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DEMOCRACY
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GENDER AND SRI LANKA'S 2020 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS:
DISPARITIES IN THE COVERAGE OF MALE AND FEMALE
CANDIDATES ON FACEBOOK

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Gender and Sri Lanka's 2020 Parliamentary Elections: Disparities in the Coverage of Male and Female Candidates on Facebook*

I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women's representation in Sri Lanka's political institutions has been minimal since the country's independence 73 years ago. Following the parliamentary election held on 5 August 2020, only 12 out of 225 parliamentarians are women (5.3%). During the period in which elections have been held under the proportional representation system, from 1989 to date, there has been no significant change in the percentage of women who are elected to parliament, this percentage has remained between 4 to 6 percent.¹

Women's participation in the socio-political sphere is important to deepen democratic governance and facilitate more equitable development outcomes. Women in Sri Lanka enjoy formal equality; Article 12(2) of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex. However, this is not reflected in the equality of outcomes, especially in terms of women's participation in government.

This research aimed to understand whether the

gender-gap reality was also represented on social media. In particular, **were top female candidates underrepresented or framed in a biased or gendered way² in Facebook page and group posts during Sri Lanka's August 2020 parliamentary elections?**

To answer our question of interest, DRI analysed 38,887 Facebook Page and 55,706 Facebook Group posts and compared online activity surrounding selected top performing male and female candidates between 1 March and 15 August 2020. We also analysed a small sample of manually coded posts to uncover biased frames directed towards female candidates specifically.

Defining Female Underrepresentation and Bias Against Women³

Underrepresentation and bias against women online means that women are not equally represented in comparison to their male counterparts. This problem may manifest itself in several ways on social media:

- Disproportionate news coverage in terms of post frequency by traditional media

* This publication is part of DRI's project "Preventing electoral violence in Sri Lanka by advancing core electoral reform issues and strengthening the integrity of the public discourse", funded by the German Federal Foreign Office.

1 Department of Census and Statistics – Members of Parliament by year and sex available at <http://www.statistics.gov.lk/GenderStatistics/StaticInformation/WomenEmpowerment/Membersofparliamentbyyearandsex>

2 A number of posts were manually coded based on a predefined list of categories related to gender bias, gender-based discrimination, abuse and candidate support, to identify gender-biased framings. Refer to Table 2 in this report for more information on the gender-biased framing of female candidates.

3 Definition from DRI's Guide on Gender and Social Media: Measuring Underrepresentation and Harassment Online: https://democracy-reporting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Final_IWD-Publication.pdf

- Disproportionate use of traditionally gendered narratives and language by traditional media and individual users
- Disproportionate representation of female users in online democratic discourse. This point is difficult to research because gender disaggregated data is not available to researchers.

In this report, DRI explores three key areas: First, whether candidates received equal quantities of coverage in terms of the number of Facebook page/group posts and user interactions; second, whether candidates received equal coverage in terms of the type of topics discussed at key moments in time; and third, how female candidates were framed in top social media posts.

DRI identified that male candidates received approximately 24 times more coverage and 51 times more interactions in comparison to female candidates. Moreover, the topics bringing most attention to male candidates include specific events and issues highlighting the candidate as the key actor, whereas the topics bringing most attention for female candidates present the candidate in the context of intermediaries. By analysing a sample of posts specifically about female candidates, DRI observed that these posts were quite supportive of the female candidates. However, 39% of posts in this sample had a potentially biasing frame, showing the candidate in the context of male colleagues or other candidates, or discussing the candidate's weakness, behaviour, appearance or personal life.

DRI's findings confirm the underrepresentation and the implicitly biased framing of female candidates in Facebook pages and groups during Sri Lanka's 2020 parliamentary election. The findings indicate that steps need to be taken to create a conducive environment for female candidates to use online platforms for campaigning and proactively support greater representation of women in mainstream politics.

II. INTRODUCTION

Disparities in coverage matter, because what people see, or fail to see, has the potential to influence their offline political or electoral perceptions. If women are not visibly represented online at the same level as their male counterparts in political campaigning, this may translate to a lack of political representation for half of the population. Without offline and online media coverage, how can women's voices and expertise be heard to shape their own political narratives? Research has shown the benefits on society and democracy, when women engage in politics at a high level.⁴ For example, public trust in politics increases and socio-economic development improves.⁵

As of 1 January 2020, Sri Lanka ranked 182 out of 191 countries in terms of representation of women in Parliament.⁶ Women themselves have been reluctant to get involved in politics for several reasons, including cultural misconceptions of a woman's traditional role in society, the lack of safeguards for women in politics and male dominance in political spaces.⁷ This trend underscores the need to be proactive in creating an environment that encourages female participation.

Evolving social media networks have created a new space for violence against women in politics and an arena for exacerbating their underrepresentation.⁸ Sexist and

4 Amy K. Lehr and Efthimia Maria Bechrakis, "Against the Odds: Overcoming Online Harassment of Women in Politics," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, 8 November 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/against-odds-overcoming-online-harassment-women-politics>

5 "Handbook on Promoting Women's Participation in Political Parties", OSCE (ODIHR), 2014, <https://www.osce.org/odihr/120877?download=true>

6 "Women in Politics: 2020 (Map)", *Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women*, 2020. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/women-in-politics-map-2020-en.pdf?la=en&vs=827>

7 For a comprehensive list of factors see: Chulani Kodikara, '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 UNDP, October 2009. Available at <https://www.undp.org/content/dam/srilanka/docs/governance/WPE%20FINAL%20PDF.pdf>

8 "Sexism, Harassment and Violence Against Women Parliamentarians", *Inter-Parliamentary Union*, October 2016, <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/issue-briefs/2016-10/sexism-harassment-and-violence-against-women-parliamentarians>

misogynistic comments, humiliating and degrading content, and threats of intimidation and violence against women in politics are often seen on social media.

This report analyses male versus female representation on Facebook during the 2020 parliamentary election period and the potentially biased framings of female candidates in social media posts.

III. CONTEXT

Sri Lanka appointed the first democratically elected female Prime Minister in the world, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, on 21 July 1960. This milestone in history, however, was followed by six decades of low female political representation in the Sri Lankan parliament.

Female voters in Sri Lanka make up 56% of the total eligible voters of the country. However, the parliament that came into power in August 2020 only comprises 12 female parliamentarians out of 225 parliamentarians (5.3%).⁹

To address the growing disparity of female representation in politics, the government introduced a mandatory 25% quota for women to enter local government through the Local Authorities (Amendment) Act, No. 1 of 2016. This quota asserts that 25% of elected legislators at the local government should be female. As a result, female representation in local councils rapidly increased from 89 to 2,300 in the 2018 elections.¹⁰

Despite this, women entering politics in Sri Lanka face many challenges deterring them from civic and political engagement. These challenges include a lack of campaign finance laws, insufficient support from political parties, online and offline harassment and demeaning media coverage of female politicians.

On mainstream media, including the press, TV and radio, women are rarely featured or called to speak on important issues including public policy, politics, elections, legislation and others.¹¹ Moreover, female politicians have been subject to slander and insults about their physical appearance, dress and behaviour on Sri Lankan media.

To date, there has been little research investigating the underrepresentation of Sri Lankan women in politics on social media networks. However, there has been considerable research looking into social media-based violence against women in Sri Lanka, including case studies of women in politics being subject to harassment and abuse on social media platforms.¹² DRI complements this research with its analysis of disparities in the coverage of male and female candidates on Facebook page and group posts.

