



January 2020

Issue 05



SAPRI Extends Greetings to Friends & Well-wishers for a Happy New Year!



Aloka News Special Issue: SAPRI's Women's Empowerment Programme

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Initiative to Empower Women Political Leaders at the Local Government, in a Nutshell

With the introduction of a 25% quota for women representatives at Local Governing bodies in Sri Lanka, under its focus area of Women Empowerment, SAPRI initiated a programme, with the assistance of the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, to enhance the capacities of the newly elected Women Councilors, in order to help sustain women's advent in unprecedented numbers into Sri Lankan politics at grassroots level.

The districts of Ampara, Colombo, Gampaha and Vavuniya were selected for the programme and women representatives of the Local Governing Councils in the respective districts were invited to participate in the yearlong effort. Colombo and Gampaha Districts were selected in order to include Women Councilors from the districts having the highest women's representation in local governing bodies, while Ampara and Vavuniya Districts were invited to the program due to SAPRI's intention to involve locations with different demographic patterns.

Altogether 29 Local Governing Councils in the form of Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabha (Divisional Councils) from the four respective districts were targeted, with approximately 200 women councilors taking part in the program. The participants represented multiple political parties as well as all major ethnicities and religions.



The programme was devised in a manner to help participants perform their duties effectively, while initiating a systematic transformation towards competitive politics. It consisted of Capacity Building Workshops designed as a progressive sequence that evolved from the understanding of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges faced by the participants to self-identification of rights and responsibilities as local governing councilors, targeting their performance as efficient public representatives. Towards this end, the

development of the skills necessary as well as recognition of common malpractices and measures to avoid them, assumed a major basis for the programme.

The commencing Sessions focused on enhancing the knowledge of the Women Councilors on local government councils, their functions and responsibilities as well as responsibilities of Councilors and their effective functioning, through the introduction of the Local Government Acts, the Constitution of the country, Financial Regulations and international instruments such as CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women) to create an awareness on their gender rights. Soft skills for identifying and addressing practical issues they encounter on a day-to- basis, interpersonal skills and IT competencies were also introduced to the Women Councilors.

Following the capacity building phase, workshops on awareness raising were conducted in the four districts, to increase the appreciation of both women councilors and their supporters in the community, to the assistance and support required from the community to sustain the political careers of the councilors and their progress towards higher realms in the political sphere. To this end community supporters too participated in the awareness raising workshops to learn of the necessity of assisting the women councilors to enable them to sustain their political careers.

As a component of the empowerment programme, SAPRI invited Ambassadors and diplomats of foreign countries to visit the project districts to join the women councilors in 'Roundtables with Diplomats'. Participant diplomats represented Africa, Asia, Europe, North America and Latin America. Ambassadors of Cuba, Italy, the Netherlands and Vietnam; High Commissioners of Bangladesh and South Africa; and senior diplomats of the People's Republic of China; Canada, India and Japan; represented the diplomatic corps. The Women Councilors participated in interactive discussions with the diplomats, a majority of whom were women, and shared knowledge and experience.

The women councilors were able to engage in a similar exercise with leaders of the national and local commercial/industrial sectors, in a series of ‘Roundtables with the Private Sector’ also held in the four districts. Representatives from leading garment manufacturer Brandix; Sanasa Development Bank (SDB); Ceylon Biscuits Limited (CBL); Advisory Footwear (Representating the Footwear Industry); LankaLoha Hardware Limited; Udumbara Caterers; Pelawatte Dairy Industries; Sewana Plantations (Horticulture); Daya Group of Industries; Pubudu Enterprises (small scale industry); AIA Insurance PLC and BBK Partnership (Accountants and Tax consultants) participated in the roundtables.

The Program culminated on 24th May, 2019, through several new initiatives. On this occasion, the Women Councilors were able to meet for the first time in a formal environment, representatives of the Women Parliamentarians’ Caucus. Former Deputy Minister Hon. Dr. Anoma Gamage M.P. and Members of Parliament, Hon. Dr.Sudarshini Fernandopulle, Hon. Dr. Thusitha Wijemanne, Hon. Shanthi Sriskandarasa and Hon. Hirunika Premachandra met with the Local Government Councilors, and shared their achievements and challenges in the highest level of politics in Sri Lanka while the Women Local Government Councilors were able to articulate their experiences in politics at grassroots level.

A press briefing conducted on the same occasion gave an exposure to the novice women leaders to interact with the media for the first time. The media agencies expressed their interest in providing ground level women leaders with coverage to increase the visibility of their social contribution. Representatives from Sunday Observer, Dinamina, & Tharuni magazine and Swarnawahini TV channel participated in the session.



