

Political Participation of Women in Local Governance: A Case Study of Selected Local Government Bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Although Sri Lanka has 51% women, their participation in local governance as well as in the national parliament is 5% in total. The strong social development indicator of women in areas such as health and education has not translated into their increased political participation. As such, this study focuses on the level of women's participation in local governance and explores why there is a low level of political participation of women in local governance. Both quantitative and qualitative methods comprising of questionnaire survey, interviews and focus group discussions were employed in this study. The findings show organized collective involvement of women was effective only in social welfare, livelihood and social security than political participation. The study also reveals that the low level of political participation by women is attributable to biological, economic, psychological, religious, and political factors. Overall, it was found that although women are interested in participating in local governance, they have a lack of space for political participation.

Keywords

Health, education, organized collective involvement, social welfare, livelihood, social security

Introduction

The role of women in the social arena of human life involves reproduction, socialization and economics. These multiple roles are used to justify that she can be put in a position of trust and responsibility. However, that role of women is conspicuously absent when it comes to the area of representation in the locality or community in formulating policy decisions at the local councils. This relegates their position to domestic affairs, while leaving out the political affairs to men, who are presumably holding it as a monopoly. Democracy provides equal opportunities for various interest groups to participate in the management of societal affairs. Therefore, it can be assumed that decision-making will be severely hindered when women are not elected or appointed to the local councils. Participation of women in local governance provides them with opportunities to contribute to national and local development initiatives in addition to the space it provides for them

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to adapt policies to suit their local needs, aspirations and expectations (Ofei-Aboagye cited in Agyeman-Duah, 2000: 234–243). If the objective of effective local governance is increased participation and involvement of all people in matters affecting their lives, then, all sections of society including women must be meaningfully represented. Thus, political participation of women in local governance is a must.

Women's participation in local governance as well as in the parliament of Sri Lanka is the lowest in comparison with their involvement education (see: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/kaushalya-perera/sri-lanka-women-universities>). The strong social development indicator for women in areas such as health and education has not unfortunately translated into increased political participation of women (Kodikara, 2009: 8–9). Women, as housemaids abroad, are reported to be the highest foreign exchange earners in Sri Lanka, bringing in a whopping 6 billion US\$ in the year 2014 (Women's Chamber of Industry and Commerce, 2016). The other highest foreign exchange generating industries, such as textile and garment (44%), tea (14%), rubber and rubber-based products (8%) are predominantly occupied by women (Export Development Board of Sri Lanka, 2015). Thus, it is clear that women's participation in Sri Lankan economy is considerable and needs to be taken seriously. However, the reality is that women's political representation in the country is negligible, amounting to 6.5% of parliamentary seats, 6% of provincial council seats, and 2% of seats in local governments (Ariyaratne, 2015: 2). Although women account for 51% of the total population in the country, they are under-represented in politics and local governance. Hence, it is clear that there is under-representation of women in political processes in Sri Lanka.

The trend of political participation of women in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka where the Tamil-speaking minority communities are predominant is explicitly notable. The official account suggests that there are 446 members representing the local governments in the Eastern Province, out of which only 10 women (around 5%) represent local government in the province (for further details, see: www.lgpc.gov.lk). Of the total population of 1,555,510 in the Eastern Province, women constitute 803,010, while men are 752,500 (Department of Census and Statistics-Sri Lanka, 2012). Although women are absorbed as members into Women Rural Development Societies and Social Audit Committees formed by various non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations, their active participation in those committees is unsatisfactory.

As such, the primary objective of this research is to explore the level of women's participation in the selected local government bodies in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka, namely Kalmunai Municipal Council (KMC), a Muslim-dominated local government body; Ampara Urban Council (AUC), a Sinhalese-dominated local government body; and Batticaloa Municipal Council (BMC), a Tamil-dominated local government body. Out of a total of 47 members (KMC: 19, BMC: 19, AUC: 9) who were represented in the three local government bodies, which have now been dissolved, only 2 were women. This shows a very small representation of women in local governance in Eastern Sri Lanka. As such, it is significant to explore why there is a low level of political participation of women in the area.

Literature review

Much has been written about women's political participation and representation in politics in the recent past. Shankar (2014) describes the history of the Indian experience and provides the measurement of women's participation at the local level. He argues that women's participation in decision-making is essential for women's interests to be incorporated into governance. Based on the study in Bihar in India, Rai (2014) echoes this view by asserting that women's political participation is an important impetus to women's empowerment in India at village levels.

Godwin's (2013) research on participation of women in the local government level in Nigeria shows male dominance in local governance. He attributes the low level of political participation of women in local governance to their lack of political consciousness, poor attitude and lack of financial support.

The account on the Sri Lankan experience examines and compares women's political participation during the period from Independence. Kodikara (2009) discusses the obstacles to women's equal representation in political institutions in Sri Lanka, where, their political representation has been minimal in more than 60 years since Independence. This study further identifies the key strategies adapted by the women organizations, in order to increase women's participation and representation in the political bodies. Similarly, the report compiled by Law and Society (Law Society Trust, 2016) provides reasons for the low level of women's political participation in Sri Lanka and recommendations for its enhancement.

The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women's interim report (2016) on *Promoting Women's Political Participation* also lists various factors inherent in Sri Lankan politics and argues for special reservations for women in both local and national government. The above-mentioned studies on women's participation in local governance have focused on different contexts including metropolitan areas, particularly in the developing countries and Sri Lanka. However, the context of Eastern Sri Lanka is different, and therefore, this study primarily focuses on Eastern Sri Lanka. Moreover, this study is significant, because while other studies in Sri Lanka demonstrated political participation of women prior to the legislation being enacted in parliament to increase the quota of 25% to women, this study has recently been undertaken, particularly as the legislation being enacted, to explore the perspective of women and others on the women's political participation in local governance. This study is significant because it employs both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the phenomenon of political participation of women in local governance in terms of ethnic dimensions in Eastern Sri Lanka.