IV. DATA AND METHODS:

SCOPE

To analyse the question of interest, 'Were top female candidates underrepresented or framed in a biased or gendered way in Facebook page and group posts during Sri Lanka's August 2020 parliamentary elections?', DRI assessed the differences in Facebook coverage of the three most popular male candidates and the three most popular female candidates (Table 1). Popularity was determined based on the absolute number of preferential vote counts received by candidates for the parties which received the highest votes overall: Sri Lanka Podujana Peramuna (SLPP), Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB) and Jathika Jana Balawegaya (JJB). One male and one female candidate were chosen per party. DRI chose this approach to provide a comparison between male and female candidate representation based on the

9 Bansari Kamdar, "Women in Sri Lanka Make up 56% of Voters, But Only 5% of Legislators", *The Diplomat*, 25 September 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/women-in-sri-lanka-make-up-56-of-voters-but-only-5-of-legislators/>

10 Minoli De Soysa, "Violence and Abuse Deter Women From Entering Politics, Ground Views", 8 April 2020, <https://groundviews.org/2020/08/04/violence-and-abuse-deter-women-from-entering-politics/>

11 Sharanya Sekaram and Lesley Abdela, "Media Gender Charter for Sri Lanka", *Hashtag Generation*, July 2020, <https://hashtaggeneration.org/publications/>

12 "Opinions, B*tch: Technology Based Violence Against Women in Sri Lanka", *Centre for Policy Alternatives, Ghosha and Hashtag Generation*, 2018, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/16ohQ7P2K08qz-kgiQUfSr0JCGvxDLHNR/view>

votes received in the election rather than engagement levels on Facebook because engagement online does not necessarily translate directly into popularity on the ground.

Table 1: Top male and female candidate selection

Party	Candidate	Gender	District	Preferential vote numbers
SLPP	Mahinda Rajapaksa	Male	Kurunegala	537,364
SLPP	Pavithra Wanniarachchi	Female	Rathnapura	200,977
SJB	Sajith Premadasa	Male	Colombo	305,744
SJB	Thalatha Athukorale	Female	Rathnapura	45,105
NPP	Anura Kumara Dissanayake	Male	Colombo	49,814
NPP	Nirupa Serasingha	Female	Colombo	9,300

Mahinda Rajapaksa is the current Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (2019-present) and was also the former President (2005-2015) and Prime Minister of Sri Lanka (2004-2005). Similarly, Premadasa is the current leader of the opposition (2020-present) and has held ministerial portfolios in previous parliaments. Dissanayake, too, has held ministerial portfolios in previous parliaments and has been a member of parliament since 2000.

Wanniarachchi is the only female candidate who holds a ministerial portfolio in the current parliament as the Minister of Women & Child Affairs, Social Security, Health & Indigenous Medicine (2019-present). Some of her previous posts include being Minister of Power and Energy and Minister of Technology and Research. Athukorala is also a current member of parliament and has previously held ministerial portfolios including being the Minister of Justice (2017-2020). Serasingha, an Attorney-at-Law, is the only female candidate who has not been elected for government.

DATA

DRI pulled Facebook page and group posts using keywords based on the top three female and male candidates outlined above. The keywords were identified upon consulting a group of social media monitors in Sri Lanka and were based on candidate names and other

words associated with the candidate (see Appendix 1). DRI collected 38,887 page posts and 55,706 group posts from the period of 1 March to 15 August 2020 using CrowdTangle.¹³ This timeframe comprises the election campaign period, election day and a brief period following the election.

From the above data set, DRI selected the top 200 posts from pages and groups for each female candidate based on total interactions. DRI manually coded the posts to understand perceptions towards the female candidates, particularly looking into whether posts discussed female candidates in a biased way. Using a predefined set of coding categories (see Appendix 3), a team of coders labeled each post based on a qualitative evaluation. The analysis of the coded posts provided additional understanding of the online discourse taking place and identified key trends. Although DRI collected 200 posts per candidate, some posts had broken URLs or were irrelevant leaving 559 posts in this sub-sample (195 posts for Athukorale, 193 posts for Wanniarachchi and 171 posts for Serasinghe). Findings from the analysis of the manually coded posts is presented in section 3 of this report.

DRI conducted an exploratory analysis to uncover overall trends in the data.

- **Pages v. Groups Activity:** Candidates were discussed more in Facebook groups rather than pages, suggesting users preferred this mode of communication for political and campaign discussions. There were 15,823 more group posts discussing male candidates in comparison to page posts (42% more), and 996 more group posts discussing female candidates in comparison to page posts (70% more). DRI did not identify any difference in trends when comparing aggregate page and group post data by gender, which is why posts were combined for this study.
- **Language:** For both male and female candidates, the narratives of the posts were constructed mostly in Sinhala and English rather than in Tamil. Since

¹³ CrowdTangle is a tool offered by Facebook to extract information from posts on public Facebook pages and groups.

Tamil is the second most widely spoken language in the country and the most spoken language among the minority communities, this shows that Tamil-speaking users did not post about or engage with these candidates as much as Sinhala-speaking users. A reason for this could also be that the candidates affiliate themselves more with the Sinhala community than the Tamil community.

LIMITATIONS

DRI was limited in its selection of top male and female candidates, given the reality that only 12 female parliamentarians were elected. The selection resulted in the top three male candidates all being front runners at previous presidential and parliamentary elections and leaders of their respective political parties. Moreover, it is expected that Rajapaksa, as the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, and Premadasa, as the leader of the opposition, will receive more attention online in comparison to other candidates due to their positions of power. Taking this into consideration, the selected male candidates have a larger following on Facebook and were already more popular than the female candidates. As a result, more social media activity discussing male candidates could be expected.

The lack of candidate representation in terms of the country's diversity in ethnicity and religion was another important limitation of this study.

Further, this study did not aggregate preferential vote numbers by district. Although one could argue that aggregating preferential votes by district could also determine popularity, DRI opted to use preferential votes in terms of absolute numbers to determine the popularity of a candidate overall.

Through the selection of best performing politicians per party, DRI attempted to generate a comparable group of top politicians. DRI recorded what occurred on social media given the selected candidates and investigated deeper into narratives and frames discussing the female candidates.

For the female candidates, DRI's keyword selection mostly included the names of politicians, which failed to capture posts containing nicknames and words with subtle nuances of potentially abusive language. As a result, DRI focused its analysis on biased narratives, quantity of representation and coverage by mainstream media online.

Additionally, in section 3 of the key findings in this report, '3. How were female candidates framed in top social media posts?', the coding categories were as comprehensive as possible, but may not have captured all types of bias. Due to time limitations, DRI looked at a small selection of posts, chosen based on the most interactions to identify posts with the widest user reach. For the coding categories "context of male" and "supporting actor", a high number of posts coded for this category may be expected given that most of the candidates in the election were male. Despite this, it was important to highlight the frequency in which female candidates were shown as the main character in their political narrative, particularly given the findings of section 2.

V. ANALYSIS

In this section, DRI will look at three key questions:

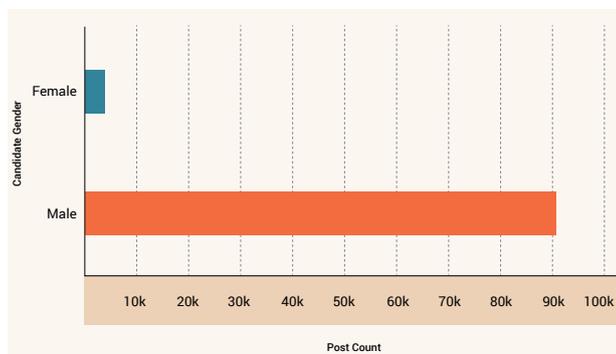
1. Did candidates receive equal quantities of coverage in terms of the number of Facebook page/group posts and user interactions?
2. Did candidates receive equal coverage in terms of the type of topics discussed at key moments in time?
3. How were female candidates framed in top social media posts and was there a gendered or biased framing?

