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Broken Pathways to Politics: Clearing a Path from Grassroots to Representative Politics

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to explain why so few women make the journey from social activism and community work to standing for election. Comparative research in Indonesia and Sri Lanka reveals four operations critical to mending the broken pathway to politics for non-elite women. *Transference* entails the recognition and valuing of women's preexisting skills, knowledge and experiences gained through grassroots activity for the political field. *Amplification* is required of women's symbolic capital so that it impresses upon a larger public. Women's political constituency and social networks need to be *extended* to be commensurate with electoral boundaries and campaign needs, and to *extend* limited financial resources. Women's sense of self (who they are and desire to be) needs to fit the ethical terrain and "feel" of the political field, requiring an operation of *translation*. This analytical heuristic can help identify strategies to mend the broken pathway from grassroots to representative politics.

KEYWORDS

Pathways to politics; women in politics; comparative research; Indonesia; Sri Lanka; grassroots activism

Introduction

Women are underrepresented in elected office globally. Where women hold seats, they are often from an elite background, with low socioeconomic and minority women less able to contest or win elections. At the same time, women from diverse backgrounds are highly active in grassroots social and political activities outside of party politics, and are more likely to volunteer their time in community welfare (Tadros 2014). Our research seeks to answer why women who would make viable political candidates and "good" elected representatives do not build upon their "political apprenticeship" (Cornwall and Marie Goetz 2005) in grassroots activities to enter the formal political arena. Other approaches to this question have focused on the barriers to election (Iwanaga 2008), or the pathways of women who have successfully forged a political career (Choi 2019; Dewi 2015; Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019). We take a middle route, interrogating the *broken* pathway from grassroots social and political activity to formally standing as a candidate. In doing so, we identify strategies to remodel political careers at the grassroots to increase the possibility that they become a route to election.

Our methodological innovation is to first understand the pathways of women who have successfully entered politics, then compare these with the experiences of "good" women candidates (explained below) who have not stood for election. We interrogate the gap between what women have (by way of resources, skills, experience, and so on), and what they felt they needed before considering becoming a candidate. We follow Tadros (2014, 10) in the ambition, of not "negating the experiences of women

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and commencing with them as if they are politically ignorant . . . [but rather] help[ing] them draw creatively on their existing experiences and resources gained in the informal arena to support their performance in formal politics.” This strength-based approach focuses less on overcoming deficiencies, constraints and barriers, and more so on how women can draw upon skills, resources and motivations to enter politics. Research was conducted in Sri Lanka and North Sumatera, Indonesia. Comparative analysis enabled us to identify commonalities and differences in the broken pathway to politics for social and politically active women.

This article presents an analytical framework to understand why so few “good” women step forward as candidates. We identify four categories of preconditions needed in order to run: the qualities of the candidates (skills, knowledges, experiences); infrastructure (political constituency, social network, and economic capital); the impression of a candidate among voters (her reputation and ability to stand out); and a sense of self as elected representative (motivation, and “fit” with political culture). Despite these preconditions being present either in part of or in full from women’s grassroots activities, women require four operations to make them appropriate and sufficient in the political field. Candidates need to *transfer* their qualities to the political field; that is, be recognized and valued. Infrastructure needs to *extend* to be sufficient and correspondent with electoral boundaries. The impression that one makes with constituents needs to be *amplified* so that it is forceful in a noisy political field. Finally, one’s sense of self needs to *translate* into the political culture or forge shifts in that culture to better accommodate women’s identities. These operations of transference, extension, amplification, and translation are useful heuristics to better understand broken pathways to politics, and to ultimately identify strategies to enable more women to journey from grassroots social action to politics.

We first outline the contribution our research makes to the literature on women’s political underrepresentation through a methodological focus on broken pathways. We then provide an overview of our methods, the political contexts of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, and our theoretical starting point. The main body explains each of the four elements of our analytical framework in reference to the empirical material. The final section outlines the implications of our findings for governments, feminist organizations, and development agencies working to increase the political representation of women.

Broken pathways to politics as an object of study

Our study aims to cut a middle path between two broad approaches to studying women’s political representation. The first, 1993) “staged supply and demand model of political recruitment,” has been used to identify whether women’s underrepresentation is due to “supply factors”—that is, a lack of suitable aspirants stepping forward for party nomination – or “demand factors”—the failure of the selectorate (party selectors and electorate) to nominate women candidates, or voters to elect them. Women’s political ambition is *frustrated* by discrimination and prejudices within party systems and the voting public (Bjarnegård 2013). Women’s political ambition is *circumscribed* by time-pressures, familial responsibilities, social norms pertaining to women’s roles, a lack of confidence, and unavailability of resources, among others (Iwanaga 2008; Prihatini 2019a). A belief that one will not be selected as a candidate or win an election curbs political ambition, and hence supply and demand factors are inextricably connected (Lovenduski 2016).

Our study is most concerned with the lack of women stepping forward to be candidates (supply factors). A growing body of work examines “candidate emergence” to try to understand the persistent gender participation gap in electoral politics. Studies have highlighted the smaller number of women in “pipeline” activities relative to men (Goyal 2020; Thomsen and King 2020), the conditions that drive women’s lower levels of political ambition (Bernhard, Shames, and Langan Teele 2021; Fox and Lawless 2005), and the incongruence of women’s goals with their perceptions of a political career (Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016). Our study is in conversation with this literature, finding many parallels, yet we also aim to overcome two limitations. First, much of this research has been conducted in Euro-American political contexts (and often based on the circumstances of white

women), with particular factors less relevant to other regions or communities (Bernhard, Shames, and Teele 2021; Dowe 2022; Goyal 2020; Piscopo and Kenny 2020). For example, identifying a single set of pipeline activities is not as useful in Indonesia and Sri Lanka where women and men have different routes to politics (see also Goyal 2020), while the feminized pipeline of community and social activism has attracted less attention in the literature despite its importance in the global South (Tadros 2014). The focus on party selection in supply and demand models also tells only a partial story in non-cadre-based party systems such as Indonesia, where the volume of parties increases opportunities for nomination, or in countries such as Sri Lanka, where political turmoil has specific implications for women's representation. Our argument is not for more case studies outside Euro-America to understand localized contexts, but rather for the possibility of extending our analytical frames by theorizing from the majority world.

