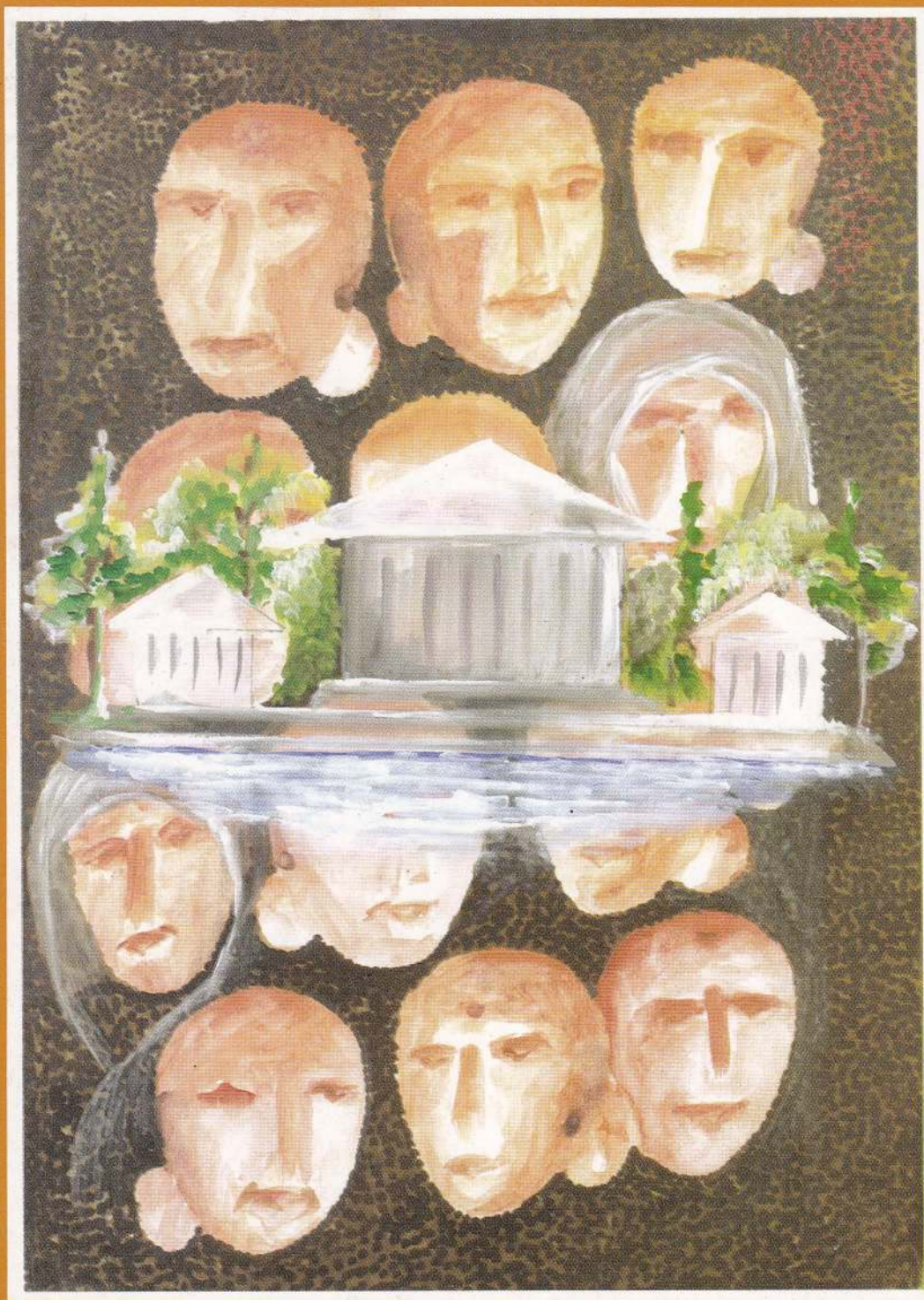




A Sri Lankan Journal for Women's Liberation

Voice of Women

❖ April 2002 ❖ Vol. 6 ❖ ISSUE 3 ❖ ISSN 1319 ❖ Rs. 20/=



Quotas?

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Printer : Hitech Prints

Sponsored by SIDA

April, 2002
Vol 06 Issue 03

ISSN 1319 - 0906

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Of Quotas



Voice of Women has collected in this issue material on the relative merits of quotas for women - entry in to the Parliament and examined the need for quotas. True enough we started very well in 1931 obtaining universal suffrage, no gender discrimination and equality assured. Moreover we had and still have a high literacy rate judging from school and university lists of number of females who pass exams. With women going abroad and earning for the family taking a decision making role, in addition to the earning capacity of the female at home, in the tea plantations, and garment industries rising, it seems that women somewhere are overlooked if not pushed out of line by patriarchal thinking and domination at home and in society.

It is alarming that this trend is growing yearly insted of reducing into some form of acceptable proportions. If we look at the proportion of women in the national legislature it crossed 5% only twice, that in the distant past of 1989 and 1994 elections.

At the general elections of 2000 the figure dropped to 4% and remained so at the 2001 general election.

The house has 225 members and out of that number only nine were women. Women have entered the economy in a deciding manner and it is only a fundamental right to seek a share in the government of the country. If certain factors in the minds of men and women curtail women - entry into the political body of the land then till we see a change in society we have to seek quotas to ensure our presence in the decision making body of the land. It is a necessity that we achieve this.

Eva Ranaweera

THE POLITICS OF PRACTICE AND THE PRACTICE OF THE POLITICS

Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran

We women do not still know the practice of politics and its implications for us women. We still do not know also the practice of competitive politics. I will try to answer the question why women and why politics and how? It is the feminists who coined the phrase "Personal in Politics". To politicize the personal of women, women need to enter politics in substantial numbers and with substantial issues, as democracy is sustained through meaningful participation and through a meaningful display of numbers.

Why don't women participate in politics is a question answered well in the recent research publications on women and politics. In short it is a sociological inquiry into the internalization of a culture that is imposed on women for centuries.

One of the main reasons for the lack of participation of women in politics is based on a culture which has assigned to woman the charge of the domestic sphere and with it the domestic chores and related concerns. This denies woman the space and time in the "public" world. Placed in the backdrop of this tradition and culture women are reluctant to setp into politics. Lack of time, and encouragement from relatives and society in general and for cultural, social expectations, women keep away from politics (Thiruchandran, 1977; 29).

Despite laws which give freedom to the woman to enter politics, she is prevented from doing so because support systems of the society in which she lives have not been provided for women in many countries. The Scandinavian countries are an exception.

Due to the absence of a supportive system consisting of child-care facilities and flexible working hours, it has been extremely difficult for a mother with small children to be a politician. Mothers are often not able to control the allocation of time, while the hours of a politician are often unpredictable.
(UN Study 1992 ; 37).

In a society which measures the woman's worth through "virtues" and "chastity" which she is expected to possess, politics can pose a threat to the woman, in that she can be subjected to charter assassination. The woman is conditioned to prefer staying away from politics than be subjected to character assassination, which forfeits her right to legitimate, "acceptable" full membership in society.

Another reason for the lack of women's participation in politics is that politics in many

countries and particularly in Sri Lanka has indeed become a dangerous game - so much so that with entry into politics there arises a constant, gripping fear for one's lives. Memories of violence amounting to murder and attempts at murder remain while the reality of political violence is fresh and bleeding in the Sri Lankan context today.



Socially and economically many women have come out of the imposition of what their culture has placed on them, but to the practice of politics there are still stumbling blocks both psychologically and practically. Those blocks also have to be broken and broken with results.

Women are socially and economically visible but politically invisible with drastic consequences and that has to be corrected. Statistics overwhelmingly provide us with examples of non-participation and therefore selections and elections of women into politics. There is a historical subordination of women and extra efforts have to be devoted to equalize opportunities, to struggle against injustice and deeply rooted discriminatory practices and exclusion of women from politics. What are our unresolved problems now in quality and quantity? We did politicize our issues but we have not politicized our issues through politics. Our politicizing is social politicizing mostly. The agenda for change in social conditions will not change automatically the whole spectrum of gender issues and gender relations. How many men have been conscientised to become "Feminists" by the historical feminist movements? Discrimination against women is endemic throughout the system, from the way in which rights and laws are conceptualised, formulated, applied and

regulated. We have been researching, documenting, petitioning, drafting, lobbying, for twenty years, from Mexico to Copenhagen, to Nairobi to Beijing and beyond. But we have been doing very little of legislating, far less in proportion to our tremendous problems and the success has been far less across space and time. How many more years do we have to wait on the goodwill of the few expecting them to be conscientised towards women's issue and gender relations? Dependent we have to be on men - because they are in a majority in politics. If we women do not make political interventions in the legislative, executive, judicial bodies we have to wait indefinitely.