1. Did Candidates Receive an Equal Quantity of Coverage?

Comparing Total Number of Posts and Interactions for Male v. Female Candidates

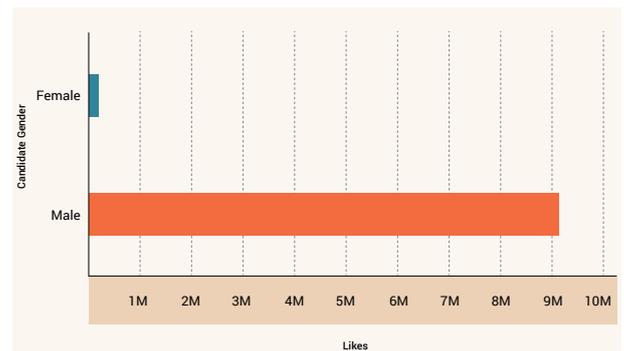
Male candidates received significantly more coverage in comparison to female candidates in our sample of Facebook pages and groups (Figure 1). 90,751 posts referred to the top male candidates while in comparison, only 3,842 posts referred to the top female candidates. This means the male candidates received almost 24 times more posts than the female candidates.

Figure 1: Post count per candidate gender



The limited coverage on Facebook page and group posts also reflected user engagement (Figure 2), where posts about the top male candidates received 9 million likes, while posts about the top female candidates received 175,000 likes. This means male candidates received 51 times the number of likes than female candidates. The vast differences in interactions between male and female candidates shows that Facebook users engage with male candidates at a much greater scale. This could be due to the popularity of male candidates on the ground and their long history of involvement in politics translating into popularity and visibility on Facebook. Another reason for this could be the disparity in campaign finances and resources between male and female candidates, leading to less advertising, boosting, and campaigning by female candidates on social media. DRI did not observe any significant differences in the types of interactions received by male versus female politicians. Across both groups, “Like”, “Love” and “Haha” were the top interaction types.

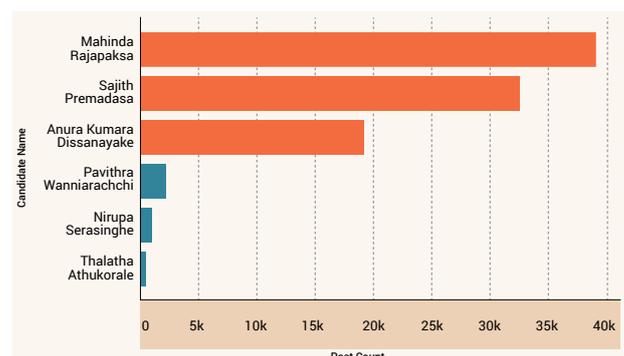
Figure 2: Likes per candidate gender



Without exception, all individual male candidates in our sample received more online attention than the individual female candidates (Figure 3). The top performing female candidate, Wanniarachchi, also the Health Minister, did not even come close to receiving the amount of coverage for the top male candidate, Prime Minister Rajapaksa, who received 17 times more coverage. Although this is expected given Rajapaksa’s popularity as the head of government, the worst performing male candidate, Dissanayake, still had 10 times more of the total number of posts than all three female candidates combined.

Rajapaksa received 39,003 posts; Premadasa received 32,520 posts; Dissanayake received 19,200 posts; Wanniarachchi received 2,242 posts; Serasinghe received 1,042 posts; and Athukorale received 558 posts.

Figure 3: Post count per candidate

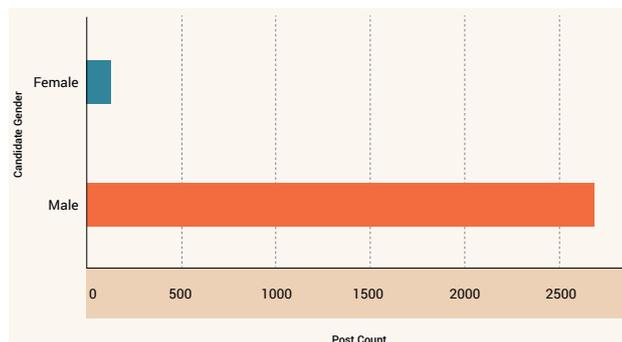


When looking only at posts on Facebook pages and groups originated and published by mainstream media outlets,¹⁴ DRI observed the same trend with less posts

14 See Appendix 2 for the list of mainstream news media outlets included in this data subset. The mainstream media outlets were chosen by compiling a list of mainstream media with a presence on social media.

about female candidates than male candidates (Figure 4). In the 2,813 total posts by mainstream media outlets, 2,685 discussed male candidates and 128 discussed female candidates. This means male candidates were discussed approximately 24 times more than female candidates. This provides evidence to suggest that the online versions of mainstream media sources disproportionately cover male and female candidates. This is interesting because users generally rely on mainstream media outlets as their main source of news. The lack of female representation in mainstream media reflects the lack of importance these news sources give to women in politics. Another reason for less coverage is because there are not many women in politics in Sri Lanka, and therefore male politicians dominate news cycles, leading to the media mostly reporting about them.

Figure 4: Mainstream media page post count per gender (2812 total posts)



Key Findings from Section 1

Did Candidates Receive an Equal Quantity of Coverage?

- Male candidates were discussed throughout the whole the campaign period.
- The top three male candidates from the parties SLPP, SJB and JJB were discussed throughout the monitored period, with Rajapaksa from SLPP being discussed the most.
- Wanniarachchi was the female candidate who was most discussed during the campaign period, however, there were less posts about her in comparison to Dissanayake and Premadasa (both were the least discussed male

candidates on Facebook groups).

- Disproportionate news coverage in terms of post frequency by traditional media.

2. Were Candidates Discussed in an Equal Way during the Campaigning Period?

Comparing Defining Campaign Moments

To gain a better understanding of the campaign topics bringing online attention for each candidate, DRI looked at how candidates were discussed on Facebook pages and groups over time (Figure 5). DRI explored the topics discussed on posts on the dates the candidates received the highest total interactions before the election.

Male candidates had a significantly higher rate of total interactions from 1 March to 2 August 2020 in comparison to female candidates. Moreover, male candidates received a higher frequency of peaks in total interactions over time in comparison to female candidates (Figure 5).

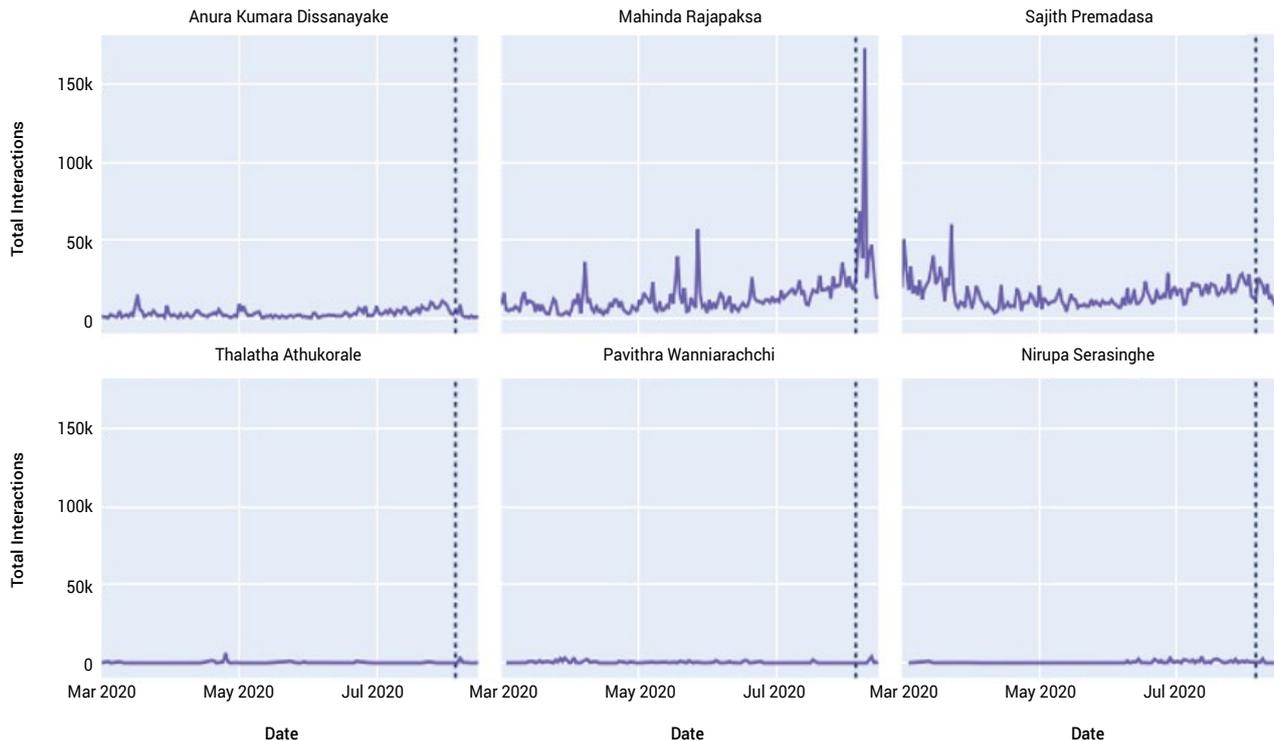
A list of topics bringing social media attention for each candidate during key spikes in total interactions over the election campaign period highlights this:

Mahinda Rajapaksa

Positive sentiments towards Rajapaksa, featuring him as the hero in post narratives.

