



# EU support for women's political participation and leadership under the EU's Gender Action Plan

A case study on Sri Lanka



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The research was funded by Demo Finland, Political Parties of Finland for Democracy.

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# Women's political participation: emergence and evolution

This paper assesses the European Union's (EU) role in advancing women's political participation and representation in Sri Lanka under the EU's Gender Action Plan II. The paper briefly reviews the evolution of women's political participation in Sri Lanka, before examining the overall focus of EU development assistance and its contributions to bolstering women's political participation in the country. The essay concludes with the broader challenges hindering international support for gender equality in Sri Lankan politics and explores avenues to overcome those challenges.

Although Sri Lanka has gone through major political changes throughout the twentieth century, the representation of women at every level of governance remains abysmally low. The country's transition to democracy began in the early twentieth century, when the island was still a British colony. Women, along with trade unions and associations of marginalised caste communities, played central roles in the campaign for universal voting rights and broader democratic reforms. In the first ever election held in 1931, seventeen years prior to independence, two women were elected to the country's State Council. After achieving political independence in 1948, new political parties proliferated. Yet, the representation of women in Sri Lanka's legislature stalled, and it has not increased much more than the five percent mark reached in 1931. Over the past few decades, policymakers and party leaders have often paid lip service to the need for legal and institutional change and have been reluctant to carry out concrete reforms that would advance democratic inclusion.<sup>1</sup>

Despite their underrepresentation in formal politics, women are very active at the community level and in civil society. Many Sri Lankan women are members of multiple voluntary welfare associations, including death-assistance societies, rural development societies, women's welfare societies, thrift and saving associations, as well as associations linked to political parties. At 33.5 percent, women's overall labour force participation is relatively low, though women do play active economic roles in rural areas.<sup>2</sup> State institutions, international donor agencies, as well as nongovernmental organisations have all supported initiatives to increase women's economic empowerment, for example through rural banking and community saving schemes. At the national level, women used to be the chief contributors to the country's top three economic sectors: tea production, the garments industry, and migrant workers, which generate both domestic and foreign income.<sup>3</sup> However, the last 10 years have seen a sharp decline of 10% in female labour force participation rates, including in the

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1 Kamdar, B., (2020): "Women in Sri Lanka Make up 56% of Voters, But Only 5% of Legislators," *The Diplomat*, 25 September 2020, available [here](#).

2 "Labour Force Participation Rate, Female (% of Female population Ages 15+) - Sri Lanka," data retrieved 15 June 2021, available [here](#).

3 Samarasinghe, V. (1998): "The Feminization of Foreign Currency Earnings: Women's Labor in Sri Lanka," *Journal of Developing Areas* (32, no. 3), p. 303-326. Available [here](#).

sectors mentioned above.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, Sri Lankan women have also played active roles in Sri Lanka's internal conflicts and its contentious politics. Since independence, the country has experienced two armed uprisings in the Sinhalese South (in 1971 and 1987-1988) and a protracted Tamil insurgency in the North and East (1983-2009). Women participated in both these armed uprisings both as combatants and in supporting roles.<sup>5</sup> Yet, their participation in armed mobilisation has not translated into greater representation in electoral politics.

## Current Trends in Women's Political Participation

As of 2021, women make up only 5.3 percent of parliamentarians in the Sri Lankan legislature, and only one woman currently serves in the 28-member executive cabinet. Women also represent only 4 percent of councillors in the country's provincial councils.<sup>6</sup> Although the proportional representation (PR) electoral system introduced in 1989 has

increased the political representation of marginalised caste groups and minority communities, it has failed to strengthen women's legislative representation.<sup>7</sup> Political parties remain hesitant to nominate women as candidates: a lack of intra-party democracy and highly competitive and expensive election campaigns lead (male) party leaders to favour male candidates. Political violence, financial barriers, and cultural prejudices against women in politics have further prevented women from benefiting from the PR system.<sup>8</sup>

Women's rights activists have pushed for an electoral gender quota to address these barriers. So far, their demands have only been met at the local level. As a result of a 2016 electoral amendment, Sri Lanka instituted its first quota for women in local government, which mandates that 25 percent of elected legislators in local government should be women.<sup>9</sup> Although not all local councils have complied with the quota requirement, the measure has increased women's representation in local government from 2 percent in 1989 to 24 percent in

4 Solotaroff, J. L., Joseph, G., Kuriakose, A., Sethi, J. (2020): "Getting to Work: Unlocking Women's Potential in Sri Lanka's Labor Force." World Bank. P.18. Available [here](#).

