"On the day of the election, a group of men from the opposite party were gathered near my office. They started shouting and saying things to me when I was leaving the office. When I tried to confront them, one of them pushed me. I fell and got badly injured. I had to be admitted to the hospital."

Her experience highlights how political aggression in Colombo, rooted in competition, patronage, and masculine dominance translates into forms of violence that women have to face. While in Batticaloa intimidation is often moral or religious in nature, in Colombo it manifests through physical harassment embedded within the urban political economy of rivalry and visibility.

Economic Disadvantage and Campaign Financing

Across all regions, women identified financial barriers as one of the most persistent obstacles to effective participation. Political competition in Sri Lanka is deeply monetized. Campaigns require funds for posters, sound systems, rallies, and voter mobilization. Women local government politicians, however, often lack access to patronage networks or independent capital.

According to a Civil Society Representative who works closely with female politicians:

"Men can manage their expenses by borrowing from shop owners, local businessmen, or people they know without much scrutiny. Women, however, cannot do the same; any such borrowing easily turns into gossip, with people creating stories and using it as supposed evidence of an inappropriate relationship."

Women politicians across all districts except for Colombo described relying on labor-intensive, low-cost methods such as door-to-door canvassing:

"I got some day cards from my party. I went from house to house during the campaign and gave them out myself. I don't have money to spend on meetings or big events."

Another added:

"I could have won if I had money. I pasted some posters the party gave me and went from house to house to talk to people. I couldn't cover all the houses because they were too far apart, but I visited most of them on my bike. I didn't have many expenses. Two women came to help me."

In contrast, men spoke openly and confidently about their campaign expenses:

"I spent around five lakhs. I had to pay the people who helped me organize the meetings, and the sound systems were expensive. Hiring a sound system for just one meeting costs about 10,000 to 15,000 rupees." (Batticaloa)

"Since the previous provincial council election, I've been helping people a lot… got involved in making roads… so it wasn't easy to get people to vote for me this time. I held a few pocket meetings and sports club meetings and asked for their support. My party also gave me some money to print posters and run the campaign, and I spent some from my own businesses as well." (Jaffna)

This stark contrast underscores how economic capital and gendered moral codes intersect to shape political competitiveness. Men can convert wealth into visibility, while women rely on proximity to voters, strategies that are less materially rewarded and less impactful.

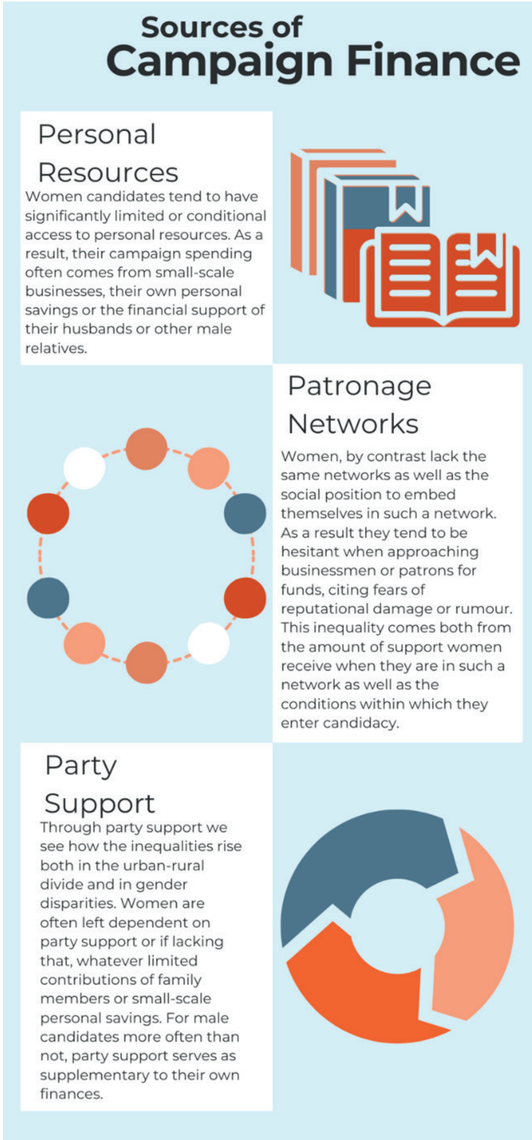
However, the dynamics in Colombo present a somewhat different picture. Given the city's highly competitive and monetized political culture, both men and women are expected to spend heavily to remain viable candidates. The gender gap in campaign spending appears less pronounced here than in districts such as Moneragala, Jaffna, Batticaloa, or Badulla. Although women politicians in Colombo did not disclose exact figures, their tone and descriptions implied significant expenditures comparable to those of their male counterparts. They tended to speak cautiously about money, often redirecting the conversation toward their "hard work" or "commitment" rather than the material scale of their campaigns. This suggests that in areas like Colombo, particularly within the Colombo Municipal Council (MC) area, participation in elections is impossible without substantial financial investment.

Moreover, women in Colombo appear to be highly active and self-driven; they are not merely contesting because their names were added to the list, but are actively attempting to make something out of the opportunity. At the same time, our findings indicate that women who enter politics in the Colombo MC area often come from relatively privileged backgrounds, they tend to possess personal wealth, own businesses, or have access to influential networks, unlike many of their counterparts in rural regions.

Sources of Campaign Finance

Personal Resources

Men often draw on accumulated personal wealth, family assets, or business holdings to finance their campaigns. These resources give them the flexibility to invest in visible and resource-intensive activities such as hiring sound systems, staging large rallies, or distributing campaign materials that significantly increase their visibility and competitiveness. In contrast, women tend to have much more limited access to such assets. Their campaign spending often comes from small-scale businesses, personal savings, pawning their gold jewelry, or the financial support of husbands and other male relatives.



Across all regions, women described various strategies to raise money for their campaigns, often revealing the deeply gendered limits of asset ownership. One of the most common means was pawning gold jewelry, which is frequently the only property directly accessible to them. As a woman politician from Badulla explained, "I pawned my jewelry for the campaign. I don't know when I will be able to save them. I haven't even thought about saving it back." Another woman from the same district recounted that she obtained a small loan by leveraging her mother's enterprise: "The banks give loans if you are doing a business, so I used my mother's business to get a loan because I don't have anything in my name to mortgage."