In the year 1994 the total number of parliamentarians were 225 out of which women were a mere eleven in number (*CENWOR, 1995*). The Cat's Eye column of the Island, 30/3/97 states that in the 1931 - 36 State Council there were 5% women and that the figure remains the same at all subsequent elections up to 1994.

Legislative body	Total	No.of women	%
Parliament	225	11	4.8
Municipal Council	209	6	2.8
Urban Council	297	7	2.3
Pradeshiya Sabha	2,882	34	1.1

(Elections Department)

Asian countries have adopted special policies to ensure fuller and greater participation of women in the country. Two broad mechanisms used to increase levels of female participation in politics

are the system of **reserved seats** and **quota or target setting**. Quotas or targets are often established by political parties themselves. Under this policy a certain percentage of all candidates for a position or selection have to come from a certain group (e.g. women), either as a minimum or as a range within which that group should fall.



The second mechanism of reservation is that reserved seats are allocated for a particular group which is normally under - represented. Only candidates belonging to this group can contest these seats (UN Study, 1992). Where women have been under - represented countries such as **Pakistan** (20 of the 237 seats), the **United Republic of Tanzania** (15 of the 244 seats in the National Assembly) **Bangladesh** (30 of the 330 seats) and **Egypt** (31 of the 360 seats) have adopted the system of reserved seats to ensure leadership of women.

There are many among us who have reservations about the quota system. But there are also arguments for the quota system. Affirmative action and positive discrimination have been put in to political practice as political experiments with beneficial results. As an interim measure one can certainly try out this system. Women have to be made to get into the water of politics to learn to swim. They are an under - represented and politically a handicapped group - with a historic subordination, and that is why it is essential to consider introducing the quota system as an interim measure as a remedial action. We, in Sri Lanka have accepted the youth quota proposed by the youth commission. The other reason which weighs heavily for the quota system is the positive experience of other countries.

The quota system is felt to be very effective in introducing and encouraging women into politics. A UN study finds that the quota setting in Scandinavian countries has been very successful. While India's move in putting forward the consideration of a bill reserving one third of seats in legislative bodies for women is a source of encouragement, the shelving of a decision on the issue owing to protests by a few parliamentarians comes as a disappointment. The quota system for women was initiated by the United Nations, in 1995, the UN Economic and Social Council endorsed a target of 30% for women at all levels of decision making. In the African National Congress (ANC) of South Africa has argued for a 30% quota on nominations to the legislature. Sweden's target is a minimum of 40% of all posts to the "less represented gender". In U.K. the labour party has set up a Working Committee on Parliamentary Selection which would have as its sole aim the development to promote representation of women. The quota system thus through its mode of ensuring seats for women in the legislature seeks to redress a situation where women's participation in politics remains low and stagnant through time.

Arguments against

1. It has been argued that women who are culturally and socially conditioned to be Secondary citizens, if introduced into politics would emerge as mere "puppets on string" manipulated by the men in the game of politics.
2. It has been argued that reservations for women become an artificially created participation, not based on their "innate

belief in their equal rights but grounded in paternalism" which once again reinforces the women's image in the political arena as a "handicapped group" entitled to concessions.

3. Another reason put forward against reservations is that its implementation increases the number of relatives into the legislature, where mothers, sisters, wives and daughters figure in high proportions. But experience has taught that these are merely a few of the initial handicaps and that with the second generation of politics it disappears.

There is a danger I feel strongly that such stereotypical re-establishment may defeat our purpose for an argument to re-emerge that feminists are less rational, less instrumental, less assertive, therefore not fit for politics for which one has to be rational, assertive and instrumental. Besides we have a history where Indira Gandhi, Imelda Marcos, Margaret Thatcher, and Jayalalitha have proved as authoritarian leaders who seldom tolerated oppositional views and could equally be corrupt.

About the question of violence. Both quantitatively, that is in numbers and qualitatively that is in its levels, kinds and manners - feminists are less violent. In Sri Lanka today violence - both political and social is the major problem. In fact, the most obnoxious one, the most intimidating phenomenon for our socio - political ethos. Will the women's entry in numbers change this scenario?

My answer is yes it will change the situation substantially. Mine is not a biologically determined argument, which says there is something in the nature of women to be less violent. It is rather due to the fact women are socialized into a phenomenon of a victim hood and therefore have been receivers of violence both verbally and physically and not perpetrators of violence. Both quantitatively and qualitatively the picture is different.

Praxis and Modus Operandi

We have established women as a category and there is no problem of definition here. Women as a gender category has its commonalties. Women share nationally and internationally a common pattern of discrimination, exploitation, oppression and marginalisation. These words are no jargons but concepts with special political meanings. When this category forms more than fifty percent of the electorate with genuine grievances there is a need to have political representation of this category proportionately in the legislative bodies. Democracy and good governance demand that women be equally represented at the decision making levels both on the argument of rationality and human rights. This is an argument for engendered democracy.

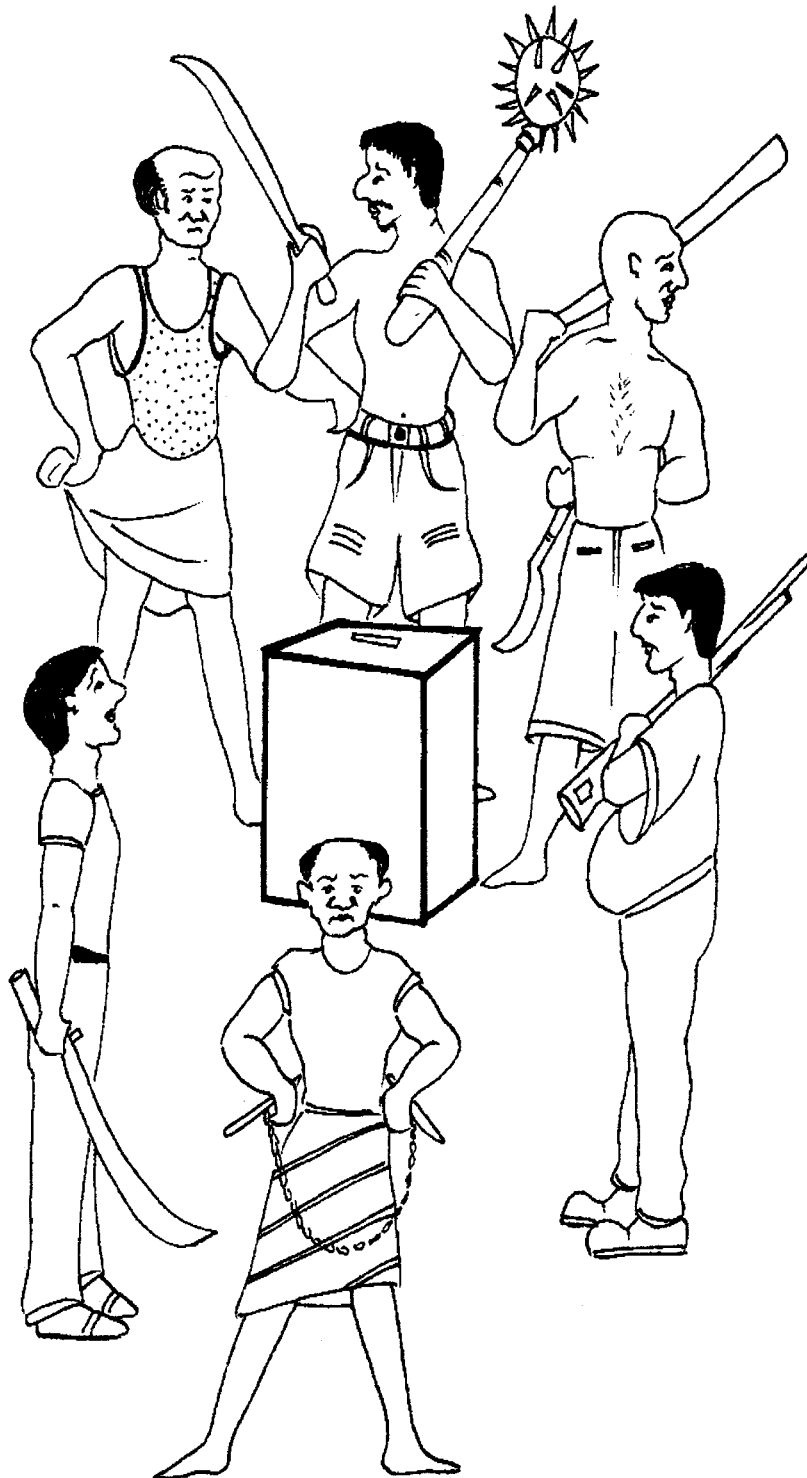
Strategies

- To raise consciousness at all levels to make women realize the importance of female political leadership, to make interventions at policy planning levels.

