Women and Political Leadership: Challenges and Constraints: With Special Reference to Local Government in Sri Lanka

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Despite Sri Lanka being one of the first countries in Asia to give women the right to vote and be elected to political office, women's representation in formal politics have remained minimal, depriving women of any effective voice in governance though women constitute 53 percent of population. The worst representation of women can be seen in the local government level, even though local government is the base for women to enter into political arena. Thus, the objectives of the study is to identify major challenges Sri Lankan women politicians face when entering into local government politics and to evaluate the impact of each and every challenge which diminish women's representation in local government politics. Further a comparison is made to recognize major challenges in Sri Lanka against Asian and Pacific region.

Since very few women politicians are in the Sri Lankan Local Government context, only seven women politicians have been selected from *Colombo* and *Kalutara* districts as the sample of the study and interviews were conducted based on a structured questionnaire prepared by the researchers in order to include the four major challenges mentioned in the conceptual framework (Social, Cultural and Religious barriers, Economic barriers, Political barriers and Psychological barriers). All the possible secondary sources were used to collect data as well as primary sources. In analyzing data, qualitative techniques and MS Excel package were used.

The study found that, economic factor as the main challenge that Sri Lankan women politicians face when entering into local government politics and secondly political factors. Challenges emerged from Social, Cultural, Religious context and Psychological perspectives are ranked as third and fourth respectively according to the answers given by the respondents. Finally, key strategies were suggested under each main barrier to encourage women's representation in local government politics.

Key words*: Women, Political leadership, Challenges, Local government*