5 Alexander, E. (2014): "Women of War: The Female Fighters of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam," Cornell International Affairs Review Vol. 7 No. 2. Available [here](#).

De Alwis, A. (2002): "The Changing Role of Women in Sri Lankan Society", Social Research, Vol. 69, No. 3, The Status of Women in the Developing World, pp. 675-691.

6 Democracy Reporting International, "Improving women's political participation in Sri Lanka," October 2021. Available [here](#).

7 The proportional representation (PR) electoral system was introduced in 1978 under the second Republican constitution, though it was only implemented in 1989 (no parliamentary elections were held between 1977 and 1989).

8 Chulani Kodikara, C. (2009): "The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka: A Stock Taking Report for the Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment and United Nation Development Programme," p. 18-20, Colombo: Ministry of Child Development and Women's Empowerment.

9 The new electoral system requires parties to submit two lists of candidates: one list for wards with single-member constituencies in each area, of which 10 percent have to be women, and the second for candidates elected based on proportional representation, of which 50 percent have to be women. In addition, parties submit a third, separate list of only women candidates. Vijeyrasa, R. (2020): "Women's absence in Sri Lankan politics: Lessons on the effectiveness and limitations of quotas to address under-representation," Women's International Studies 81, p.5.

2018.<sup>10</sup> There are now 1,926 female local councillors serving in local government across the country.<sup>11</sup> The Women Parliamentarian Caucus, set up by women politicians in 2020, aims to push for similar electoral reforms at the national level.<sup>12</sup> So far, advocates' reform proposals have not succeeded and an effort to implement a 25 percent gender quota for women in provincial councils has stalled.<sup>13</sup>

## Barriers to Women's Political Representation

Barriers to women's political participation in Sri Lanka include the undemocratic nature of political institutions as well as patriarchal norms in society writ large. Sri Lankan political parties have gaps in institutionalisation and can be seen to function to a large extent as networks of powerful men.<sup>14</sup> As a result, few women get the opportunity to advance through party structures, unless they happen to be related to a male member of a party's leadership. Therefore, women nominated by political parties as candidates are often the wives or daughters of established (male) politicians. Although the local

quota law has forced parties to recruit more women, it has also undercut their political influence, as women elected through proportional representation lists are treated by male leaders as second-class politicians.<sup>15</sup>

Finances represent another significant barrier. Due to the patronage-based politics of most Sri Lankan political parties, contesting an election has also become a very costly enterprise. Candidates have to campaign across a wide geographical area and use their own resources to mobilise and consolidate their electoral base. As women tend to have less access to independent wealth as well as political donor networks, they are often discouraged from running for political office.<sup>16</sup> Intensive inter- and intra-party competition and violence in electoral politics also works against women aspiring to become political leaders, particularly as there are few support services or accountability mechanisms for women targeted with political violence or sexual harassment. Lastly, both men and women in Sri Lanka are still socialised to see politics as the legitimate sphere of men rather than women.<sup>17</sup>

10 Despite this quota, many local authorities found it difficult to meet the 25 percent threshold. At the moment, women make up 24 percent of local government representatives.

11 Interview with Manjula Gajanayake, the National Coordinator of the Centre for Monitoring Election Violence, 17th September 2021 (via Zoom).

12 Women Parliamentary Caucuses have a long history in Sri Lanka, with a new caucus set up with every new Parliament.

13 Democracy Reporting International (2021): "Improving women's political participation in Sri Lanka," p. 4. Available [here](#).