Amendments have recently been made to the Local Government Act stipulating that women's participation in local governance be at 25% (Warunasuriya, 2016: 3). However, it is not clear yet whether political parties will take this amendment seriously and respect the said quota in their nominations for forthcoming elections.

Research methodology

This study has been carried out by utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods. The first part of the data collection was a bibliographic survey in which the author reviewed all the existing literature. Historical materials and official documents were also collected from divisional secretariats and municipal councils as well as previous research reports, journals, NGO records, and other relevant documents.

Field work consisted of observation, questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed among female social activists, politicians, government employees, and other stakeholders such as religious leaders and members of NGOs, based on simple random sampling method in each local government body. The distribution of questionnaire sampling in the three local government bodies is shown in Table 1.

To collect qualitative data, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted in the three local government areas. A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted. Of this, five interviews were conducted in each local government body (KMC, BMC and AUC). Furthermore, six focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in the three local government areas with the participation of 10–15 members in each FGD representing both men and women from a wide spectrum of economic and professional domains, to ensure fair representation of the issues. Qualitative

Table 1. Distribution of sampling for questionnaire survey in three local government bodies.

GN divisions	Total population	Percentage	Sample
Kalmunai municipal area	106,780	44.11	88
Batticaloa municipal area	91,571	37.82	76
Ampara urban area	43,720	18.06	36
Total	242,071	100.00	200

The collected data from questionnaire surveys (quantitative) was arranged according to the coding system and the questionnaires were analyzed using the Statistical Package of Social Sciences (SPSS).

GN: Grama Niladhari.

data were analyzed using the descriptive method with the support of tabulation, graphs, and diagrams.

Study area

The Eastern Province in Sri Lanka is one of the first-level administrative divisions of the country. Sri Lanka has a total of nine such provinces and the Eastern Province is one of them. With the Indo-Lanka accord that led to the 13th amendment to the constitution of Sri Lanka, the province gained legal status in 1987 and was temporarily merged with the Northern Province. The province is comprised of three districts, namely Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Ampara, and has in it a total of 45 Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions and 1085 Grama Niladhari (GN) divisions. Trincomalee is considered the capital of the province. Figure 1 shows the Eastern Province in the coastal area of Sri Lanka.

The province has a total land area of 9361² km (Department of Census and Population, 2012) and is surrounded by the Northern Province to the north, the Bay of Bengal to the east, the Southern Province to the South, and the Uva, Central and North Central Provinces to the west. The population of the Eastern Province in terms of ethnicity is given below in Table 2.

As shown in Table 2, the province is the most diverse in Sri Lanka, both ethnically and religiously, and was severely affected in the past by both man-made and natural disasters. The civil war that spanned over three decades in the country and the tsunami devastation that occurred in 2004 claimed a significant number of lives of people in the Eastern Province.

This research has confined within three local government authorities in the Eastern Province, namely KMC, BMC and AUC. KMC and AUC are located in Ampara district, while the BMC is located in Batticaloa district.

Results and discussion

This section outlines the results and discussions of the study and it analyzes various aspects including the factors contributing to the low level of political participation of women in local governance.

Local government system in Sri Lanka

The local government system was introduced by the British during the latter part of their administration (1796–1948). Municipal councils were established during the British Colonial Period. The municipal councils for Colombo and Kandy were the first to be established. It was in 1924 that the system of village councils was introduced, and subsequently a four-tier system of local government



Figure 1. Map of the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka.

Table 2. Population of the Eastern Province based on ethnicity.

Districts	GN divisions	Total land (km ²)	Tamils	Muslims	Sinhalese	Others	Total
Ampara	20	4415	112,915	282,484	251,018	1640	648,057
Batticaloa	14	2854	424,199	154,197	3303	4902	586,601
Trincomalee	11	2727	144,613	184,529	110,679	1051	440,872
Total	45	9996	681,727	621,210	365,000	7593	1,675,530

(Source: District Secretariats: Ampara, 2012; Batticaloa, 2014; Trincomalee, 2011).

GN: Grama Niladhari.

such as the municipal councils, urban councils, town councils and village councils was introduced under the Donoughmore Constitution in 1931.

The local government system presently consists of municipal councils, urban councils, and Pradeshiya Sabhas, which are governed by three different laws, such as Municipal Councils Ordinance (1947), Urban Councils Ordinance (1939), and the Pradeshiya Sabhas Act (1987)

Table 3. Details of local authorities in the Eastern Province.

Districts	Number of local authorities	Number of councilors	Women representatives
Ampara	20	201	03
Batticaloa	12	127	03
Trincomalee	13	118	04
Total	45	446	10

(Source: www.lgpc.gov.lk).

There are three tiers of administration in Sri Lanka in the present context: (1) central government, (2) provincial government, and (3) local government institution. This study is presently confined to local governance in relation to political participation of women. The powers to control and supervise the local authority transferred from central government to provincial councils. However, powers relating to the formation, structure and national policy on local government still remain with the central government.

The local government authorities are responsible for providing services for the well-being of the community in the respective areas. The functions of local government authorities include the following:

- Regulatory and administrative functions
- Promotion of public health and sanitation
- Environmental sanitation
- Public thorough fares and public utility services.

Table 3 shows the number of local authorities functioning now in the Eastern Province with the numbers of councilors and more specifically with women representatives.