Similar accounts were heard from Moneragala and Batticaloa, where women politicians said they pawned jewelry to cover travel expenses and to buy food for those accompanying them during campaign work. These stories underscore how women's access to political life often comes at the expense of their few personal possessions, turning jewelry which are their symbols of security and social status into instruments of political survival.

In Colombo, the pattern appeared somewhat different. The women politicians in Colombo had more avenues for income through family businesses, small enterprises, or salaried work, which provided some buffer against financial insecurity. Yet, even these women hesitated to disclose specific amounts. They often spoke in vague or cautious terms about campaign spending. While they did not explicitly mention exact figures, their descriptions implied significant expenditure. One woman politician in Colombo commented, "You know, we have to spend a lot if we want people to notice us, it's not possible to do politics in Colombo without spending." The way these female candidates spoke suggested that while their access to resources was relatively greater, discussing money openly, especially large sums remained socially uncomfortable and politically sensitive.

In all these settings, the men narrated a markedly different experience. None mentioned pawning jewelry or taking loans. Instead, they described drawing from their businesses or personal wealth accumulated over time. As a man politician in Badulla stated, "I spent around five lakhs. I have to pay for the people who help me organize the meetings, the sound, the printing. I used the money I earn from my business." Others spoke of using earnings from "photo framing shops," "renting vehicles," "running three-wheelers," or "conducting tuition classes." These accounts highlight how men's access to business capital and property enables them to fund campaigns more comfortably and at a larger scale.

As one expert interviewee representing a regional women's rights organization summarized, *"Women rarely hold property in their own names; even land deeds are typically registered under their husbands. While men can pawn land or other assets to fund election expenses, women lack such financial means. In most cases, the only assets women possess are small amounts of gold jewelry, which are often managed or controlled by their husbands."*

This structural inequality in asset ownership profoundly shapes women's political participation. For many women, entering electoral politics means entering debt or risking personal assets that hold both economic and emotional value. Their financial dependence on husbands or family members also limits the autonomy of their campaigns. While men exercise relative freedom over their expenditures, women must often negotiate within households to access funds, introducing both delays and constraints in decision-making. The contrast underscores how financial capital is deeply gendered and tied to property ownership as well.

Patronage Networks

Established patronage networks remain central to the generation of campaign finance, particularly for men. In Sri Lanka, politics is deeply embedded in webs of reciprocal obligation where favors, assistance, and influence are exchanged for loyalty, support, and financial contribution. Patronage operates not simply as an economic relationship but as a moral economy, an ongoing negotiation of gratitude, recognition, and reciprocity. Through acts of everyday brokerage such as helping a villager secure a hospital appointment, obtain a welfare benefit, or resolve a bureaucratic issue, men build a reputation of being able to "get things done," which later translates into both votes and campaign funds.

In Batticaloa, a man politician reflected on how his work at the local hospital allowed him to assist villagers in various ways:

"I am working at the village hospital. Because of my job, I have been able to help a lot of people in this area. If anyone known to me contacts me before coming to the hospital, I don't let them stand in the queue. I help people to get their name added to the clinic list. Also, I distribute free medicine that I get from the hospital... I have anyway been doing these favours to people and helping them even before I thought of doing politics."

His account focuses on the everyday forms of assistance he provides; helping people bypass queues, secure medicine, or gain access to public services. While framed as acts of personal generosity, such gestures reveal how occupational positions within the state apparatus open avenues for building durable relations of obligation and trust. These practices, sustained over time, transform the performance of duty and kindness into forms of social capital that can later underpin political legitimacy. In such contexts, the boundary between public service and political cultivation becomes blurred: the ability to help becomes a quiet but powerful means of accumulating influence.

Another man politician from Batticaloa recalled how his popularity grew after helping to reclaim a local marketplace, ensuring affordable goods for residents. As he explained, his ability to "get things done" became both his political message and his fundraising tool. Similarly, in Badulla too, a man described his gradual rise through local networks of assistance and business connections:

"I rent vehicles for a living, and I also have a photo framing business. I've been involved in politics since 2005. Even before I got directly into politics, I used to help people a lot."

These men have framed their political engagement as a natural extension of their longstanding social roles. Their entry into politics was not a sudden ambition but the culmination of years spent cultivating personal networks grounded in mutual obligation. Through acts such as voluntary labor, donations, and logistical support, they built reputations as dependable figures within their communities. This social credibility, in turn, becomes a kind of economic resource by attracting contributions, supporters, and investors who trust that their assistance will be reciprocated. As a result, men contest elections from a position of confidence, backed by community loyalty and the implicit promise of continued patronage.

Women, by contrast, remain largely peripheral to these entrenched circuits of patronage. Their entry into politics is often recent, facilitated through the 25% quota or as stand-ins for male relatives who cannot contest. While women frequently perform community work by helping people secure identity cards, welfare benefits, or access to local officials, these efforts are rarely recognized as political capital. Instead, they are moralized as acts of service rather than as transactional exchanges aimed at securing votes when they themselves contest elections.

A woman politician from Moneragala described her deep involvement in everyday problem-solving and bureaucratic mediation for villagers:

"I help people a lot to get their IDs, to get their names on the Aswesuma list. Even the secretary said people like me should be in politics, but they cut my name."

Her experience highlights how women's contributions, though socially valued, often fail to translate into formal political reward. She elaborated further:

"I won the election but they didn't give me the chance. Instead, they put another woman who doesn't even have a good character, she's in the toddy business. They chose her over me because of their networks. They had given sand to the minister and helped build his office, so they were rewarded."

Her narrative reveals the moral and transactional boundaries of women's political legitimacy. Her moral capital rooted in service and propriety was insufficient in a political culture where influence flows through exchange, brokerage, and material contribution. In the absence of comparable patronage networks, women's political participation most often remains precarious, dependent on external validation from male power brokers.

Moreover, women expressed discomfort with the idea of approaching businessmen or patrons for financial help, fearing reputational risk. As one woman politician from Batticaloa put it:

"If a woman goes and asks for money from a businessman, people start talking. They think she is getting help for other reasons. So we try to manage with what we have."

Another woman politician from Badulla explained:

"For men, it is easy to ask for money. For us, even if we go and talk to someone, we have to think about what people will say." She added further insight into the structural barriers women

face in campaign finance: "Businessmen are also scared to invest in women because they aren't sure they will get back what they put in. They say women are too honest; they won't be corrupt like men, so the money might not come back to them."