- 7 April 2020 (36,179 total interactions) - posts featuring Prime Minister Rajapaksa's special statement addressing the nation about the covid-19 situation in the country and the government's covid-19 efforts.
- 18 May 2020 (39,880 total interactions) - posts highlighting and celebrating the eleven-year anniversary of the end of the civil war in Sri Lanka on 18 May 2009. The posts focused on the role of the military in defeating the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).
- 27 May 2020 (57,043 total interactions) - posts celebrating fifty years of Rajapaksa's political career.

Figure 5: Candidate interactions over time



Pavithra Wanniarachchi

Discussed in the context of the covid-19 pandemic and duties as Health Minister.

- 27 March 2020 (2,885 total interactions) - measures taken by the Ministry of Health in providing covid-19 pandemic relief.
- 29 March 2020 (3,286 total interactions) - requests made to the Ministry of Health for the conversion of the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU) hospital into a covid-19 treatment centre.
- 2 April 2020 (3,358 total interactions) - Muslim politicians and citizens pleading with ministers, including the Health Minister, Wanniarachchi, and the government to allow for the burial of those who have passed away due covid-19.

Sajith Premadasa

Mixed topic sentiments, mostly discussed in the context of being the leader of the opposition.

- 2 March 2020 (50,401 total interactions) - the

launch of the new political alliance, Samagi Jana Balawegaya (SJB), led by Premadasa.

- 15 March 2020 (40,109 total interactions) and 23 March 2020 (60,159 total interactions) - opposition towards Premadasa's statements on covid-19 medical advice and treatment suggestions.

Thalatha Athukorale

Received negative posts for opposing top male figures in government and neutral posts about her campaign.

- 25 April 2020 (6,289 total interactions) - opposition towards a video of Athukorala criticizing the President's covid-19 address to the nation, where President Gotabaya Rajapaksa discusses the government's role in combating covid-19.
- 19 April 2020 (1,537 total interactions) and 20 April 2020 (1,201 total interactions) - video of Athukorala discussing her views on holding elections during the covid-19 pandemic and her views on the previous and current government's policies, where she also highlights the issues she is most passionate about.

Anura Kumara Disسانayake

Interviews of Disسانayake discussing the election, his campaign and policy stances.

- 17 March 2020 (14,992 total interactions) - an interview of Disسانayake with Ada Derana, a mainstream media outlet in Sri Lanka, where he discusses his views on policy, the upcoming elections and whether the government would obtain a two-thirds majority in parliament.
- 25 July 2020 (10,392 total interactions) - Anura Kumara's campaign rallies, interviews, and discussions with civil society being featured in the media, including Ada Derana and Rupavahini (both mainstream television media networks).
- 30 July 2020 (11,222 total interactions) - opposition towards Anura Kumara's involvement in Avant Garde's projects, a security services firm which came under scrutiny for high seas arms trafficking.¹⁵

Nirupa Serasinghe

Received most traction for posts on activism and women's rights and JJB campaign events.

- 12 July 2020 (6,451 total interactions), 18 July 2020 (6,584 total interactions) and 29 July 2020 (5,914 total interactions) - events attended and campaign speeches given by Serasinghe highlighting the challenges faced by women in urban and rural settings and the need for increased activism and work on women's rights.

Key Findings for Section 2

Were Candidates Discussed in an Equal Way during the Campaigning Period?

The main differences identified between the topics for the male and female candidates which caused key spikes in total interactions over the campaign period include the following:

- The topics bringing the most attention for male candidates include specific events and issues highlighting the male candidate as the key actor.
- The topics and posts bringing female candidates the most attention often highlight the candidate's affiliation with their representative party or ministry and are also in the context of male politicians and other intermediaries.
- The topics bringing most interactions for male candidates receive tens of thousands of more interactions than female candidates.

3. How were female candidates framed in top social media posts?

Zooming in on a sample of 559 posts discussing female candidates

To understand the way in which female candidates were framed, DRI analysed a selection of the top 200 posts (based on most "total interactions") per female candidate, in total 559 posts.¹⁶ These posts were manually coded based on a predefined list of categories related to gender bias, gender-based discrimination and abuse and candidate support.¹⁷

3(a) Biased framing of female candidates

38.5% (215 posts) of the 559 posts were labelled with at least one type of biased framing (Figure 6, see definitions in Table 2). This is particularly meaningful given that the posts in this selection are the most-interacted-with posts about the candidates, meaning they reached a considerable audience of users and high total interactions in terms of overall likes, reactions, comments and shares. Although this does not represent a majority of posts, it can be considered a noteworthy reach given the already limited coverage of female candidates received as shown in section 1 of this report.

¹⁶ We collected 200 posts per candidate, although some posts had broken URLs or turned out to be irrelevant leaving 195 posts for Thalatha Athukorale, 193 posts for Pavithra Wanniarachchi and 171 posts for Nirupa Serasinghe (see section IV for further discussion).

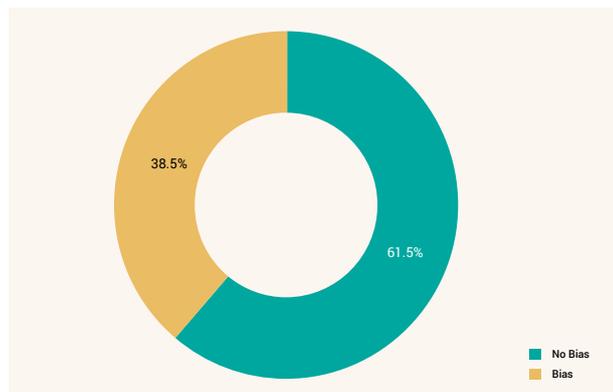
¹⁷ DRI created a list of predefined coding categories based on a preliminary qualitative assessment of the posts about female candidates (see data and methods section for further discussion and coding categories in Appendix 3).

¹⁵ "5 released from the Avant Garde case", *News First*, January 2020, <https://www.newsfirst.lk/2020/01/17/5-released-from-the-avant-garde-case/>

Table 2: Coding categories to understand gender-biased framing

Definitions:	
Weak 8 posts	Presenting a female candidate as mentally or physically weak.
Context of Male Politician 77 posts	Featuring or discussing a female candidate in the context of her male counterparts.
Supporting Actor 79 posts	Featuring or discussing the female candidate in the context of other candidates.
Behaviour 23 posts	Discussing the way a female candidate speaks or carries herself.
Appearance 2 posts	Discussing a female candidate's dress and physical appearance.
Personal Life 1 post	Featuring or discussing a female candidate's family and other personal life issues.
Combination of the above 25 posts	Biased in multiple aspects and not specifically targeting one category of bias. This includes posts which downplay a female candidate's credibility by discussing the candidate in the context of male colleagues, discuss her appearance (dress), discuss her behaviour (speech, carries self) or discuss her family (personal life).

