

# Can Sri Lanka's new NPP government deliver for women in politics?

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**The NPP, which was the victor in Sri Lanka's recent presidential election, prioritised women's political inclusion and appointed Harini Amarasuriya as prime minister - but still needs to do much more to achieve lasting change**

In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike became Sri Lanka's first woman prime minister - and the first female prime minister in the world - after entering politics and taking over leadership of her husband's party after his assassination. Once in high office, Bandaranaike proved highly adept in navigating the complex and male-dominated political landscape - something equally true of other women leaders, including her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, who became the president of Sri Lanka in later years. However, their political journeys were often enabled by male family members who were career politicians. These women leaders' mode of entry into politics, based on family legacies, did not lend itself to creating more space for women in politics at the grassroots level.

Even when they have benefitted from articulate and competent women politicians in their ranks, Sri Lanka's political parties have typically not allowed them key decision-making or leadership roles. It is for this reason that the elevation of Harini Amarasuriya to the office of prime minister in September, after the victory of Anura Kumara Dissanayake in the country's recent presidential election, is significant. The National People's Power (NPP) - a coalition of civil society groups and trade unions organised around Dissanayake's party, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) - nominated Amarasuriya to a seat in parliament in 2020, when she was a senior academic. This was already notable, as it was evidence of a conscious move by the NPP towards greater inclusion and representation of women.

In recent years, many women who do not have family political links or legacies have entered Sri Lanka's politics laterally, just like Amarasuriya. These women have entered national-level politics not by joining political parties at the grassroots level and working their way up, but by earning prominence and influence through their work in other party-linked organisations and movements before stepping into the political arena. The last woman to rise through the ranks from a party's base and secure a significant ministerial position was Renuka Herath, who became the minister of health in 1989. Amarasuriya's appointment to the second-highest decision-making position in the government has to some extent challenged the patronising and exclusionary attitude towards women that has historically prevailed in Sri Lankan political parties.

The NPP's ascent to governance followed on the heels of mass anti-government protests in 2022, which marked the delegitimisation, in the eyes of the Sri Lankan public, of the political class that had dominated the country's two-bloc party system for decades. Despite not organising or actively leading the 2022 protests - popularly known as the *Aragalaya* - the NPP mobilised voters with its

demands for “system change” to secure victory in this September’s presidential election. Ideologically, the NPP has projected a progressive centre-left policy stance distinct from the Marxist-Leninist leanings of its core political party, the JVP. In the lead-up to the presidential vote, both in parliament and beyond, the NPP spoke consistently against corruption and political impunity. It appealed to the aspirational middle classes and rural masses, and mobilised diverse demographic groups such as women, youth, professionals and farmers to consolidate its electoral prospects.

**WOMEN HAVE TRADITIONALLY** been sidelined in representative democracies like Sri Lanka, along with the youth, persons with disabilities, ethno-religious minority groups and others. In Sri Lanka, the percentage of women in the 225-member parliament has historically remained stagnant at below seven percent. The country’s party system has remained hierarchical and actively discriminatory against women. This has meant that women enrolled in political parties have hardly been able to rise through party ranks.

As Sri Lankans increasingly came to perceive their main political parties as corrupt and ideologically indistinct, the country saw the rise of satellite political organisations. For example, in the run-up to the 2019 presidential election, a network of professionals called Viyathmaga became an influential electoral platform affiliated to the Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP). The SLPP is the party of the Rajapaksa family, which had led previous governments and reclaimed power in 2019. The NPP itself – comprising 21 organisations, with the JVP as the only political party – can be considered a satellite organisation of the JVP.

The NPP “busted the myth that women did not want to come to politics in Sri Lanka because it was violent,” Prabha Manuratne, a senior lecturer in the department of English at the University of Kelaniya, said. “The party was a platform that enabled the social capital of some women to be converted into political capital, as political parties are particularly weak and do not allow women to rise within them.”

In the process of women using their agency to navigate the political landscape, the NPP was able to mobilise women more effectively. “The NPP targeted women based on their professions in this election, whether it was teachers or nurses, and this was much more effective than trying to mobilise women solely on the basis of their gender,” Nimendra Mawalagedara, a political scientist at Georgia State University, said.