These testimonies demonstrate how gendered norms of respectability and moral scrutiny constrain women's ability to participate in the informal economies of patronage that underpin political financing. Beyond economic inequality, it is the social policing of women's interactions that limits their access to the flows of money, influence, and obligation that sustain political life. For men, patronage is a well-established form of political investment; for women, the very social codes that valorize them as morally pure restrict their capacity to engage with those same mechanisms of power.

Political Party Support

Political parties constitute another critical layer in the financing of electoral campaigns, but their impact is highly differentiated across gender and class lines. For men, party support typically plays a supplementary role. They often have independent financial capacity, accumulated through businesses, property, or entrenched local networks, which allows them to operate with autonomy. Party assistance that covers poster printing, vehicle rentals, or publicity functions more as a symbolic endorsement than a financial lifeline.

For women, however, especially those from rural and working-class backgrounds, party support often represents the primary or even the only available source of campaign funding. These funds are usually modest, covering only the most basic campaign expenses. Yet, the very act of securing party backing is itself a negotiation, one in which women's credibility, moral reputation, and financial means are all scrutinized.

As one political analyst shared his observation:

"Political parties avoid nominating women with real chances of winning; they fear such candidates. Women are often included only to meet the quota requirement. While men with businesses, shops, or property are prioritized, women are typically selected from lower social strata with limited resources or influence."

This dynamic reflects a broader structural bias: parties rely on women's symbolic value for fulfilling representation quotas but rarely invest in them as viable political actors. Party nominations thus reproduce rather than challenge gendered hierarchies, placing women in positions of dependence rather than empowerment.

A disabled Muslim woman politician from Batticaloa recounted her repeated rejections across party lines:

"I went to different political parties to ask whether I can contest from their party. They rejected my request because they knew I didn't have the financial capacity. The Muslim Congress said I don't have enough money with me to spend on the campaign and the NPP said I don't have educational qualifications to contest from their party. In the end, only Sajith gave me a chance. That too... may be due to sympathy as I am disabled."

Her experience captures the intersectional nature of exclusion in local politics, where gender and financial capacity interact to restrict entry into formal political spaces. Political parties assess "winnability" not only in terms of community trust or grassroots work but in terms of financial liquidity and connections.

Another Muslim woman politician from Batticaloa explained how her years of social work were overlooked by party elites:

"Before I entered politics, I did a lot of social work. I tried to meet politicians about these matters, but they never gave me time. Meeting Hisbulla was impossible. Most Muslim women who enter politics have influence through their powerful families. I worked at the RDS as a treasurer and helped many women find jobs, so I was able to enter politics because I was already well known among the Muslim women in this area for helping them. Now, the same politicians who wouldn't meet me before are trying to meet me to get votes for their parties."

Her story reveals how women's social work becomes politically legible only when it serves the electoral goals of men. Their moral labor is instrumentalized to mobilize votes but seldom rewarded with substantive power or financial support. As another woman politician from Batticaloa succinctly put it,

"No one in any political party gives equal treatment to women. They all just use us, women, to get their votes."

Women's experiences within parties thus illustrate a paradox. They are encouraged to participate in public life as representatives of community virtue and service but are excluded from the transactional spaces where resources and influence circulate. One woman politician from Moneragala recounted:

"When I entered politics in 2018, no one gave me any guidance. They just wanted a woman's name on the list."

Her disillusionment points to the tokenistic nature of party inclusion, where women are valued for representation rather than governance.

In essence, political parties serve as both enablers and gatekeepers in women's political journeys. For men, party backing complements already existing networks of capital and patronage, reinforcing their authority within the political field. For women, party affiliation in most situations offers visibility but not autonomy. Their access to finance, recognition, and leadership remains mediated through male-dominated hierarchies that define legitimacy in terms of wealth, influence, and transactional exchange. Thus, while gender quotas and party reforms have opened the door to women's participation, they have not dismantled the underlying political economy that privileges moneyed masculinity as the currency of power.

The Role of Campaign Finance in Electoral Competition

Campaign finance plays a decisive and multifaceted role in shaping electoral outcomes in Sri Lanka, extending far beyond the mere logistics of organizing rallies or printing posters. The ability of candidates to mobilize financial resources directly influences not only their visibility and credibility but also their capacity to convert social recognition into votes. This dynamic underscore the way economic power intersects with political power, often reinforcing pre-existing social hierarchies.

As a woman politician in Colombo explained, even candidates with long-standing community engagement struggle to succeed without significant financial investment. She stated, "You can have a record of ten years helping people, but if you don't spend during the campaign, people won't remember you. Winning is about what voters see in the last month, not what you did before." This highlights the temporal logic of electoral politics in Sri Lanka: long-term service and grassroots engagement, while socially valued, often fail to translate into votes unless they are complemented by immediate, visible interventions during the campaign period. In effect, electoral success is mediated less by cumulative social contributions and more by candidates' capacity to orchestrate short-term, high-impact displays of support.

This pattern is reinforced in Badulla, where a woman politician recounted how years of sustained community work were eclipsed by a man politician's last-minute material intervention. She reflected, "My husband and I had always helped people, but another male candidate fixed a water line issue just before the election. Everyone voted for him because it was done a couple of days before the election and that is what retains in their mind." This example illustrates how strategic timing and visibility of campaign spending can override sustained social engagement. Women face this issue more acutely than men because, on average, they have less access to personal wealth, party funds, and donor networks, limiting their ability to make large-scale or last-minute interventions despite investing years in community service.

The Role of Campaign Finance in Electoral Competition

Elections are often decided not by longstanding service and commitment but by visible interventions in the days leading up to the election day.

Material Intervention — Male politicians invest in donations or repairs to draw attention to their campaign by leveraging the advantages inherent to them. This eclipses female candidates who invest years into community service

Unreliability of Elections — A candidates access and ability to mobilize financial resources impacts their visibility and credibility and their electoral success

Financial Inequality — In an environment where women are already constrained by an amalgamation of social and cultural barriers, financial inequality further deepens the divide between male and female candidates

Why is Campaign Finance Regulation Important?