14 Chulani Kodikara, "Women and Politics in Sri Lanka: The Challenges to Meaningful Participation," Groundviews, 2 September 2008, available [here](#), and Wimala De Silva, "Participation of Women in Politics and Decision Making in Women, Political Empowerment and Decision Making," (Colombo: CENWOR, 1995): 1-53.

15 Democracy Reporting International (2021): "Improving women's political participation in Sri Lanka," p. 8. Available [here](#).

16 Find out more about the costs of running for election in Sri Lanka: Jayasinghe, C. (2020): "Candidates spend Rs 2.2 bn over Sri Lanka's polls campaign period," Economynext, available [here](#).

17 Kodikara, The Struggle for Equal Political Representation of Women in Sri Lanka, and Peiris, P. and Lacamwasam, H. (2021): "Necessary yet Insufficient: Women's Quota for Wider Political Representation in Sri Lanka," Colombo: Women and Media Collectives, available [here](#).

# The EU's actions on women's political representation and leadership

Gender equality has been a long-standing priority of Western donors active in Sri Lanka. Yet over the past five years, only a few EU-funded projects have directly addressed women's political participation and leadership. Instead, the EU's main assistance priorities in Sri Lanka have been the peace and reconciliation process, agricultural development, and responding to people's basic needs, such as water, health, and nutrition. The table below provides an (non-exhaustive) overview of gender-related

initiatives funded solely by the EU or in collaboration with other EU member states since 2017 (see Table 1). This overview shows that from 2017 until 2021, there have only been three EU-funded programmes that directly foreground women's political participation, in addition to a wider range of projects that focus on sexual and gender-based violence and women's socio-economic empowerment, and broader governance and health programmes that integrate gender as a cross-cutting or secondary goal.

**Table 1: Gender-related EU assistance programmes in Sri Lanka**

EU programmes targeting women's political participation
<p><b>Building Inclusive Communities and Promoting Women's Leadership (2017-2021)</b></p> <p>This project is funded by the EU and implemented by Chrysalis in partnership with the Law and Society Trust, and the Ministry of Justice, Human Rights and Legal Reforms. The project seeks to address the root causes that inhibit the rights of women and other marginalised communities as well as citizens' fundamental rights more broadly. Concretely, the project seeks to train 300 women and a 100 men to transform social norms and change the structural barriers that fuel gender-based discrimination and undermine fundamental freedoms. To achieve these objectives, the project supports eighteen "Shared Advocacy Platforms" across five districts in Northern Sri Lanka.<sup>18</sup></p>
<p><b>Network Engagement Transform (NET) Project (2016-2018)</b></p> <p>This project was funded by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and was implemented by Chrysalis, an affiliate of CARE International. The objective of the project is to promote women's voice and meaningful political representation to prevent and address sexual and gender based violence in 6 Divisional Secretary Divisions (DSDs) in Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu Districts in the North of Sri Lanka. The project targeted 420 women leaders from 60 Women's Rural Development Societies, Women's Affairs Societies (WRDS/WAS), 6 Gender-based Violence Forums, and other networks, including 60 State officials working for the benefit of 60,000 women. Chrysalis partnered with the Women's Action Network for Transformation (WANT) and the Community Development Organisation (CDO) to implement a number of capacity building, awareness-raising and networking activities.<sup>19</sup></p>

<sup>18</sup> "Building Inclusive Communities and Promoting Women's Leadership" project funded by the European Union, Chrysalis, available [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> Nucleus Service (2018): "Report: Final Evaluation of the Network Engage Transform (NET)," submitted to Chrysalis,

### **Capacity Development for Local Government (2018-2023)**

This project is co-funded by the EU with a budget of USD 6.11 million and implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It aims to strengthen local government institutions as part of the EU's wider support for governmental decentralisation in Sri Lanka. It does so by pursuing action, such as the strengthening of public participation in local decision-making processes. In order to increase women's engagement in local governance, the project provides targeted capacity development to elected women officials as well as mentorship to potential women leaders. It also aims to sensitise male officials and ensure women's involvement in participatory planning and budgeting processes and allocates specific funds to projects proposed by local women leaders.<sup>20</sup>