There is so much anomie and apathy among women who are able and efficient at the social level.

- To convince women's wings in political parties and the leadership of the political parties to enlist women candidates to seek elections both at local government and National levels with gender sensitive manifestos.

- To do the same at Trade Union Levels.
- To take steps to mobilise women and introduce gender sensitivity at the level of civil society in the electorate by creating a component of "raising the political consciousness on gender issues" into our gender sensitizing programmes.



WE ARE MANY

I want, I, woman, to leave
More than a thumbprint on historical
Documents reposing in archives
My identity a tattoo of distortions
A purply-blue scar from the wounds
Of my life.

I don't want to be an anonymous face
A romanticized portrait in classic mould
Hanging in the frozen timelessness of
Galleries, museums or painted on the walls
Of labyrinths and tombs.

I want to write my own histories
Subvert time so that eras and epochs
Coalesce running in mercurial quicksilver
Rivulets to form my world shaped in
The palm of my hand.

I see myself, bloodstained sheets flung
Aside, giving birth in the sterile chambers
Of this world, taking new transfusions of

Some strangers blood into my body to
Replenish the copious flow
Of what I have lost.

I have spent myself giving birth to
The new creations engendered from
My being, the poems, the fictions
That will one day be heard as women
Sing, recite, narrate in lyrics, dirges, laments
The stories of their lives.

Huddling in darkened caves, raped by war
Gaunt spectres of famines suckling new born
Infants with their lifes blood
Trekking trekking across trackless wastelands
Escaping from the ruins of cities and
The debris of shattered homes.

There are more than children growing
In my womb, there are sagas, epics
That cry for recognition, pages torn off
Their spines flung on the streets of the
World gathered up by those silent watchers
And bystanders who decipher the lettering

Which creates the narratives of our lives,
The lives of women whose countless
Experiences are played on the dulcimers
Of countless fingers, the screaming
Discords mingling with wind harmonies,
The battlecries in that backdrop
Drowning the wail of the birth - emerging
Child, to find life in the rage of that
Music which no breath can stifle,
No tongue can still in that primeval cry.

Jean Arasanayagam.



Women in Politics in USA

Seela Ebert -

(President - Sri Lanka Federation of University Women)

It can be safely asserted that the 20th century was marked by the struggle of women to come out of the ancestral division of the gender roles and have campaigned vigorously to win the rights they have been denied to become equal partners with men. In America too many laws limited the rights of women. They could not vote or sit on juries. When a woman married, her property became her husband's. Any money she earned had to be turned over to her husband. She was not even entitled to protection against physical abuse. A husband had the legal right to beat his wife with a 'reasonable instrument'. Customs as well as laws limited women's rights. Probably most Americans regarded women as weak and as intellectually inferior to men. At the same time they believed that women were morally superior to men. Accordingly a woman's proper place was in the home, where she could guard the family morals and give religious training to the children. American women lead several struggles in this background first to get equal pay for equal work and for the right to vote so that they could participate in public life.

History has a more complicated, more surprising story to tell about women's rights to vote. In the world of colonial Virginia where George Washington, Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson learned their politics as a matter of law you must be a white male owning at least a modest amount of property to be elected.

Sometimes there was only one polling place for the whole district, where Sheriff supervises the election. Besides him stand the two candidates who vie for the House of Burgesses (Virginia Legislation assembly). Both of them are members of prominent local families. You announce your vote aloud in a clear voice. Then you step over to the candidate for whom you have voted and he treats you to a glass of rum punch. That was an election day during colonial times in America. Can you imagine the plight of women at a time like that? Voting was not a matter of assent but a statement of affiliation, where drink, dollar and drama brought people to the polls.



In this background American women had to wage a long battle for the right to vote. Although definitions of democracy commonly includes all adults, measures of democracy often failed to include women.

Women voted only in scattered instances. Women with prosperity were allowed to vote in New Jersey in 1807 after women won the right to speak in public in 1838, a steadfast group of women argued that women as well as men deserved the right to vote. Three months before the Declaration of Independence was

signed, Abigail Adams wrote to her husband John Adams; "In this new code of laws which it will be necessary for you to make, remember the ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be tyrants if they could".

In 1840 a single incident sparked the beginning of a formal women's right movement. Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton travelled with other abolitionists to the worlds' anti slavery convention in London. Once there, the two women were refused the proper seating because of their sex, despite the protest of the American men. Mott and Stanton began thinking about organizing a convention solely devoted to women's rights. They called a Women's Right Convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848. On the same model on the Declaration of Independence they wrote a declaration, which called for equal rights, in education, ownership of property and VOTING. Then the group passed a series of resolutions that denounced the many unfair legal restrictions on women. All but one passed unanimously. The exception was the resolution demanding the women be given the right to vote.

In any event, the convention marked the start of a national campaign for women's equality, which still continues.

In 1896 they organized the National Woman Suffrage Association. That same year Lucy Stone and her Husband started the American Woman Suffrage Association. The two groups

merged in 1890. To call attention to the condition of women, Susan B. Anthony voted for President in 1872 and was arrested and fined.

Another constitutional amendment giving the vote to women was introduced in Congress in 1875. Every Congressional session for the next 40 years also introduced this amendment for women suffrage.

Western States had taken the lead in allowing women to vote. Wyoming, which became a State in 1890, had allowed women to vote since 1869.

By 1914, women could vote in 11 states. In 1916 Montana elected Jeannette Rankin the first woman to serve in the United States House of Representatives.

In 1914, Alice Paul and Lucy Burns formed the National Women's Party and began a campaign of parades and picketing. In 1917 for almost a year they took a stand out side the White House in sunshine, rain, sleet and snow urging passage of the constitutional amendment that would give them the right to vote.

Finally they were carried off to jail as public nuisances. When they went on a hunger strike they were forced fed.

On January 9th 1918 President Wilson declared himself in favor of women suffrage and on 10th January 1918 the Anthony Amendment passed

the House with the bare 2/3rd majority. In 1919 senate approved the amendment.

On August 26, 1920 the last of the 37 States ratified the 19th amendment and it became Law. Women voted for the 1st time in the Presidential election of 1920.

In 1923, Carrie Chapman Catt, former President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, described the effort as "To get the word Male" in effect out of the Constitution cost the women of the country 52 years. During that time they were forced to conduct 480 campaigns to get legislatures to submit suffrage amendments to voters: 47 to get state constitutional conversions, 277 campaigns to get state party conversions to include woman suffrage planks, and 19 campaigns with 19 successive congresses.

In the past half century women have accomplished much in the political realm. In

1996 elections, the media make explicit that 54% women voted for Bill Clinton compared with 43% of men. Elizabeth Boles short lived attempt at obtaining the Republican Party Presidential nomination captured the attraction of the media. Geraldine A. Ferraro earned a place in history as the first woman Vice-Presidential candidate on a national party ticket. Ms. Ferraro was first elected to Congress from New York's Ninth congressional District in Queens in 1978 and served three terms in the House of representatives.

In the US females vote more than males, with 56% of eligible women voting in 1996 compared to 53% of the men. American women also tend to register to vote at a 4% higher rate than the men.

In the US in 1999, 9% of the Senate and 12% of the House were composed of women. (But compared to the Industrialized democracies this is fairly less. Scandinavian countries average 39%, Germany 30%, Belgium 22% and UK 18%. Sri Lanka with a figure of less than 5% is far behind all these countries including America.

On average female representation in American State legislature is 22% almost twice the average of the women in the Congress. As of 1999, women constituted 41% of the members of the Washington State legislature, 36% of the Nevada legislature, 33% of Colorado and 32% of Kansas. Southern States have the lowest representation, including a mere 8% in Alabama.

Globally female ministers or heads of executive departments have been restricted to political positions that relate to their sex, such as the Ministry of Women and Family, Education or the Ministry of Labour. Until 1992 women cabinet members in the US normally held posts such as Labour, Education and Health and Human Services. President Clinton's appointment of Janet Reno as Attorney General and in 1996 Madeline Albright as Secretary of State repeated a change in this situation. It is not only in developing nations that women's political involvement gets portrayed in "motherly and nurturing" way. During the 1996 US Presidential Election, the Soccer moms incorporated by the Democrats, media, and then later, the Republicans played on women's roles as mothers. They did not empower women but projected women solely as mothers.

In politics, women lack role models and those who can mentor them in the art of politics. In the American system, those who decide to run for office also need financial backing. When the

cost of the average House Seat campaign is roughly US\$ 650,000 it has become imperative for women to be tied into the network of campaign donors.

