

**BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING?  
THE PARADOX OF FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN SRI  
LANKA**

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“The glass ceiling metaphor conveys a rigid, impenetrable barrier, but barriers to women’s advancement are now more permeable. Although men have long monopolized leadership, especially more powerful roles, this is changing.”<sup>1</sup> While this certainly is, it appears that women leaders in third-world countries, like that of Sri Lanka, are being wittingly or unwittingly manipulated by the traditionally-powerful patriarchal setting of their countries. The two Sri Lankan female leaders in Sri Lanka’s history, Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga, mother and daughter, outwardly appearing to challenge patriarchal force more so than by the surface-definition of “breaking the glass ceiling”; they were females elected to very high positions. By definitional terms, they indeed were leaders: “[people] who exercise[d] authority over people.”<sup>2</sup> But what truly happens to women who rule in traditionally patriarchal, international countries where the role of the woman as a mother and nurturer is to be honored? Do they become what is expected—a soft-hearted sympathizer with those who are victimized by power—or do they become like their male counterparts, with the tendency to be a cold-hearted authoritarian? Although both Bandaranaike and Kumaratunga demonstrated either an aggressive or level-headed approach to politics that defied traditional stereotypes of women, especially in the case of the Sinhalese versus Tamil conflict that has enveloped Sri Lanka, Bandaranaike and Kumaratunga also operated through patriarchal biases and did not have much of an influence on the stance of females in Sri Lankan society.

Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the first female prime minister in the world, served this role for three terms in Sri Lanka’s history: 1960-65, 1970-77, and 1994-2000, during which her daughter,

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<sup>1</sup> Alice H Eagly and Linda L Carli, *Through the Labyrinth: The Truth about How Women Become Leaders* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Alice H Eagly and Linda L Carli, *Through the Labyrinth*, 8.

Chandrika Kumaratunga, served as President. Before one can delve into analyzing how Bandaranaike acted in her role in the ethnic conflict between the Sinhalese majority and Tamil minority, an understanding must be gained of the prior twelve years of Sri Lankan independence preceding Sirimavo's first term, in which the Bandaranaike family had played a large role. It is currently known that this Sri Lankan family line dominated politics for most of the second half of the century because they were of the highest class and politically active.<sup>3</sup> The Bandaranaikes were a respected name that hailed from Kandy and claimed that they were the purest blood in Sri Lanka because they did not have interracial marriage with minorities or those who colonized Sri Lanka. After Sirimavo Bandaranaike's husband, the former prime minister, was assassinated in 1959, Sirimavo Bandaranaike quickly replaced him. She was immediately dubbed "the weeping widow" for frequently bursting into tears as she pledged herself to continue her husband's vaguely socialist policies<sup>4</sup>. Her first step into the limelight of politics displays a stereotypical, emotionally-unsound woman, a typecast trait of females. Thus, she played the role of a soft-hearted suffering woman to gain the sympathy of the traditional-minded Sri Lankan voters in order to gain their sympathy. And yet, her progressively-aggressive actions form an antithetical portrait of Sirimavo Bandaranaike throughout her three terms.

When Bandaranaike exercised her powers, she was unsympathetic to the minorities, much like the male prime ministers before her. During her first term, Bandaranaike upheld Buddhism and Buddhists, who were largely Sinhalese, in "Sri Lanka's public life. She made their primacy in

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<sup>3</sup> "Sirimavo Bandaranaike: First woman premier," BBC News: South Asia, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/964914.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/964914.stm) (accessed May 1, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