Fairness Matters — Campaign finance regulation emerges as a critical mechanism to counterbalance the structural disadvantages that women face. Regulation allows women more feasible opportunities for participation

The material dimension of electoral competition further entrenches gendered inequalities. In Badulla, another woman politician explained, "People voted for the candidate who gave them goods and money. Another candidate who was competing with me went around giving rice packets and 5,000 rupees to every house, so people didn't vote for me." Similarly, in Batticaloa, financial expectations from constituents can be explicit and immediate. One woman politician described being confronted directly: "They say it to our faces, 'When you win, you'll make your own money, so give us at least ten thousand now to help bring you to power." In Jaffna, women politicians noted that some campaign helpers demanded monetary compensation for their support, withdrawing assistance when payments were refused, "When we ask for help, they ask what they will get in return. If we don't offer anything, they will not come to help... Same way if they demand anything from us in return, we also don't accept help from them."

Across all areas, women politicians spoke about the expectation of alcohol during campaigns. A woman politician from Moneragala explained, "I didn't give anyone alcohol to support my campaign. But my husband gave a drink to some of his friends who came to help." Another from the same district stated, "A man contested from the opposition. He gave everyone alcohol and spent a lot on food and drinks. Among the young men, there was a perception that there's no point helping women, because they won't even get anything to drink."

The gendered disparities in campaign finance are not limited to direct voter inducements. Men frequently leverage material interventions strategically to consolidate community support over time. In Badulla, a man politician openly described investing in school sports, supplying cricket equipment to local boys as a way to gain recognition and cultivate goodwill. Such practices reflect a broader political culture in which visibility, patronage, and material benefit are tightly intertwined with electoral success, disproportionately benefiting candidates with financial leverage.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the amplification of pre-existing inequalities. Women face compounded barriers: social norms often limit their mobility, public engagement, and access to informal political networks, while financial constraints restrict their ability to deploy the kinds of strategic interventions that male candidates routinely use. As a result, women may struggle to translate years of community work, social trust, or moral credibility into electoral outcomes.

In sum, campaign finance in Sri Lanka is far from a neutral mechanism. It is a decisive instrument that shapes not only the conduct of elections but also the social composition of political representation. By intertwining visibility, patronage, and material resources, campaign finance functions as both a gatekeeper and amplifier, consolidating the advantage of men and posing significant hurdles for women aspiring to political office.

Why is Campaign Finance Regulation Important?

Campaign finance regulation emerges as a critical mechanism to counterbalance structural disadvantages in electoral competition in Sri Lanka. By limiting campaign expenditures, such regulation reduces reliance on personal wealth or patronage networks and encourages candidates to compete based on merit, visibility, and community engagement rather than purely financial capacity. These rules help create a more level playing field, particularly for women, whose access to the resources necessary for large-scale campaign spending is often restricted.

As a woman politician in Badulla noted:

"That rule to control campaign finance is good. Before this act came, there was a well-known candidate who used to go around the villages in a three-wheeler full of money and give money to everyone. After this act came, we didn't see those things happening. But now they do the same thing in a more hidden way..."

Similarly, a woman politician from Moneragala reflected on the mixed outcomes of the reform:

"The intention is good but not successful... There was a male candidate in my own political party who spent more than 35 lakhs for his campaign."

Political analysts and election observers too have highlighted significant limitations in the design and implementation of Sri Lanka's current campaign finance framework. A key critique is that the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act does not empower the Election Commission of Sri Lanka (ECSL) to examine the contents of submitted expenditure reports or to cross-check their accuracy. Under the current law, the Commission must accept reports and it lacks authority to independently audit them. This gap allows for the possibility that "anyone could give false amounts that would abide by the given limit but will not get audited," a concern repeatedly raised by analysts.

During an expert interview, a political analyst further stated:

"The Election Commission appears to view the reporting requirements under the new act as a burden, often citing insufficient human resources to manage the additional workload effectively." She further mentioned that the law does not regulate aspects such as third-party spending or media and social media advertising costs, leaving room for undeclared expenditures to create competitive imbalances.

Together, these accounts illustrate both the potential and the limits of campaign finance regulation. While such measures have curtailed the most visible forms of overt vote-buying and established formal boundaries around campaign spending, they have not fully addressed the underlying inequalities of access to resources and networks. Campaign finance regulation is crucial not only for maintaining fairness in electoral competition but also for enabling women to participate on more equitable terms. Yet, without strengthened enforcement and comprehensive auditing mechanisms, the effectiveness of these rules remains constrained, limiting their capacity to transform the broader structural barriers faced by women candidates.

Compliance with Campaign Finance Regulations

Gendered Differences in Spending

Women politicians frequently operate within official spending caps, often not by deliberate choice but due to limited financial resources. Most of the women who were aware of the regulations in Moneragala, Batticaloa, Badulla and Jaffna mentioned that they anyway spent much lower than the spending cap they were given. A woman politician from Moneragala said *"I didn't come anywhere close to the spending cap. I don't have that kind of money. I only spent on petrol to go from house to house".* In contrast, men commonly treated spending ceilings as flexible guidelines rather than binding limits. They framed overspending as acts of generosity where they distribute gifts or host community events rather than explicit violations. Strategic underreporting of expenditures was also observed among men, allowing them to expand influence while maintaining the appearance of compliance. In Batticaloa a man politician said *"Reporting is only for formality. No need to write down all the expenses... and anyway most of the expenses are to help people and people expect that from us".*

However, it is important to note that, even within the category of women politicians, experiences differed. Women from urban districts or with established political family backgrounds often had better access to resources, networks, and party support, enabling them to compete more equally with men. A woman politician from Colombo described her campaign, noting that her daily expenditures exceeded LKR 100,000, yet, the expenses she submitted did not reflect what she actually spent. Despite these exceptions, most women continued to face structural disadvantages. While men could convert resources into visibility through large events, material handouts, or timely interventions, women were frequently constrained to low-cost strategies, such as door-to-door canvassing or small community meetings. A woman politician from Moneragala reflected, *"I spent only 3,500 rupees on my campaign, avoiding external donations to prevent obligations to others. While it allowed me to stay independent, few people noticed my campaign."*

Legal Literacy and Awareness

Awareness and understanding of campaign finance rules are also marked by pronounced gendered disparities. Across all districts, men generally demonstrated greater familiarity with the regulations, whereas many women lacked even basic knowledge. In some cases, women were entirely dependent on their patrons, resulting in very low levels of legal literacy and awareness. In Batticaloa, the majority of women politicians reported never having heard of the law, relying instead on party officials or male patrons to handle all the paperwork. Two women politicians from Batticaloa explained:

"We are both working at an agency. Our sir told us to contest for the election. We only gave our names and signatures. He handled everything else. I don't know how much was spent on my campaign because he did everything."