In US Congress, the largest obstacle for increased female representation is incumbency and the fact that 85% of the incumbents are re-elected and incumbents received 80% of the financial donations special interest groups give. The increase during the past 20 years have come primarily through retirement of incumbents.

Nevertheless women have made great improvements in representation and participation in politics in America. Thirty years ago women in the US composed less than 5% of all State legislation.

In spite of the obstacles females in the US have become more involved in politics. In the 21st century women continued gain in representation and political organizations will make women as global citizens not as the wives of politicians, soccer moms but as more powerful political actors.

Extracted from Manika

" . . . She oiled her hair with both palms and combed out the coils. She wound the long strands round her fingers into a knot low on her neck. The jacket was tight across her breasts and there was a tear under one arm. That didn't matter, she said, the saree pota will cover it. She stepped into a pair of sandals and taking all her money from her purse, tucked the bundle of notes between her breasts.

She will be back soon, she said.

I will leave the money for the girls with their father. He will put it by for their dowry.

It is true that he drinks and has this other woman and he hit me and we even had to go to the police station and make an entry.

She took the wicker basket with the fragrant oil cakes in one hand. In the other she took her handbag and stepped out of the door. She looked back at me and smiled happily.

He is a good man, she said, unfurling her umbrella."

Quotas for Women

Chulani Kodikara

At the Fourth World Conference on women, 189 governments including the government of Sri Lanka pledged to 'ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision making'. To fulfill this objective they pledged to "establish the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women with a view to achieving equal representation of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions."

Despite this commitment, the UN five-year Review and Appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action shows that little has changed in the last 7 years and very few countries have reached the critical mass of 30% women's representation in politics. In the few countries that have achieved 30% or more representation for women, this increase is due almost entirely to the implementation of a quota for women. This is true not only for Europe but for Africa, Asia and Latin America as well. In Western Europe, countries with the highest number of seats in Parliament have political parties which introduced quotas in the 1970's and 1980's: Sweden (42.7%), Denmark (37.4%), and Norway (36.4%). In Africa, South Africa leaped from

number 141 in the 1994 Inter-Parliamentary Union ranking of Parliaments according to the number of women represented to no. 8 in 1999. This was after the introduction of proportional representation and the adoption by the African National Congress of a 30% quota for women in the party list. In Asia, women's representation at the panchayat (village) level in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have soared with the implementation of 33% of seats for women.

Why Quotas

Arguments in favour of quotas can be broadly summarized as follows:

- **A matter of justice :**

The most compelling argument in favour of quotas is that it is a matter of justice. Women constitute half the population and therefore should be equally represented. If there were no obstacles operating to keep women out of political life then political influence would be randomly distributed between the sexes, and the present gross under representation of women has to be attributed to intentional or structural discrimination. Here equal representation is seen as a goal in itself.

- **Represent women's interests and concerns:**

Here the argument is that women have at least some interests which are distinct from and may be even in conflict with men. Women have distinct interests in relation to child bearing. They also have interests arising from exposure to violence and sexual harassment, their unequal position in the division of paid and unpaid labour and their exclusion from most arenas of economic and political power.

- **Women will make a difference in a number of ways and introduce a different set of values**

It is also argued that by increasing the numbers of women in politics it is possible to introduce new kinds of behaviour and a more generous scale of values; that women will be less aggressive, less competitive, more cooperative and more prepared to listen to others; that women's socialization will actually translate into a political style which is based on consultation and consensus building and that women will raise the moral tenor of politics.

More specifically the lack of women's participation in political decision - making:

- deprives women of an important right as well as responsibilities as citizens
- excludes their perspectives from policies and legislation
- prevents their input into national budgets and resource allocations

deprives society of women's skills, knowledge and perspectives.

Systems of Quotas

There are three broad ways of implementing Quotas.

1. Constitutional / Statutory Quota

In some countries a certain percentage of seats in political bodies have been reserved for women by the Constitution or by national legislation.

- In **India** 33% of seats in local bodies have been reserved by a **constitutional amendment in 1993**.
- In **Bangladesh**, The Union Parishad Ordinance of 1997 enables women to be directly elected to local government with reservation of seats. Approximately 12, 828 seats are reserved for women.
- Since the restoration of democracy in **Nepal** in 1990, a 20% reservation for women at ward level has been introduced increasing women's representation in village councils. An estimated 36,000 women have been elected as ward representatives since then.
- In 2000, the military government in **Pakistan**, amended the local government law whereby 33% of seats have now been reserved in local government institutions for women.
- Under the Constitution of **Uganda** one parliamentary seat from each of the 39 districts is to be reserved for a woman.

2. Reservation in Nomination lists

In some countries the electoral law establishes a compulsory minimum quota for women as election candidates. This system ensures women's participation in the electoral process and have been used successfully in a number of countries. However unless the quota is substantial enough or there is a provision that women's names must be placed in winning positions on the list (in the proportional representation system) it does not necessarily ensure that a certain percentage women will be elected.

- Since 1991, in Argentina women must make up 30% of the ballot and must be placed in winnable positions on the party list. Argentinian women now occupy 30.7% in the Chamber of Deputies (from 6% in 1991) making Argentina rank 9th in the world in terms of having the most number of women in Parliament. Almost all Argentine provinces (22 out of 24) have also established quota laws for state legislatures and municipal councils. In provinces with a closed party list system, the quotas have increased women's presence in state legislatures to 21% from 7%.

Starting in late 1997, Argentina was joined by Bolivia, Brazil, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru, Panama and Venezuela in adopting some type of national law requiring political parties to reserve a fixed percentage of their candidate lists for women. The requirement ranges from a high of 40 percent in Costa Rica to a low of 20 percent in Ecuador.

- In **France**, a new law passed on May 3rd 2000 obligated the country's political parties to fill 50% of the candidates in virtually every election with women. At the local government elections held after the new law came into effect women's representation in municipal councils increased from 22% to 47.5%.
- **Belgium** was one of the first countries in Europe to employ a Statutory Quota requiring parties by law to put forward a minimum percentage of women candidates. In 1994 Belgium passed a law that there should be a minimum of 25% women on all party lists for election. This increased to 33% in 1999. If a party does not meet the quota it is required to leave the remainder of the seats on the list vacant. Despite this law, women's representation in Belgian politics is not high because the Statutory Quota does not state where women must be placed on the lists. Parties may therefore place enough women on the lists to fulfil the quota, but put them predominantly in unwinnable positions (near the bottom of the list). Currently 23% of MPs are women. Belgians are now considering whether the law should in future enforce zipping for electoral lists.

But it needs to be emphasized that women should be placed in winnable positions, if the quota is to have a significant impact.

- In **Brazil** although women make up 20% of the proportional representation ballot, it has not resulted in a tremendous increase in women in electoral politics primarily because the votes cast for the

party list is not for the whole group but for individual candidates. Women's Representation in parliament is only 6.8%

3. **Political parties may adopt their own informal quotas for women as candidates**

In some countries some political parties have themselves established internal quotas for women as election candidates, even in the absence of a law which makes it mandatory. If the quota is high enough, it can dramatically increase women's representation.

- **South Africa's** African National Congress instituted a quota system which reserves 30% of parliamentary and 50% of local government candidacies for women. South Africa jumped from no. 141 in 1994 in the IPU's ranking of women's representation in national legislatures to no. 9 in 2000. At present 29.8% of women of the lower house of parliament are held by women.
- **In Denmark, Norway and Sweden** quotas were introduced by social democratic and leftist political parties in the 1980's. Accordingly the following quotas are /were in operation.

The Norwegian Labour Party : At all elections and nominations both sexes must be represented by at least 40% (introduced in 1983)

The Danish Social Democratic Party : Each sex has the right to a representation of at least 40% of the candidates for local and regional

elections. If there are no sufficient candidates of each sex, this right will no fully come into effect (introduced in 1988 and abolished in 1996)

The Swedish Social Democratic party in 1994 introduced the principle of 'every second name on the list a woman'. Thus if the first person on the list of candidates for election is a man, the next one must be a woman, etc.

- In Britain the use of all women short lists by the British labour party in half of all marginal seats and half of the seats where Labour MPs were retiring at the 1997 election almost doubled the representation of women from 9.2% to 18.2%. The total number of women in Parliament increased from 63 to 120 and the Labour women in Parliament increased from 37 to 101. Thirty-five of the 101 Labour women elected owed their political lives to all-women short lists. After much bitterness inside the party and a challenge under the UK Sex Discrimination Act, the lists were not used in the 2001 elections, and women's representation fell slightly since then to 17.9%.