## **EU programmes with a primary gender focus that do not target women's political participation**

### **Inside Justice: Enabling Justice for Victim Survivors of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, Sharing of The Asia Foundation's Experiences (2016-Present)**

This project, run by The Asia Foundation with EU support, is focused on formal judicial reform to redress domestic, sexual, and gender-based violence in Sri Lanka. The programme has developed a variety of resources targeting lawyers, judges, development partners, and other stakeholders in order to improve victims' access to fair and sensitive judicial processes.<sup>21</sup>

### **Empower War-Affected Women in Sri Lanka (2018-2022)**

This project, funded by the EU and SIDA with a budget of EUR 760,000 and implemented by We Effect Sri Lanka, aims to empower Sri Lankan women to become entrepreneurs and leaders. It focuses on women in twelve cooperatives, training them on issues like access to marketplaces, credit, farming skills, and dialogue with local authorities and service providers.<sup>22</sup>

### **Enabling and Empowering a Business Environment to Establish and Sustain Income-generating and Employment Opportunities for Vulnerable Communities in Uva and Central Provinces (2017-2021)**

This project, implemented by CARE Deutschland-Luxemburg in Uva and Central Provinces with a budget of EUR 4.9 million, seeks to support sustainable, income-generating employment opportunities for vulnerable women, youth, and their communities. It aims to increase the voices of women and youth in decision-making around employment creation, business development, and economic growth.<sup>23</sup>

available here, available [here](#).

20 "Capacity Development for Local Government," project co-funded by the European Union, United Nations Development Programme, available [here](#).

21 "Inside Justice, SGBV in Sri Lanka," The Asia Foundation, available [here](#).

22 "Empower War-Affected women," project co-funded by the European Union, We Effect, available [here](#).

23 "Enabling and Empowering a Business Environment to Establish and Sustain Income-generating and Employment Opportunities for Vulnerable Communities in Uva and Central Provinces," project funded by the European Union, CARE Deutschland-Luxemburg, available [here](#).



## EU programmes with gender as a crosscutting or secondary priority

### **Organisational Capacity Enhancement and Networking (2017-2020)**

This EU-funded project, implemented by a coalition of three organisations, aimed to strengthen civil society's role in good governance and development in six regions of Sri Lanka. One of the project's objectives was to ensure that victims of gender-based violence and discrimination benefit from development plans.<sup>24</sup>

### **Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition (2017-2020)**

This EU-funded project aimed to mobilise civil society to hold the state accountable for ensuring victims' rights. It included training on trauma counselling for women police constables at women's desks in police stations.<sup>25</sup>

### **Rehabilitation Services for People Affected by Trauma Resulting from Conflict or Structural Violence in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka (2017-2020)**

This EU-funded project aimed to support mental health services for community members suffering from trauma and to improve psychological services for vulnerable communities, with a particular focus on involving women and youth leaders.<sup>26</sup>

### **Empowering and mobilising individuals, small groups, and CSOs for better governance and accountability (2017-2020)**

This project funded by the EU's Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities programme was implemented by Stichting ZOA. Its objective was strengthening CSOs as actors in governance, social development of women and inclusive growth. The project also aimed to actively involve women in politics and policy-processes concerning their communities. Activities included the promotion of women's participation in politics, women's involvement in advocating for good governance, and training members of CSOs on constitutional reform and the electoral systems. It also involved facilitating networking with other women's groups, encouraging women to engage in social issues that impact the whole community, and increasing women's participation through Self Help Groups.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> "Organisational Capacity Enhancement and Networking (OCEAN)," project funded by the European Union, Sri Lanka Centre for Development Facilitation, October 2019, available [here](#).