Similarly, in Moneragala district, a woman politician remarked:

"We received a form to fill the election expenses. I only wrote my name and put the signature and gave it to the political party. The political party fills the details and sends."

These accounts illustrate that many women candidates' engagement with formal electoral procedures was limited to fulfilling basic bureaucratic requirements, while the substantive work of documentation and compliance was undertaken by others, typically male patrons or party officials. Their participation in these processes was thus largely symbolic, mediated through party structures rather than based on autonomous understanding or control.

In Badulla, both men and women politicians demonstrated comparatively greater awareness of campaign finance regulations, having read the documentation provided by the Divisional Secretariat office at the time of their nominations. However, even here, linguistic barriers persisted. Although the candidates in Badulla received an information pack explaining the campaign finance regulations in all three languages, the official expense declaration forms were provided only in Sinhala. As a result, several Tamil-speaking politicians, particularly women had to rely on their political parties to help complete and submit the forms. This highlights how procedural awareness does not necessarily translate into procedural autonomy. For women from some minority groups, the persistence of linguistic and bureaucratic barriers, combined with gendered hierarchies within party structures, limits women's ability to engage directly with the formal mechanisms of electoral accountability. What emerges, therefore, is a form of mediated participation, where women's involvement in elections is facilitated through party networks but constrained by institutional and linguistic exclusions that reinforce dependency rather than empowerment.

In general, awareness of the campaign finance law largely varied according to candidates' educational backgrounds and the manner in which they were selected for candidacy. Women with higher levels of education were mostly aware of the legislation compared to those with limited formal education. Similarly, women who had been involved in politics for a longer period demonstrated greater familiarity with the law than those who were newly nominated to meet the 25 percent quota requirement. Participation in training programs conducted by civil society organizations also contributed to higher levels of awareness among some politicians. However, it is important to note that these observations are based on qualitative accounts rather than a representative survey; therefore, the overall level of awareness across districts cannot be positioned or generalized with precision.

Hospitality versus Campaign Spending

Sri Lankan political campaigning is deeply entangled with broader cultural practices of hospitality and generosity. In everyday life, offering tea, food, or small gifts is considered essential when hosting visitors, and refusing such gestures can even be seen as offensive. This cultural expectation seamlessly spills into the political arena, making it difficult to distinguish between ordinary hospitality and campaign-related spending. As a woman politician from Moneragala explained, "In our culture, when someone comes to the house you cannot just let them go empty-handed. You give tea, you give something to eat. But in an election time, this same practice becomes a campaign cost."

The blurred line between culture and politics means that routine acts of generosity, such as sponsoring a meal at a religious event, distributing refreshments at a sports match, or even organizing a birthday gathering become woven into electoral strategies. These gestures are often expected by communities, making it nearly impossible for politicians to avoid. As a woman politician from Batticaloa mentioned, "Men have clever ways of hiding political spending, like giving liquor shop tokens instead of cash. We know about it, but if we complain, people will blame us for stopping the poor from getting benefits, and we'll lose the few votes we have." Such practices, often justified as "helping people," complicate oversight and blur the boundaries between cultural obligation, personal generosity, and campaign expenditure.

The most critical and unresolved question around campaign finance in Sri Lanka is not only how expenses are reported but when a campaign actually begins. Politicians struggle to draw this boundary, particularly in a cultural context where hospitality and gift-giving are everyday practices. Sponsoring a religious event, providing refreshments at a school function, or distributing gifts at a wedding could all be considered as campaign expenses if they occur in proximity to an election. Yet, because these activities are also embedded in cultural obligations, candidates often insist that they are simply "helping the community." This ambiguity creates the first major challenge to both regulation and reporting.

At the same time, campaign finance itself is highly complex, extending well beyond visible expenditures such as posters or rallies. In Batticaloa, women politicians described how men strategically mobilized religious authority, "They take the eldest male in the family to the mosque, give him some money, and get him to promise inside the mosque that he will ensure all the votes in the family come to that politician." Here, the use of money, family influence, and the sacred space of a religious institution becomes tightly interwoven. However, should this be understood as a campaign expense, a personal donation, or a cultural/religious practice? When religious spaces and promises of loyalty overlap with financial transactions, the very definition of what constitutes a campaign becomes blurred.

Even when reporting is required, it is widely perceived as a symbolic exercise rather than a serious accountability mechanism. A woman politician from Moneragala bluntly said, "The intention [of the law] is good, but it is not successful." Many candidates across districts described it as a matter of "just fill anything and send." This lack of seriousness is reinforced by the opaque nature of the process. Politicians, both men and women expressed confusion about what qualifies as a legitimate campaign expense versus what might be dismissed as "cultural" or "social." Without clear guidance, the line between routine social obligations and campaign spending remains blurred, widening the gap between regulation and practice.

Practical barriers further exacerbate the problem for women. In Badulla, for instance, politicians repeatedly raised concerns about language accessibility. While politicians received explanatory documents in Tamil from the DS office, the actual expense reporting forms were issued only in

Sinhala which illustrates a deeper failure of social inclusion in the implementation of campaign finance laws. As a result, women have to rely on intermediaries, usually men, which not only undermines their autonomy but also reinforces dependence on male patrons or party officials.

Taken together, these issues demonstrate how campaign finance in Sri Lanka is far from straightforward. The uncertainty about when a campaign begins, the blending of culture, religion, and politics, and the perception of reporting as a mere formality all combine to undermine regulatory intent. For women politicians with fewer resources and less institutional backing, these complexities impose disproportionate costs.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Women's campaign finance realities are often shaped less by their own choices and more by the conditions under which they are brought into politics. The 25% quota, while intended to expand opportunities for women, has in practice been used by most political parties as a way to meet the requirement rather than to promote women as viable candidates. Men, by contrast, are usually selected from financially or socially stronger backgrounds and positioned as the main vote-gatherers, while many women are nominated with little expectation of winning. As a result, there are many instances where women's campaign spending is typically lower because their candidacies are seldom treated as serious electoral bids and they are provided with limited resources. It is also important to note that this study has focused primarily on marginalized women, those disadvantaged by financial weakness, ethnicity, or restrictive cultural norms. The findings may therefore not fully extend to women who are better positioned within the political culture and who, over time, have managed to carve out more successful political trajectories.