The second limitation is a focus on specific variables without a broader view of the constellation of circumstances that makes political participation (im)possible or (un)desirable for differently positioned women. "Ambition" parsed from the broader preconditions required to be a credible candidate does not capture how women continually redefine their ideas of who they can or want to become within shifting life-circumstances and a dynamic socio-cultural context. An example of the importance of the latter is Deo's (2012) analysis of historical cooption of India's feminist movements by international development agencies, resulting in NGO-ization of women's groups and their withdrawal from electoral participation (though see Roy 2015 for more contemporary readings). The long-term consequences of these trends are also evident in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka, where community development has often trumped politics as an outlet for socially oriented activity for women. A focus on the barriers women face in electoral politics within a static account of their life and the socio-cultural context, overlooks women's agency in developing and taking advantage of the conditions of political possibility (Spark and Corbett 2018).

In contrast, a pathways approach to research on women's political representation identifies lessons from the experiences of women who have been successfully elected (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019) and is the second approach we build upon. A pathways approach is a methodological choice (Hawkesworth 2012) that starts by identifying strengths and opportunities from in-depth qualitative research of women's journeys into politics, often deploying a life-history methodology. Accounts of pathways to election have provided insights into how a wider pool of women pursue a political career. While some studies do not go beyond the journeys of "elite" women (Dewi 2015), others examine how women from different backgrounds successfully negotiate gender and class-based adversities (Choi 2019; Haritas 2008). The value of these studies is not only in identifying barriers and strategies to overcome them (Haritas 2008), but also in illuminating qualitative differences in women's pathways to election and the types of representatives they become (Choi 2019). When aggregated, individual narratives can reveal broader structural conditions that impede or advance women's representation (Burns 2007). For example, (2019) analysis of the pathways of senior women leaders in the Pacific reveals the practices of accruing, converting and redeploying political capital to win elections. Such analytical tools can provide insights as to how development agencies can encourage and assist other women to take a similar path.

We focus on the pathways to politics for women from non-elite backgrounds. Following Cornwall and Marie Goetz (2005, 784), we examine women's political apprenticeship, "the routes via which representatives enter and engage in political activity." For many women, political apprenticeship occurs in nonparty settings, including civil society organizations, feminist activism, community welfare groups, and so on; these routes influence their effectiveness as advocates for women's rights once in parliament (Cornwall and Marie Goetz 2005). Using a model of political apprenticeship, Tadros's (2014) excellent edited collection privileges women's political experience and capacities in their pathways into politics. As women are already highly active, the core aim is not to overcome deficiencies, but rather to identify how women can transform their already "informal repertoires of power into formal political leadership?" (Piscopo 2019; Tadros 2014, 1; see also Piscopo 2019). Tadros's (2014, 36–37) argues that the key question to ask is, "What is locally needed to enable

women who are engaging politically to increase their influence and outreach at different junctures in their pathways?” We contribute by identifying what is needed to help women build upon their grassroots political and social activity to enter representative politics.

Where we differ from a pathways approach is to focus not only on successful routes to representative politics, but also the experiences of the larger number of women who either do not pursue, or are unable to continue the journey to formal political leadership. Our approach has much in common with Spark and Corbett’s (2018) study of emerging female leaders in Melanesia. They too sought to understand why women who are archetypal candidates choose not to contest elections. Where our study differs is that for many of the women we interviewed, they did not so much *make a choice* not to enter politics; rather they reached a point when this decision was foreclosed as they did not have in place what they needed to become a credible candidate with a chance at success. In identifying the broader preconditions needed to move between grassroots and representative politics, we reveal the difficulties women face in traversing the two. We seek to understand not only the political apprenticeship that elected representatives undertake, but also identify why long periods of time spent accumulating the skills, knowledges, experiences, and resources necessary to become an effective elected representative are insufficient to become a credible candidate in the eyes of the selectorate and/or candidates themselves. Our focus is not on identifying barriers, nor opportunities. Rather our contribution is the identification of a common set of operations required to transform the circumstances of women active at the grassroots into the preconditions necessary to contest elections.

Comparative research for mid-level theory

We developed our analytical model through comparative research in Indonesia and Sri Lanka: two countries with a significant number of women highly active at the grassroots, yet with stark female political underrepresentation. We wanted to see whether the reasons “good” women candidates did not contest elections were the same in each country, and what we could learn from comparison. A “good” candidate refers to a woman who is in touch and responsive to “ordinary” citizens, driven by motivations to serve, and effective as a representative. We use a normative category as the aim of our project is to increase the representation of non-elite women and the quality of representation. A “good” candidate must also, however, have a credible chance of being elected. We use White and Aspinall’s (2019, 3) definition of a “good woman candidate” “to refer to candidates who have political experience . . . , and/or who have a strong base of community support through leadership in organizations of various sorts, and who are motivated to serve their communities through political participation.” We build upon White and Aspinall’s study by examining not only why good women candidates do not win, but also, why they do not enter the race.