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Women Parliamentarians in dialogue with their Counterparts in Local Government

Members of the Women Parliamentarians' Caucus in May, 2019, met, in a formal gathering, with Women Local Government Councilors of SAPRI's Women Empowerment programme from Ampara, Colombo, Gampaha and Vavuniya districts. The Women Parliamentarians who endeavoured relentlessly to increase the number of women at local government level shared their experiences as members of the larger Constituency, in an effort to encourage the women leaders at the grassroots level and enhance their capacities.

Hon Dr. Sudarshani Fernandopulle, Member of Parliament



“Change is possible with effort. Women must speak factually with sources. Gender equality as a concept is absent in Sri Lankan society, partly due to gender socialization”, said Dr Fernandopulle, commencing her remarks.

She commented that the 25% quota for local governance was the result of a long-term struggle. However, it should not to be mistaken as the only solution. Conventional ideologies such as distributing assistance in the form of material resources to the constituency were still predominant, however, it was efforts such as ensuring the wellbeing of the community in a habitable environment that were important. A discourse should commence on the importance of women's role in society and the media should support that effort.

Setting up of Women's Caucuses at Local Governing bodies, in the mold of Parliamentary Women's Caucus was important, to be extended to district and provincial level. Such a structure would help to link women politicians at all levels, while encouraging convergence on the basis of common concerns, Dr. Fernandopulle emphasized.

Hon. Shanthi Sriskandarasa- Member of Parliament

“With the emergence of large numbers of women in local government politics as a result of the 25% quota, it is important to discuss about the role of women in politics in Sri Lanka. Traditionally, women's role is confined to the wellbeing of the family”, Hon. Sriskandarasa remarked.

She emphasized that women in politics must be mindful of safeguarding their reputation during their social interactions. As regards male dominance in politics she commented that overcoming male dominance was important for women to go ahead in politics, which could be achieved through unity among women political leaders. It was ideal if Women Councilors could establish committees at the village level. These committees should consist



of educated, respected and sensible persons. Hon. Sriskandarasa expressed the necessity to continue a meaningful dialogue between Women Parliamentarians and the grassroots level political leaders.

Hon. Dr. Anoma Gamage- Member of Parliament



“Women in politics face a number of challenges in their interactions with the society as well as with fellow politicians, regardless of their party biases. Such difficulties were not emphasized in the promotion of the quota system, to ensure that potential women candidates remained interested and contested the local government elections. The magnitude of such challenges directed towards women political leaders is multiplied for Women Parliamentarians” said Dr. Gamage in her remarks.

She further said that it was important to establish a solid rapport with the constituents and that visiting them and listening to them was essential. Grassroot level politicians were expected to execute the decisions taken at the top level to benefit the society. Local level politicians should have a solid understanding on matters undertaken at ground level politics, to be communicated to the higher levels. In executing community projects, available skills and marketing facilities as well as the potential for sustainable economic growth should be considered, underscored Dr. Gamage.

Hon. Dr. Thusitha Wijemanna- Member of Parliament

“A sound educational background is helpful for a woman venturing into politics. Of the Women Parliamentarians present in Parliament, at least 10 are professionally qualified” remarked Dr. Wijemanna, referring to the Women Parliamentarians in the current Parliament of Sri Lanka.



She referred to Parliamentary Sectoral Oversight Committee on Women and Gender of which, she was President, and said that those serving on the Committee have had a sound education, were experts and reflected a wide ethnic diversity.

She spoke on the Committee’s action to repeal the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Act and make the General Marriages Act applicable to all citizens.

Dr. Wijemanne referred to children specific activities undertaken by the Committee and focused on efforts to introduce reproductive health education at school level, and amendments to the birth certificate, with regard to the father’s name. The Committee had also proposed measures for setting up Lama Mithuru Piyasa (Child Shelters) for victims of child abuse, elaborated Dr. Wijemanna.

Hon. Hirunika Premachandra- Member of Parliament



“Male parliamentarians are given more speaking time in Parliament than females, and allowed to speak even if they are not scheduled speakers, which hints of more space for males in politics than females, through male dominance in the political sector”, said Hon. Premachandra during her interaction with Women Local Government Councilors.

She commented that the current Women Parliamentarians were not linked to malpractices. She firmly believed that it was necessary to obtain the support of the women voters, as generally women appear reluctant to vote for women political candidates. As 52% of the country’s population is women, women political candidates should make an extra effort to appeal to women voters.

She referred to cybercrimes, and said she was planning to propose the setting up of a Police unit to investigate cybercrimes. It was advisable to have a similar space within the Local Government wards, to serve as a rapid response unit for women to complain, particularly, about sexual harassment, concluded Hon. Premachandra.