The Rationale Behind Quotas

The core idea behind quotas is to ensure that women are not isolated in political life and to shift the burden of recruitment from individual women to those who control the system of recruitment. Quotas aim at ensuring that women constitute at least a critical minority or critical mass of 40 or 30 percent. It is of course a much debated issue and opinions may vary among both men and women regarding the effects, fairness and repercussions of using quotas to increase

women's representation. For instance it could be argued that quotas cannot transform existing practices of power and will not bring about authentic democracy and that it will only add a few more bourgeois women to the political power structure. Or that introducing of women as a category paves the way for other special interest groups to claim for representation.

Those who support quotas see it primarily a shift from one concept of equality to another. i.e. From the concept of formal equality to substantial equality. The classic liberal notion of equality assumes that removing formal barriers, for example giving women the right to vote and be elected to political office was sufficient. The rest was up to women. Following strong feminist pressure in the last few decades a second concept of equality is gaining increasing relevance and support. The argument is that real equal opportunity does not exist just because formal barriers are removed. Direct discrimination as well as a complex pattern of hidden barriers prevent women from getting their share of political influence. This argument appeals for recognition of the principal that equality of opportunity and resources require at times that individuals or groups should be treated unequally where they are disadvantaged due to conditions/circumstances beyond their control. Quotas and other forms of positive measures are thus a means towards equality of result. It can be seen that this idea is slowly gaining currency by the fact that as of 2001, there were quotas for women in assemblies or on party lists in force in at least 30 countries.¹

Sri Lanka : The Way Forward

A provision to reserve 25% of seats at local government level was included in the

government's proposal for a new Constitution in 1997. (Para 42 of regional list). This was included on the initiative of the Government and welcomed by women's groups in the country. But this provision was not present in the August 2000 Constitutional Reform Proposals tabled in Parliament. The reason given by the government was that the Muslim and Tamil parties felt that they would not be able to find sufficient women candidates. The Women's Manifesto of the UNP has now promised to implement a 25% reservation for women in local government within the next 5 years. At a recent National Consultation on 'increasing women's representation in the political process facilitated by the ICS women activists from around the country agreed that women need at least a 30% reservation of seats in both local government bodies and in provincial councils. Given the differences in opinion between the Women's Movement and political parties on this issue we need to work out an appropriate mechanism to increase the numbers of women in local bodies which is acceptable not only to political parties but also to women activists who have tirelessly worked to ensure women's full and equal participation in politics in Sri Lanka. Without such a mechanism women will continue to be marginalised from political and decision making processes and vital issues of relevance to our lives will continue to be determined by men.

Our Vision of Women's Leadership

We cannot imagine that our struggle for equality and for social justice can end with the adoption of a quota. We need to emphasize that our goal is not merely to increase the numbers of women in political institutions or to replace the places of men with women. We have a vision of women's

leadership which is transformative, accountable, transparent, inclusive and democratic, sensitive to the needs of the people, challenges existing

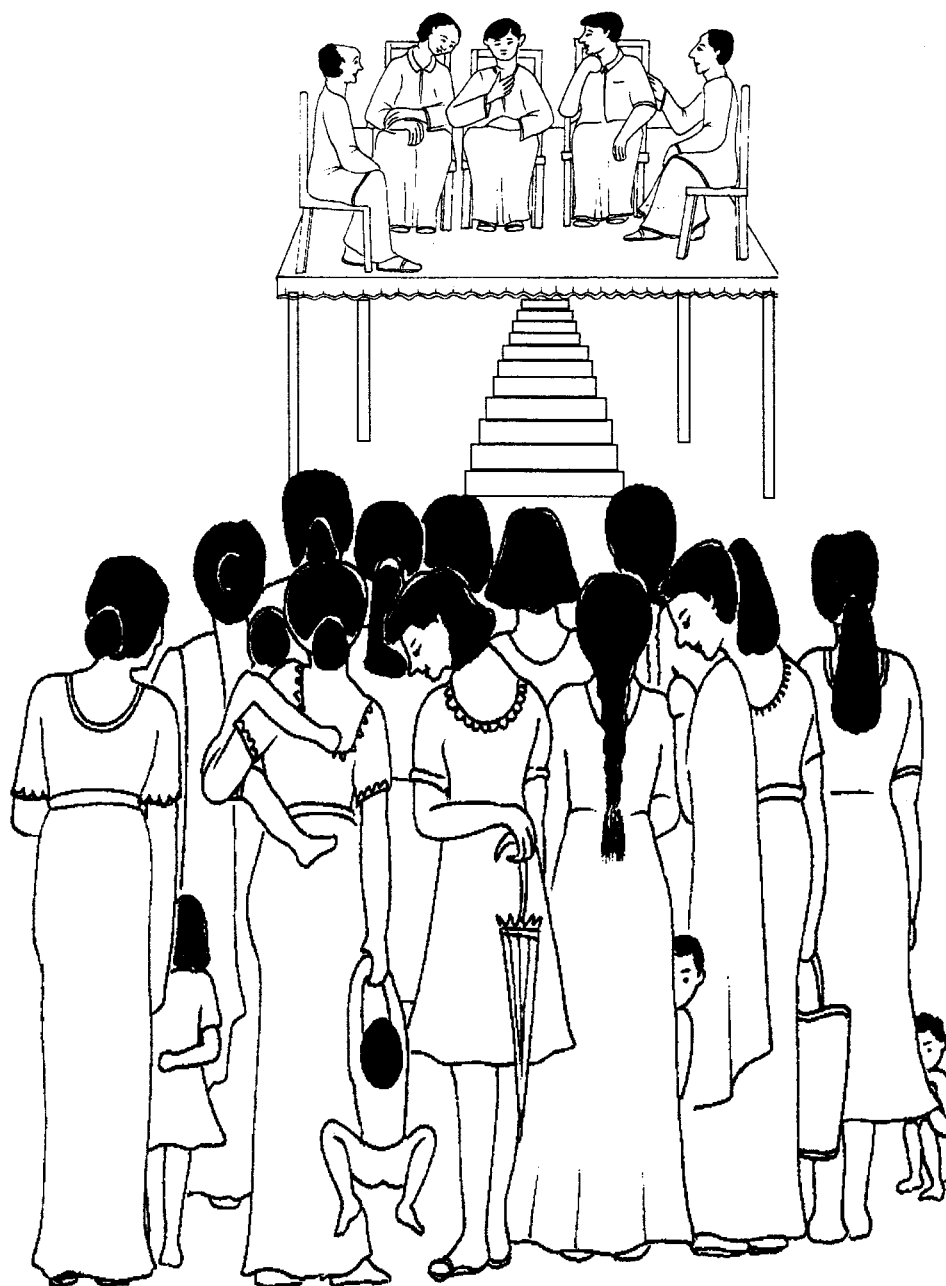
gender, caste, class and ethnic hierarchies and which is non violent.

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REVELATIONS

Parvathi

The machines were droning like a swarm of bees moving from one destination to another..Drawn by some centrifugal force which propelled them to their orbit. Rani had often encountered this scene when she lived in her home town which was situated in the dry zone of the country. Life was so different there, there was time to tend the vegetable plots, bathe in the wewa and harvest the small strip of paddy land which lay adjacent to their small house. But then things changed and Rani was compelled to come to the city in search of a job. If only her relatives had not become acquisitive and taken over the paddy field and the land surrounding their house, then she would not have left her home. Of course Shiela her best friend had assured her that life in the city would not be too bad since she would be able to earn a salary of about two thousand rupees and she could help her family back in the village.

She stood in the small office which was strategically placed, so that it gave a complete view of the main work room, without the workers actually noticing that they were being observed. In a way it was like spying, since the manager could detect anyone who was not working fast enough. Immediately he would contact the supervisor who paced the floors of the work room and would ask that person to report back to him during their ten minute tea break. The girls were aware that they were being watched over, not by a benevolent guardian but

by individuals whose main motive was to extract the maximum from their labour force. A sense of fear used to pervade the air, as the girls were aware that tough action would be taken on any of them who broke the rules. Sometimes their salaries would be cut if they came in a few minutes late to the factory. The late comers would be reprimanded and then sent to the work room, where they would have to work the entire day without any salary. There were other measures too which were used to obtain the greatest efficiency out of the workforce. For instance, Shiela had casually mentioned to Rani, that leave was out of the question. You could only visit your home during the new year. "Anyway", Shiela had reassured Rani, "It's not worth going for a day to visit the family, because travelling costs are so high.....". She had stopped in the hallway and looked taciturn as if she did not want to talk about the conditions in the factories anymore.