In recognition of the problem of women’s underrepresentation, the Government of Indonesia has passed laws that demands that every third position on a party’s ballot paper needs to be a woman. The effect has been positive, but has not achieved the impact desired by feminist advocates. Women are consistently placed in positions three, six, nine, and so on, from which it is harder to get elected (Prihatini 2019a), and are often nominated solely in order to open more positions to men. Indonesian female parliamentarians continue to be disproportionately “elite,” that is, rich, with familial connections or celebrity status. Of the 118 women legislators elected in 2019, 44% had dynastic connections (Wardani and Singka Subekti 2021), with some claiming that quotas had exacerbated the tendency to nominate well-known women rather than good women candidates. In general, the quota’s guarantee that 30% of candidates be women has not significantly lifted the percentage of women voted into legislatures in Indonesia, nor achieved substantive representation through a more diverse politician cohort (Prihatini 2019b). The percentage of women elected into the National Parliament (DPR) increased only marginally from 17.3% in 2014 to 20.5% in 2019.

Only 5.38% of Members of Sri Lanka’s Parliament are women as of the 2019 election, significantly lower than other countries in South Asia (IPU 2022). Such poor performance is despite allowing women to stand for elections as early as 1932, and having the world’s first elected female Prime

Minister (Sirimavo Bandaranaike) in 1960. Female leaders have mostly, however, followed the South Asian phenomenon of widows, wives, and daughters coming into politics “over the dead bodies” of their deceased male relatives (Jayawardena and Kodikara 2003), although the limits to this framing have been contested in recent times (Vijayarasa 2022). Of the 12 women parliamentarians currently in office, seven women marked their entry to parliament with the demise of a male relative (Hannan 2021). In a partial effort to address the low presence of women in politics, Sri Lanka introduced a quota for women at the local government level (legislative amendments in 2012, 2016, and 2017). Quotas increased the percentage of women elected at the local level from 1.9 in 2016 to 29% in 2020 (Vijayarasa 2020). Whether experience at the local level provides opportunities at higher level of governments is still to be seen.

Research was undertaken between October 2020 and June 2021, and was, at various points, refined due to Covid-19. Our descriptive findings from Indonesia are limited to North Sumatera, whereas research took place in 14 out of 25 districts in Sri Lanka. In stage one, we interviewed women who are, or had previously served as, members of legislatures. In Indonesia, we interviewed seven current female members of the Local People’s Representative Council (DPRD) at the city and regency level (Medan and North Sumatera, respectively). In Sri Lanka, we interviewed seven current or former elected representatives at the local, provincial, and national level. Women were identified from publicly available lists and contacted via e-mail and/or telephone to explain the research. If they were interested, a participant information sheet was sent prior to the interview itself that took place via Zoom or in-person based on their preference. We invited the women to talk about their life-history up to the point they ran for election and their experiences on being elected. From these interviews, we were able to pinpoint key moments and circumstances in their life that facilitated their pathway into politics, while also identifying pipeline activities. We enquired into the meanings and beliefs the women held in relation to gendered social roles, the nature of representative politics and how it differed from other forms of social activity or political activism.

In stage two, we interviewed female leaders of various organizations with strong connections to the community and a record of social and political activity but who had never contested an election. These qualities had been identified as pipeline activities for women in stage one. We looked for characteristics and experiences that resembled those of the women who had been elected, contextualized for each location. In North Sumatera, these included: campaigning for others, a history of youth/student activism, and involvement in women’s political associations and/or community development, and/or religious/ethnic associations. In Sri Lanka, women were identified based on the number of years of experience they had working as community-level activists or social workers, having financial backing from personal and family sources, being well networked, and demonstrating leadership in their current roles. In North Sumatera, we recruited nine participants from Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, Parmalim (ethnic based religion), and Hindu organizations, plus the heads of non-government organizations (NGOs) or other community-based organizations. We identified suitable participants from the team’s extensive personal networks (each of the Medan-based authors are themselves engaged in community work and activism), seeking verification of their track record through media and personal engagement before deciding they would make a “good candidate.” In Sri Lanka, we recruited six participants representing Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim, Up-country Tamil and Burgher ethnic groups, and all major religions in the country: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. These women are well-known public figures and activists in their communities, with some working toward increasing women’s representation in politics. We asked respondents to discuss their lives up to that moment, seeking to identify where their paths deviated from one in which a political career remained viable. We also sought their reasons as to why they have not chosen to contest elections, and what would have to be different in order for them to have done so. As with stage one, interviews lasted between 30 and 120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed with the consent of the interviewee and, where relevant, translated into English.

After the interviews, we held one of two team analysis workshops. Due to travel restrictions, these were held online. The June 2021 workshop benefited from “findings” templates completed by each

country team and then read by all investigators. At the workshop, teams presented these findings verbally (and by powerpoint), which we collectively unpacked to arrive at key themes to be explored in the next stage of research: focus group discussions (FGDs) of between three and ten participants. Pipeline activities (identified in interviews) informed our recruitment of participants. In North Sumatera, we conducted five FGDs with student activists, leaders of non-Muslim religious organizations, leaders of Muslim prayer groups, leaders of NGOs or community organizations, and party cadre. With the exception of the latter, all FGDs were women only. In Sri Lanka, we conducted six female only FGDs with community activists, local NGO representatives, women in office, former local representatives, and former female youth parliamentarians. Participants were recruited through our networks and snowball methods. As a consequence of restrictions on in-person gatherings, all FGDs were held online using Zoom. Through interviews we generated in-depth, rich data on women's pathways to politics, capturing how the respondents perceive their social worlds, their sense of self within these social worlds, and the opportunities afforded within them. The FGDs allowed us to fine tune our understanding of these shared social worlds and test the validity of themes that emerged in interviews.