politics a hard reality.”<sup>5</sup> Not only did she follow her husband’s footsteps by satisfying Sinhalese nationalism, with Sinhalese being the majority in Sri Lanka, but with the help of a radical populist group, United Front (UF), communists, and Trotskyites, she furthered suppressed the Tamil minority in 1992 by “imposing strict quotas on Tamils in higher education.”<sup>6</sup> By “energetically” enforcing her husband’s “Sinhala Only Act” plan<sup>7</sup>, which forced Sri Lanka to operate with the majority-language of the Sinhalese and recognize it as the country’s official language, English was no longer the intermediary language between the rivaling groups of Sinhalese and Tamil. In fact, everything from businesses to education to employment operated with the Sinhala; Tamils and other minorities were now barred from many opportunities that acted more favorably towards the Sinhalese. Therefore, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was as “ruthless as [her husband] in pursuing policies that were inimical to Tamils and injurious to the once vaunted ethnic harmony of the island”<sup>8</sup> and therefore, civil disobedience inevitably ensued. American magazines, notably *Time*, made it appear that “Mrs. B”, as Sirimavo Bandaranaike was known in Sri Lanka, was incapable:

“During her first ten months in office as the world's first woman Prime Minister, Mrs. Sirimavo Bandaranaike, 45, has a record of more trouble than accomplishment. She has alarmed foreign investors with continual threats to nationalize foreign oil companies, and foreign diplomats by her close relations with the Communists and Trotskyites who supported her election. She dismayed the island's 800,000 Roman Catholics by nationalizing their

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<sup>5</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institute Press, 1999), 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous. "Sinhala Without Tears." TIME. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,872330,00.html> (accessed May 3, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, 6.

schools. Last week she had to call out the army before she could quell the latest wave of opposition.”<sup>9</sup>

Although this attitude can be partly attributed to the world’s uncertainty with a female prime minister, their words surely held some truth. When some Sri Lankan Tamils finally went on strike and picketed in response, Bandaranaike swiftly lashed back. Reports *Time*:

“She went on the radio, declared that "the nation cannot be held to ransom by threats," ordered general mobilization of the armed forces, sent troop reinforcements scurrying up to the Tamil areas. She decreed a state of emergency, under which strikers could be jailed for up to five years, and imposed curfews on principal Tamil communities. She banned the Tamils' Federal Party, tossed into jail more than 70 of its leaders, including all but one of its Members of Parliament.”<sup>10</sup>

As she intended, the Tamil rebellion died down and to ensure that no further rebellion or opposition was possible, Bandaranaike “imposed total censorship” on newspapers and reports about the situation. It was still clear that Bandaranaike would always act on behalf of her Sinhalese majority, especially because they had once been overshadowed by Tamils and Sri Lankans. Those who were fooled by weak Bandaranaike’s tearful pleas during her campaign were now having “dry-eyed second thoughts.”<sup>11</sup>

When Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected in 1970 after losing power to a pro-western and democratic United National Party, she was shadowed by “discriminatory education and employment policies” coupled with economic poverty and underdevelopment, which led to “violence-prone insurgency movements” by both the Sinhalese party (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna [JVP]) and the

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<sup>9</sup> "Sinhala Without Tears." TIME.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

Tamil party (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam [LTTE]).”<sup>12</sup> Because of events like these in her second term, it appears that Sirimavo Bandaranaike toughened up even more and incited rebellion from the disgruntled and more reactive minorities. She crushed the JVP rebellion with military help from India. There are allegations of torture and indiscriminate killing of the protesting youth by the Sri Lankan army. She also extended her term of office by postponing the elections indefinitely. When Bandaranaike ran again in 1977, she was crushed by the opposing party and was even expelled from Parliament in 1980.<sup>13</sup> Accused of misusing power, Bandaranaike was banned from prime minister-type responsibilities for seven years. Although this only lasted six years and Bandaranaike attempted to re-enter politics in 1988, she “narrowly lost the election for a new, more powerful post of president.”<sup>14</sup> Her third term was much more insignificant in light of her daughter, Kumaratunga, now with the title of President of Sri Lanka. During her leadership, however, Bandaranaike appeared to have been influenced by other leaders in her decisions. For example, “she accepted the program of her leftist allies to nationalize plantations and build a state-owned industrial sector.”<sup>15</sup> She became more allied with regimes in China and Russia and moved away from western democratic countries. And yet, she still operated in ways that were unexpected of a female leader who won her votes partly from sympathy; she did not display sympathy to the plight of the poor and the minorities in Sri Lanka because of her tough policies. Instead, she embraced the traditions and biases that came before her.