(Initiative to Empower Women.....Contd. From page 3)

On the conclusion of the programme an Advisory Panel of Experts, consisting of voluntary experts representing different domains such as the academia, public and private sectors and the civil society was set up, to be an advisory body to the Women Councilors. Roadmaps were created by the Councilors, with the assistance of the Experts, on targets they aspired to achieve by the end of the year, to which, the Panel as a unit was to guide the participants.

In hindsight, the workshops and sessions were innovative and practical in their emphasis on an approach that was centered on self-learning. Activities were interactive in their application, and self-reflective in their output. Extensive and meaningful collaborations with senior academics, civil society representatives and activists, was self-evident, through the program planning as well as its execution, which contributed to the successful conclusion of an year of enabling women leaders to progress in their leadership roles, in order to sustain the quota system put in place by the policy making.

Women Councilors on the Women Empowerment Initiative

“When I entered politics and became a Councilor, I knew neither about what I am expected to do, nor say during council sessions, Then I participated in SAPRI’s workshops. That enabled me to get a clearer idea of my role as a politician. The mock council sessions contributed to improve my self-confidence. As a result, I became a member of Committees of my council, despite some competition. The program encouraged women councilors to venture into depths formerly unknown to us”.
-A Participant Councilor from Vavuniya District

“The political system in Sri Lanka is corrupt, which could change through the influx of women politicians at local government level. The program was educational. Thanks to SAPRI we are now familiar with the basic requirements of Councilors, unlike before. We learnt of the importance of Time Management. We, as housewives, are occupied with household work as well and thankfully, we now know how to balance our political and family roles within available time. Also, we can recognize priorities in our villages, and design development projects accordingly”. – **A Participant Councilor from Gampaha District**

“I learned that the ideas and suggestions of women must be incorporated into decision and policy making aimed at women and children. I took to heart the statement ‘nothing about us without us’, shared by a foreign diplomat, that emphasized the importance of women’s inclusivity in decision making on matters that impact their lives”. – **A participant Councilor from Colombo District**

“I was able to identify my strengths and weaknesses, through the workshops. The knowledge on Budgeting was particularly helpful for me as a novice public representative. Other politicians and even my own family raised the issue of whether women should engage in politics. However, I continue to be in politics despite these challenges and obstacles. I submitted 15 project proposals, of which 12 were accepted by the Council. One of the highlights of my proposals was one on deployment of female employees to sell women specific merchandise. I have also formed a Women’s Movement to cater to women’s needs and welfare, with a special focus on war widows”.
– A Participant Councilor from Vavuniya District

“The fact that capacities of males and females are similar was something that we learnt during the workshops, that helped in an attitude change in us. Through practical exercises we demonstrated a variety of activities traditionally known to be dedicated male activities. This made us realize that such tasks can be performed by females as well. We were branded as persons to rock the cradle. However, now we have realized our true potential, that we can be as capable as men, thanks to the workshops”.
-A Participant Councilor from Vavuniya District

“Although I was not even able to express my views in an effective way when I joined the programme, with the lessons learnt from the sessions my confidence increased. I initiated a cultivation program with the support of affluent people from my own village and it has now become successful. I am currently working on beautifying the electorate based on a water source to attract tourists. Funds for the project is sourced through the ideas gained from SAPRI’s program. With the ability to go ahead with initiatives of this nature, I am confident that higher levels of politics will soon be within my grasp.”
- A Participant Councilor from Gampaha District

“I had to contest with 3 males to secure a seat at the Council and I learnt never to show weakness or fear when interacting with male councilors. I took to heart the advice of a foreign diplomat at SAPRI workshops ‘not to communicate signs of incompetence’.
A Participant Councilor, Colombo District

“When we go to the constituency women always request for assistance to overcome challenges with regard to their livelihood issues. The private sector meetings SAPRI arranged resulted in creating self-employment opportunities that we could offer the women in our community”.
-A Participant Councilor from Ampara District

“Our hands are tied, though we are given a 25% quota. Our political party or the implementers of the quota did not give us a training. SAPRI’s program changed our outlook completely. Now I feel very confident as a counselor”
- A Participant Councilor from Ampara District

Netherlands Ambassador Reiterates the Importance of Propelling Women's Leadership



H.E. Joanne Doornewaard, former Ambassador

Following the introduction of the 25% quota to Women Local Government Councilors, SAPRI was keen to empower the Councilors through developing their capacities. The Embassy of the Netherlands in Sri Lanka came forward to support SAPRI in this endeavor.