The framework presented here was developed and refined in the second team workshop held in October 2021. Comparing the findings from an empirically solid base in both countries allowed us to identify affinities in women's broken pathway to politics in both countries. Reading across the empirical findings and based on discussions in the first workshop, the lead author developed abstract categories that could travel across both contexts (Bjarnegård and Kenny 2016). These were discussed, elaborated, tested for relevance, and refined in the second workshop. Translating these into the different languages of our field-sites (English, Indonesian, Sinhalese, and Tamil) further helped to flesh out the nuances and arrive at "operations" that were valid across countries and, most importantly, invited reconsideration of the empirical material to arrive at fresh insights (Yengoyan 2006). We sought to re-localize these operations in the final research stage: research driven dialogs (see Mauksch and Rao 2014), although to date we have been unable to complete these in the Sri Lankan context. In Indonesia, we presented the analytical framework to research-end users (political parties, women's organizations, women's caucus) and engaged them in a process of sense-making for what it means for their practice. Here the abstract categories get new life as heuristics for thinking about concrete problems within particular structural and institutional conditions.¹

Comparison was important in two ways. First, comparison reveals patterns of women's participation and exclusion across contexts, while also discerning what are national and local factors (Hawkesworth 2012). The insights from one country shed light on the conditions in another, inviting us to see things we had otherwise overlooked, or to appreciate the singularity of observations. Second, comparison is useful for the development of mid-range theory. Comparing our data helped us to go beyond the particularities of each case study to reveal operations central to, or frustrated in, the move from grassroots to representative politics in both national contexts, albeit with different localized expressions in each (van der Veer 2016). By comparing Sri Lanka and Indonesia, we also contribute to correcting the geographical imbalance of theory development that is overwhelmingly conducted in and about Euro-America, then applied to the "rest" of the world (Liu 2018; Teele 2019). In particular, we contribute qualitative comparative work in order to build concepts and frameworks from a non-Euro-American viewpoint (Tremblay 2007).

Our research is qualitative and exploratory. Our aim is to develop an analytical framework that captures the relatively hidden practices and processes that aid or hinder a pathway to politics, to be further tested and refined. The utility of our approach is to provide a set of heuristic tools that can be modified and applied across political contexts. We next outline the four operations required for women to transform a political apprenticeship at the grassroots into a political career, and how these are related to a particular set of preconditions required to contest elections.

Transference: qualities of a candidate

Running for election and being an effective representative requires relevant knowledges and skills. Capacity building is hence one of the most common practical initiatives to equip women to contest and win elections. Despite appreciation of training by some women aspirants, questions remain as to the appropriateness of an approach based solely on identifying and overcoming deficiencies in women, rather than transforming the political systems that lock them out from opportunities (Piscopo and Kenny 2020). In contrast, a strength-based model identifies how women's existing skills and knowledges can be utilized within the political field (Tadros 2014). This section outlines the personal qualities candidates must have to be a good, credible candidate as identified by the study participants. The women did not suffer from knowledge or skill gaps, but rather were frustrated that what they had was unrecognized or undervalued in the political field. *Transference* describes the operation required to convey (make them count) women's skills, knowledges, and experiences gained in grassroots social and political activity to formal politics.

The kinds of qualities required by candidates were similar in Sri Lanka and Indonesia. Leadership skills were mentioned most often, and included decision-making, mobilizing people, problem solving, and public-speaking. Women had acquired knowledge on social issues, laws, and political structures from their social activism, and learnt project implementation and management of finances from organizing community welfare initiatives. Less tangible skills included the ability to connect with a wide range of people, from informal workers to high-ranking officials. Women had enjoyed multiple opportunities to acquire these skills and knowledges, including participation in village level committees, sector-based societies, women's rural development societies, and youth clubs in Sri Lanka, and religious and ethnic organizations and some political parties in Indonesia. Student and youth politics were also an important site of early learning in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka, providing skills and confidence in debating, networking, interacting with senior leaders, and community mobilization. The women in our study were hence confident that they had the skills, experience, and knowledge to enter politics; they had undertaken a political apprenticeship – in some cases lasting decades.

The problem is not a deficiency on the part of the women, but a lack of recognition of the diversity and quality of what they bring to the table. Political parties seem (perhaps willfully) ignorant of the qualities that women bring from their decades of community-based social work and activism. Devika and Thambi (2012) describe a “hierarchy of political activisms,” the political activity of women at the grassroots is devalued on account of it being both feminine and local. According to women activists in Sri Lanka, political knowledge, leadership skills, and experience count for little when nominations are handed out. Party elites turn down nominations for excellent women leaders in favor of installing close family members and allies. According to one woman, parties “keep women as foot-soldiers instead of giving them leadership roles or decision-making roles” (Sri Lanka FGD1).² In Indonesia, young women are overlooked for leadership positions in student politics, despite their equal ability to debate, mobilize and articulate their positions, deterring them from pursuing a political path. Parties complain about the absence of suitable women to fill quotas on party tickets, yet women complain that their considerable skills, knowledge, and experience mean nothing to party elites.

Where there is arguably a skills gap is the ability to navigate party systems to demand recognition and reward. As female activist Annisa³ (Indonesia) said: “In the future, if we are to be recruited by parties as candidates, we must be brave and bargain with them We should not just be included as a number.” She is referring to the practice of parties to place women far down on the ballot paper, where they have no credible chance of winning, yet contribute their networks, labor, and skills to the overall campaign effort. This is also experienced by women in Sri Lanka who, after contributing their efforts toward campaigning for the party, find that their names have been pushed to the bottom of the list. At times, women with demonstrable skills are sidelined for women with less visible skills but who are seemingly more manipulatable. The very skills that some women demonstrate at times intimidate (mostly male) political elites who suppress rather than value these skillsets. To be upwardly mobile in

political terms, the skills women need are those that ensure that the political apprenticeship served in grassroots politics has relevance and value in the upper echelons of party politics.