From Table 3, it is clear that there are 446 members in the 45 local government authorities in the Eastern Province, out of which only 10 are women (around 5%). Of the 4485 members representing the 365 local authorities throughout the island (for more information, see: www.lgpc.gov.lk), 446 members are in the Eastern Province, which is exactly 10%.

Women's association in researched areas

As demonstrated in the previous section, there are 446 members representing the local governments in the Eastern Province; among them only 10 are women (around 2.25%). Of the 4485 members representing all the 365 local authorities throughout the island (for more information, see: www.lgpc.gov.lk), only 83 were women. These 83 women were distributed as follows: 64 of them in Pradesya Sabhas, 9 in urban councils, and 10 in municipal councils (for more information, see: www.lgpc.gov.lk). It shows very little participation of women in the local governance throughout the island. However, the situation is more acute in the case of local governance in the Eastern Province.

The results show that associations and organizations representing women in the village level in the researched area usually become dysfunctional soon after their registration. Table 4 reveals the number of women associations functioning in the respective local government areas.

The findings from the focus group discussion held with members of women's associations and other members in Kalmunai municipal area show that women societies have been involved in what

Table 4. Women's associations in Kalmunai MC, Batticaloa MC, and Ampara UC.

S.No	Local government authorities	Number of women's associations/societies	Active organizations
1	Kalmunai MC	30	√
2	Batticaloa MC	48	√
3	Ampara UC	15	√

(Source: Kalmunai, Batticaloa, and Ampara Divisional Secretariat, 2017).
MC: municipal council S.No.: ; UC: urban council.

is termed a *seettu* system (saving system) and according to the members who participated in the FGDs, the majority of the associations are now defunct though they had their numbers registered in the DS office.

In the FGDs held in the Ampara urban area, it was highlighted that women's associations which function actively help to contribute to the livelihood of women. They maintained that women's societies were mainly focused on self-employment projects such as handicrafts, candle production, small boutique businesses, etc. They primarily rely on bank loans from Private Banks such as *Lanka Orix Leasing Company* (LOLC) to help their colleagues to engage in self-employment projects. One of the respondents from the Ampara urban area noted:

“The profit we earn from these self-employment projects is just enough to settle only the interests of banks and we run out empty at the end” (Interview 12).

This is the pathetic situation of women in the Ampara urban area. The case of Batticaloa is somewhat different from that of the other two local government areas.

The number of registered women's associations is larger in the Batticaloa municipal area than the other areas, and their active involvement, not only in local government elections, but also in local government development initiatives, was noted during the FGDs held with the participants in the area. Members in the FGDs held in the Batticaloa municipal area highlighted that their organizations were largely involved in the following three key areas:

1. Rural development projects
2. Savings
3. Self-development initiatives such as capacity building, training, leadership training.

This is evident from the responses given by an interviewee from a focus group discussion held in the Batticaloa municipal area.

“We, the members of the Kallady Uppodai women's society, were once involved in the road renovation works, funded by a non-governmental organization. But, we aren't given any more projects. We don't know why the authorities distance us in the projects” (Interview 6).

The above statement clearly indicates that the authorities previously involved women's societies in projects, such as road reconstruction. However, they are no longer involved in such projects in the area and feel disappointed and discriminated against.

The survey conducted in the three local government areas also underlines the higher involvement of women in societies and associations as shown in the Figure 2.

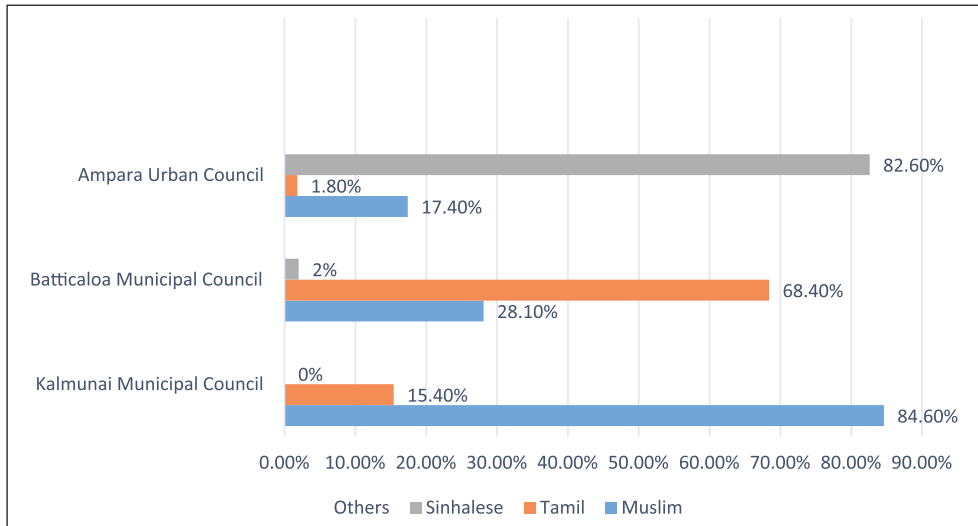


Figure 2. Involvement of women in associations or societies.