Chandrika Kumaratunga proved to be a sharp contrast. The daughter of Sirimavo and Solomon Bandaranaike, she was quite different in leadership style than her mother. She won a larger

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<sup>12</sup> Rotberg 51.

<sup>13</sup> "Sinhala Without Tears." TIME.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. *Creating Peace in Sri Lanka: Civil War and Reconciliation*, 59.

role in the presidency election in 1994, by which her party, the People's Alliance (PA) won the majority of seats in parliament. She had originally only run for prime minister, but the presidential candidate for her party was killed by a bomb attack at an election rally during the campaign. Kumaratunga, like her mother, was fortunate to be in such a circumstance where she was clearly the next up for the president-elect. Easily elected, Kumaratunga, who also lost her husband prior to gaining office, appointed her mother to act as prime minister for the third time. Unlike her mother who didn't go beyond secondary education, Chandrika had her university education in Sorbonne. She gained from her parents' power and wealth to get educated abroad, unlike other women in the island who are discouraged from proceeding to higher education, in deference to traditional norms. She seemed to be cut "from the modern cloth,"<sup>16</sup> as Robert Rotberg phrased it, and had more sympathy for the plight of her country's ethnic rivalry. "Sri Lanka had been consumed by war. Peace was a better option."<sup>17</sup> Therefore, she ran on a campaign that promised to establish or at least make the attempt to reconcile and "forge a workable compact with the LTTE"<sup>18</sup>. However, the LTTE had assumed that this was a strategic move because Kumaratunga had not discussed her plans with them prior to campaigning. By early 1995, President Kumaratunga, only two months after her inauguration, "initiated peace talks with the LTTE and declared a unilateral ceasefire"<sup>19</sup> in her government. Rotberg says that it was constitutional reform that lied at the "heart of her pursuit of peace"<sup>20</sup>. Kumaratunga, then, was much more resourceful and diplomatic than her mother. However, when the attempts proved to be fruitless and an assassination-attempt was made on the President,

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<sup>16</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. 9.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

Kumaratunga and her government resumed war with LTTE “reluctantly” in 1995. Even after the LTTE had a victory at Kilinochchi in late 1998, attempts for peace were made again, this time from the LTTE. Said Kumaratunga, “Our government believes in a negotiated political settlement for the ethnic crises. But we cannot rush to talks with the LTTE.”<sup>21</sup> As displayed, Kumaratunga operated in a level-headed manner, and it was noted by others that “Sirimavo Bandaranaike and her daughter did not always see eye to eye - largely over issues of leadership rather than policy.”<sup>22</sup> While Sirimavo Bandaranaike seemed to have a more “socialist fervor”, Kumaratunga had more pragmatism<sup>23</sup>.

Despite the fact that both females acted contrarily to “female norms” when handling issues like the ethnic conflict, amongst others, it appears that patriarchy has a fixed function in society in which the gender of a leader would not contribute to much of a difference. In fact, those who voted in the elections were unwittingly operating under a patriarchal system; “...patriarchal beliefs significantly affect the problem in question if they manifest themselves within the context of a period of crisis. It shows that the ‘cult of motherhood,’ a patriarchal notion that mothers are caring and incorruptible, which manifests itself in varying forms in political cultures across the region, is particularly contributory in the election of women in times of crisis”<sup>24</sup>. After all, “as societies [advance] economically, women as a group [become] identified as the nurturing and domestic sex...”<sup>25</sup>. Not only were these two females chosen because both societies were in need of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. 3.

<sup>22</sup> "Sirimavo Bandaranaike: First woman premier," BBC News: South Asia,

<sup>23</sup> Robert I Rotberg, ed. 102.

<sup>24</sup> Lavanga Wijekoon, "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?" Res Publica, [http://www2.iwu.edu/polisci/RP\\_2005/Res\\_Publica\\_BOOK\\_05\\_wijekoon.pdf](http://www2.iwu.edu/polisci/RP_2005/Res_Publica_BOOK_05_wijekoon.pdf) (accessed May 3, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Alice H Eagly and Linda L Carli, 33.