Operations of transference are the ways skills, knowledges, and experiences acquired through grassroots activity retain their value when transferred to formal politics. The implication is that capacity building in a generic sense is less important than helping women to receive the recognition and reward for what they already know and do. There are two elements. The first is convincing party elites of the value of their skills, knowledges, and experiences acquired through grassroots activism. The second is to upskill women to negotiate with party elites to reward women for the contributions they make by, for example, denying parties their labor or name unless it comes with real political opportunities. Capacity building that starts with preconceived notions of skill and knowledge gaps will be less effective than helping women to get the recognition and reward for what they already know and do.

Political capital/'impression:' amplification

Our respondents had devoted significant time in accruing symbolic capital, yet were unable to make a strong enough impression to be successful. Here we explore the need for women candidates to amplify their political capital. We do this acknowledging that it is primarily political parties who do not see the value of women's skills, knowledge and experiences. In contrast, voters are concerned with the *impression* of a candidate. We understand this quality as a form of political capital in the sense used by Spark, Cox, and Corbett (2019): that is, forms of social and cultural capital recognized and valued in a particular social field, in this case, the political field. Spark, Cox, and Corbett's (2019) innovative frame to understand women's pathways to politics in the Pacific reveals how women accrue, convert, and deploy various forms of capital, including less tangible capital associated with moral standing, family name, education, and cultural competence among others. This symbolic capital can be used to overcome deficiencies in other forms of capital, notably economic capital. We build upon Spark, Cox, and Corbett (2019) by considering how women accrue, deploy, and convert symbolic capital into political capital. Through our attention on women who have not successfully navigated the political field, we identify an operation required for this strategy: amplification.

An important source of symbolic capital in (2019) study is family connections. Familial name can provide political legitimacy and legacy advantage for women in politics (Baker and Palmieri 2021; Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019). A political pedigree seems particularly important for women (and men) in Sri Lanka. Respondents noted how the political legacy of a (deceased) father, husband, or brother lends women from these families a background to enter politics: background being shorthand for the name, wealth, and connections such a legacy brings. Family, and clan, are also important in North Sumatran politics for providing a base for voter support and a network of campaigners. Women from large clans were regularly tapped on the shoulder by parties to run on their ticket in recognition of the political capital of their name, yet they too faced challenges. Nova has twice turned down offers to contest the election as her family connections do not coincide with electoral boundaries: "There are five thousand members, but these five thousand are in three regencies, so we cannot get a single seat." She continued that without a concentration of family members in one seat, she would require a lot of money instead.

While familial name and the legacy advantage may enable a small number of (mostly elite) women to succeed in politics, the bigger question for our study participants was how to overcome the disadvantage of not having such capital. The barriers can seem overwhelming. As one woman in Sri Lanka said, it is "difficult to find a woman who has entered politics out of her own interest and after working in the community" (Sri Lanka FGD3). The culture still exists in villages that women get into politics on the corpses of their husbands. In Indonesia, the percentage of women from dynastic backgrounds increased between 2014 and 2019 (Wardani and Singka Subekti 2021). The majority of women in our study did not come from dynastic backgrounds, and hence needed to cultivate other forms of symbolic capital.

An alternative in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka is the symbolic capital of moral standing. Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck (2006) show how moral capital was a core asset enabling women to break the glass ceiling to the top echelons of political power in four countries in Asia, although all four women also benefited from a legacy advantage. Nonetheless, moral standing is the most easily accrued “resource to mobilize for political goals, activities or support” (Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck 2006, 246). The women in our study displayed humility, honesty, community spirit, and service orientation. Being able to “go down”—that is, be humble in front of and communicate effectively with ordinary people – is an important part of the moral capital of women from the grassroots, and is contrasted with elite politicians – both men and women – who may lack a local perspective. Hence, this form of symbolic capital is different from that accrued and deployed by elite women (Derichs, Fleschenberg, and Hüstebeck 2006; Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019), in that it is based not only on their gender, but also their socio-economic positioning, or at least, relatability. That is, moral standing may be easier to demonstrate legitimately for women from and active at the grassroots, whereas elite women arguably struggle to show community connectedness in a legitimate way.⁴

There are two challenges to a political strategy that overly relies on moral capital. The first is the time required to accrue it. As Spark, Cox, and Corbett (2019) note, associated practices such as door-to-door interactions with voters, and building a record of social work over a long period are time-consuming. In Indonesia and Sri Lanka, gendered norms require women to be more responsive to community demands than men, and hence, time expectations are greater. Berlian from Indonesia said that when women “visit someone sick, we will not hesitate to hug her and tell her; ‘I’ll buy you some food.’ It is different with men. ‘Say hello, goodbye,’ coffee shop, then it is done.” Extending such social service and care over larger areas, such that it covers a political constituency, is a significant time burden and often one women have to negotiate with their families. While this challenge was less relevant to the women in our study (selected for their record of social and political activity), not having time to build a record of community work, much less enter politics, is a significant impediment to women’s political representation.

The second, and more acute challenge for women in our study is the inaudibility of women’s symbolic capital in a noisy political field. In other words, while women may engage in social activities that demonstrate their moral standing, few people know, and hence it does not accrue as capital. Women in Sri Lanka were quick to point out the potential role of the media in amplifying their work, in contrast to the largely negative role the media currently plays. The media is quick to publicize women’s faults and outward appearances but rarely promotes grassroots level women’s activism nor women’s leadership, such coverage requiring money that few grassroots women are willing to spend on their own promotion. Women who became candidates had trouble attracting high-value media opportunities, such as television and newspapers, and received significant gender-based abuse on social media. More important for our purposes are the large number of women who undertake significant grassroots work, yet remain poorly known in their constituency. The media has an as yet unrealized role in helping women to extend their constituency (the positive impression she has in the electorate) by promoting their social activities.