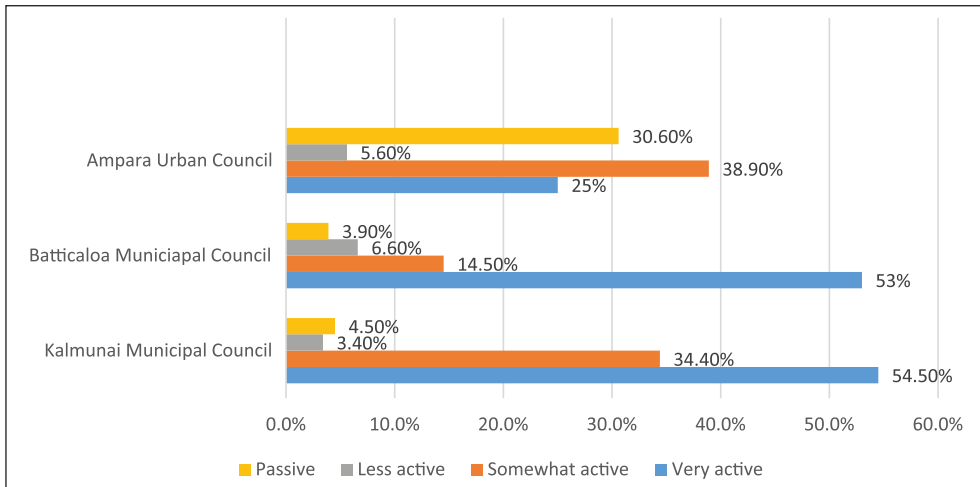


Figure 3. Active participation of women in societies.

From the above figure, it is clear that the majority of women in all three local government areas participate in associations and societies. Their involvement cuts across ethnic boundaries, since all three communities in the three local government areas participate in various societies for various purposes. That shows a healthy development of women in these local councils, as far as their participation in associations is concerned.

As shown above, the majority of the societies in the three local government areas are seemingly active only in the case of saving and self-development initiatives with loans obtained from banks. This is evident in the results of survey shown below in Figure 3.

The above figure shows that a vast majority of women actively participate in societies and associations, particularly in women’s societies. This also suggests that regardless of ethnic differences,

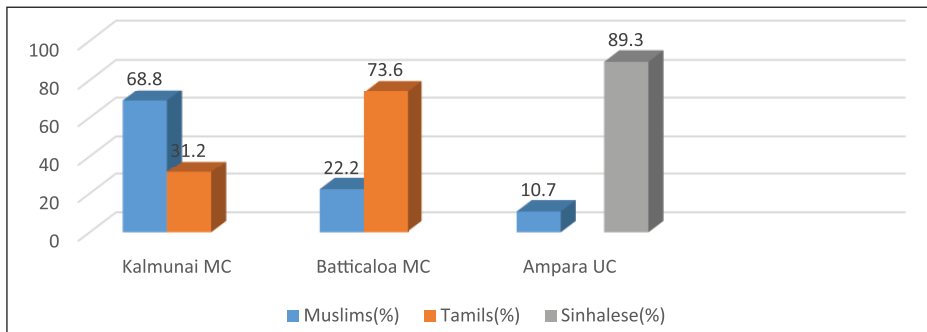


Figure: 4. Awareness of women's participation in local governance.
MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.

women's active participation in societies in general is promising. The situation in the AMC, according to our survey, is slightly different. It should also be noted that a significant percentage of women (25% very actively and 38.9 % somewhat actively) participate in societies or associations in the Ampara urban area. The survey results also corroborate the fact that women are active not in the local governance system, but only in the building of their network by engaging in savings (*seettu*) and self-development initiatives.

Interestingly, political parties make use of these associations during the election times. A respondent's perspective is highlighted below:

“Political parties usually come to us during election times and give us some money. In return, they expect us to work for them and vote for them. We distribute that money among our members” (Interview 4).

The references made by a large number of members who participated in the FGDs held in three local government areas also corroborate the above response. They feel that political parties invariably come after women's associations, providing them with financial assistance in return for their votes. This may be regarded as a form of bribery on the part of politicians prior to and during the election period. However, political parties are reluctant to involve women in politics.

Significance of women's participation in local governance

It is important to explore what people think about women's participation in local governance. The following Figure 4 shows the awareness on the part of women in participation in local governance in all three local government areas.

Figure 4 clearly suggests that a majority of women in each local council area have positive impressions about their participation in local governance. A total of 89.3% Sinhalese, 73.6% Tamils, and 68.8% Muslims acknowledge that their role is significant in local governance in many ways. They believe that their participation in local governance will lead to the positive developments in local authorities. However, in reality, this is not the case, since the involvement of women in local governance is conspicuously absent. A majority of the participants in all six FGDs conducted in three local government areas have highlighted the need for women's engagement in local governance. A respondent from the KMC area noted:

Table 5. Dynamics of women's participation in local government elections.

Local council	Nomination		Propaganda or canvassing		Voting		Celebration of victory		Raising their concerns		Other works	
	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)	Yes (%)	No (%)
Kalmunai MC	21.9	76.1	4.5	95.5	81.8	18.2	8	92	3.4	96.6	4.5	95.5
Batticaloa MC	18.4	81.6	18.4	81.6	98.7	1.3	36.8	63.2	19.7	80.3	0	100
Ampara UC	27.8	72.2	36.1	63.9	91.7	8.3	33.3	66.7	25	75	5.6	94.4

MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.

“We know how important our involvement in local governance is. But due to many reasons, we keep away from local governance, particularly its election process” (Interview 5).

The importance of women's involvement in local governance is noted in the assertion highlighted above.

Dynamics of women's participation in local government bodies

Despite the awareness on the part of women on the significance of their participation in local governance, it is not satisfactory in the three local government bodies. More importantly, their participation in the dynamics of local government elections is not forthcoming. This is illustrated in Table 5 drawn from the results of survey.

Table 5 reveals the dynamics of women's participation in local government elections. The survey results suggest that active participation of women is confined to voting. This is a general phenomenon among all three communities in all the three local government areas. Active political participation involves only voting, while the other elections tasks are carried out by men. Over 70% of respondents in all the three local government areas underline that they are not involved in the nomination process. Over 65% (the actual percentage varies between 65% and 95%) said that they do not engage in propaganda and celebration of victories or raise their legitimate concerns in the local government authorities. This phenomenon transcends ethnic boundaries, since the survey findings reflect the views of Muslims, Tamils as well as Sinhalese. Thus, the realm of politics, that is, the dynamics of local government elections are completely male-dominated and noted in the interview.

