



Women in Politics: Sri Lanka's next step forward

Parliament passes a law enforcing a mandatory 25% quota for female candidates in local general elections.



Chandrani Bandara, Minister for Women and Child Affairs talks to 25 women leaders about the challenges faced by female candidates and how to overcome them, at a focus group discussion supported by SDGAP in Anuradhapura. Photo credit: Indika Fernando/SDGAP. December 2017.

"We need to keep fighting for the increased number of women in active politics. A complete society is built only through combining both paternal and maternal values," His Excellency, Maithripala Sirisena, President of Sri Lanka, during his address at the Women for Change event, November 2017.

November 2017 – Women in Sri Lanka make up 52% of the general population but only 12 women currently hold parliamentary seats. In a move to step it up for gender equality and ensure that women are better represented in decision making processes, in August 2017, the Parliament of Sri Lanka passed an amendment to electoral law that enforces a mandatory 25% quota for female candidates in local general elections.

The amendment which makes the 25% quota possible demonstrates the commitment of both Sri Lanka's President and Prime Minister towards empowering women. Implementation of the quota however, requires effective mechanisms that enable and empower women to be a part of such processes.

There has been some confusion regarding the quota, and as a means of helping to resolve this, USAID's Strengthening Democratic Governance and Accountability Project (SDGAP) in Sri Lanka, organized several focus group discussions together with the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government, to explain the new system to stakeholders at the national and local levels. A successful example of this collaboration was an event held under the patronage of His Excellency, the President of Sri Lanka, entitled "*Women for Change*," on November 14, 2017 for over 1,000 women leaders, across all parties.

Organized as a joint project by the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Government and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs, and supported by SDGAP, with the objective of generating awareness on the 25% quota for women at the local government level, attendees included the President, Prime Minister, Ministers, Members of the Parliament, the Commissioner of Elections, Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Governors, representatives from United Nations' Agencies and other International NGOs and female political party representatives from all over Sri Lanka.

The National Plan of Action for Women in Sri Lanka was launched at this event, by the Action Forum Collective for Women's Political Participation. SDGAP supported the development of this Action Plan which will be endorsed in Parliament in the near future. In addition, the project will also support the implementation of a series of focused group discussions and trainings with a view to influence national policy making by facilitating the interaction of women representatives from the provincial and local governments, and their civil society and community counterparts.

The quota alone is not a silver bullet. Rather, it needs to be reinforced by effective strategies and strong partnerships. Stakeholders from various groups must be brought together, along with the Ministry of Provincial Councils and Local Governments to develop these much needed mechanisms. Meanwhile, SDGAP will continue to work closely with the Parliamentary Caucus of Women and the Ministry of Women and Child Affairs (MOWCA) as part of its overall commitment to strengthening democratic governance and accountability through the increased engagement of women and under-represented groups in parliamentary processes.

Update to this story: December 2017- Since the announcement that local elections would take place on February 10 2018, SDGAP continued its capacity development programs for local women contesting in the local elections, together with the Parliament Women's Caucus and the Sectoral Oversight Committee on Women and Gender (SOCWG). This has included a series of seminars, workshops and focused group discussions that bring together prospective candidates and women leaders aspiring to seek nominations for the upcoming elections. These events allow for in-depth discussions on the challenges faced by women candidates, how to overcome them, and how to better prepare to compete as candidates in local general elections. SDGAP maintains a tracker of these women who are aspiring to move into politics, which tracks their progress. As of December 2017, it was noted that five prospective women leaders, from groups trained in Batticaloa and Jaffna earlier that year, have received a nomination and will be contesting the election. They represent a diverse range of parties including the United National Party (UNP), the United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) and the Eelam People's Democratic Party (EPDP).