<sup>25</sup> "Accountability Through Community Engagement and Initiatives for Transition," project funded by European Union, National Peace Council of Sri Lanka, available [here](#).

<sup>26</sup> "Rehabilitation Services for People Affected by Trauma Resulting from Conflict or Structural violence in the Northern Province of Sri Lanka," project funded by European Union, Family Rehabilitation Centre, available [here](#).

<sup>27</sup> European External Action Service, "Empowering and mobilising individuals, small groups, and CSOs for better governance and accountability," August 2020, available [here](#).

**Preventing electoral violence in Sri Lanka by advancing core electoral reform issues and strengthening the integrity of the public discourse (2019-2021)**

This project funded by the German Federal Foreign Office is implemented by Democracy Reporting International in partnership with the Rural Women's Front. This project's primary aim is preventing electoral violence, and it has a strong capacity building and awareness-raising component focused on women in politics. Namely, the project conducts the training of a trainers' programme on women in politics, establishing district-level groups of women political representatives, conducting public discussions on electoral reforms, and increasing the effectiveness of women politicians' engagement on socio-political issues. It also includes support for local organisations for workshops on mainstream media communication for women political representatives from local government bodies. The project has also used interviews of key women political figures for awareness raising purposes on the radio, and it has led an awareness raising campaign which uses animated videos that are based on the real experiences of Sri Lankan women in politics.<sup>28</sup>

One of the EU-funded projects in Sri Lanka that directly focuses on women's political leadership is called "Building Inclusive Communities and Promoting Women's Leadership (TRANSFORM)." This project, which is implemented by the Sri Lankan civil society organisation Chrysalis, seeks to address the root causes that inhibit women's agency at the local level. The project's activities have included leadership training and capacity building for women community leaders and local councillors as well as the inclusion of women and girls in local community development forums. The report that Chrysalis produced, based on the project, has been presented to the Provincial Women's Caucus and awaits to be presented to the Parliamentary Women's Caucus. This was done in order to facilitate the drafting of new policies that address the gendered barriers that women face at the local level.<sup>29</sup>

TRANSFORM succeeded a previous project, which was also implemented by Chrysalis and funded

by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, titled "Network, Engage, Transform" (NET). This project focused on bolstering women's meaningful political representation in order to prevent and address sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in the northern parts of the country. It tried to achieve this goal through three main mechanisms: by strengthening women representatives' leadership capacity, building local networks and alliances focused on fighting SGBV, and advocating for the implementation of existing anti-SGBV laws. Overall, the project was relatively successful at coaching and mentoring women leaders, though increasing women's participation in advocacy networks proved more challenging.<sup>30</sup>

A third and ongoing EU-funded project contributes to women's political participation and leadership as a secondary goal. The UNDP's five-year "Enhanced Local Governance" project primarily seeks to strengthen local governance, infrastructure, and service delivery. Yet, it also includes activities aimed at

28 For an overview of Democracy Reporting International's (DRI) activities in Sri Lanka, see [here](#). DRI's latest report on the project: Democracy Reporting International (October 2021): "Improving women's political participation in Sri Lanka," p. 8. Available [here](#). Public awareness-raising campaign: available [here](#).

29 Phone interview with Ashika Gunasena, the Chief Executive Officer of Chrysalis, September 15, 2021.

30 Nucleus Service (2018): "Report: Final Evaluation of the Network Engage Transform (NET)," submitted to Chrysalis, available here, available [here](#).

strengthening women's participation and leadership within local government institutions in the four participating provinces, primarily through training elected women officials and young women leaders. The UNDP is also in the process of implementing a seed grant for local women councillors, who have previously been trained on how to develop project proposals. These seed grants are meant to assist women politicians initiate various projects in their constituencies, thereby enhancing their credibility and local support. The longer-term goal is to help women councillors build their support base for future elections.<sup>31</sup>