It was in this context that SAPRI sought an interview with Ambassador Joanne Doornewaard, who was heading the Embassy of the Netherlands at the time. Ambassador Doornewaard who has since left Sri Lanka for another diplomatic assignment, considered the subject of 'Empowering Women' not only as a professional undertaking but as a personal passion as well.

Therefore, during the interview, SAPRI sought her personal views as well as those of the Government of the Netherlands on the topic. The Ambassador revealed that she herself shared some of the concerns faced by the women she is now attempting to empower.

"I myself have faced a number of challenges in achieving what I have. At times I felt like I have to outwork everyone in order to be noticed." said the Ambassador, emphasizing the importance of promoting women's participation in leadership.

"Half of the population, and half of the workforce is female, thus the need to include them. The best way to do so is by allowing them to have a say" she explained, reiterating the importance of platforms for women's voice that carries a unique perspective into a dialogue



H.E. Tanja Gonggrijp, Ambassador of the Netherlands

"Women often have a different way of looking at things, which helps in matters such as reconciliation. They are really committed towards their communities, thus making it even more important to make them a part of the solution".

The Ambassador is also alive to the advantages of having women in leadership. *"Where women lead, it is less confrontational and more sustainable. However, women tend to downplay their capacities and tend to make themselves smaller, in comparison with their male counterparts. This may be a cultural restriction, that needs to be remedied through appropriation of role models who project a good work-life balance"*. In the process of women capacity building and said *"it is important to have the right skills as well"*.

However, lack of women in political leadership and decision making is not only a Sri Lankan issue, but rather a global concern, also reflected in politics, according to Amb. Doornewaard. *"In the past, politics was considered to be a realm of men. Women were expected to look after household duties"*, she opined. *"In Netherlands, women did not have voting rights and once voting rights were granted, they needed to have their representatives in decision making. Yet, issues such as salary disparity are commonplace"*.

Amb. Doornewaard highlighted the unity she witnessed from women in Sri Lanka, who, had shown willingness to collectively address common issues, despite political differences. *"I have been to the grassroots to meet the women who later became candidates in 2018 Local Governing Council Election. They are very brave to be stepping forward in a male dominated environment. They decided to act rather than blaming and sitting idle, inspiring the next generation as well"*.

Amb. Doornewaard praised SAPRI's undertaking of the initiative, and arranging for the councilors to meet with women leaders including Diplomats. *“Most of these Women Councilors have stepped forward with reluctance due to challenges they feared. Therefore, It is important to give them the much needed skills and moral support, to execute their duties successfully. I commend SAPRI for stepping forward on behalf of such women leaders. Exposure to women leaders who have overcome challenges enables Women Councilors to learn from their experiences”*.

The current Ambassador Her Excellency Tanja Gonggrijp, at a meeting with SAPRI officials, had similar views to express about the topic of 'Women's Empowerment'. She commended the initiative by SAPRI and her predecessor, and pledged the continued assistance of the Netherlands Embassy to uplift the status of women in Sri Lanka. The Ambassador further referred to the importance of the role played by women political leaders at the ground level, due to their proximity with the community and the possibility of harnessing their potential, to address broader concerns in the society.

In this context, as the new Ambassador of the Netherlands in Sri Lanka, she spoke of her desire to gain an insight into the position of women leaders at the local government, and said that she looked forward to visiting the different districts of the country for this purpose.

District Level Activities

COLOMBO DISTRICT WOMEN COUNCILORS HOLD ACTIVITY IN KOLONNAWA TO PROMOTE RECONCILIATION



Colombo District Women Councilors in Solidarity for Reconciliation

Women Councilors of Colombo District joined hands in a timely discussion on strengthening communal peace, in the wake of ethno-religious tensions in April 2019. The initiative was conducted following the pledge the Councilors made during SAPRI's program, to collaborate to influence the development of the district, despite political differences.

The event themed 'Reconciliation and National Security', was considered timely following the Easter Bombings in April that called for rational thinking and peace at communal level.

Former Army Commander General Daya Ratnayake made the keynote address on the theme, as a senior administrator and security official. The session saw a multi-party representation of male-female political leaders from local governing councils; and community leaders. Members of the clergy from the four major religions who were the distinguished invitees led the audience in prayers.

Participants of the session highlighted the importance of dialogue in place of violence to address mistrust, while representatives of clergy encouraged similar events, to eliminate misconceptions.

The event was held on 1 June 2019 in Kolonnawa, organised by the women councilors of the Kolonnawa Urban Council and attended by Eleven women Councilors from the Municipal Councils of Colombo and Dehiwala-Mt Lavinia and the Kolonnawa Urban Council, representing different political parties.