The increasing participation of women in the NPP – as evidenced by how the size and number of women’s rallies in its support outnumbered those held by other major political parties – occurred against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and Sri Lanka’s 2022 economic crisis, which was a major driver of the Aragalaya. Women shoulder a disproportionate burden of care work and domestic labour in Sri Lankan households, and they experienced the economic fallouts of the multiple crises most acutely. Melani Gunathilaka, a human-rights defender and environmental-rights activist, pointed out that the Aragalaya was more inclusive than traditional Sri Lankan political spaces and saw the active participation of women – but it was unable to provide and institutionalise a safe space for citizen-activists. “The JVP-NPP also has a history of trade unions working with women in the garment industry, who were especially impacted by the pandemic,” Gunathilaka said. “As a political party, it was able to provide a credible space for women to be politically active.”

The NPP’s mobilisation of women can be situated against the backdrop of the party’s poor

performance in the 2020 general election. The coalition had to re-strategise to regain lost ground – supposedly the result of its cooperation with establishment parties, and especially with the government of the United National Front for Good Governance, led by president Maithripala Sirisena and prime minister Ranil Wickremesinghe between 2015 and 2019. Part of the NPP's new strategy was to strengthen the party's mobilisation among the lower and middle classes in rural and urban areas. Women were an integral part of this new strategy.

Vraie Cally Balthazaar, an NPP candidate for the general election from Colombo, said that the NPP was very strategic and conscious in mainstreaming women's politics. "The party's leadership came to a collective decision that the women's movement must be front and centre, and not peripheral," she said. "They listened to what women in the party had been saying for a while – that women are a majority in this country and represent a significant voter bloc. So, it became a matter of looking critically at how to include women politically and how to engage them within the political structures."

**THE NPP WOMEN'S MOVEMENT** has gained momentum since 2022. Its slogan of *Gahanu Api Eka Mitata Malimawata* – translated on the NPP's website as "We, women, profusely for NPP" – signifies strength in numbers. One of the foremost women's groups in the NPP, the Progressive Women's Collective, paid careful attention to language and deliberately chose the word *gahanu* in the slogan, instead of *kaanthaa* or *wanithaa*. All three words mean "women", but the first is devoid of patronising connotations while the other two have roots in classical literature that portrays women as the "fairer sex".

Balthazaar said that the NPP formed numerous *kantha sabhas*, or women's councils, as part of its grassroots mobilisation at the level of *kottasa sabhas*, or ward committees. It did this by appointing women and youth to leadership positions. This provided a space and platform for a new wave of female political activism. Women became actively engaged in district rallies by putting up posters, managing logistics, canvassing for candidates and delivering speeches – all of which had been male-dominated activities until then. "The NPP made women more aware of their political rights and roles in society," Jayadeva Uyangoda, an emeritus professor of political science at the University of Colombo, said, "The NPP made women 'citizens'."

An anecdote narrated at an NPP women's rally in Anuradhapura, in north central Sri Lanka, offers a good example of the messaging used at such events. The crowd of mainly women attendees was told the story of Kombi, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet and self-made entrepreneur who overcame various obstacles imposed by patriarchal social conventions. At a time when women's access to education was highly limited, Kombi secretly learnt to read and write from her father. She was ostracised from her community for a relationship with a trader from a different caste. Kombi survived sexual assault, desertion by male partners and the loss of her children, and built a business growing and selling agricultural produce, all the while expressing herself through poetry. Her story of empowerment was told in such a way as to draw contrasts with Western fairy tales steeped in gendered tropes. While the historical veracity of Kombi's story is uncertain, it resonated with NPP supporters to the extent that Kombi achieved the status of a legend, and her story became immensely popular on Sri Lankan social media.

Mobilising women at the grassroots level is not altogether new in Sri Lankan politics. Before the NPP, the Rajapaksa's SLPP organised women with considerable success and obtained significant

shares of their votes in elections between 2018 and 2020. Sagara Kariyawasam, the party's general secretary, said that one of the party's policies was that grassroots-level SLPP organisations were not officially recognised until they formed a 20-member women's subcommittee. However, such attempts by the SLPP and other parties did not facilitate a women's movement with its own momentum and trajectory. This is where the NPP's strategy has been qualitatively different.

Many previous attempts by mainstream political parties to mobilise women also perceived them through a conservative lens. A case in point is the platforming of the southern Mothers' Front by the People's Alliance led by the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) in the 1990s. The Mothers' Front was formed by women who had lost their children to a brutal state crackdown against the second JVP-led insurgency from 1987 to 1989. At its peak, the front had nearly 25,000 members, and it was pivotal to the electoral victory of the SLFP candidate, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Despite becoming a successful platform for mobilising women to a political end, the Mothers' Front received no tangible outcomes in terms of justice and accountability.