“We only vote in elections. Candidates send us vehicles to go to the polling station on the election day. We leave the rest of the election-related activities such as propaganda, canvassing, nomination, celebration etc. to males” (Interview 8).

Since women are seen as incapable of handling other election duties, it reveals their vulnerability and further underlines their apathy towards the processes of election. Such a perception towards women is derived from societal assumption and requires examining the views of people living in the area about women's initiatives about entering local government elections.

People's reaction to women's participation in local government elections

There has been a growing trend among women in western countries to participate in politics. In the present Canadian Government, 15 cabinet ministers out of 30 are women (see: <https://www>.

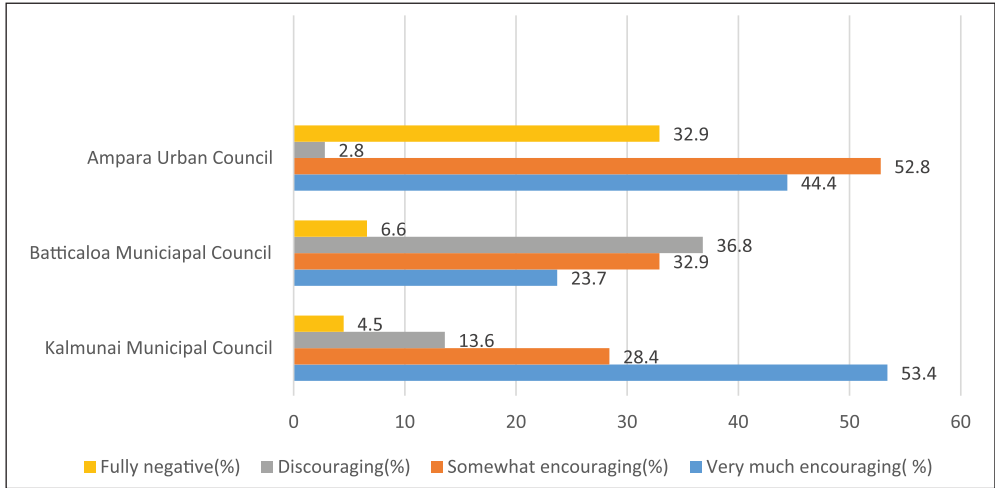


Figure 5. People’s reaction to women’s participation in local government elections.

theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/04/canada-cabinet-gender-diversity-justin-trudeau). This has been the trend in Scandinavian countries too. However, in South Asian countries, which are dominated by stringent social structures and stratification due to the prevailing system of caste and religious denominations, politics has been regarded as an exclusive male domain, hence, leaving little room for women to engage in politics. It is also the case in Sri Lanka, too. However, the government now is in the process of involving more women in politics, with legislation being passed as a preparatory arrangement. As highlighted above, women have shown a greater interest in voting in the research area, though they have been shunned from other processes of elections. Moreover, the study focused on the reaction of people towards women entering the processes of elections. Figure 5 shows the results of findings.

A total of 53.4% of people in KMC, and 44.4% of people in AUC have said that the society’s reaction towards women’s participation in politics is very encouraging. A total of 32.9% of people in BMC demonstrated that it is somewhat encouraging. This goes to show that society is generally supportive to women entering into the realm of active politics, that is, to contest in an election.

Institutional support and challenges confronting women’s participation in local governance

There has been encouraging support from society for women’s active political participation, particularly in local governance. Therefore, it is significant to recognize the kind of institutional support women can obtain from the society if they contest in elections. Social institutions like families, peer groups, civil society organizations and religious organizations play a pivotal role in women’s participation in politics (Table 6).

The findings of the survey (Table 6) suggest that approximately 50% of the women obtain support from families, friends, and civil society organizations if they contest in elections. A total of 58.3% in AUC, 35.5% in BMC, and 28.4% in KMC said that they will obtain support from their families. Overall, 30.6% in AUC, 51.3% in BMC, and 20.5% in KMC feel that they will obtain support from their friends or social networks if they contest in elections. Similarly, support from civil society organizations to women wishing to contest in elections figures

Table 6. Institutional support for women's political participation.

Category	Kalmunai MC (%)				Batticaloa MC (%)				Ampara UC (%)			
	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much
Families	33	20.5	17	28.4	6.6	14.5	42.1	35.5	–	5.6	11.1	58.3
Peer groups/ friends	18.2	22.7	36.4	20.5	–	10.5	36.8	51.3	11.1	5.6	25	30.6
Neighbors	43.2	21.6	20.5	13.6	2.6	26.3	46.1	23.7	5.6	19.4	44.4	16.7
Civil society organizations	11.4	15.9	17	53.4	5.3	28.9	30.3	31.6	11.1	–	33.3	25
Religious organizations	22.7	22.7	38.6	13.6	22.4	34.2	19.7	21.1	11.1	13.9	2.8	36.1
Others	6.8	1.1	2.3	14.8	1.3	–	2.6	–	–	2.8	19.4	16.7

MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.

prominently in the survey results as above. A total of 53.5% in KMC, 31.6% in BMC, and 25% in AUC are positive that they will obtain support of civil society organizations if they contest in elections. All of these figures underline the fact that women are aware that families, friends and civil society organizations will extend their support to them if they (women) contest in elections.

