

Online Feminism for an Inclusive Democracy in Sri Lanka: Using Digital Platforms to Increase the Gender Representation and Political Engagement

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Abstract

Women's political participation in Sri Lankan politics was widely discouraged by the male-dominated patriarchal political system. However, social solid development indicators for women in health, education and social service do not necessarily translate into increased political representation in Sri Lanka. In such a context, this paper attempts to explain why it is essential for women's representation in the parliament and how modern digital awareness-raising tools such as 'Social Media and Online Feminism' could be helpful to empower women as well as to educate the entire public on this issue. However, the lack of technological facilities and digital infrastructure in rural areas are critical concerns. Therefore, this paper suggests that identifying the world web as a fundamental human right is essential with advanced technological development in the modern world because many human rights rely on digital technology. The perspective given in this paper helps to strategically think of this issue and find creative solutions to build an inclusive democracy in Sri Lanka. The suggestions of this paper would help the Sri Lankan policymakers reduce the barriers and improve the overall quality of life by acknowledging the internet as a human right.

Key Words: *Online Feminism, Inclusive Democracy, Representation, Gender Equality, Human Rights*

The global average of women's representation in politics is 24.6%, in the Asian region, it's 20.5%, in Sri Lanka, it's 5.3%, with the women population being 52%. There is very little done to address the broad discrimination against Sri Lankan women or provide them protection and empower them to be equal partners in the country's growth and progress. We need to be cautious and supportive, so women do not feel intimidated by politics perpetuated by the ruling class.

*Lihini Fernando,
Female Politician and attorney-at-law in Sri Lanka.*

Although Sri Lanka has achieved so much progress in education, health and most of the social indicators, the representation of women at every level of governance remains abysmally low. Since the country's transition to democracy began during the 1930s, the representation of women legislators at the national level has never exceeded 7% throughout Sri Lanka's electoral history (UN Women, 2022). According to Sathya Karunaratne, the Research Executive at Advocata Institute, Sri Lanka did not break the glass ceiling with the top political leadership of Prime Minister Sirimawo Bandaranaike and President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga because the men in their lives were deep-rooted in politics (cited in Kamdar, 2020).

In such a context, the topic of increasing female representation in Sri Lankan politics has been subjected to much exciting debate in recent years. Under-representation globally can be attributed to several factors. At the same time, "the stereotypical notions about the 'right' place of women in society" have been identified as a critical factor in why women are often reluctant to play a significant role in Sri Lankan politics (Perera, 2015). This paper explores whether 'Online Feminism' is an effective tool amongst Sri Lankan social media users to increase awareness of inclusive gender representation in Sri Lankan Politics. Digital communication platforms play a vital role as the modern form of awareness-raising in changing the Sri Lankan public discourse on women's capabilities and political rights. However, to facilitate open access to current communication channels for urban and rural communities, recognizing the right to digital technology as a fundamental human right in the 21st century is necessary since rural communities represent critical game-changing votes in Sri Lankan politics.

Do we need women in politics?

Political participation as a human right grants citizens "the right to take part, directly or through representatives, in the conduct of public affairs and government, and to vote at genuine periodic elections based on universal suffrage and the secret ballot" (Asiedu et al., 2018 p.2. as cited in Steiner, 1988; Bunch, 1990). However, for ages, women's political participation has been a highly debated topic in a patriarchal and male-dominated society. Article 07 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which the United Nations General Assembly adopted in 1979 (OHCHR, 2022), called for the state parties to take necessary steps to eliminate discrimination against

women in the political spheres by ensuring both women and men have equal rights to vote, to be eligible to vote, to be eligible to hold public office, to participate in the policy formulation and implementation, and to participate in non-governmental organizations. Accordingly, the meaningful participation of women in policy-making leadership roles at both national and local levels has become a critical focus of the global development policy. However, some may doubt why it matters if women become political leaders or play a role in decision-making.