Besides the three EU-funded projects cited above, a few EU member states have also supported women's political participation and leadership in Sri Lanka. The Finnish democracy assistance organisation Demo Finland (in cooperation with the local multi-party organisation One-Text Initiative (OTI) launched a pilot project in 2019 that focused on building multi-party networks between local women politicians across twelve different districts. The participating women councillors also received training on Sri Lankan and international gender equality frameworks and learnt how to leverage traditional and social media in their political campaigns. In 2020, Demo Finland and OTI extended the project to focus specifically on building the skills of women politicians, fostering greater support for gender equality among party leaders, and bolstering the coverage of women politicians in local media. The new project has, for example,

studied the internal policies and practices of Sri Lankan political parties regarding gender equality. It thus includes a greater focus on political parties, given their key role in selecting women candidates and promoting them to leadership positions.<sup>32</sup>

In addition, Democracy Reporting International, with support from the German Government, has also conducted "training of trainers" programmes targeting women leaders, in partnership with the Rural Women's Front. The programme aims to increase women's knowledge of existing electoral reforms and regulations, but also fosters discussions on campaign finance, gender equality, and the broader hurdles women face in Sri Lankan politics.<sup>33</sup>

31 Author's Zoom interview with Buddhika Udayajith, local governance specialist at the UNDP, September 17, 2021.

32 Demo Finland, "Sri Lanka," accessed November 13, 2021, available [here](#). See also, [here](#).

33 Democracy Reporting International (October 2021): "Improving women's political participation in Sri Lanka," p. 8. Available [here](#). The German government has also funded a project focused on strengthening the role of women in addressing sexual and gender-based violence that includes training and empowerment for women police officers, government officials, and support for civil society networks focused on fighting SGBV. More information [here](#). The authors received information that the Embassy of the Netherlands has also been supporting capacity building of women councillors, however, we could not confirm this information or find any official information on such support. World Bank data does confirm the Netherlands committed USD 28.586 to supporting women's rights organisations in 2019, but microdata is unavailable.

# Challenges and remedies: increasing women's political representation

In Sri Lanka, women's political representation is still very limited, despite decades of advocacy by civil society groups. Patriarchal norms and social practices encourage women to play a passive role in the public sphere, whereas intimidation and misbehaviour on the side of male politicians generally goes unpunished.<sup>34</sup>

Several cross-cutting challenges currently hinder the effectiveness of external support for women's political empowerment. First, projects often fail to provide continuous and sustained support to women political leaders. Instead, they tend to be conceived as one-off or short-term activities, such as two-day training workshops, which limits their overall impact.<sup>35</sup> Second, projects seeking to bolster gender equality in politics have primarily contributed to increasing women's descriptive representation, albeit to a limited degree. However, they have struggled to enhance women's actual power and influence in politics<sup>36</sup>. Addressing this shortcoming requires a more holistic approach that begins by strengthening women's economic autonomy as well as their role in civil society and transforms patriarchal social norms and practices.

Third, donor-funded programmes often assume that women's political representation goes hand-in-

hand with democratic governance. This approach ignores the reality of patronage politics in Sri Lanka, where parties tend to function as cartels. In this context, providing "good governance" training for women candidates may not necessarily help them succeed in electoral politics. For both men and women who rise through the party ranks, what matters is not their commitment to democratic politics or campaigning skills, but their blind loyalty to the current leadership.

As a result of these dynamics, local and national-level actors in Sri Lanka do not always agree on the best strategy for advancing women's political participation. Some local women's organisations view the recommendations of gender consultants who work on the implementation of the EU's Gender Action Plan as out of touch with local realities. For example, national-level gender consultants often prefer to organise trainings on political participation for women active in local civil society organisations. Yet, some local actors argue that it would be more effective to approach women who are already connected to political parties and already have substantial political influence, even though they may not necessarily be as committed to democratic values as women activists in civil society.<sup>37</sup>

34 Author's Zoom interview with a former EU GAP consultant and the current gender focal person at the EU Delegation in Sri Lanka, September 20, 2021. The latest case of verbal abuse by male MPs against female MPs led the Chairperson of the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus in the Sri Lankan Parliament to write a letter to the Speaker of Parliament calling out against the abuse. Colombo Page, "Women MP's of Sri Lanka parliament call for action to prevent verbal harassment from male colleagues", available [here](#), accessed on 29 November 2021.