Significantly, women discount the support of neighbors and religious organizations. They may already have the impression that it would be difficult for them to obtain the support of neighbors and religious organizations. However, this is not a general phenomenon. The survey results demonstrate a contrasting feature as far as the support of religious organizations and neighbors is concerned. Overall, 43.2% in KMC negate the role of neighbors when they contest in elections, while 46.1% in BMC and 44.4% in AUC feel that they would obtain support of neighbors. Support from religious organizations to women's political participation exhibits a contrast too. A quarter of the respondents, that is, 22.7% in KMC, and 22.4% in BMC, discount any support from religious organizations for women's political participation, while 36.1% in AUC feel that they are likely to obtain the support of religious organizations in political participation. This also points to the differences in cultural and religious structure of communities in each local government area. For instance, religious organizations such as the Masajid (mosques) and Kovils (Hindu temples) may discount the idea of women contesting in the elections. This is clearly reflected in the results of survey conducted in both KMC and BMC, where Muslims and Tamils are a predominant majority, and their religious organizations seem to be influential, to some extent, in determining their socio-cultural and religious affairs of the community.

This is also reflected in the FGDs conducted in all three local government areas and in the in-depth interviews. A majority of respondents in the FGDs conducted in three local governmental areas stated the belief that they would be able to obtain the support of their families, friends, neighbors and civil society organizations, if women contest in elections, but they felt that they would not obtain support of religious organizations/institutions. In-depth interviews conducted with selected people also reflected the same perspective.

“We can get the support of families, neighbors, civil society groups and friends, but we are not sure about getting support and cooperation from religious institutions. Because, they think it is taboo for women to enter into politics and that it is a male domain” (Interview 7).

Table 7. Factors hampering women's participation in local governance.

Factors	Kalmunai MC (%)				Batticaloa MC (%)				Ampara UC (%)			
	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much	Not at all	Partially	Some extent	Very much
Economic	54.5	21.6	10.2	13.6	6.6	21.1	61.8	10.5	19.4	–	27.8	33.3
Religious	36.4	23.9	29.5	10.2	9.2	30.3	31.6	28.9	38.9	11.1	11.1	19.4
Social	8	38.6	33	19.3	1.3	27.6	48.7	22.4	25	2.8	36.1	27.8
Biological	8	31.8	51.1	8	2.6	25	47.4	23.7	13.9	11.1	8.3	36.1
Psychological	10.2	33	42	11.4	3.9	26.3	47.4	18.4	33.3	13.3	5.6	19.4
Political	26.1	48.9	15.9	8	6.6	28.9	31.6	32.9	22.2	16.7	16.7	11.1
External pressure	28.4	42	10.2	19.3	5.3	27.6	40.8	23.7	33.3	8.3	2.8	22.2
Others	3.4	13.6	1.1	2.3	–	–	–	3.9	3	6	5	6

MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.

The above statement also underscores the reality. Therefore, it is clear now that there has been a growing acceptance among people for women's participation in local governance. However, their interest in contesting elections (political participation) is absent from mainstream politics. This may be due to several factors which need to be examined. The next section deals with this aspect.

Factors contributing to low levels of political participation of women

Low levels of women's political participation have been witnessed not only in Sri Lanka, but at the global level too. Their participation in politics is not as widely appreciated as the participation of men. Even if they do involve themselves in politics, the support rendered by society is very minimal and in some cases, women are ostracized by the society. On the contrary, women's political participation figures prominently in some developed countries like Canada, Norway and Sweden, to such an extent that they hold responsible ministerial portfolios in those countries.

The previous section shows the vulnerability of women in politics, and their apathy towards active political participation. This section sheds light on the factors that contribute to a low level of women's participation in politics in the area. Table 7 shows the result of surveys drawn from the respondents.

Data in Table 7 suggest that the low level of political participation by women is mainly attributable to social, biological, religious, psychological and economic factors. Furthermore, to a certain extent, political factors and external pressures also contribute to the low level of their political participation. A total of 51.1% respondents in KMC said that biological factors contribute to some extent, while 23.7% in BMC, and 36.1% in AUC said that biological factors contribute to a great degree to the low level of women's political participation. This implies that women perceive that they are biologically unfit to contest in elections or participate in the whole process of political participation. This shows their negative perception towards electioneering and political participation. This is reflected in the FGDs where the majority of women reiterated the point that, being women, they cannot contest in elections or be involved in election-related works. A respondent noted:

“Society wants us to be at home; not in the local authorities or the parliament. We are women; we cannot do election work. We also believe that our main task is to raise our children and look after our family affairs” (Interview 2).

This also shows that biological differences dominate the perception of women's political participation. Thus, they are conditioned to confine their duties to domestic and family chores.

A total of 61.8 % of those surveyed in BMC indicated that economic reasons too, to some extent, hampers their political participation, while 13.6% in KMC and 33.3% in AUC said that economy is the major reason contributing to the lack of women's political participation. As a result of war, the number of widows in Batticaloa increased dramatically and most women have now been compelled to play the dual role as a housekeeper as well as a breadwinner. This leaves very little room for them to participate in politics, particularly in the local governance. Thus, this emphasizes that economy plays a significant role in determining the political dynamics of people. Since politics in South Asian countries including Sri Lanka is necessarily entwined with cheap publicity, deception, corruption and so on, it is difficult to be successful in politics without financial strength. This is further corroborated by the interviewees:

“To enter politics, we need money, a lot of money. Being poor is a disqualification in politics. During an election, you need a lot of money to spend. Otherwise, nobody will be with you. Even to have a poster stuck on a wall, you need money. You cannot go on begging. You need money” (Interview 11).

Thus, it is clear that the financial strength is a basic requisite for women to enter into politics and contest in elections, because it entails significant expenses for printing posters, financially supporting certain sports clubs and social groups to enlist their support, media and political campaign.