There's a broader discussion and growing concern in democratic countries on how to build a good parliament. The Good Parliament is "truly representative, transparent, accessible, accountable and effective in its many functions" (Childs, 2016). In building a good parliament, women's political, social and economic inclusion highly matters. It promotes gender equality by challenging the socio-political structures that perpetuate a culture of women's subordination in the private and public spheres (Asiedu et al., 2018, p.2). In the theoretical concept of democracy, "power belongs to the ruled, not the rulers" (Johnston, 2001, p. 296). Representative democracies are frequently said to need competent men and women to function effectively so that they value gender equality. Gender equality is another crucial theoretical concept that focuses on both men's and women's progress through different aspects of development, which are simplified into capabilities, opportunities and empowerment/ agency (Kabeer, 2005; Beer, 2009). Among the various aspects of gender equality, the political empowerment of women is one of the most critical aspects. This includes active political representation and improved decision-making capacities at all governance levels. Overall, political empowerment of women helps advance gender equality and affects both the range of policy issues that get considered and the proposed types of solutions.

Active political participation can lead to various gains for democracy, such as more excellent responsiveness to the needs of citizens, increased cooperation across parties and a more sustainable future (Perera, 2018). This effort also increases the number of women in the parliament, improves policy outcomes and promotes inclusiveness in public spheres (Asiedu et al., 2018, p.2). It challenges the dominant power structures of men and relations that undermine the consideration of women's needs and interest in policy-making. Women's representation in governance is significant for promoting a greater diversity of views in government, combatting damaging sexist notions that subjugate women and diminish their capabilities and value, and

because fundamentally, it aligns with their right against discrimination based on gender (Philips, 2015).

Research indicates that the sex differences of legislators have a more significant impact on their policy priorities. An analogical increase in policymaking emphasizes quality of life and reflects the importance of families and minority groups when more women are elected to run the office (Pepera, 2018). The democratic process requires the participation of all citizens. Any deviations from this can create unfair and unequal power-sharing between men and women. The exclusion of women can further result in inequitable social policies, unfair political processes and more incredible frustration among citizens. Thus, increasing women's political representation is vital to transforming countries into inclusive democracies and fostering socio-political norms.

Online Feminism: As a form of awareness-raising in the 21st century

Being a patriarchal and traditional-minded society, Sri Lanka suffers from the gendered nature of politics and entrenched stereotypes that privilege men as leaders and women as caregivers. (Philips, 2015 as cited in Wickramasinghe & Kodikara 2012; Krook & Norris 2014). This has had a sustained impact on women's exclusion from politics and policy, marking leadership roles. Although the previous Sri Lankan government (2015-2019) introduced a 25% mandatory quota for women to enter the local government in 2016, the expected results have not been received due to women's lack of interest and political awareness. Hampered by the social norms surrounding the 'role of a woman,' most females lack the required competence and political knowledge to run a successful election campaign on par with the male candidates. (Perera, 2015). This is not healthy, considering the active roles that many Sri Lankan women are playing in their communities through various social service activities. To address these identified gaps, awareness-raising among women should be recognized as the most prominent solution. However, it should be innovative and strategic to increase the level of confidence of women to fight against male-dominant political systems.

Women's rights movements and feminism have turned to digital technologies and social media platforms in recent years. Many activists and civil society rights-based organizations worldwide use social media platforms to dialogue, network, and organize against contemporary human rights issues, sexism, misogyny, and rape culture (Mendes et al., 2019). The

emergence of feminist campaigns such as #MeToo, #BeenRapedNever Reported, #distractinglysexy and #NotYourAsianSidekick are part of a growing trend of digital resistance and challenges to sexism, patriarchy, and other forms of oppression. (Small, 2020)

