

“MATARIN YAHANATA”: POSTERS, PROPOGANDA AND FEMALE CANDIDACY AT THE 2010 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION, AND THE 2011 LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION IN SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

Actress Anarkali Akarsha's controversial but successful entry into politics through the Southern Provincial Council election in 2009 was one of the contentious issues during the election year. While her suitability to hold public office was in question, her election campaign became highly publicized when she received death threats from fellow candidates and her election office in Galle was destroyed. While an analysis of the 2009 Provincial council election is beyond the purview of this study, Anarkali Akarsha's public portrayal becomes an entry point into the discussion of the relationship between gender and politics in Sri Lanka. While certain social groups such as CaFFE (Campaign for Free and Fair Elections) sympathized with Akarsha's situation, she was represented continuously by the print media as highly sexualized. An attempt to disfigure her campaign was seen through a set of posters which circulated at the time, which depicts Anarkali in a sexually compromising position, with a slogan that is equally sexual. Therefore, although Anarkali Akarsha was certainly visible during the campaign, such visibility was wrought with stereotypes of women in politics as non political, domestic and sexualized.

The above case study clearly show the challenges women face in politics, and opens up the issue of the stereotypical portrayal of female political candidates in Sri Lanka, relative to their male counterparts, and the role of the media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards women in politics.

This becomes critical in the light of the current level of women's political participation in Sri Lanka. It reveals that although women represent 56% of the registered voters of the country, women constitute less than 6% of Parliament, 5% of Provincial Councils and 2% in Local Councils. While these statistics are the lowest in South Asia, the reasons for such low representation is perhaps due to many reasons such as the reluctance of political parties to give sufficient nominations to women candidates, the lack of systematic plans for women's inclusion in the political sphere, and women's marginalised role in economic and social development. Such limited female representation in Government is well illustrated in both the General Election in 2010 and the Local Government Election in 2011.

The General election witnessed 36 recognized political parties, 301 Independent groups and 7620 candidates. However, there were only around a hundred female contestants from all parties, the majority fielded from various Independent Parties, although a central issue raised during the elections was the need to increase female representation in Parliament by increasing the percentage of nominations for women. Finally only 13 female Members of Parliament were elected to the 7th Parliament of Sri Lanka out of a total of 225 members. Those elected included Sumedha Jayasena, Nirupama Rajapakse, Sudarshani Fernandopulle, Rosy Senanayake, Malani Fonseka, Kamala Ranatunga, Thalatha Atukorale, Sriyani Wijewickrama, Chandrani Bandara, Anoma Gamage and Upeksha Swarnamali.

The Local government elections were held in Sri Lanka on 17 March 2011, 23 July 2011, and 8 October 2011 to elect 4,327 members for 322 of the 335 local authorities in the country. The United People's Freedom Alliance's domination of Sri Lankan elections continued as expected. It won control of 270 local authorities (including two contesting as the National Congress), the

Tamil National Alliance won 32 local authorities (including two contesting as the Tamil United Liberation Front), the United National Party won 9 local authorities, the Sri Lanka Muslim Congress won 5 local authorities and a UPFA backed independent group won one local authority. There was no overall control in the five remaining local authorities but the UPFA was the largest group in three, the UNP in one and the Up-Country People's Front in one. The JVP failed to win any local authority. Only 72 women were successful in receiving nominations for the local government election. Out of these candidates, 11 women were voted into the Local Governments of their respective districts.

Therefore, the objective of the following study is to highlight the strategies and mechanisms women use to facilitate, negotiate and enhance their entry into politics, primarily through the use of posters/ advertisements and to illustrate some factors that impact on women's political representation, with a particular emphasis on the 2010 General election and the 2011 Local Government election of Sri Lanka.

OBJECTIVES

The study is two-fold. First, it looks at the profiling of female candidates in the print media through an analysis of articles, reviews, cartoons etc which the print media used to promote female political participation. Next, it examines the election posters of female candidates at the 2010 Parliamentary Election, and the 2011 Local Government election in Sri Lanka, in order to discuss how female candidates advertised themselves during the political campaign.

The study attempts to examine the following:

1. How did print media (newspapers, in this instance) represent female candidacy?
2. Are male and female candidates of similar socio-cultural standing equally represented in the print media?
3. How and to what extent are women candidates able to challenge unfavorable media coverage and benefit from positive self profiling through the use of posters/advertisements?
4. Do the female candidates mobilize or contest clichés of women through these posters/adverts? In other words, do these posters help or hinder women's entry into politics?
5. To what extent do these posters promote sexism, gender bias or discrimination and gender stereotypes?

METHODOLOGY:

This study first analyses six of the leading Sinhala and English language newspapers published between the 19th of February and 05th of April 2010, representing government, independent and alternative views, in order to demonstrate the role of the print media in shaping perceptions and attitudes towards women candidates in the 2010 General Election. Next it analyzes the same newspapers and their representation of the female candidates at the 2011 Local Government Election, in order to discern how the print media represented women's candidacy.

While this examination will help highlight perceptions of female political leaders in the media and in society, we next focus on a random sample of election posters/ advertisements by several women candidates of the two main political parties- the UPFA and the UNP- in order to observe if women candidates benefit from the use of positive advertising content. Posters of several male candidates will also be evaluated to assess how men construct themselves in the political

campaign as compared to women, further illustrating the relationship between gender and politics.

This study will incorporate feminist postcolonial theories, as those conceptualized by theorists such as Chandra Mohanty, Sara Suleri and Trinh T. Minh-ha, in the analysis of the representation of women in the newspapers, posters, and other social media under study.

DISCUSSION

The newspaper coverage of women candidates appears to be limited. Although the *Women and Media Collective* launched a nationwide campaign for both the General and Local Government election regarding the necessity to vote for women, and called on political parties to increase their nominations of women candidates in the future, the role of print media in promoting women candidates and preventing negative stereotyping of women seems detrimental. Some of the findings at the preliminary stage of this research found that the newspapers analyzed carried inadequate literature on the women candidates. Women candidates were often invisible or only covered in stereotypical ways. For instance, female candidates are often evaluated by their looks, clothing and appearance, and described in terms of their sex, children and marital status. Although some male candidates are evaluated on their appearance, fewer sex-typed images are attributed to the men, weightage given more to their ability to hold political office

With regard to the use of posters and other social media by women candidates, their representation varies in terms of how the candidates are posed. Often the female candidates use “feminine” traits to their advantage and frame themselves in stereotypical terms as mothers and wives, campaigning as female candidates rather than political candidates. Some female candidates use “masculine” and “feminine” traits while male candidates often emphasized stereotypical “masculine” traits such as leadership and competence. However, some women candidates blurred these boundaries by acknowledgement of their assumed position of the weaker sex by carrying electoral slogans that explicitly sought to contradict those positions, such as the slogan “Editharakama” (courage). Further, a preliminary study of some of the posters used by some female candidates also demonstrate a flouting of the stereotypes by the physical stances such as raised fists in posters, found on the posters of a female candidate from the North-East. But in some cases, female and male candidates are similar in their use of visuals and slogans.

CONCLUSION

As this study is still in progress, substantial conclusions on the analysis that the study yields are yet to be made. In terms of broader conclusions, this study opens up the relationship between gender and politics. Firstly, while female and male candidates, both, employ societal stereotypes in their posters/adverts, it appears that the increased visibility of women through advertisements does not always guarantee favorability and recognition. Next, the sexist depiction of women undermines women’s role in politics. Third, the use of sexualized images of women candidates in negative ads illustrates the socio cultural and gendered violence that hinders women’s political participation.

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