Psychological factors are also highlighted by the survey. It refers to emotional and mental support provided by families, society and other social groups to women contesting election. A total of 18.4% in BMC, 11.4% in KMC, and 19.4% in AUC indicated that psychological factors were an influence on the low level of women's political participation. A negative perception of politics and elections may have been a contributing factor. In a country like Sri Lanka, elections are always associated with anti-social behaviors, such as drugs and alcohol, deception, violence and so on and thus, women may be discouraged from entering active politics. A respondent affirms:

“We cannot be involved in election-related violence, as we are women. We cannot even give false promises. It would be difficult for us to raise our children and attend to the household work if we take part in active politics” (Interview 15).

As highlighted above, election-related violence and household duties prevent women from taking part in active politics or contesting in elections.

Religion also plays a pivotal role in determining the stance of women towards political participation. According to the survey, 10.2% in KMC, 28.9% in BMC, and 19.4% in AUC said that religious factors hamper women's political participation, particularly in contesting elections and election-related activities. This is reflected in the FGDs and in-depth interviews. A significant proportion of participants in the FGDs in all three local government areas agreed that religious reasons bar women from contesting in elections. Although no religions have overtly precluded the political entry of women, it is regarded as a taboo for women to contest in elections and reflected in the responses of interviewees:

“No one encourages us to contest in elections. Religious leaders or the clergies never welcome our entry into active politics. They want us to look after our family. So, we keep away from active politics” (Interview 7).

Women keep away from active politics, because of their apprehension of societal disapproval and the disapproval of religious leaders. This relegates them to the domestic realm. This can be regarded as the segregation of duties to men and women in the social domain. It is also significant

that members in the FGDs conducted in Tamil and Muslim areas (Batticaloa and Ampara) highlighted there is a tendency among the men, particularly in the Tamil and Muslim communities, not to let the women to take a dominant role even in family affairs. This tendency of lacking support to women seeking to play a role in the administration of their respective areas is continuing to date. Overcoming this cultural barrier is a daunting task for those encouraging women to take leadership roles in the respective communities. This is one of the reasons for women shunning from active politics.

The responses in the survey, interviews and FGDs represent the lack of active political participation by women attributed to political reasons and external pressures. The majority of participants in FGDs, conducted in all three local government areas, pointed out that political parties are an important reason for the low level of women's political participation. Reluctance on the part of political parties to accommodate women in their list of nominees was highlighted as a major contributing factor.

“Although many political parties do not choose women as their candidates or party cadres, Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP) enlists women as party cadres and encourages them to contest in elections. I am also an active member of TMVP and may contest in the upcoming local government election in the Batticaloa district” (Interview 9).

It is apparent that only one political party in the BMC involves women as its cadre or members, and accommodates women as candidates in elections, while the other parties are male-centric. Such political factors keep women away from active politics.

Thus, the above section highlights that the low level of women's political participation is attributable to biological, economic, psychological, religious, and political factors in the area of this study. However, there has been an effort over the last few years to encourage political participation of women there by a few agencies functioning which will be highlighted in the next section.

Agencies promoting political participation of women

It appears that there are some agencies that promote women's political participation in the area. This is a great initiative, considering that legislation has recently been passed in the parliament to allocate a 25% quota for women in local government elections. Figure 6 shows the results of the survey in relation to agencies promoting political participation of women.

Figure 6 clearly demonstrate that almost half of the respondents agree that there are agencies working to promote political participation by women in KMC, BMC, and AUC. A total of 58% in KMC, 46.10% in BMC, and 63.90% in AUC said that there has been an effort by various agencies to promote political participation of women. On the other hand, it can also be seen in the above figure that an equal percentage of respondents disagree on agencies promoting women's political participation, that is, they discount it totally. However, the findings from the FGDs and interviews reveal that a few agencies promote women's political participation in the area. Although they may have done so in the past, they no longer focus on those aspects. They pointed out that the focus of NGOs and civil society organizations is now on peace and reconciliation and post-war economic development. The concern of these agencies is short-term goals to achieve certain objectives. This can be corroborated from the responses of the interviews:

“Surya Foundation and Viluthukal conducted programmes on women's political participation in Batticaloa earlier. But, this is not on their agenda these days. They are doing some other programmes” (Interview 6).

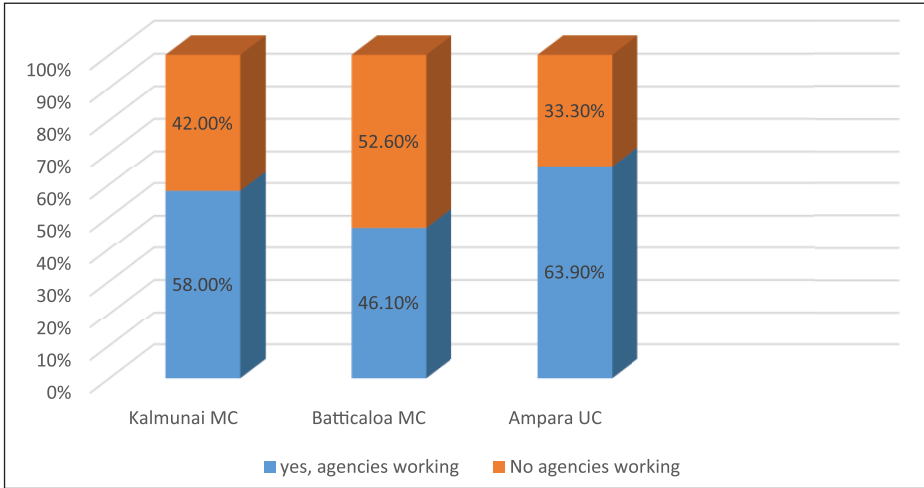


Figure 6. Agencies working to promote women’s participation in local governance.

MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.