Creating a level playing field for women requires tackling both the structural and cultural dimensions of electoral competition. Three steps stand out. First, campaign finance laws must be effectively enforced so that candidates who exceed spending limits face meaningful consequences. At present, regulations remain weakly implemented and poorly understood, making them ineffective. For women, this weak enforcement is especially harmful, as their limited financial independence, weaker access to resources, and reliance on male intermediaries leave them disproportionately vulnerable when rules meant to level the playing field fail to function. Second, political parties must move beyond treating women as symbolic placeholders and instead support women politicians with genuine prospects of winning. Without such institutional backing, women remain at a structural disadvantage, unable to compete on equal terms even when they formally enter the race. Third, long-term engagement with society and political culture is essential to address entrenched expectations of high campaign spending. Encouragingly, some political parties have begun to recognize the importance of women's political participation, and recent national-level discussions suggest that change, while difficult, is not impossible[1].

While legal reforms are vital, they will not succeed in isolation. Only by combining stronger enforcement with cultural change and party-level responsibility can Sri Lanka move towards a political system where women are not just present to meet quotas but are able to compete on equal terms. Ultimately, without reforms that address both the gendered dimensions of campaign finance and the broader social norms that underpin exclusion, electoral competition will continue to reproduce inequities. Strengthened campaign finance regulation, paired with measures to enhance women's autonomy and legitimacy, together with engagement from political parties and society to create new norms and trends, has the potential to transform women's participation from symbolic representation into substantive political engagement, while also fulfilling the original objectives of introducing campaign finance laws.

1. Prime Minister Dr. Harini Amarasuriya stated that "no country has yet fully achieved gender equality, and the road ahead demands sustained political commitment" (Prime Minister's Office, 2025). https://www.pmoffice.gov.lk/news.php?para=RU5vekFVR2dpQTd2VGRiMkZUNE4wRUowaFNidmJPMHBKdmdqU29aZ25CU0t0MDE2b0tEa0luemErMFkyeG-dzUQ==

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations are organised around the four key stakeholder groups identified in this study as most influential in shaping women's political participation, access to campaign finance, and the implementation and adherence to campaign finance laws: voters, women politicians, government authorities, and political parties. Each recommendation is grounded in the study's empirical findings and analysis, reflecting the realities faced by women across different regions and political contexts. These recommendations are intended to guide policy, advocacy, and institutional reform efforts and may be further refined through consultation with practitioners, academics, and experts working on women's political participation, elections, and campaign finance in Sri Lanka.

1.0 Engaging with Voters

Voter education is essential to strengthen democratic accountability and reduce the influence of money in politics. Awareness programs should help voters understand not only the importance of electing women but also the broader implications of campaign spending. Excessive campaign expenditure often signals candidates' reliance on patronage and their likelihood of engaging in malpractice to recover campaign costs once in power. Educated voters are therefore better equipped to make informed choices that can gradually shift the political culture away from vote-buying and financial clientelism.

Actionable recommendations

Immediate Actions (0-6 months)

1.1 Generate Evidence on Voter Perceptions

- Conduct a nationwide voter perception survey to assess public attitudes towards campaign spending, vote-buying, and electoral accountability, with particular attention to gendered perceptions of political participation and barriers faced by women candidates.

Short Term Actions (6-24 months)

1.2 Implement Coordinated National Voter Education Campaigns

- Drawing on findings from the voter perception survey, design and implement coordinated national voter education campaigns that clearly communicate the risks and consequences of excessive campaign spending.
- The Election Commission, in partnership with civil society organisations, should lead these campaigns ahead of national and local elections to ensure consistency, credibility, and wide outreach.

1.3 Develop Targeted Multilingual Media Content

- The Election Commission, in collaboration with civil society organisations, should produce teledramas, short video clips, public service advertisements, and documentary-style segments in Sinhala and Tamil. These materials should emphasise the long-term social costs of monetised elections and the democratic value of electing candidates committed to integrity and public service.
- Media content should explicitly demonstrate:
    - How vote-buying and excessive campaign spending distort public service delivery

and governance outcomes.

  - How citizens ultimately bear the costs of monetised elections, even when vote-buying is perceived as an immediate personal gain.
  - Why women candidates face unequal financial barriers and structural disadvantages in electoral politics.

- These materials should be disseminated at least six months prior to elections and broadcast repeatedly during peak viewing hours across television, radio, and digital platforms.

1.4 Institutionalise Campaign Finance Education within School Curricula

- In the context of ongoing syllabus reforms led by the National Institute of Education (NIE), structured dialogue series should be organised between the NIE, relevant ministries, civil society organisations, and subject-matter experts to provide inputs on integrating campaign finance and democratic accountability into curricula. Key thematic areas should include:
  - Voter responsibility and democratic accountability
  - Women's political participation
  - Campaign finance regulation and ethical electoral practices
- Training-of-trainers programmes for civic education teachers should be implemented, supported by standardised training manuals and assessment materials, to ensure consistent and effective delivery across all provinces.

1.5 Expand Voter Education Initiatives within Universities

- Facilitate collaboration between the Election Commission, the University Grants Commission (UGC), and civil society organisations to design and implement voter education programmes within universities.
  - Workshops focused on areas such as democratic accountability, ethical campaigning, campaign finance, and women's political participation, tailored to university student audiences.
  - Inter-university dialogues and debates on the social and political costs of monetised elections, ensuring representation from universities across different regions to incorporate diverse socio-economic and marginalised perspectives.
  - Student-led research and social media initiatives that translate campaign finance and electoral integrity issues into accessible, public-facing content aimed at wider youth audiences.

1.6 Strengthen Community-Based Voter Education Programmes

- Drawing on findings from the voter perception survey, design and implement local-level voter education programmes through grassroots organizations such as Rural Development Societies, Youth Organizations and Women's Societies, using these organisations as local hubs for sustained voter engagement.
- Train community facilitators to conduct structured village-level discussions and participatory activities that actively challenge the normalisation of vote-buying and clientelistic exchanges.