Although she looked exhausted and pallid when she met Rani during the New Year holiday, she had urged Rani to leave the village....."What's the use of waiting here" she had smiled at Rani, "Can you earn a living by working on a strip of paddy land which now doesn't belong to your family." Rani, didn't have an answer to this question. All she knew was that she had to go in search of a job, because her father was a virtual

invalid, after having become involved in a legal dispute with his own brother. The case had come up and his brother had won the case.....Now he had taken over the paddy field. There was no way out of this. For Rani's family....employment opportunities were few in this area and even the vegetables which Rani tried to grow in the garden failed to mature. She realized that she had to leave, at least for the sake of her family. Her younger brothers and sisters were still going to school and they needed money for exercise books and stationary. So she decided to go with Shiela to work in a factory in the industrial zone. She didn't have many belongings to take with her only a few clothes, a pair of shoes and some certificates. Shiela had told her to bring along these certificates since many of the girls who worked in the factory were with A levels and O levels qualifications. Some of them had already followed classes in operating juki machines while others had worked in the Middle East.... they often returned to find that most of their earnings had been spent by their husbands. They had to therefore face a life of great deprivation. Some of these women had discovered that their husbands had taken other women.....or sometimes they discovered terrible secrets of their husbands forcing their children into incestual relationships because they could not live without a woman to meet their physical needs. Shiela had also gone to the Middle East but when she returned she found that her husband had left the house and children, and had gone to live with Alice akka, who lived some distance away from her house. Fortunately for Shiela, her elderly mother had managed to keep the family together and had sent the children to school, managing on a meager allowance she got from the state. But she had not been keeping too well and had sent a letter to her daughter to come and see to the children.

It had been a great shock to Shiela to discover that her husband had left the house. She has decided not to go back to the Middle East because she knew that her mother was weak and sick. She looked like a thin reed which grew abundantly on the banks of the wewa. She also thought of her daughters. They were young women now.... It would not be safe to leave them on their own. Even the door of her hut could not be closed properly. How she disliked her husband. If only he had used the money to at least build a strong door to protect her daughters, then she would have forgiven him. But he had forgotten his familial duties and had gone in search of his need for another relationship. He hadn't even come home to see his children, when there was a talk in the village that someone had tried to enter his house and scare his children.



Working in the factory had thus been a means of escape for Shiela. Although she faced great hardship, at least she was working in the country itself. If there was any major crisis, she could be contacted immediately. Although now she was having second thoughts about this when she realized that the factory resembled a great fortress, with its high walls, strict rules and security guards. It was very difficult to maintain any contact with the outside world once you were inside the factory. Your ears would be filled with the monotonous sound of machines and the sharp commands of the supervisor who didn't think twice about humiliating any worker in front of the entire work force. Shiela had got used to this routine of rising early in the morning, bathing in the well, with only a few buckets of water and

eating a slice of bread provided by the factory. The factory was very proud about its contribution to the welfare of the worker by providing them with a breakfast of bread and dhal, but this was actually a means of monitoring and curtailing the time spent on eating food from the wayside boutiques which had sprung up like grimy toadstools on the margins of the dusty road. Eating a breakfast given by the factory would save time and money. The word quotas often reverberated in Shiela's mind as she bent over a sewing machine. If they didn't work on schedule they would have to face the consequences by working overtime even on holidays. There was no respite, churning out garments which would be exported.

There were no options for most of the girls and they were compelled to leave their homes and come and work in the free trade zone. Although a few factories had been opened in some of the villages to enable girls to live and work in their own homes.....they were still in the germinating stage and it would take time before they could accommodate people like Rani.

Rani was desperate for a job. She tried getting a place at a factory in Dambulla but found that there were no vacancies. Even the vegetables she was trying to grow looked dry and wilted....She knew that she had to follow Shiela's advice and work in the factory many miles away.

The terse voice of the factory manager interrupted her thoughts as she was called into a small room to be interviewed. This entailed, a

cursorial glance at her certificates and a few questions about her village. She found herself directed towards another room where she was given an overall and cap, a pair of gloves. "From today, you will be working in this area" said the supervisor in a curt voice.

Although her first day at work was very exhausting Rani felt thankful that she had got a job, even though it was miles away from her home. Shiela had been correct, as time passed, she would get used to the dull routine which pervaded the entire factory. She discovered that if she transformed herself into a machine, then she could survive this regimentation. She was also very careful to follow the rules which had been intricately woven into the life of the factory system. Every step, every human need had been stretched to the maximum, analysed and monitored so that the human being was subtly transformed into a machine. A machine which would give the best years of its life to an efficient production process till it broke down after some years. Then it could be thrown away like the mountain of cut-pieces which were thrown into the mud and dirt.....Later to be collected by inhabitants from that area who would convert them into patch-work garments, sold at the market place or in pavement shops.

It was certainly soul killing, this life of routine but then what would she have done in the village, Rani thought to herself as she sat on the floor of her boarding house, watching darkness settle into the entire compound. Her companions, other factory girls were all fast asleep on the ground. Their clothes were hanging on nails and on pieces of rope tied across the greasy walls.

In the fast diminishing light, Rani studied her work worn hands with a sense of nervousness. Today, had been a strange day, full of unexpected events. The reason for this sudden change of events, was the arrival of the director of the factory. Rani had gasped when she saw him. It was Mr. Perera their next door neighbour, the man who owned such vast tracts of land next to their small garden. She had never really liked him, even though as a child she used to play with his children, when they used to come home for their holidays. She used to always feel his eyes focused on her, as she ran with the others through the coconut trees flying kites which rose high up towards the blue skies. Once he had called her to the verandah where he was sitting, drinking and smoking.....and had fondled her head and arms and asked her whether she would like to be a companion to his children. She had felt a great sense of fear traversing through her fragile body as she broke free from the heavy grasp of the mahathmaya.....Running wildly through the coconut grove till she reached the safety of her own house. She hadn't told anyone about this episode, but had decided to keep away from the large house. Whenever the children called out "Rani, Rani, come and play....." she would hide within the cool walls of her hut till they got tired of calling for her and then would leave. Sometimes she had been compelled to go and play with the children because her mother would urge her to do so.....but then she would always be alert and hide in the shadows if she saw the mahathmaya emerge from the house. Something told her that previous encounters with him had not been innocent. His hands had been too intrusive, familiar, rousing the senses. Some inner instinct always made her steer clear of this man, although everyone respected him in the village.

This morning, when she had seen him, she had been engulfed with a sense of nausea and

revulsion. She didn't know how she could escape. She could already imagine his eyes focusing on her like a predator gazing with a sense of satisfaction at its prey.....Waiting for the correct moment to devour her. Although he had pretended not to show any signs of recognition when he saw her bent over the juki machine, she felt that she had walked into a trap.....a great abyss. No longer would she be able to escape his advances. There were no shadowy niches in which she could hide, no protective guardians to whom she could confide in - she was alone. But she decided that she would not give in so easily, she would wait till he made the first move and then she would leave this fortress. But then, where was she to go? There were very few options for people like herself and therefore they were compelled to work in these factories for long hours, walking back home to their boardings where they would stretch their weary limbs on the ground, often too tired to even make a cup of tea. They would be often reminded by their boarding mistresses that they had to be careful and not waste any water so that even brewing a pot of tea was luxury.

In a way, she wished that she had met someone suitable so that she would not be open to such subtle forms of harassment which she felt she would face with Mr. Perera's arrival. Some of the factory girls had already befriended men from the locality as a means of protection..... often however these individuals took advantage of the girls. The girls themselves had no other way out than to give into the demands of their lovers. But then many sought relationships for their own protection because there would be someone to accompany them after work when they had to walk on ill lit roads. Many of the girls had often been harassed on their way back home after a late night shift. Some of them had their chains snatched off their throats. But then they were helpless because they had no other way of

earning a living. Rani knew that unless she moved out of the factory, she would be drawn in like an insect into the arms of Mr. Perera. She knew that her fears were not unfounded because she had heard stories about him. But then who could protest? As long as she worked in this factory, Rani knew that she was a marked woman. There was no escape from poverty.

Back at home, the vegetable plants she had tried to grow had become wilted because there was

no one to tend them. She knew that she could not return to her home empty handed because her family looked forward to the money that she sent home each month. She told herself that she would somehow survive although it would mean a sacrifice to face humiliation at the feet of the man she had tried to escape from as a child. But then, she was not going to give in to his demands so easily. She was like a plant, searching for a perennial underground stream which would provide her with sustenance to withstand this drought.



Case Studies

1. France

A radical new law in France requires all political parties to have 50% of women in their nomination lists. The slogan of the campaign which led to this progressive law was 'parity' - to be on par with and goes back to a movement for equal representation of women in legislative assemblies started in 1992 with a handful of French women. The group gained public prominence in November 1993, with a full page advertisement entitled the 'Manifesto of 577 for a parity - democracy' in the Le Monde newspaper asking for law reform to ensure that as many women as men hold elected office. It was signed by 577 persons 289, female citizens and 288 male citizens (= the number of seats in the French parliament).