One of the respondents who participated in the focus group discussion held in Batticaloa also confirmed:

“TMVP is the only party that gives 30% seats to women, while other political parties have never done that. TMVP highly encourages women to take to politics” (Interview 9).

As mentioned in the introduction section, the government has recently made amendments to the Local Government Act to increase women’s participation to 25% in local governance (Warunasuriya, 2016). This has received a positive acknowledgement among the respondents, and the people are aware of what is being done with regard women’s political participation in local governance. Figure 7 shows people’s awareness of government legislation to increase women’s participation by 25% in local governance.

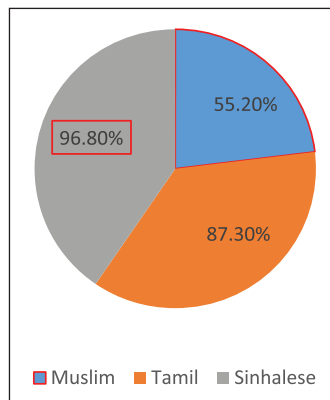


Figure 7. Awareness of people on legislation to increase women’s participation in local governance.

All three communities in the three local government areas, according to the results of survey shown in Figure 7, are aware of the initiatives taken by the government to increase women's participation to 25% in local governance. This is a positive development and has become the focal point of discussion in the popular discourses ahead of the local government election in Sri Lanka, scheduled to be held this year. However, it is yet to be seen whether the political parties will allocate 25% of the quota to women in their list of nomination in the upcoming local government election.

However, the above findings explicitly suggest that there is a lack of initiative by agencies and institutions in the three local government areas promoting political participation by women, except in the BMC, where only a political party which, to some extent, involves women and encourages them to engage in active politics. The other political parties, NGOs, and civil society organizations do not pay attention to the aspect of women's political participation, though a few organizations had previously focused on this issue.

Conclusion

While the developed countries encourage political participation of women, the scenario in Sri Lanka is different; although women account for 51% of the total population of Sri Lanka, only about 5% of women are elected to the parliament, provincial councils and local government institutions. As such, this study on political participation of women in local governance in the selected local government bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka was conducted.

The findings show that organized collective involvement of women, across all ethnic boundaries, was found effective only in social welfare like *seettu*, livelihood and social security than political participation. Interestingly, it was found that candidates of political parties financially help these organized collective associations prior to and during election period to secure their votes. Ironically, political participation of women ends only with voting, leaving aside the rest of the task of elections to men such as nomination, propaganda, canvassing, and celebration of victories.

Another finding is societal support towards women's entry into realm of active politics. Women are able to secure support of families, friends, neighbors, and civil society organizations, but they encounter challenges from religious institutions. However, women shun from active politics owing to biological, economic, psychological, religious, and political factors. Most importantly, their apprehensions, inferiority complex, poverty and lack of financial strength, social norms that confine them with domestic affairs, discouragement by religious leaders, and dual role as a housekeeper and a breadwinner in the family are indicated as social factors. Above all, the reluctance on the part of political parties to involve them or give them slots in the list of nomination is also underlined as a significant factor for their low level of political participation in the area.

It further reveals that a few agencies are promoting political participation of women. Political parties, many NGOs, and civil society organizations pay scant regard to women's political participation. Although a few of the agencies/institutions focused on women's political participation in the past, they are no more doing so. Their priorities have shifted to other aspects such as peace and development. It also shows that all three communities – Muslims, Tamils, and Sinhalese – are aware of the initiatives taken by the government to increase women's quota by 25% in local governance. This is a positive development and has become a focal point of discussion in the popular discourses ahead of the local government election in Sri Lanka scheduled to be held next year. However, it is yet to be seen whether the political parties will accommodate 25% of women in their list of nominations in the upcoming local government elections.

Overall, it was found that although women would like to participate in local governance, in order to contribute their potential and address their grievances at local government level, it appears

that the space for women's participation is limited due to the factors listed above. In the wake of the government's formulation of legislation to allocate a 25% quota to women in local governance, it is important for the civil society organizations, women's associations and political parties to ensure that this is adhered to in their nominations in the upcoming elections.

As this study – coming out in the aftermath of the government legislation to increase the quota of women's participation in local governance – has focused on different aspects of women's political participation in local governance, it would significantly help policy makers both at the national and local governmental levels.

This study would also be useful to women's associations who intend to field their members in the upcoming local government elections. More importantly, political parties which plan their policies for future elections with the involvement of women will have to consider the findings of this study as there are invaluable inputs/lessons for their future strategy and policy making. This study will be significant for researchers, scholars and others who seek information on the importance of political participation of women in Eastern Sri Lanka.

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Appendix I. Details of interviewees.

Interview no.	Name	Local government area	Sex
01	Mrs A Yogesveran	Kalmunai MC	F
02	Mrs MY Relifa	Kalmunai MC	F
03	Mr J Liyakath Ali	Kalmunai MC	M
04	Mrs UK Suvaitha	Kalmunai MC	F
05	Mrs MP Raheema	Kalmunai MC	F
06	Mrs VK Jayanthi	Batticalao MC	F
07	Mrs M Ruthramurdhy	Batticalao MC	F
08	Mrs T Vijayalakshmi	Batticalao MC	F
09	Mrs MV Ranjani	Batticalao MC	F
10	Mr K Rasmanikkam	Batticalao MC	M
11	Mrs RDP Nilmini	Ampara UC	F
12	Mrs AM Dayani Ramya	Ampara UC	F
13	Mr UP Senarathna	Ampara UC	M
14	Mr DCD Ilangakoon	Ampara UC	M
15	Mrs VKS Sumathy	Ampara UC	F

F: female; M: male; MC: municipal council; UC: urban council.