Women’s symbolic capital also gets “drowned out” in a moral terrain with competing claims. While symbolic capital is mostly thought to accrue from positive moral dispositions, negative moral persuasions – to be tough, commanding, ruthless – can be politically advantageous when exhibited by men (Piliavsky and Sbriccoli 2016). “Thuggery” can be useful for non-elite men to show that they can get things done through whatever means necessary. Violence and bullying were particularly prevalent in Sri Lanka, where women claimed men were selected as candidates on account of “muscle.” Women not only have to compete with these forms of symbolic capital, they also suffer from the violence unleashed by it. Women politicians regularly had to put up with intimidation, mudslinging, and physical assaults. These are not only an affront to her own moral standing, it also threatens it: “Even if a woman is physically assaulted for some reason, people say that. . . she must have done something wrong and that is why she has been attacked like this . . . the good things done by these women are not highlighted” (Sri Lanka FGD2). Hence, while women can accrue (certain forms of) symbolic capital, it

is not a durable resource. It can be diminished or its value diluted in the broader moral terrain of the political field.

Symbolic capital is a resource that the women in our study, by selection, have accrued. Yet they find it difficult to make an impression with a broader constituency, due to the limited noise their actions make. Spark, Cox, and Corbett (2019, 1232) argue that the “conversion of women’s symbolic capital into political capital comes at a high exchange rate” as gendered forms of symbolic capital are not as valued as that accrued by men in the political field. We share this view that women have to generate more (with the time this entails) symbolic capital in order to have sufficient political capital and add that what is missing for many women working at the grassroots is the amplification of their good deeds. Women are doing the work – the missing operation is promoting this to a larger constituency.

Infrastructure; extension

A third set of preconditions required to become a credible candidate is the infrastructure around which a successful campaign can be built. Infrastructure describes what needs to be in place before women would consider running for election, and without which they considered such an ambition foolhardy. Infrastructure is not a quality of the person, but rather the supporting conditions. Three elements are crucial: political constituency, financial capital, and a network of supporters. Women had built such infrastructure through their grassroots political and social activities, yet for many, it was insufficient, or alternatively, did not precisely match what was needed. There is, therefore, a need to *extend* women’s existing infrastructure by establishing and building on from the conditions required for a viable campaign.

For women in Sri Lanka and Indonesia, having a constituency was critical infrastructure required before considering running for office (see also Tadros 2014). A constituency is built through long-term continuous engagement with the community; candidates cannot suddenly engage with the community and expect people to vote for them. Candidates must be *familiar* to the community, not solely in the sense of being known, but also of having an emotional connection. Women were purposefully selected in this study who had a history of community service, and hence their constituency was part of what makes them a viable candidate: “People know that we have worked for a long time in the community. We have been introduced to the community and we speak up for rights” (Sri Lanka FGD3). Erni, a female candidate in North Sumatera, described how she unintentionally built a constituency by providing free medical care: “At the time, we just did these activities, didn’t we? We just happened to be like this [socially minded].” Her story is common; women’s volunteer and social activities build the community relations that are the starting point for a political constituency. While Erni recognized and used her potential political constituency, many women do not appreciate the resource they have acquired.

For many women, however, tapping into preexisting community relations is insufficient. The challenge is located in the term “community,” which is often smaller to, or mismatched with, electoral constituencies. Some women decided not to become a candidate because their connections to the community are in a geographical area that did not map on to electoral boundaries. Social work that traverses multiple electoral divisions without being concentrated in any one, dilutes how well they were known in the constituency in which they could potentially run. For other women, their connections were concentrated in a smaller area, covering a few villages, and mismatched with the larger population of voters. Some women in Indonesia who decided to run, were asked by parties to stand for elections in electorates where they were unknown, rather than where they had built their constituencies. A long-term approach to getting more grassroots women in politics would gently nudge their social activities to be congruent with electoral boundaries from the beginning of their careers. For women who are already social workers and activists, they need support to *extend* their political constituencies.

A network of committed supporters is both an important element of one’s electoral infrastructure in its own right, while also extending a candidate’s political constituency. Supporters provide labor

during a campaign, mobilize voters, amplify campaign events, and undertake essential tasks. Supporters also draw upon their own relationships with the community to extend the goodwill and trust needed to build a political constituency over a larger area. Most critically for many women, a network of support is an important infrastructure for women to fall back on for advice and encouragement. When women candidates encounter problems, they have people to trouble shoot with, and this gives them confidence to be part of the process. Supporters may also have specific professional skills – such as media engagement, campaign management, budgeting, and so on – valuable in any campaign.

In Sri Lanka, women stressed the importance of support networks for solidarity. They desired the “feeling they are supported. They have some kind of a backbone . . .” (Sri Lanka FGD1), as critical to having the confidence to consider such a move. In Indonesia, support networks were critical for the more practical tasks of running a campaign: “we did not have any assistance in my electoral district But with the support of . . . friends at [NGO] . . . two of their staff accompanied me, arranging campaign schedules When we unite, we can reach this potential” (Indonesia FGD3). The free labor provided by these networks was important in Indonesia in a context where political volunteers demand a monetary token of appreciation for being a part of campaign teams (Harahap et al. 2022). Families provided important practical assistance in Sri Lanka. Sharaz’s seven sisters “behaved as if they themselves were contesting . . . spent their time . . . Even now . . . if they identify any problems among the people they come and tell me.”