The movement quickly gained support and generated a lot of debate and discussion. The campaign went to traditional women's organizations such as the YMCA and women's civic and charitable associations and also housewives associations, and other similar groups which were not political but were interested in the rights of women. In general women were convinced of the need to have more women in politics and these women took the campaign to the streets. A poll in April 1994 showed that

56% of men and 62% of women were in favour of parity. By 1996 86% of men and women were in favour. Even political parties picked it up. For instance in 1994 French lists of candidates for the election to the European parliament almost reached parity between men and women.

In January 1996 Jacques Chirac called for legislative elections in 1997, a year before the next election was due. In this election the leader of the Socialist Party in France, Lionel Jospin pushed for parity, even though there was some opposition by others in the party who thought that it would make them lose the elections. 133 (27.8%) women were eventually named as candidates. The Socialist Party manifesto also said that if elected to power they would amend the constitution to include the principle of parity. Other left wing parties and Green party followed suit. The Socialist Party won the election. Of the 63 women elected to parliament, 42 were socialists. In June 1997 Jospin reaffirmed his decision to reform the Constitution. On May 3rd 2000 the French parliament passed a new law which obligated the country's political parties to fill 50% of the candidates in virtually every election with women. According to this law,

- In Regional and Municipal elections - parity must be observed in groups of 6 persons who can be presented in any order as long as there are three women and three men. Electoral lists that do not observe the above laws will be declared invalid. many felt uneasy about giving special privileges to elite women by ensuring seats for them in the parliament, while they had previously supported quotas for women at the grass-roots level of the panchayats. To date, the amendment has not been passed by parliament. However, the current government of the Hindu nationalist BJP has committed itself to introducing another quota bill for women in parliament.

- Legislative elections - All political parties must present 50% of women among their candidates. If they did not, they would lose a proportion of their campaign funding - in France the government gives grants to pp for election expenses. No order is mandated so that a party can run their women candidates in constituencies that are weak.

- In Senate and European elections - All electoral lists must observe alternate parity - one man, one woman or one woman one man in consecutive order.

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- a. (French women storm the political Batille, *Cats Eye, Island*, Wednesday 23rd August 2000).
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Malady

A child for the malady¹ who
I got begging the Mayavan²
So that people will not refer to me
as "Malady, Malady."

**Dr. Selvy Thiruchandran -
from Feminine Speech Transmissions**

1 malady - barren woman
2 Mayavan - Lord Krishna

2. Pakistan

Fact Sheet

Countries which have applied quota systems in national and local level legislative bodies or / and political parties have experienced a significant increase in women's representation. This is true not only for Europe but in Africa, Asia and Latin America as well.

1. In terms of sheer numbers, quotas have without question increased the number of women in decision-making positions.

- Six nations (Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, and Iceland) have women in at least one third of the seats in the lower or Single House of the national legislature, all of which have some type of quotas in place to increase representation of women.

- Most dramatic is the case of South Africa which jumped from No. 141 in 1994 in the Inter-Parliamentary Union's ranking of national legislatures by the share of seats held by women to No. 9 in 2000 after adoption by the African National Congress of a 30 percent quota for women candidates. At present, 29.8 percent of the lower legislative seats in South Africa are held by women.

2. Several countries have passed reservation laws for women in national and local legislative bodies :

- Bangladesh (30 seats out of 330 in Parliament)
- India (1/3 of Panchayat or Village Councils)
- Tanzania (15 percent of 255 seats in parliament)
- Eritrea (10 seats out of 105 in parliament)
- Uganda (one seat for each of 39 districts)
- Pakistan (33% of local govt.)

3. The following countries of Latin America have laws which require political parties to reserve 20 to 40 percent of candidacies for women :

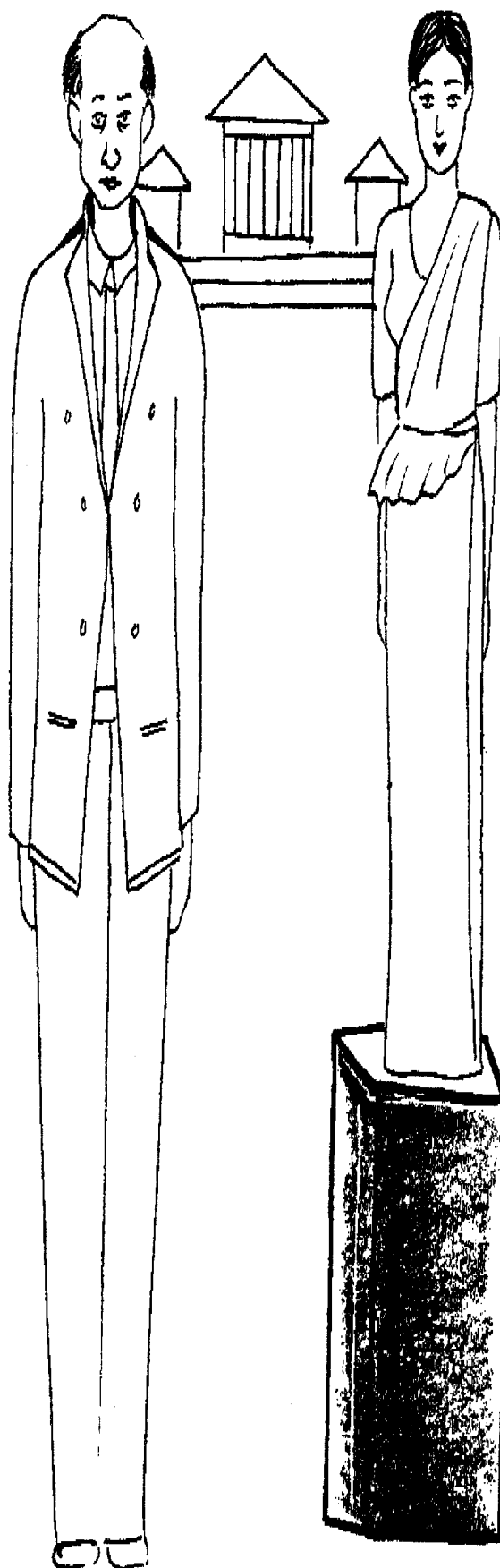
- Argentina
- Dominican Republic
- Venezuela

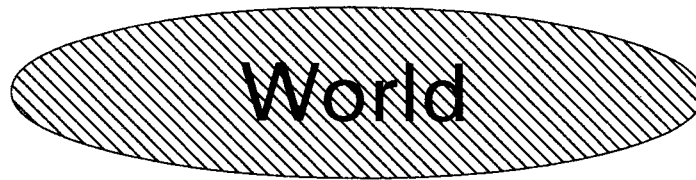
- Bolivia
- Ecuador
- Brazil
- Panama
- Costa Rica
- Peru

Similar minimum - seat quota laws have been enacted at the subnational level as well. For example, quota rules have been adopted in many Argentina provinces and Mexican states.

4. Some of the most celebrated quota systems in the world are informal, party-led actions :

- **S**outh Africa's African National Congress party instituted a quota system which reserves 30 percent of parliamentary and 50 percent of local government candidates for women.
- **A** number of European countries including Austria, Belgium, Denmark, France, Germany, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, all have political parties committed to using quotas with fixed percentages of women candidates.





Pakistan

Farhan Bokhari

Pakistan's military regime has no shortage of critics. But as 20 districts prepare for local elections today, the quota system that reserves one-third of seats for women is earning positive marks from some feminists.

"These elections are addressing the strategic gender for women. There is now new space for women, which gives them legal and political entitlement for the first time", says activist Beala Jamil.

While Gen. Pervez Musharraf's plan for political reform has been criticized by the two parties who have alternated rule for most of the past dozen years, some rights activists say opportunities for women now are greater even than during the tenure of the Islamic world's first woman prime minister, Benazir Bhutto twice headed governments during Pakistan's 11 years of democracy from 1988 to 1999.

College graduate Hameeda Waheeduddin got her first opportunity to enter politics this year when she became president of her union council in the town of Mandi Bahauddin in Central Punjab, the country's largest province. Responsibilities of

country's approximately 7,000 union councils include running schools and local health services - and, in the future, imposing taxes.

"I had a clear victory in every polling station in my constituency, "Ms Waheeduddin told a gathering of newly elected women at a seminar in Islamabad. "People were willing to give me a chance because they thought I could change their lives".

Shazia Elahi Sethi, another president of a union council near the city of Sialkot in Central Punjab, said that "in a male-dominated political environment, change is becoming a reality with the quota. "Ms. Sethi described how, while on the campaign trail, she left home every morning accompanied by 40 or 50 men, demonstrating that her support came from men as well as women.

According to the Aurat Foundation, an advocacy group for women's rights, between 85 and 90 percent of women's seats in the first two of six phases of the local elections were filled. (After today, three more sets of elections will be held by mid-August). But supporters of the military's plan are under pressure to show how political

power can quickly change the status of women in a country with many condemned anti-women practices.