Figure 6: Posts about female candidates with biased framing (based on sample of 559 posts)

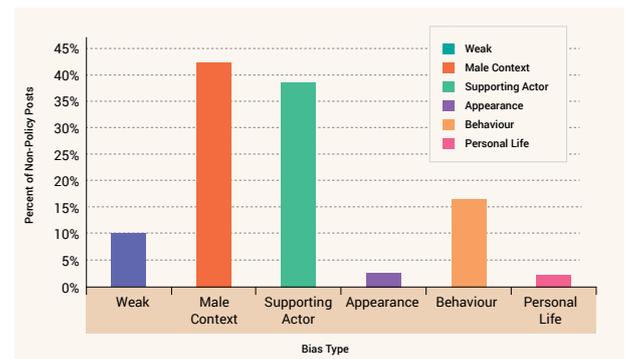


Within these 215 biased posts, the **top key frame put female candidates in the context of male politicians only (Figure 7)**. The second top frame showed female candidates as the supporting actor in a post. This suggests that the female candidate was not always shown as the lead actor in her own political narrative. In terms of biased characteristics, candidate “behaviour” and “weakness” were the top categories observed.

Most posts were labelled with one bias type, but 25

posts were labelled with more than one bias type. The most common bias types observed together were a combination of a “Male Context” and “Weak” (9 posts) and “Male Context” and “Behaviour” (4 posts). This could suggest that female candidates may be directly juxtaposed to their male counterparts to present them in more negative terms.

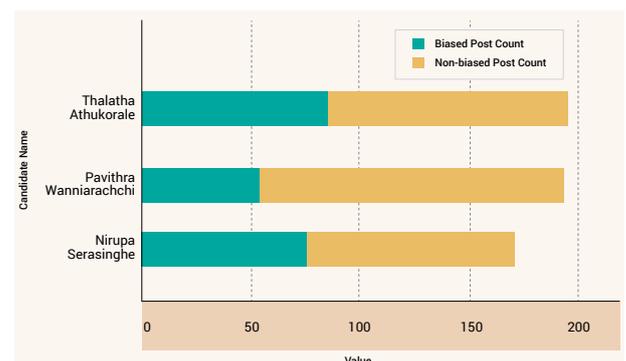
Figure 7: Different bias types as percentage of total biased posts (based on 215 biased posts)



When comparing biased framing of specific candidates, it appears that Athukorale and Serasinghe received the largest proportion of biased posts (Figure 8), both at 44% of sampled posts about them. Wanniarachchi received the fewest number of biased posts. This may be due to her being a well-known politician and playing a prominent role as Health Minister during the covid-19 crisis leading to stories with her as the single focus of a post or article.

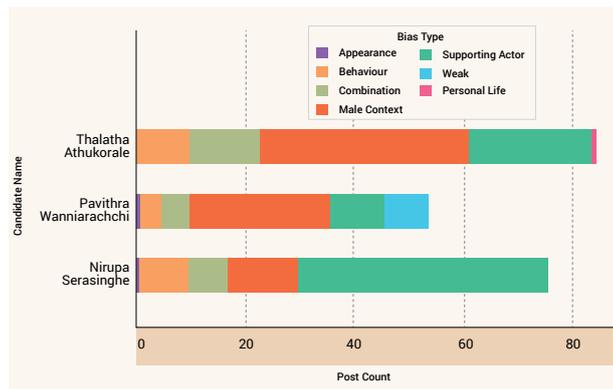
For Athukorale, 44% of posts in the sample were labelled as biased (85 biased, 110 not biased). For Wanniarachchi, 28% of posts in the sample were labelled as biased (54 biased, 139 not biased). For Serasinghe, 44% of posts in the sample were labelled as biased (76 biased, 95 not biased).

Figure 8: Number of posts with biased framing per female candidate (based on sample of 559 posts)



Slight differences in the identified bias types per candidate (Figure 9) were also noticed. For Athukorale and Wanniarachchi, the largest bias types identified were being shown in the context of male politicians. For Serasinghe, being shown as the supporting actor amongst other candidates was the most observed bias type. A number of sampled posts showed Wanniarachchi as weak.

Figure 9: Type of bias per female candidate (based on sample of 559 posts)



3(b) Gender-based discrimination and abuse against female candidates

We identified few posts in our sample with gender-based discrimination and abuse (Figure 10). From the sample of 559 posts, 4% were abusive (24 posts) and 0.5% included gender-based discrimination (3 posts).

Table 3: Coding categories to understand gender-based discrimination and abuse

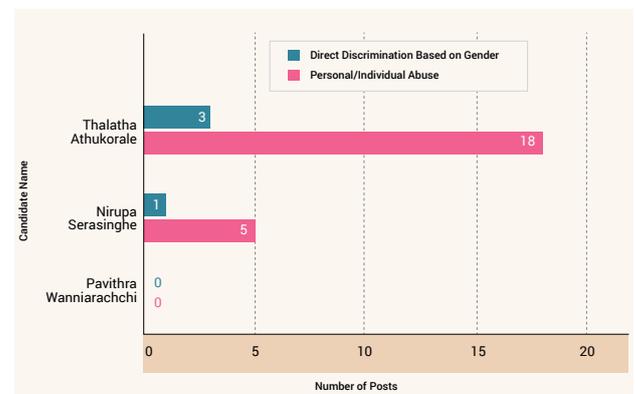
Definitions:	
Gender-based discrimination 3 posts	Posts that discriminate against a female candidate based on their gender and their ability to fulfil the duties of a position.
Abuse 24 posts	Posts explicitly abusing or harassing a candidate on any ground or any post that is defaming the character of a candidate

However, DRI's original sample selection may have been limited to identifying such posts, as we mainly used official candidate names to pull female candidate posts rather than nicknames or derogatory terms used for these candidates. Despite the small number of posts in the sample, it is worth noting that these posts were interacted with by 7,633 people.

Athukorale, contesting for the opposition party, SJB, received more personal abuse and character defamation through posts (19 posts) in comparison to Serasinghe (5 posts) and Wanniarachchi (0 posts). Interestingly, within the manually coded posts, Wanniarachchi did not receive any direct discrimination based on gender or posts explicitly defaming her character.

While coding the sample of posts, DRI observed various abusive user comments towards the female candidates. This current analysis cannot comment on significance and suggests that this could be an area for further research.

Figure 10: Number of abusive and gender-discriminatory posts (based on sample of 559 posts)



3(c) Support for Female Candidates

Despite biased, discriminatory and abusive posts, **most posts in our sample supported the female candidates (Figure 11, see Table 4 for definitions)**. In particular, Serasinghe received an overwhelming proportion (88% or 153 posts) of supporting posts in our sample. Athukorale received the largest proportion (27%) of negative posts (See Figure 12).

Figure 11: Support for female candidates (based on sample of 559 posts)

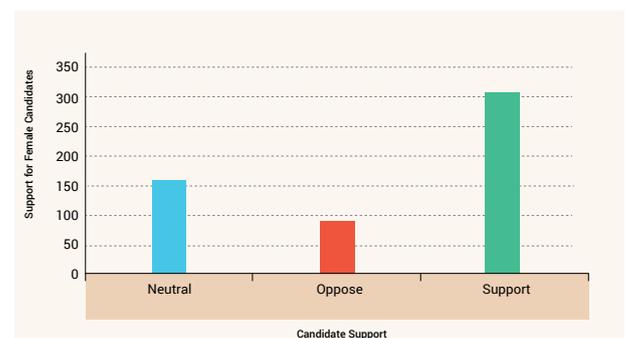


Figure 12: Female candidate support by candidate (based on sample of 559 posts)

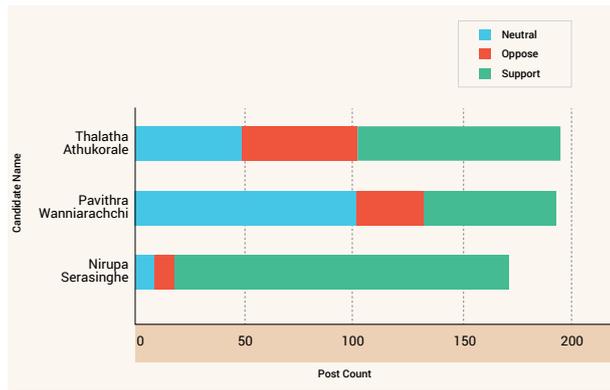


Table 4: Coding categories to understand support for female candidates

Definitions:	
Support 307 posts	Posts promoting a female candidate's campaign, policies, statements.
Neutral 160 posts	Posts expressing an impartial sentiment towards the female candidate.
Oppose 93 posts	Posts demoting a female candidate's campaign, policies, statements.