The women in our study all had strong networks, yet they faced two challenges. In Sri Lanka, women sought support and comradery with women politicians but found it was limited. The solidarity so evident among women engaged in community work, does not seem to be present in formal politics, where competition among women is more common. There is a need to *extend* women’s networks of solidarity to include female politicians – current and/or retired – who are willing to be allies, mentor and provide assurance to grassroots women. While relevant also to Indonesia, the challenge here was more so putting together a team that had the right skills and knowledge. Women’s networks had a large capacity to relate to, mobilize, and organize the community, yet were less equipped in dealing with campaign finance, media engagement, and large-scale event management. Candidates cannot do everything themselves, and these gaps speak to insufficient infrastructure, in that the skills are lacking in the broader support team. Hence the focus on providing individual *candidates* with the skills and knowledge to run a successful campaign, is better thought of as extending her network of support and the capacities of the broader team.

Many women had sufficient infrastructure with respect to a political constituency and support network, yet lacked the third element deemed crucial to contest elections: financial capital. A lack of money, or a reluctance to bear financial risk, was considered the biggest impediment to becoming a candidate in both Indonesia and Sri Lanka; “if we talk about practical politics, it’s not enough just to be well-known, it’s not enough to just be smart, right. You need money too. Money, money, I don’t have any money at all, let alone 200 million [Indonesian rupiah]” (Hanum, Indonesia). In both countries, practices such as vote-buying, or the provision of club goods to communities in return for electoral support, have made elections highly expensive (Aspinall and Berenschot 2019). Campaign costs also include payments to volunteers, promotional material, souvenirs for voters, travel, refreshments, and so on. In Indonesia, fundraising among the community is impossible in a context where people expect politicians to pay voters; in Sri Lanka, there is unfair distribution of party campaign funds for men and women. Many respondents said that despite years of activism, experience, and knowledge of the socio-political field, they are unable to enter politics because of financial constraints.

As a consequence of the high costs of campaigns and limited access to funds, most grassroots women consider the risk too high and do not attempt to stand for election. Yet women with sufficient political constituency and support networks (alongside the amplification of symbolic capital) are able to extend their financial resources to reduce overall campaign investment. Women can achieve the symbolic ends of cash transfers and gift-giving that is common in Indonesian elections through attentiveness, care, and long-term commitment to the community (Harahap et al. 2022; Mahsun,

Zulfa Elizabeth, and Mufrikhah 2021). Further, women can draw upon strong support networks to provide volunteer labor. Rather than consider large sums of cash a necessary precondition to run for election, it is more useful to see it as a short-cut when one has not built the political constituency or support networks required to win elections (that is, the other two pillars of one's infrastructure).

A strength-based approach helps women to recognize the power of her relationships with the community and large support network to help her overcome a lack of financial capital. Elections are never costless, yet having these two pillars of infrastructure can extend limited financial resources to run credible campaigns with a minimal budget. While women with long records of grassroots political and social activity will have infrastructure in place – that is, a political constituency and social network – it may not be sufficient, or correspondent with what is required. They may also not recognize the resources they have, underlining the value of “political empowerment programs to help women unearth the full scale of the community relations that they have forged, but which they have yet to tap into in their political campaigns” (Tadros 2014, 10). Such infrastructure may also need to be extended, so that women have a foundation from which they feel secure to contest elections. The next question is, can they see themselves as an elected representative?

Sense of self: translation

A focus on ambition – gendered or otherwise – does not distinguish between the broader conditions that make a run for election possible (as outlined above), and whether women see themselves as being an actor within the political field. We find that women who satisfy the other preconditions for being a candidate experience a dissonance between the idea of being a politician, and their sense of self. There are two elements here. First are the gendered cultural and social resources for self-making that influence one's sense of who one is, and can become (Ortner 2006). For example, Dowe (2022) demonstrates how Black women in the United States acquire a radical imagination that is both gendered and racialized. Women perceive community organization and leadership as tied to who they are, and electoral politics as one avenue to enact social change. The second element is the reproduction of the political field, understood not only as rules for the accrual and deployment of capital (Spark, Cox, and Corbett 2019), but as an affective terrain, in which bodies are differentially at ease, and differentially befitting (Puwar 2004). We argue that encouraging more women to envisage a sense of self as elected representative requires operations of translation between these two elements. By translation we mean the process of becoming “appropriate with” (*sesuai dengan* in Bahasa Indonesian) or fitting the political field.

Social work for many women in our study is a calling intimately tied to their sense of self: “I have always had a very high social *jiwa* [spirit] . . . I feel I have a calling” (Indonesia). For some, this calling to help others can be furthered through political activity, or what they call in Indonesia, the practical political realm (*pengertian politik praktis*). Ratih, an Indonesian youth, explained her ambition to enter politics as a result of her activism: “We have been involved in a lot in social activities, and through these we have come to realize the many problems women have to deal with, and by dealing with these problems, our own desires arise, our interest to pursue practical politics.” In Sri Lanka, respondents emphasized the need to see changes to society and political culture: “Some attitudes that are inherited from the past still exist. We are asking for an opportunity for women to enter politics in the hope that new attitudes will emerge in the society” (Sri Lanka FGD6). For some, politics is a strategy to help them overcome the powerlessness they face in their social activities. Others see the compatibility in more pragmatic terms; they cultivate connections in the community through their social activities, which they later reap in terms of electoral support.

A greater number of respondents did not, however, see their social activities as compatible with practical politics, nor harbor ambitions to enter the political realm. Some rejected the idea that the two realms were oriented toward the same values: that is, to effect positive change. Politics is considered a sphere of self-interest incompatible with community work. For one woman in Sri Lanka, politics should be about making a commitment to the people, however, “there is no room in society for those

who are really willing to make such a commitment . . . people in our country today have turned politics into a source of income. Such people have blocked space for those who wish to make a voluntary sacrifice” (Sri Lanka FGD6). Most respondents do not see community activism as compatible with politics even though they acknowledge the experience and knowledge gained from community activism as an important asset to enter politics.