- Design programme content to explicitly discourage the exchange of votes for personal favours by linking such practices to long-term consequences for village development, public service delivery, and social equity.
- Facilitate collective reflection on shared development priorities, encouraging voters to make electoral decisions based on community-wide outcomes rather than short-term individual gains.
- Prioritise the participation of women and marginalised groups by working closely with Women's societies to strengthen political awareness, local leadership, and community-level accountability mechanisms.

2.0 Engaging with Women Politicians

The study revealed significant disparities in women's awareness of the campaign finance law, particularly among economically marginalized and rural women. Many women politicians relied on party officials or patrons to complete expenditure reports, which undermines women's autonomy and exposes them to legal risk. Addressing these gaps requires targeted, practical, and empowerment-oriented interventions.

Actionable recommendations:

Short Term Actions (6-24 months)

2.1 Establish Pre-election Training for Women Candidates

- The Election Commission, in collaboration with civil society organisations and development partners, should organise district-level pre-election training workshops for women candidates contesting local and national elections.
- It is important to ensure that all women candidates are informed about and given the opportunity to participate in these trainings, as some women are often invited to multiple initiatives while others may be completely excluded.

2.2 Link Legal Knowledge to Political Empowerment

- Training modules should explicitly frame campaign finance literacy as a tool for:
    - Reducing dependence on political patrons and party brokers
    - Enhancing credibility and trust among voters
    - Strengthening women's power within political parties and strengthen their capacity to compete on equal terms
- Programmes should also introduce women candidates to preventive strategies that explicitly demonstrate how excessive campaign spending can be avoided. This should include showcasing creative, low-cost, and legally compliant campaigning methods such as strategic timing of activities, sustained community presence and volunteer-based outreach, thereby reinforcing that political visibility, voter engagement, and electoral credibility can be achieved without resorting to excessive or unlawful expenditure.

3.0 Engaging with Authorities

Weak enforcement remains a major barrier to the effectiveness of campaign finance regulation. The study identifies underreporting, inconsistent monitoring, and language barriers as systemic issues that undermine compliance.

Actionable Recommendations:

Immediate Actions (0-6 months)

3.1 Strengthen Enforcement Authority and Procedures

- The Election Commission should issue clear, publicly accessible enforcement guidelines outlining:
    - Monitoring procedures
    - Audit criteria
    - Sanctions for non-compliance
- A specialised unit within the Commission should be mandated to investigate overspending and underreporting.
- Conduct independent expenditure audits during election periods to ensure accountability.

3.2 Improve Transparency and Language Accessibility

- All reporting templates, guidance notes, and legal explanations must be made available in Sinhala, Tamil, and English to ensure full accessibility.

Short Term Actions (6-24 months)

3.3 Create Ongoing Legal Literacy and Advisory Mechanisms

- Establish a dedicated campaign finance helpdesk or hotline to provide real-time guidance to candidates, with particular attention to women candidates.
- Introduce an accessible online complaints mechanism (e.g., an Android application) that allows candidates to report violations, intimidation, or irregularities related to campaign finance and electoral processes, with the option to do so anonymously.
- Ensure these mechanisms are staffed by trained officers or legal advisors who are independent of political parties, to maintain credibility and trust.

Long Term Actions (2-5 years)

3.4 Invest in Institutional Capacity

- The government should allocate dedicated budget lines to strengthen the Election Commission's monitoring and investigative capacity, with particular emphasis on ensuring sufficient human resources.

4.0 Engaging with Political Parties

The study finds that many political parties include women politicians mainly to meet the mandatory 25% quota, without providing them with the same level of support, resources, or recognition extended to men. In most cases, women are not viewed as serious contenders with the potential to win, but rather as symbolic inclusions. Addressing this imbalance requires political parties to move beyond token representation and actively support women's political participation as part of a broader democratic reform agenda.

Actionable recommendations:

Immediate Actions (0-6 months)

4.1 Engage with Political Parties on the Changing Political Culture

- Initiate structured dialogues with party leadership to promote a shift away from clientelist, male-centered practices toward a more transparent and inclusive political culture.
- Demonstrate how equitable support for women politicians and responsible campaign finance practices can enhance party credibility and appeal to reform-minded voters, drawing lessons from the 2022 Aragalaya movement.

Short Term Actions (6-24 months)

4.2 Establish Mentorship and Leadership Development Programs

- Create formal mentorship networks connecting experienced politicians with women candidates to strengthen political confidence, fundraising skills, and public visibility.
- Implement targeted leadership training programs within parties to build women's strategic, organizational, and campaigning capacities.

4.3 Trainings to Re-orient Women's Wings towards Women's Political Empowerment

- Support targeted training and facilitation programmes to clarify the political mandate of women's wings as structures that exist to support, resource, and advance women politicians within their parties, rather than functioning in symbolic roles.
- Provide technical assistance to strengthen internal accountability and financial governance mechanisms within women's wings, ensuring that funds they raise are transparently and strategically channelled towards supporting women candidates' campaigns rather than absorbed into general party financing or informal patronage networks.
- Deliver capacity-building and attitude changing initiatives that enable women's wings to function as mechanisms for creating a more level playing field in electoral competition, including support for campaign resources, campaign planning, mentoring, and strategic guidance to help reduce structural disadvantages faced by women candidates.

Long Term Actions (2-5 years)

4.4 Introduce Internal Party Guidelines for Equity

- Develop and enforce internal policies to ensure fair allocation of campaign resources, including funds, logistical support, and media access for women candidates.
- Monitor and evaluate compliance with these guidelines to ensure women politicians can compete on equal terms with men.

REFERENCES

Agrawal, K. (2021). Reforming political finance for more diversity in political office. International IDEA.

Athukorala, S., Ramanathan, S., Applegate, M., & Bibler, S. (2021, September). Women's political representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral system analysis and recommendations. International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES). https://www.ifes.org/publications/womens-political-representation-sri-lanka-electoral-system-analysis-and

Bandarage, A. (2010). Women, Armed Conflict and Peacemaking in Sri Lanka: Towards a political economy perspective. Asian Politics & Policy, 2(4), 653–667.

Bari, F. (2010). Women's political participation: Issues and challenges in Pakistan. United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women.

Bjarnegård, E., Håkansson, S., & Zetterberg, P. (2022). Gender and violence against political candidates: Lessons from Sri Lanka. Politics & Gender, 18(1), 33–61.