There has been a growing social media presence among Sri Lankans, especially during the pandemic. Many social services such as education, jobs, health and food services were provided online. According to the data shared by datareportal.com (2022), there were 11.34 million internet users in January 2021 out of the 21.46 million overall population in Sri Lanka (Jan 2021), while 8.20 million social media users were recognized during the same period. This social media presence has been divided among Facebook users (7.15 million – Meta advertising resources), YouTube users (6.68 million – Google’s advertising resources), Instagram users (1.55 million – Meta advertising tools), Twitter users (296.7 thousand – Twitter’s advertising resources) and LinkedIn users (1.50 million – LinkedIn’s advertising resources). The above statistics show that approximately 40% of the population has access to the internet and social media. Comparatively, Facebook and YouTube have become the most popular social media platforms in Sri Lanka.

Considering the social media presence in Sri Lanka in politics and current affairs, Sri Lankan social media spaces have been very active during the elections and crises. The best example is the ongoing social media campaigns carried out by the general public against the incapacity of the Sri Lankan government to manage the current economic situation in Sri Lanka. *#GiveUsOurStolenMoneyBack*, *#GoHomeGota*, and *#GoHomeRajapakshas* hashtags have been trending in Sri Lanka from March to May 2022. Many people have gathered on the roads due to social media campaigns and increased levels of networking (Raymond, 2022). Social media campaigns can be an innovative form to raise awareness of increased women’s participation and political engagement in such a context. Small (2020, p.181) argues that (as cited in Golbeck, Ash and Cabrera 2017, para.11) social media provides a digital mediated consciousness-raising space for intersectional feminism to flourish, support and public awareness of feminist issues. Small (2020) further states that social media channels such as Twitter create a “space – even a community” for communication, discussion, debate, support and awareness of the issues facing modern women and girls.

Primarily, social media conversations move beyond social group conversations instead of becoming a sustained global conversation between women and girls. Sometimes it can also raise awareness outside the community (Small, 2020, pp 184-186). Taking the Sri Lankan example protests against President Rajapaksa's government since March 2022 started from a small group discussion. It has covered the entire island nation and reached the Sri Lankan diaspora (NewsWire, 2022). A picture of a woman taking an infant baby who participated in the silent protest in front of the President's house has become the most popular in April 2022. Many Sri Lankans have used the same picture as their profile pictures on their Facebook profiles to show women's and children's struggles amidst the worsening of the economic crisis (Wickremesekera, 2022). Online feminism also can affect the direction of the feminist movement; it also has a personal impact on participants. This can be exemplified by the Twitter campaign executed by the Colombo-based Sri Lankan activist against the advertisement of the multinational company showing stereotypical patriarchal attributes (Hettige, 2020). This campaign also received a broader reach on both Facebook and Twitter platforms. Many women and girls shared their personal experiences and thoughts about their struggles while living a feminist life in the male-dominant system.

Above opportunities using online feminism as a form of awareness-raising and the ongoing Sri Lankan economic crisis are examples of how effective social media campaigns can be, demonstrate the transformational power of modern digital technologies within gender politics. The younger generation is very much closer to the world of social media, and therefore, it is essential to generate discussions on women's and girls' issues. A theme like increased women's political participation and women's political engagement could be more relevant for younger generations. Thus, social media platforms that are more popular among younger generations should be used effectively as a critical platform for awareness-raising in this digital age.

Can online feminism reach rural communities in Sri Lanka?

Social media users in Sri Lanka have significantly increased by 1.5 million (+23%) between 2020 and 2021, while internet users in Sri Lanka have also increased dramatically by 800 thousand (+7.9%) during the same period (datareportal.com, 2022). This has happened mainly due to the Covid 19 pandemic and associated factors such as expanding virtual services and

communications. However, of the 21.46 million overall population in Sri Lanka (Jan 2021), only 18.8% live in urban areas, while the remaining 81.2% live in rural areas (datareportal.com, 2022). The majority of the rural regions struggle to connect with the internet and social media platforms due to the lack of technological devices and network signals. In this context, social work organizations and service providers struggle to reach rural women and girls via online feminism and social media campaigns to raise awareness of women's political empowerment.