Key Findings from Section 3:

How were female candidates framed in top social media posts?

- Overall, the posts seem to be quite supportive of the female candidates, but a considerable number of posts (with high levels of user interactions) portrayed the candidate in a potentially biased way.
- In the biased posts, female candidates were often shown in the context of their male colleagues or other candidates, rather than being a key actor in their own political narrative.
- In terms of physical bias framing female candidates, "behaviour" or "weakness" were the most observed in our sample.
- Serasinghe in particular received a large amount of positive coverage online (88% of posts in sample), this is noteworthy because she is the only candidate who has not been elected for government.

VI. CONCLUSION

DRI analysed the level of representation and online coverage female candidates received and whether they were framed in a biased way in Facebook pages and group posts during Sri Lanka's August 2020 parliamentary elections.

One key finding is that male candidates received disproportionately more coverage in Facebook pages and groups than their female counterparts. This was also the case with user engagement: the ratio of likes received on posts about male versus female candidates is approximately 51:1. A reason for these trends could be the high profile and well-established status of the male candidates, one being the prime minister and another the leading opposition figure, in comparison to the female candidates. However, in efforts to narrow the gender-gap and promote more equitable outcomes, one could expect female candidates to receive more attention online than this study has discovered. Given that female candidates were generally much less visible online than male candidates, this points to a greater need for improved online campaign strategies for female politicians.

The topics bringing forth traction for male candidates highlight them as the key actor in their narrative. For female candidates, the topics frame them in the context of male politicians, their parties or other intermediaries. This suggests that male candidates are portrayed as being more of a figure of authority amongst voters and within their respective parties in comparison to female candidates.

Despite the unequal coverage and contrasting narratives, when analysing a subset of posts about female candidates which were manually coded, DRI recognised that the sample posts were mostly supportive of the female candidates and their election campaigns. However, an indicative number of posts presented female candidates in a biased way, including framing them with reference to their behaviour, appearance, personal life, being 'weak' or being portrayed in the context of male politicians. The contrary nature of these findings is interesting because it could suggest that although female candidates are generally positively received online, there is also an

evidently skewed predisposition in how they are being discussed. The implicit bias and abuse female politicians receive online should be further studied and reported on in comparison to the bias and abuse received by male politicians. It would be noteworthy to analyse whether male politicians also faced the same levels of bias and abuse online in comparison to their female counterparts. For example, whether negative portrayals online of male politicians are also about their behaviour, appearance, and family life.

In conclusion, DRI's findings show the under-representation and the potentially biased framing of female candidates in Facebook pages and groups during Sri Lanka's 2020 parliamentary elections. The huge gap between representation of women and men as candidates is reflected in how they are being covered online in Facebook pages and groups. Our findings support the need for steps to be taken to improve the coverage of women in politics online and the need for preventive measures against potentially increasing abuse against women online.

VII. RECOMMENDATIONS

DRI makes the following recommendations for civil society organizations, social media companies, media organizations, and the Sri Lankan government:

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS (CSOs):

Develop capacity for more social media monitoring research in the area of female politicians' representation and perceptions online for evidence building.

Develop and amplify positive narratives about women entering politics using innovative approaches.

In future research, look specifically at social media user-comments rather than posts themselves to understand abuse and gender-based discrimination against female candidates.

For future research in the area of equal media representation and biases, DRI encourages researchers to use a more intersectional approach by including case studies of candidates or politicians from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. Further, DRI also encourages comparisons in potential online bias and abuse between male and female candidates.

Develop and conduct programmes to address and unlearn the implicit biases against women entering politics amongst CSO representatives, media personnel, youth, women groups, political candidates, and other groups.

SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES:

Begin robustly tracking and reporting on flagging requests based on the protected characteristics for sex, gender identity and sexual orientation. Especially in contexts where hate speech and false information targeting protected groups run the risk of creating an unfavourable space or deters them from socio-political engagement.

Provide further data access to researchers. Researchers oftentimes do not have access to data where protected characteristics such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation are being negatively discussed because data aggregated by protected characteristics being negatively discussed is not made available.

MEDIA ORGANISATIONS:

Consider the negative effects of stereotyping women in politics and the implicitly biased post headlines inaccurately framing female politicians, especially when interview videos and articles are distributed online.

SRI LANKAN GOVERNMENT:

Engage with parliamentarians, political parties, civil society, journalists, media personnel, and civil society organisations to develop strategies to show the need for female representation in politics as well as take steps to improve women's political representation offline and online.

VIII. APPENDIX

1. KEYWORDS USED TO EXTRACT SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS FROM CROWDTANGLE

Table 5: Keywords used to extract social media posts from CrowdTangle

Party	Candidate	Keywords (pages)			Keywords (Groups)		
		Sinhala	Tamil	English	Sinhala	Tamil	English
SLPP	Mahinda Rajapaksa	මහින්ද රාජපක්ෂ, මහින්ද රාජපක්ෂ, (මහින්ද) AND (අප්පච්චි, අප්පච්චි අග්‍රාමාත්‍ය. අගමැති)	மகிந்த ராஜபக்ஷ, மகிந்த ராஜபக்ஷ, (மகிந்த) AND (பிரதமர், ராஜபக்ஷே)	mahinda rajapakse, mahinda rajapaksa, (Mahinda, Rajapaksa) AND (prime minister)	"	"	"
	Pavithradevi Wanniarachchi	පවිත්‍රාදේවී, පවිත්‍රාදේවී, සෞඛ්‍ය ඇමතිනි, සෞඛ්‍ය අමාත්‍යතුමිය, පවිත්‍රා චන්තිසාරච්චි, පවිත්රාදේවී	பவித்ராதேவி, பவித்திராதேவி, (பவித்ரா, பவித்திரா) AND (தேவி), பவித்ராதேவி வன்னியராச்சி, பவித்ரா வன்னியராச்சி, (சுகாதார அமைச்சர்) AND (பவித்ராதேவி, பவித்ரா, பவித்திரா)	Pavithradevi Wanniarachchi, (pavithra, pavithradevi) AND (health minister)	"	பவித்ராதேவி, பவித்திராதேவி, பவித்ராதேவி வன்னியராச்சி, பவித்ரா வன்னியராச்சி, (சுகாதார அமைச்சர்) AND (பவித்ராதேவி, பவித்ரா, பவித்திரா)	"
SJB	Sajith Premadasa	සජිත්, සජිත් ප්‍රේමදාස, (සජිත්) AND (ප්‍රධාන, ප්‍රධාන, ඩිරැ ප්‍රධාන, ඩිරැ ප්‍රධාන)	சஜித் பிரேமதாச, சஜித்	sajith premadasa	"	சஜித் பிரேமதாச	"
	Thalatha Athukorale	තලතා අතුකෝරල, තලතා අතුකෝරල, තලතා අතුකෝරල, තලතා අතුකෝරල	தலதா அத்துகோரல, (தலதா) AND (SJB)	thalatha atukorale, thalatha athukorale	"	"	"
NPP	Anura Kumara Dissanayake	අනුර කුමාර දිසානායක, අනුර කුමාර, (අනුර) AND (ලපය, ලප කුමාරයා, රතු අලියා)	அனூர குமார, அனூர குமார திசநாயக	anura kumara dissanayake, anura kumara dissanayaka	"	"	"
	Nirupa Serasinghe	අනුර කුමාර දිසානායක, අනුර කුමාර, (අනුර) AND (ලපය, ලප කුමාරයා, රතු අලියා)	நிருபா சேரசிங்க, நிருபா சேரசிங்க, நிருபா, நிருபா	nirupa serasingha, nirupa serasinghe	"	நிருபா சேரசிங்க, நிருபா சேரசிங்க	"