35 Author's Zoom interview with local women's organization, September 24, 2021.

36 Author's Zoom interview with a project implementing partner of the EU, September 21, 2021.

37 Author's Zoom interview with a national-level US project partner, September 21, 2021.

Overall, women's exclusion from political decision-making will likely persist as long as parties are not institutionalised and political careers remain highly lucrative. Since the 1970s, political actors have increasingly undermined the Sri Lankan civil service and public administration, and political corruption in the country is rampant. Over the past several years, the country has experienced further democratic backsliding, with the government further expanding the powers of the executive and increasing the role of the military in government.<sup>38</sup>

In this context, programmes seeking to improve women's political participation, therefore, need to carefully consider the broader health of democratic institutions. Ideally, they should be complemented with efforts to democratise political parties and electoral processes. If they wish to facilitate meaningful change, donors also need to incentivise state reforms in a similar manner to the European Union, which has used its Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP) to push for human rights commitments. Moreover, local gender specialists note that the EU Delegation should engage with the government more proactively to promote gender equality using its diplomatic tools.<sup>39</sup> Unlike many other donors, the EU Delegation tends to maintain a neutral and limited dialogue with the government.

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38 Selvarajah, A. and Jeyasundaram, B. (2020): "Authoritarianism Is on the Rise in Sri Lanka," Jacobin, September 16, 2020, available [here](#). Sanjeev, L. (2020): "Is Sri Lanka Becoming a De Facto Junta?," Foreign Policy, available [here](#). And "Sri Lanka Parliament votes to strengthen presidential power," Al Jazeera, October 22, 2020, available [here](#).

39 Author's Zoom interview with a gender specialist who work with local partner organization, September 28, 2021.

# Recommendations and conclusions

## Recommendations

Going forward, there are several steps the EU could take to strengthen its support for gender equality in Sri Lankan politics.

First, the EU needs to prioritise support for democratic reform and a democratic culture more broadly. In particular, the EU should support the democratisation of political parties and electoral processes; for example, by advocacy which targets party leaders to push for greater party institutionalisation or by supporting local-level party members voicing their demands for internal party reform. The Electoral Commission is likewise a potential ally in institutionalising a democratic culture conducive to equal representation.

Second, as part of a stronger focus on democratic reform and accountability, the EU should strengthen its political dialogue with the government regarding women's political participation and leadership. Such political engagement could focus on the need to advance electoral reforms at the national and local level, or to implement measures that address violence and harassment against women in politics.

Third, future support should focus on the structural barriers inhibiting women's political participation, such as the role played by family structures, religious leaders, as well as patriarchal societal norms. Legal reforms, while important, are unlikely to be sufficient to ensure women's equal political participation; they need to be complemented with initiatives to transform sociocultural and economic barriers. For example, future programmes should also focus on norm change and women's representation in the media. This should be done to emphasise the

importance of women's political participation, with the broader aim of legitimising women's political involvement in the eyes of the electorate. Such support needs to be sustained throughout electoral cycles, rather than centring only on elections.

## Conclusion

Even though Sri Lankan women on average enjoy higher living standards than their South Asian neighbours, they continue to be largely excluded from formal politics. Gender equality activists have long pushed for affirmative action measures, such as gender quotas to improve women's political participation. So far, their efforts have only borne fruit at the local level, with a new local quota measure being implemented in 2018.

Under the second Gender Action Plan, the EU has funded only a few projects that directly support women's political participation in Sri Lanka. As a result, the EU's contributions towards strengthening women's political participation have been comparatively weak. In the future, the EU could expand its engagement by investing in project activities that consider the country's political culture, and it could push for higher-level state reforms that will help democratise Sri Lankan elections whilst opening up more space for women and other marginalised groups.



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