“matriarchal” figures at such a time of unrest, but it appears that Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga could have been chosen because of other outside factors: their blood, a ‘pure’ and high-ranking class, and wealthy and politically-active family, rather than gender, and they thereby acted accordingly. Proof includes that their roles do not reflect the participation or impact of females in their society and the concerns of South Asian women remain marginalized during their political careers. As provided by a Human Development Report, the “Gender Empowerment Measure Value” (GEM) in regard to broad development indicators on the status of South Asian women has shown a decrease in Sri Lanka; in 1998, the GEM was .309 which reduced to .274 in 2000, which climbed just a tad higher in 2002 with .276<sup>26</sup>. States the study by Khawar Mumtaz:

“Women’s subordination in the region is acknowledged to be structural. As the *Human Development in South Asia 2003* report succinctly puts it, it is owed to ‘the embedded system of patriarchy in South Asia’ with the result that “discrimination against women in South Asia is far worse than in most other developing countries.” Women, especially those belonging to the powerless groups find themselves doubly disadvantaged and vulnerable. Hence the sad reality in South Asia that even where the *condition* of women may have improved their social *position* has remained largely unchanged.”<sup>27</sup>

As Mumtaz notes, it is very important to realize that although “Sri Lanka [has an] institutionalized democratic system,” the females chosen were largely because of “aberrations of emergency rule” –Sirimavo willingly walked into the limelight following her husband’s death and likewise for Kumaratunga, following the death of the presidential candidate shortly before elections who was in her party. Without such aberrations, it may have been unlikely that the women would

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<sup>26</sup> Khawar Mumtaz, "Women's Representation, Effectiveness and Leadership in South Asia," United Nations Development Fund for Women, [http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Women\\_representation.pdf](http://www.unifem.org.in/PDF/Women_representation.pdf) (accessed May 4, 2009).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

have earned their roles. Because Bandaranaike and Kumaratunga achieved their roles largely through “fortune” and additionally through affirmation from family and class ties, it is possible to say that they were primarily operating under the patriarchal influence to even achieve their roles. In fact, even in their workplaces, they communicated with an entirely male-dominated cabinet, which raises the interesting question of how much influence this could have had on each leader. As Steve Goldberg says in his book, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, “The point of importance, however, is that even in such societies, authority has continued to be overwhelmingly associated with the male and an overwhelming number of positions of leadership have been filled by men.”<sup>28</sup> So even with the positions that both women had, it is questionable whether this was a “definitional” leadership or a genuine superiority and command of these female leaders in South Asia. It is expected to be the former: “unlike Western Europe, . . . Southeast Asian societies from which these women have emerged as elected leaders continue to be associated with patriarchy and the subordination of women”<sup>29</sup>.

Has the fact that Sri Lanka had two highly influential female leaders made a difference for women in its society? Apparently not; it appears that the two Sri Lankan female leaders had done little to empower their fellow women, aside from them simply winning their respective roles of Prime Minister and President. It has been stated that both did very little to change the status quo and thus implicated themselves in the “prevalent patriarchy”<sup>30</sup>. “We've had less than 5 per cent representation in our Parliament and the percentage is declining. This despite the President being a

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<sup>28</sup> Steven Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy* (New York: William Morrow & Company, 1973), 32-33.

<sup>29</sup> Lavanga Wijekoon, "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?" Res Publica,

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

woman, her mother being the first woman prime minister in the world...<sup>31</sup>. Political representation by females in Sri Lanka is actually much worse than India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal, all of which have had influential female leaders<sup>32</sup>. This is not just a problem in Parliament, in which 225 of the seats in the lower chamber are only occupied by 10 women in 2004, a mere 4.44% of the total<sup>33</sup>; in local bodies, there is only one percent of female representation in the local bodies. Because it is a highly patriarchal society, the presence of women in legislature and local bodies is very small, regardless of the very fact that women are leading the country.