2. LIST OF SRI LANKAN MAINSTREAM MEDIA OUTLETS

Table 6: List of Sri Lankan mainstream media outlets and corresponding Facebook pages

Mainstream media name	Page Name
Ada Derana Sinhala, Ada Derana	Ada Derana Ada Derana Sinhala Ada Derana LIVE Ada Derana Biz Sinhala Ada Derana 24 Ada Derana Tamil
Newsfirst.lk, NewsFirst	Newsfirst.lk Newsfirst.lk Tamil
Hiru News, Hiru FM, Hiru Gossip	Hiru News Hiru FM Hiru Gossip Hiru TV Hiru News Live Hiru News Sinhala Hiru Live
Neth News, Neth FM, Neth Gossip	Neth FM Neth News Neth Gossip
BBC News සිංහල , BBC News தமிழ்	BBC News සිංහල BBC News தமிழ்
NewsWire	NewsWire
Newshub.lk	Newshub.lk
Lankadeepa - ලංකාදීප	Lankadeepa - ලංකාදීප
Daily Ceylon	Daily Ceylon
Dinamina	Dinamina
Mawbima	Mawbima
Virakesari.lk	Virakesari.lk
Daily News	Daily News
Groundviews	Groundviews
Daily Mirror	Daily Mirror
Ceylon Today	Ceylon Today
Daily FT	FT Sri Lanka
Sunday Observer	Sunday Observer
The Nation	The Nation
Tamil Guardian	Tamil Guardian

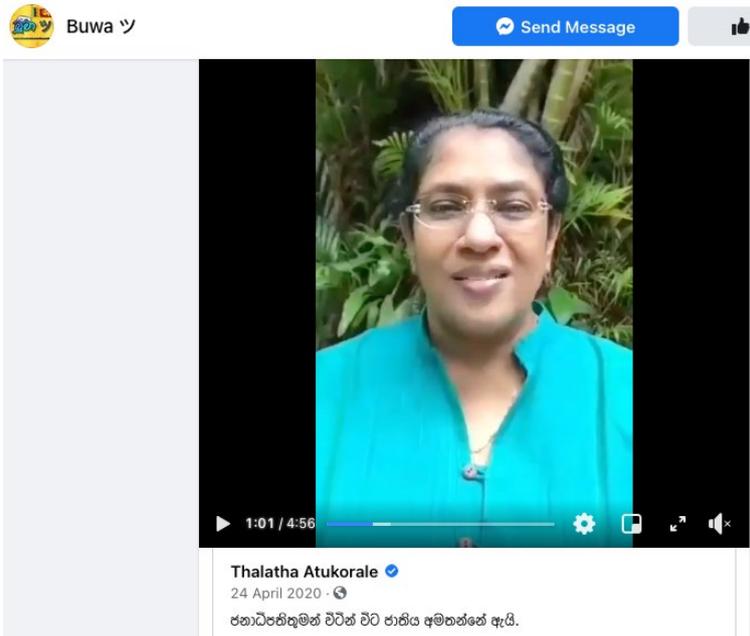
3. CODING CATEGORY DEFINITIONS AND EXAMPLES

Descriptions of coding categories are provided in Tables 2, 3, 4, 7, 8 and 9 of this report.

For more details on coding categories and manual coding, please refer the codebook used for this analysis:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ZzCtv87Fu5C2Ntnk9GpmBhTgNE3tWGBu/view?usp=sharing>

Table 7: Posts with biased framing of female candidates

To understand biased framing of female candidates, DRI manually coded posts for the following categories:	
<p>Weak</p> <p>8 posts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Presenting a female candidate as mentally or physically weak. 	 <p>Thalatha Atukorale ✓ 24 April 2020 · 🌐</p> <p>ජනාධිපතිතුමන් වටින් වටි ජාතිය අමතන්නේ ඇයි.</p> <hr/> <p>Buwa ✓ 25 April 2020 · 🌐</p> <p>බලේ නැතුව පිස්සු වැට්ලා</p> <p>See translation 18</p> <p>Context: Minister Thalatha Athukorale uploaded a video on Facebook criticising the President of addressing the country from time to time, calling him ‘not a real president’ and accusing him of trying to capture media attention during the campaigning period leading up to the election.</p> <p><i>Translation:</i></p> <p>Thalatha Athukorale: “Why is the President addressing the country from time to time?”</p> <p>The page reposting: “She has gone mad without power.”</p>

18 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/buwaSL/posts/2315882238717169>

Context of Male Politician

77 posts

- Featuring or discussing a female candidate in the context of male politicians.



Translation: Prime Minister has gifted a machine to the Ministry of Health.

A PCR machine which identifies the covid-19 virus, and few other viruses have been gifted to the ministry of health by the Prime Minister.

The event of handing over the Machine to the Health Minister Pavithra Wanniarachchi was held at the Prime Minister's residence in Wijerama on 11 March 2020.

President Rajapaksa, Ministers Senaviratne and Chardesna also took part in this event along with the Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa.

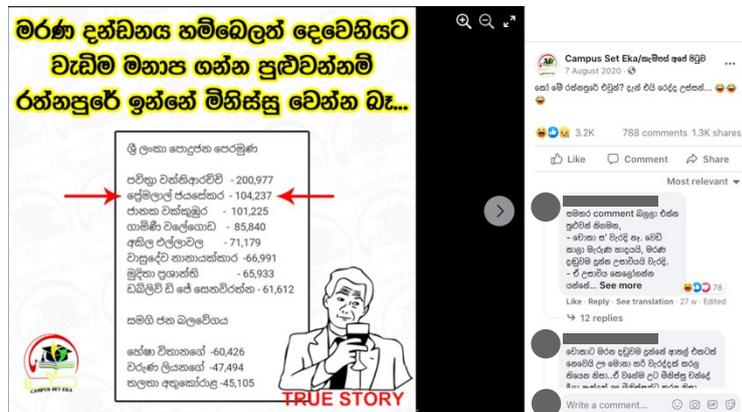
This machine worth 3,000 USD, manufactured in South Korea can identify the virus in a short time.

The specialty of this machine being small in size is that it is portable. This was personally gifted to the Prime Minister.

Supporting Actor

79 posts

- Featuring or discussing the female candidate in the context of other candidates contesting.



Context: The post above has listed Thalatha Athukorale among a list of other candidates who contested along with her.

Behavior

23 posts

- Discussing the way a female candidate speaks or carries herself.

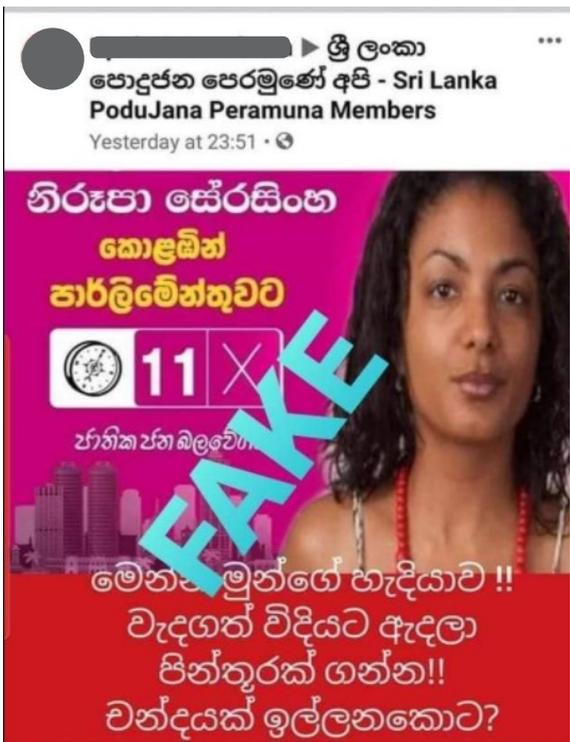


Translation: The “naika” (Sinhala term for a female leader) of the Ratnapura District, Attorney Thalatha Athukorale. The Sri Lankan emblem of civilized politics.