Internet is not a luxury service anymore, especially during a pandemic. The United Nations (UN) has declared (in 2016), even before Covid 19 pandemic, that it considers the internet to be a human right (Howell & West, 2016). This was added to the Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which states: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (Howell & West, 2016). Moreover, the section 32 adds "the promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the Internet" and another 15 recommendations that include the rights of people who financially depend on internet access.

This addition also applies to women, girls, and other minorities heavily impacted by the digital divide. Covid 19 has exposed the harsh reality that not everyone has internet access in their homes, including millions in the developed countries in the world as well. Accordingly, The UN's suggestion that internet access should be a human right provided by the government has become more relevant now because other human rights, including the right to work and education, cannot be adequately realized during public health emergencies. According to many recently conducted studies, internet access is essential in the modern world for employment, education, and ensuring other human rights such as freedom of expression, freedom of association, and access to information (Barry, 2020).

Considering the Sri Lankan government's efforts on digital technologies, former state minister of digital technology and enterprise development, Namal Rajapaksa stated in early 2022 that transforming Sri Lanka into a technology-based society is one of the key national policy objectives of their government and, therefore, they would make sure to cover the entire country on broadband for telecommunication coverage with 5G speed hopefully by the end of their regime (Telecom Review, 2022). He

further stated that his ministry had launched the 'Networking to Villages' (Gamata Sanniwedanaya in the Sinhala language) program to establish towers in rural Sri Lanka and provide coverage in all parts of the country. However, although the Sri Lankan government has made some substantial efforts to transform the country into a digital hub, the government has not yet accepted the 'internet' as a human right politically or legally. This has been exemplified by the nationwide social media restriction Sri Lankan President Gotabaya Rajapaksa imposed in April 2022 to control the virtual networking of the public against his leadership (netblocks.org, 2022).

Many human rights activists, journalists and legal practitioners had condemned this decision of the President and took action to report to the Human Rights Commission (HRC) of Sri Lanka (Raymond, 2022). The HRC has noted that imposing a social media ban violates human rights and pressured the government to ease the restrictions immediately (Farzan, 2022). In this sense, identifying internet access as a human right is extremely important to empower women and protect people's fundamental rights such as freedom of expression, association, and the right to information. Authorities should understand that fundamental rights and the internet are inter-connected in the modern world. For example, access to health coverage, one of the fundamental rights for many Sri Lankans, can now be accessed thanks to technology. Accordingly, rural communities that do not have enough technological infrastructure for the internet will enjoy less protection of specific rights. Therefore, it needs to be recognized as a fundamental right within its legal framework to ensure access.

Conclusion

Women have been depicted as politically ineffective, unmotivated, naive, invisible and dependent upon the power of men. The primary reason for women's low political representation in Sri Lanka because women cannot be decision-makers, in contrast to men, as their skills do not lend themselves to life in the public sphere. Additionally, there is also a belief that women would not be able to devote the time and energy to run the office precisely because they are often also caregivers and homemakers (Krook & Norris 2014). In a country where women have achieved more significant progress in education, volunteering and social service activities, women's political representation is vital to building an inclusive democracy with an excellent representative parliament.

Online feminism, a revolutionary networking platform with the development of globalization, can contribute as an effective mechanism to increasing women's confidence by empowering them ideologically and emotionally. It can also act as a new digital tool to expand the public's awareness of the importance of representative democracy and gender equality at all levels. However, it is essential to empower and reach all communities irrespective of everyone's geographical location, including rural communities, as they represent nearly 80% of the game-changing votes in Sri Lankan politics. Politically it is imperative to recognize the right to internet access as a fundamental human right that would encourage responsible authorities to establish digital infrastructure soon within the next few years. In conclusion, it is essential to create an environment for all women to succeed and feel safe in the political system, leading to an empowered society being more receptive toward 'female leadership' and achieving gender equality in politics.

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