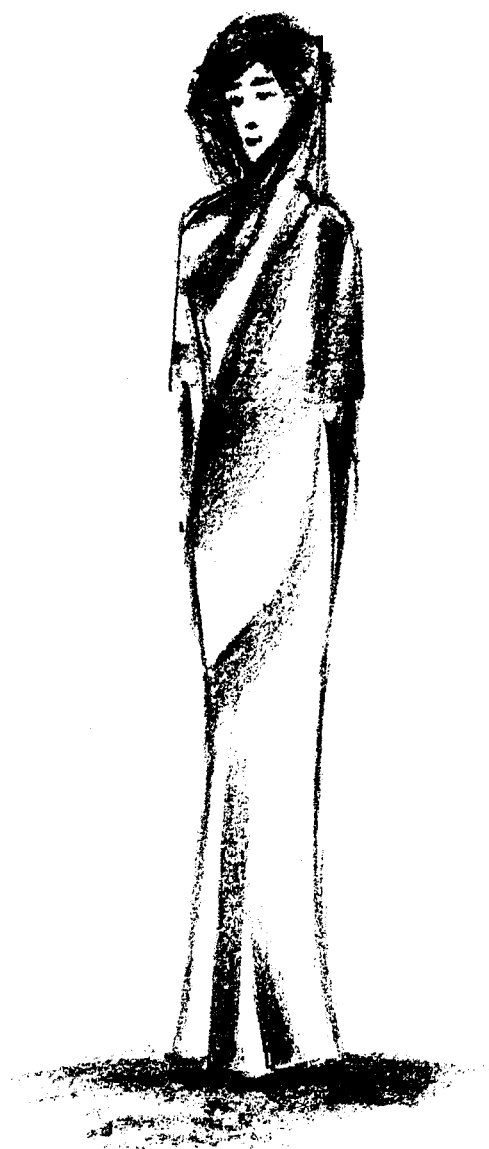
For years, feminists have campaigned against the practice of honor killings, in which a male member of a family considers it his right to preserve the family's honor and kill his sister, mother, daughter, or wife on the mere suspicion of extramarital relations. During the first phase of elections in December, a woman candidate in Punjab was killed by her husband because she refused to withdraw from the contest, but the couple reportedly had other differences that sparked the killing. Other controversial practices include demands for the introduction of sharia, or Islamic holy law. The laws prescribe, for example, that evidence in court from two women would be considered equivalent to that of one man.

Critics of the quotas also say that power will remain in the hands of a limited group of families; Waheeduddin's late father, for example, was a member of the provincial legislature. Yet others say the new opportunities are an important step. "The change may not come overnight," says attorneys Shehla Zia, "But eventually change will come, simply because there will be more women in grass-roots politics who would be seeking that change," she says.

Mainstream political parties that have denounced General Musharraf's political reforms have also criticized women's groups for their stance. One political leader who spoke on the condition of anonymity says; "A military regime is an anomaly, it's an illegal government. How can anyone support democratization under the generals, who don't have their own legitimacy?"

According to Nigar Ahmad, head of the Aurat Foundation, "There's no element of discomfort" over the military's backing for the elections. "Further we could have ignored these elections, or we could support them," she says. "We supported them because no government in future would be able to turn around and say there aren't any women out there to contest."

For first-time politicians such as Waheeduddin, the opportunity of making an entry into politics is more important than who is behind them. For women aspiring to improve their social status, she advises women to take charge of their lives and to go "for political office as the first step."



Supportive

Seela Ebert, was for quotas as early as 1935 when we had representation in parliament at 4%. Even with a high literacy rate of 90%. "We see a trend of decreasing rates of political representation at national, provincial and local government levels" says Seela. It has never gone up beyond 5% in the history of our political representation. The South Asian scenario has seen a radical change with the introduction of quotas at the local govt. levels in countries like Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal. Although these four countries have very low literacy rates for women millions of women have come out to participate actively in politics due to the introduction of the quota system. Now they are lobbying for a quota in the national assemblies too. Even some of the European countries have come a long way with the introduction of the quotas." she added

"I do not agree with the opinion that high status enjoyed by the Sri Lankan women are marred by asking for quotas as we are supposed to be not discriminated in any form being a woman in Sri Lanka. The actual situation is different. If we have to make a big difference at policy level, women must have higher representation (at least 30%) to make any opinion at political participation and at decision making levels. When at the national level women's representation is at 4.8% and one woman cabinet minister restricted to the political position that relates to her sex as Minister of Women's Affairs has hardly any say within the cabinet of minister in charge of powerful ministries. With this position how do we expect radical positive changes on behalf of women in the country at national level. This is worse when it comes to the provincial and local govt. level when representation is 2%. The only answer is a quota of at least 35%." she stressed.



Doreen Wickramasinghe

Doreen Wickramasinghe the first Western woman to have been elected to a Parliament in Asia, contested her husband's sister's husband in a bitter struggle where she was attacked for being a white woman and a foreigner. She polled 16,626 votes and won by 1001 votes. Her victory was a historic one.

In Parliament, Doreen contributed to the debates, highlighting the lack of health and educational facilities for the poor, criticising the government for its policies and speaking out on issues of foreign policy, during a period when the government took a very pro-Western stand.

In the budget debate every year Doreen drew attention to malnutrition, infant mortality and the

lack of educational facilities in the country. In 1954 she criticized the Minister of the Health, and citing the infant mortality rate of 71 per thousand births, spoke of "the pathetic plight of our children under five years old" and especially the alarmingly high death rates of 2 year old children (Hansard 1954: 1300-4). Education, however was her constant theme; the Minister of Education was condemned for the lack of school building, equipment, and the out dated content of education.

Doreen gave many examples from her electorate; in one school she reported, "I was appalled to find 240 small children rammed, jammed, crammed like sardines into a ramshackle temporary building ... with only 3 teachers". Some schools in her electorate had no latrines.

but the children had books on hygiene; and in other schools they had no drinking water." What sort of mockery of education is it where you find posters all around the classroom emphasizing the importance of pure drinking water, but no . . . pure water to drink".(Hansard 1956: 2175-77) In 1954 Doreen claimed "the Minister is apparently content to live and laze in a by gone age . . . what was good for his father, his grandfather is good enough for him."; referring to "revolutionary and inspiring discoveries" in the field of education and child psychology she condemned the use of "backward methods" including the "discredited alphabet method" and "the old authoritarian relationships" between teacher and students. Teachers she said "are expected to dedicate their lives" for the noble profession, but the Minister had not "dedicated even his little finger for education" (Hansard 1954: 1634-7)

Among many other matters, Doreen drew the attention of parliament to the need for housing for fishermen "Who live in hovels which are really not worthy of those hardworked brave men" (Hansard 1954: 1580); she also said the government was "callously neglectful" in failing to provide life-boats for fishermen "who through poverty have to take great risks" in bad weather (Hansard 1955: 1683). She also campaigned about the condition of roads after floods in her electorate and offered to take the Minister along those roads "I can assure him that he would get such a shaking up" she remarked. (Hansard 1956: 2057)

What is perhaps most remarkable about Doreen Wickramasinghe' career was the way she was

accepted by Sri Lankans including activists of the Left, workers, peasants, women and by the electorate. For many middle-class radicals too, she was an example of how a Western woman could devote her energy to causes ranging from national liberation and women's liberation to Socialism. In terms of colonialism and gender she was indeed the opposite of the memsahib. Her foreign origin actually increased rather than decreased her popularity. For she chose boldly to protest against the imperialist policies of her own country of birth and to identify with movements for social change in her country of adoption. She radicalized education in Buddhist girls' schools, and succeeded in giving many teachers and pupils a political and social awareness, an ability to fight patriarchal family oppression, an appreciation of local culture and an internationalist perspective. Doreen Wickramasinghe's life particularly serves as an example of a woman who participated in the social and political movements of her time, showed courage in confronting oppression and exploitation and spoke out without fear against all forms of injustice.

Extracted from
Doreen Wickramasinghe
by Dr. Kumari Jayawardena





A Sri Lankan Journal for Women's Liberation

Voice of Women

❖ April 2002 ❖ Vol. 6 ❖ ISSUE 3 ❖ ISSN 1319 ❖ Rs. 20/=

Adeleine Molamure in the State Council...

"... If women are to be excluded merely on the ground of old customs and rules made by men for their own benefits, then I would earnestly ask the house to be chivalrous enough to amend these rules in this age when women have shown that they are quite competent to be treated on an equal footing with them....

women do not ask for favours.... all we want is justice and equal rights with men..."

(Hansard 14 Feb. 1934: 140 from Casting Pearls by Malathi de Alwis & Kumari Jayawardena)