Appearance

2 posts

- Discussing a female candidate’s dress and physical appearance.



Translation of original post discussing appearance: Nirupa Serasinghe for Parliament from Colombo District. This is the behavior of these people. Wear something respectable when contesting in an election.

[Note: a FAKE sign is placed across the post to highlight the appearance and information on the poster being untrue].

20 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/332357824226727/permalink/635228910606282>

21 Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/DRnalinda/posts/3850487888326525>

Personal Life

1 post

- Featuring or discussing a female candidate's family and other personal life issues.

ඡන්දලයා
30 May 2020 · 🌐

අපි.....

ඩී.එස් සේනානායක මහතා මැරුණම ඩඩ්ලි සේනානායක අගමැති කරගත්තා..
බණ්ඩාරනායක මැරුණම තොරගොල්ල වලව්ව බලාකියා ගෙන සිටිපු මෙලෝ
දේශපාලනයක් නොදන්න සිරිමාව උස්සන් ගිහින් අගමැතිම කලා.

විජය මැරිව්ව දුවසේ අත් උස්සලා සත් ය වෙනුවෙන් හඬ නගනවා කියලා සඵත කරපු
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ගාමිණී මැරුණම පසු ශ්‍රීමතී ව උස්සන් ගිහින් ජනාධිපති අපේක්ෂකයා කලා..

ගාමිණී අතුකෝරල මැරුණම තලතා උස්සන් ගිහින් ඇමති කලා..

ලොන්සේකා මහතා ජීරේ ගියාම ගැනිව කරේ නියාගෙන ගියා..

පෙයරාජ් ජරනාන්දපුත්‍රේ මැරුණම වයිර, ඩොක්ට සුදුර්ගනීව උස්සන් ගිහින් ඇමති
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වන්ද්‍ර දායකයෝ වෙව්ව
අපි උඹලගෙ වැරැද්ද.....

See translation

👍👎🔥❤️ 226

7 comments 33 shares

22

Translation:

We...

- Elected Dudley Senanayake, the Prime Minister, following the passing of his father D.S. Senanayake.
- Elected Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who did not know a thing about politics, the Prime Minister following the passing of her husband, Mr. Bandaranaike.
- Elected Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga the President, after she swore, she would find the truth behind her husband's murder on the same day he was killed.
- Made Srimala Dias a presidential candidate, following the passing of her husband, Gamini Diasanayake.
- Elected Thalatha Athukorale a Minister, following the passing of her brother, Gamini Athukorale.
- Treated Anoma Fonseka with immense respect after the imprisonment of her husband, Sarath Fonseka.
- Elected Sudarshani Fernandopulle a Minister, after the passing of her husband, Jeyaraj Fernandopulle.

It's our fault as voters and not theirs, for electing them into places of power.

Combination of the above

25 posts

- Biased in multiple aspects and not specifically targeting one category of bias.



Context: This post is a combination of biases by portraying Thalatha Athukorale as weak by having a kid in the meme challenge her, and also discussing her in the context of a male candidate.

Text on the bottom left: 'Puthano', referring to Sajith Premadasa, who heard Thalatha Athukorale say this, and who also addressed the nation even before the presidential election was held:

Translation: "The president addressed the nation twice this month. Do real presidents do that? He is going to be a joke if he tries to do media shows." – Thalatha Athukorale.

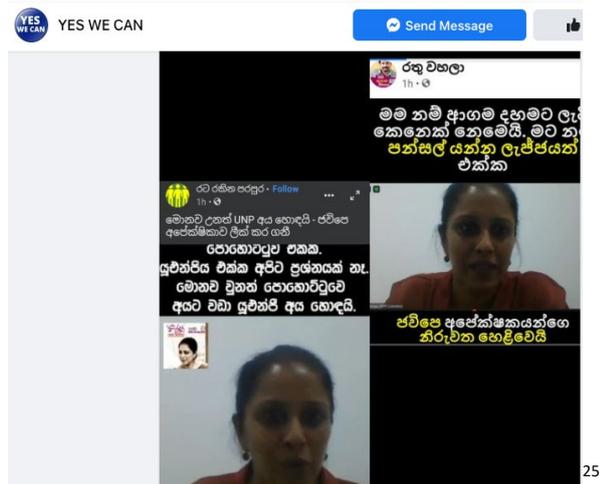
Kid in meme (as Sajith, in speech bubbles): "Dear beloved, listen, please kill me instantly".

23 Available at: https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=156554112495133&id=104611064356105

Abuse

24 posts

- Posts explicitly abusing or harassing a candidate on any ground or any post that is defaming the character of a candidate



Context: The original post is by an unknown party that interviewed candidate Nirupa Serasinghe on Zoom. The unknown person has edited out crucial information shared during the meeting and has posted Nirupa's answers to the questions in a very misleading and defaming manner. Nirupa Serasinghe had then taken screenshots of these misleading answers and posted on Facebook, defending herself and calling out the interviewer who publicized inaccurate information about her.

Translation: "We don't have any issues with SLPP or the United National Party. No matter what, UNP candidates are better than SLPP candidates."

"I am not a person who loves religion. I even feel ashamed to go to the temple."

Note: The above statements are inaccurate and misleading answers to the questions that were posed to Nirupa's interview, she goes onto justify what she actually said at the interview.

Oppose

93 posts

- Posts demoting a female candidate's campaign, policies, statements.

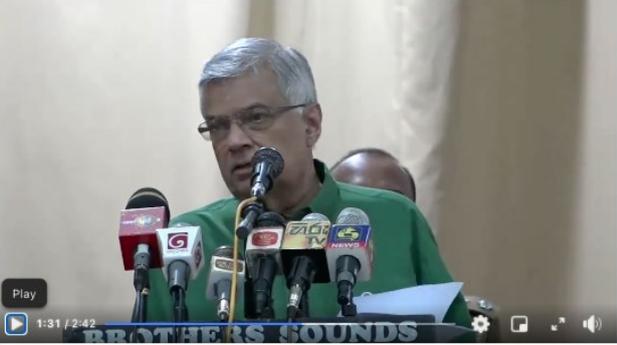
Ranil Wickremesinghe •
17 July 2020 ·

කොරෝනා මර්ධනය සඳහා ලැබුණ විදේශ ආධාර වැන අනෙකුත් මහජන සහ සෞඛ්‍ය ඇමතිවරුන්ගේ ඉදිරිපත් කරන්නේ සම්පූර්ණයෙන්ම සරස්වර විරෝධී ජර්නාල දෙකකි. සැබැවින්ම ඒ ආධාර වලට පිළිවිදි දෙය පුරවැසියන්ට කෙලි කල යුතුයි.

කොරෝනා ඉවැරදිවීම් සිදුකරන ලද්දේ කොරෝනා ඉවැරදිවීම් නීති ඉවැරදිවීම් පිරිසිදු කිරීමට පමණක් නොවේ. පවිත්‍ර මානව හිතවතුන්ගේ මුහුණට පත්වීම් සිදුකරන ලද්දේ ඉවැරදිවීම් නීති ඉවැරදිවීම් පිරිසිදු කිරීමට පමණක් නොවේ. ඉවැරදිවීම් නීති ඉවැරදිවීම් පිරිසිදු කිරීමට පමණක් නොවේ.

Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapaksa and Health Minister Pavithra have made two completely contradictory statements regarding foreign aid received for the control of the Coronavirus. What is it that really happened to this aid? This should be revealed to the citizens.

See translation



1:31 / 2:42

456 122 comments 120 shares 28

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