By contrast, the NPP conducted training sessions and workshops for women at the grassroots level on topics such as the economy and care work, as well as gender and sexual orientation. "I remember that the workshops on care work and gendered bodies resonated the most," Kaushalya Ariyaratne, an NPP general election candidate in Colombo, said. "They reinforced the idea that while material change was important, the *punarudaya*" –renaissance – "that the NPP promises is impossible without an ideological shift in how society thinks about women and their role in politics and the economy."

The training sessions "really helped the women to articulate their lived experiences of unpaid care work and relate it to the intersection of national politics and the economy," Balthazaar said. "We drove home the message that relief from their economic situation was their right and it was the state's responsibility to ensure this right, in terms of providing access to good quality education, health and transport."

**WHILE THE NPP'S STRATEGY** to mobilise women was effective to a considerable extent, empowering women requires more consistent effort and structural changes beyond just mobilisation. The NPP has only eight women in its 73-member executive committee; the JVP has only two women in its 28-member central committee. Moreover, there is a lack of transparency surrounding the party's nomination process and the extent of women's representation within the nomination boards.

The limits to the NPP's success in mobilising women are evident also in the nomination lists for the upcoming general election. The NPP has nominated 36 women candidates in its national and district lists. While this is higher than the number of women fielded by other key political parties – except for the People's Struggle Alliance, which has nominated 37 women – it is still around 12 percent of all candidates fielded. Moreover, the NPP has not taken any disciplinary action against Lal Kantha, an NPP stalwart, for making repeated public comments of a sexist nature, or issued any statements clarifying the party's stance on this. These aspects cumulatively compromise the narrative of progress and empowerment that the NPP claims for itself.

The NPP's lack of ability to garner substantial support among Tamil and Muslim minority communities, as seen in the voter data from the presidential election in September, is also reflected within its nomination of women candidates. Women's political participation has historically remained low among Sri Lanka's minority communities, both within the NPP and more mainstream parties.

Politics is among the domains where the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions is most starkly evident in Sri Lanka. The country currently ranks 175<sup>th</sup> out of 193 countries when it comes to the percentage of women in national parliaments. Despite strong advocacy by women's groups since the 1990s to increase women's political representation, the only structural reform towards this has been the implementation of a women's quota in 2017, when women's representation in sub-national government was pegged at a mandatory 25 percent. The 2024 NPP manifesto sets out an ambition to increase women's representation to 50 percent at all levels of government, but it falls short of advocating affirmative action in the form of quotas.

The NPP's recent success in mobilising women was a reflection of the abysmal baseline of women's representation in national politics. The coalition also benefitted from incremental structural reforms like the 25-percent quota, which created space for women to enter politics. Even as the NPP provided an anti-establishment platform for socially active citizens to launch themselves into politics, women had already started taking on leadership roles. As the NPP gained traction as a political force, women capitalised on its ascendance.

Another limitation of the NPP's strategy is its exclusionary approach while working on women's issues in parliament and in civil society initiatives. Kanaka Abeygunawardana, the convenor of the Gender and Elections Working Group, an independent civil society platform, said that "in training programmes offered to women politicians, especially at the local government level, the NPP had not actively collaborated with civil society organisations to nominate women trainees." This indicates that the NPP's non-engagement with other political parties overshadows its activities regarding gender politics too. A notable exception came in June 2024, when the NPP supported a private member's bill tabled by the SLPP MP Premnath C Dolawatte to decriminalise same-sex relationships under the penal code.

The NPP's victory was built in good part on grassroots mobilisation of women, and it heralds a qualitative change in Sri Lanka's electoral dynamics. "Ultimately, however, it's too soon to conclude whether the NPP has genuinely empowered women," Thamali Kithsiri, a senior lecturer in the department of geography at the University of Peradeniya, concluded. "Much depends on how they act once in government and whether they continue to prioritise gender equality after the elections." While the inspiration and enthusiasm behind the NPP's progressive politics is welcome, what is more important is whether and how these things translate into structural progress and lasting policy changes. The real test for the NPP is to usher in an era that will give rise to success stories of many more women in politics and leadership rather than just the one legend of Kombi.△

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