Hon. Ganga Ushanthi Perera of Kolonnawa Urban Council, played a prominent role in realizing the initiative.

PROMOTING HAPPY FAMILIES IN COLOMBO DISRICT



**Mayor Hon. Rosy Senanayake and
Commissioner Mr. Palitha Nanayakkara of
of Colombo Municipality with the audience**

Women members of the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) organized a knowledge sharing platform titled 'Happy Family', on 1st November 2019, aimed at raising awareness on a variety of topics, such as nutrition and health; safety of mothers and children; zero tolerance for alcohol; physical-mental well-being; and enhancing family unity and happiness; among the residents of Colombo and the underprivileged communities in particular, thus leading to 'Happy Families'.

Council Member Hon. Kishani Jayasinghe, Chair of Women & Children's Affairs Committee of the CMC, led the organizing of the event, planned as a multiparty effort, under SAPRI's 'Empowerment Programme' for Women Local Government Councilors.

The event took place at the New Town Hall, on first of November 2019, with Hon. Rosy Senanayake, the current and first woman Mayor of Colombo Municipal Council, participating as the Chief Guest of the occasion. Colombo Municipal Commissioner Palitha Nanayakkara made opening remarks. Over 100 residents, men, women and children, of the CMC areas attended the Happy Family event.

Publicity on Women's Empowerment Programme

Cuban Ambassador to Sri Lanka Highlights Women's Empowerment

Cuban Ambassador to Sri Lanka Juana Elena Ramos underscored the important role that Cuban women are currently playing, at a roundtable discussion with women from local governments.

Invited by the South Asia Policies and Research Institute (SAPRI), the Cuban diplomat participated in the event in the district of Vavuniya, in the Northern Province.

The meeting is part of a project carried out by that institution to empower Sri Lankan women.

When highlighting the work by Cuban women, Ramos stated that they currently represent 53.2 percent of the members of the Cuban Parliament.

She added that Cuban women make up 60.5 percent of graduates from higher education or university, and 67.2 percent of all technicians and professionals in the country.

The ambassador noted the ideology of the historic leader of the Cuban Revolution, Fidel Castro, who always understood the enormous political force women represent in the Revolution.



The article was originally published in

http://www.colombopage.com/NEW_LPC/NewsFiles19/Apr01_1554094814.php

Sunday Observer on Empowering Women Local Council Members



The final sessions of “Empowerment of women local government members” was held at the BMICH last Friday. It focused on meeting the women parliamentarians’ caucus and setting up an advisory panel of experts with the participation of 12 local government members (3 each from Colombo, Gampaha, Vavuniya and Ampara). They are- Toshini Niluka Sooriyaarachchi, Ismalebbe Tisreena, Sumithra Jeganathan, Kishani Renuka Jayasinghe, Ushanthi Gangani Perera, Kumuduni Sanghasa, Thushari Priyanga, Prascila Ann Deepika Marcus, Renuka Shyamali Perera, Thushari Muthumali, Ajanthan Thayalini and Kohilakumar Anjala.

“The political system in Sri Lanka is corrupt, something which could change through the influx of women politicians at local government level. This program was educational. Earlier we did not even know about fundamental council procedures. Thanks to SAPRI we are now familiar with these basic requirements of councilors and feel confident. We also learned the importance of time management. We, as housewives, are occupied with household work and now we know how to balance our political and family roles within the available time.

Also we can recognize priorities in our villages, and design projects accordingly,” speaking at the conference, a participant councilor from Colombo district said.

The South Asia Policy and Research Institute with the assistance of the Embassy of the Netherlands, initiated the program - ‘empowering the newly elected women local government members’ in May 2018, to enhance their capacities, leadership skills, and knowledge, so as to create effective political leaders. The year-long comprehensive agenda was linked to theoretical and practical training, targeting capacity building, interactive sessions, participation in breakout groups, attending a number of skills building exercises, awareness raising workshops, round-tables with ambassadors and diplomats, as well as with leading private sector representatives.

The article was originally published in <http://www.sundayobserver.lk/2019/05/26/news/empowering-women-local-council-members>

Netherlands Embassy Acknowledges the Social Impact of the Initiative



Project in Digital

SAPRI’s program on Empowerment of Women Local Government Councilors utilizes multiple E- channels including the social media, to spread the updates of the continued good work of the women leaders.

Women Empowerment Blog Space

<https://womenempowersl.blogspot.com/2019/05/empowerment-of-women-local-government.html?spref=tw>

SAPRI Twitter Space

<https://twitter.com/SAPRILKA>

Documentary

A documentary featuring highlights of the year-long program will be placed on SAPRI website shortly