Bjarnegård, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2020). Gender and violence against political candidates. Routledge.

Campaign for Free and Fair Elections. (2017). Regulation of campaign finances and the electoral process in Sri Lanka.

Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989(1), 139–167.

de Alwis, M. (1995). Gender, politics and the "respectable lady." In P. Jeganathan & Q. Ismail (Eds.), Unmaking the Nation: The Politics of Identity and History in Modern Sri Lanka (pp. 137–157). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

de Mel, N. (2001). Women and the Nation's Narrative: Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka. Rowman & Littlefield.

de Mel, N., Peiris, P., & Gomez, S. (2013). Broadening gender: Why masculinities matter—Attitudes, practices and gender-based violence in four districts in Sri Lanka. CARE International Sri Lanka.

Department of Census and Statistics. (2023). Sri Lanka Labour Force Survey: Annual Report 2022. Department of Census and Statistics.

Department of Elections, Sri Lanka. (2024). Parliamentary election 2024 results.

Gunatilaka, R. (2013). To work or not to work? Factors holding women back from market work in Sri Lanka (ILO Working Paper No. 994838403402676). International Labour Organization.

Hattotuwa, S. (2024, August 23). Sri Lanka's official election spending cap is a mockery of the law. LinkedIn.

International Foundation for Electoral Systems. (2022). Women's political representation in Sri Lanka: Electoral system analysis and recommendations [PDF]. https://www.ifes.org/sites/default/files/migrate/ifes_womens_political_representation_in_sri_lanka.pdf

Jalalzai, F. (2013). Shattered, cracked, or firmly intact? Women and the executive glass ceiling worldwide. Oxford University Press.

Jayawardena, K. (1986). Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World. Zed Books.

Jayawardena, K. (2017). Labour, Feminism & Ethnicity in Sri Lanka: Selected Essays. Colombo: Sailfish.

Kodikara, C. (2010, October 18). Why women in politics always matters: A conversation with Chulani Kodikara. Groundviews.

Kodikara, C. (2011, March). Sri Lanka: Where are the women in local government? OpenDemocracy.

Kottegoda, S. (2023). Unpaid care work is work. Polity, 11(1), 85–87.

Krook, M. L. (2010). Why are fewer women than men elected? Gender and the dynamics of candidate selection. Political Research Quarterly, 63(2), 366–380.

Krook, M. L., & Mackay, F. (Eds.). (2011). Gender, politics and institutions: Towards a feminist institutionalism. Palgrave Macmillan.

Liyanage, K. (2018). Women and political parties in Sri Lanka. In A. Shastri & J. Uyangoda (Eds.), Political parties in Sri Lanka: Change and continuity. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Muragala Foundation. (2024, February). An assessment of women's political representation through the 25 percent quota in Sri Lanka: Impact and lessons learnt (S. A. Prabha M. Manuratne, H. B. Dassanayake, R. Gamage, & K. Abeygunawardena, Authors). Muragala Foundation.

Nazneen, S. (2018). Binary framings, Islam and struggle for women's empowerment in Bangladesh. Feminist Dissent, 3, 194–230.

Nazneen, S., & Mahmud, S. (2012). Gendered politics of securing inclusive development. BRAC Development Institute.

Paik, S. (2018). 'New' Dalit women and their 'improper' politics. Economic and Political Weekly, 53(24), 16–18.

Peiris, P., & Lecamwasam, H. (2021). Necessary yet insufficient: Women's quota for wider political representation in Sri Lanka. Women and Media Collective.

Peiris, P. (2023). Sri Lanka's bipolarized multiparty system: Democratizing the selection of rulers, not their rule. In S. Iwanaga & G. Sardesai (Eds.), Rethinking parties in democratizing Asia (pp. 195–217). Routledge.

Perera, M. (2024, December 22). Campaign finance law: Concerns over EC's limited powers. The Morning.

Siriwardhana, I. W. (2022). Women's political representation in Sri Lanka: Does finance matter? (Asian Schools Working Paper No. 6). Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies.

Skanthakumar, B. (2024, November 22). Sri Lanka's people have kicked out the old political class. Jacobin.

Sritharan, N. (2024). Unveiling the margins: Women, caste, class, and post-war development in Sri Lanka's North and East. In K. N. Ruwanpura & A. M. Saleem (Eds.), Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Sri Lanka (pp. 194–206). Routledge.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL). (2016). Annual report 2015: Electoral integrity and governance in Sri Lanka.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL). (2023). Recommendations on the Election Campaign Finance Bill.

Transparency International Sri Lanka (TISL). (2023). Review of the Regulation of Election Expenditure Act No. 3 of 2023 as per standards for integrity in political finance.

United Nations Population Fund Sri Lanka. (2025, August 22). Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Sri Lanka: A literature review.

Uyangoda, J. (2012). Minority rights, political inclusion and state reform: The case of Up-Country Tamil community in Sri Lanka. In Social Scientists' Association (Ed.), Reframing democracy: Perspectives on the culture of inclusion and exclusion in contemporary Sri Lanka (pp. 129–162). Colombo: Social Scientists' Association.

Venugopal, R. (2011). The politics of market reform at a time of civil war: Military fiscalism in Sri Lanka. Economic and Political Weekly, 46(49), 67–75.

Welikala, A. (Ed.). (2012). The Sri Lankan Republic at 40: Reflections on constitutional history, theory and practice (Vols. I–II). Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Wickramasinghe, M., & Kodikara, C. (2012). Representation in politics: Women and gender in the Sri Lankan Republic. In The Sri Lankan Republic at 40: Reflections on constitutional history, theory and practice (Vol. 2, Chapter 20). Centre for Policy Alternatives.

Woodward, C. A. (1969). The Growth of a Party System in Ceylon. Brown University Press.

WEDO (Women's Environment and Development Organization). (2007). Women candidates and campaign finance: Research and policy recommendations.

Transparency International Sri Lanka
366, Nawala Road, Nawala,
Rajagiriya,
Sri Lanka.

Phone: +94 11 4 369 781
Fax: +94 11 2 865 777
Email: tisl@tisrilanka.org
Web: www.tisrilanka.org

twitter.com/tisrilanka
lk.linkedin.com/company/tisrilanka
facebook.com/tisrilanka
instagram.com/transparency_sri_lanka
youtube.com/user/tisrilankatube