In fact, Kumaratunga, the more level-headed leader and President, stated, "I think women must participate in the political processes, but, as nature has decided that it is a woman who will have children...it is a difficult thing"<sup>34</sup>. Oddly enough, Kumaratunga appealed to voters in her 1994 landslide win with her political rhetoric, which incorporated the fact that she was a widowed mother of two, her husband, like Bandaranaike's, having been assassinated. She operated on the theme of a "sacrificing mother"—but this again provides proof that South and South Asian societies tend to pick matriarchal figures in the time of crisis<sup>35</sup>. Both Kumaratunga and Bandaranaike "gained acceptance as the anti-thesis of and solution to the illegitimacy and instability that characterized the presiding

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<sup>31</sup> 1. Rasheeda Bhagat, "A gender paradox in Sri Lanka," *The Hindu Business Line*, <http://www.blonnet.com/life/2005/08/26/stories/2005082600120300.htm> (accessed May 2, 2009).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Khawar Mumtaz, "Women's Representation, Effectiveness and Leadership in South Asia,"

<sup>34</sup> Lavanga Wijekoon, "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?" *Res Publica*,

<sup>35</sup> Lavanga Wijekoon, "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?" *Res Publica*,

regimes”<sup>36</sup>. Additionally, Lavanga Wijekoon states that the “bereavement” of these two leaders following the death of their husbands elicited compassion and sympathy from “a patriarchal populace that views them as fragile and weak”, thereby winning the sympathy vote<sup>37</sup>.

What is this paradox that exists in Sri Lanka? Even the female leaders of high authority were operating with gender biases in mind to the extent that although they should have had more power than their male counterparts, they were incapable of “rising above the shackles of patriarchy, still perform[ing] and acknowledg[ing] the hegemonic script”<sup>38</sup>. A *Businessline* article states that, “usually, women leaders never think of women's issues as their priority. When you meet them they agree to feminist thinking. In private even the men say: 'Sure'. But when it comes to political power, they don't want to yield any space.”<sup>39</sup>

In conclusion, it is worth questioning whether it is enough to consider females as the independent and dichotomy-subjugating pacesetters, merely by the definitional application of “leader”. Are there not many implications that make attaining female leadership only half of the battle? It appears that female leaders have been a “South Asian” phenomenon, from India (Indira Gandhi) to Pakistan (Benazhir Bhutto) and Bangladesh (Khaleda Zia) to Sri Lanka. It is also recognized, however, that these leaders are heavily influenced and perhaps motivated by the patriarchal underpinning of their society, especially when one factors in outside forces like class, race, and family ties. Because of such factors, the women leaders of these countries are not truly

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Rasheeda Bhagat, "A gender paradox in Sri Lanka ," Hindu Business Line.

subjugating the traditional patriarchal framework of their societies. There may also be other factors that this paper can neither prove nor disprove, but can only bring to attention:

“Another political cultural aspect that underscores the patriarchy that pervades these countries is the tendency of political parties to nominate women (who will potentially garner votes by virtue of their identities as widows or mothers), as candidates for the chief executive because the male party “veterans” believe that as women they will be easily malleable and could be influenced to carry out these party members’ agendas.”<sup>40</sup>

While the female leaders may be challenging patriarchal roles on the surface, there are simply other factors that are inevitably acting on and influencing them, with or without their knowledge. Many of these leaders’ cabinets almost entirely of men and to disregard the possible effects of such a fact would be faulty. However, not all female leaders operate under these factors, of course; one only needs to look at the political careers of women prime ministers in the United Kingdom and Israel. Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meir were also very tough, but they came to power through their own merits, not through the influence of the men-folk in their family. In any case, viewing female leadership in any country where patriarchal influence is so thoroughly grounded will inevitably result in us peering through a problematic and uncompromising lens of reality and raising the seemingly-unanswerable question, “What if the patriarchal system really *is* inevitable and in *some* way, always operating?”

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<sup>40</sup> Lavanga Wijekoon, "Why Do South and Southeast Asians Vote for Female Heads of State?" Res Publica,

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