Other women felt that they could achieve more outside of politics than in it. Rahma (Indonesia) noted that joining a party would constrain what she could fight for: “the party boxes us in. If we go into one box, we cannot go into another box.” Political parties limit the activities that members can do, and hence remaining outside allows some women to pursue what is most meaningful for them. Some women doubt that even if they had a seat in parliament, they would be able to amplify the voices of the grassroots due to the dominance of elite men and women. As one woman noted: “I still believe that the extra-parliamentary powers are far more effective for meThe voices of my friends [in parliament] have not reverberated [had an impact], even though they want policy change” (Indonesia FGD3). Similar to the emerging women leaders in Melanesia, “women’s choice to be community rather than parliamentary leaders is a strategy designed to influence political change” (Spark and Corbett 2018, 227). When social change is the primary ambition, politics is not seen as an effective route in either Indonesia or Sri Lanka.

The perceived incompatibility between these two realms means that entering politics can be detrimental to social activities. In Sri Lanka, women are afraid that negative attitudes toward politicians may lead the community to be suspicious that one is engaging in social work with ulterior motives. As one woman noted “when we talk about politics, a lot of organizations look at us in a different way. They think that we are working for political parties and wonder which party we are affiliated to” (Sri Lanka FGD3). Respondents view electoral practices such as giving cash and gifts as despicable, and engaging in these practices as detrimental to their reputation as a social worker whose intention is to serve. Participants associated the current culture of “politics” as contradictory to their own perceptions of political engagement which they defined as “a commitment” or “voluntary sacrifice.” Such perceptions that women’s empowerment is best achieved outside of electoral politics may in part be a legacy of international development efforts that tend to focus on community development, rather than explicit political engagement (Deo 2012).

The public perception that “politics is dirty” also deters Indonesian women from seeing it as an appropriate place for them: “I think being a member of the DPRD is like swimming in mud. Every time you swim, some mud is drunk” (Eva, Indonesia). Wira claims successive elections mired in controversy has educated the general public that politics is a dirty sphere (Indonesia FGD3), and therefore it is “taboo for women at the grassroots to talk about practical politics.” As practical politics is corrupt and dirty, women at the grassroots look down on political parties, and rebuff their invitations to join their tickets. Such rejections help parties maintain the line they are unable to fulfil quotas as women are unwilling to stand as candidates. Even when women are willing to get dirty by entering politics and with the money and skills to be competitive, families will often not give their approval. “There are many educated and politically active women . . . but . . . they face huge opposition from their families when entering into politics” (Sri Lanka FGD2). In Sri Lanka, where such sentiments were particularly strong, none of the respondents spoke about a lack of familial support or active discouragement as hindering their involvement in social work, yet all needed familial approval to enter politics.

The reproduction of politics as a masculine sphere creates further incompatibilities with social models of womanhood. Respondents in Sri Lanka considered the political domain as a masculine space where women’s voices are suppressed and they are assigned limited roles. Derogatory language and a violent political culture prevent women from entering into politics. Forms of political engagement are masculine and incongruous with gender norms, such as addressing large gatherings on a public stage. Politics is perceived as dealing with macro-level issues that are properly the domain of men; localized issues and social concerns are a part of an extended private feminized space, and kept separate from the “political.” The political terrain was not always this way. Participants alluded to the

past when politics was dignified, based on voluntary participation and dedication. Present day politics is referred to as professionalized; a popular art of making money, a space for men, not women. As Helen noted: “you have to be this stereotypical woman and standing on a stage, speaking up for things that you care about, but this does not necessarily embody the Sri Lankan woman, right?” She says women are not educated or socialized to be involved in politics. Helen is referring to two processes: the processes of self-making, and the production anew of the political realm. These processes are divergent; gendered ways of being are incompatible with the reproduction of politics as masculine and dirty.

The problems of incongruence between a sense of self and the political realm are not insurmountable, yet require a long-term approach to both expanding the possibilities of self for women, and challenging the discursive reproduction of the political field as dirty and masculine. Several female politicians spoke of the importance of early socialization for seeing politics as a space open to women. Lucia, from Indonesia, describes herself as a “fanatic” for politics, following in the footsteps of her father who was an administrator of the party. Vasanthi, a political aspirant in Sri Lanka, considers the role of politician and party leader as her birthright despite opposition from senior male members. While prior to her father’s passing she never considered a career in politics, this opposition propelled her to the party leadership. Vasanthi’s childhood experiences in a political home, alongside the legacy advantages of her father’s political career, enabled her to form her own political party and workers’ union and is preparing to contest the next parliamentary elections. For Vasanthi irrespective of “whether you are male or female, if you work toward a goal and work for the people we can definitely win. It is with this belief that I am journeying.” As (2022) also demonstrates, socialization of girls and young women can set in train the imaginings of self that are congruent with political action, and potentially a parliamentary career.

Other strategies include emphasizing the compatibilities between what women do, what is important to them, and how they see themselves, with the political field. Perceptions of the characteristics of politics matters for women’s goal congruence and political ambition (Preece and Stoddard 2015; Schneider et al. 2016). Eva spoke about her recruitment strategy for women: “If we approach women asking her to join a movement based on politics or the struggle for power, in our experience she will back away. [But if we say] ‘Let’s go into politics, let’s join the party, because within the party there is a religious activity, social activity, other activities’ she will join.” For some women, the increasing role of Islam in Indonesian politics has created opportunities. Dhyaul joined an Islamic based party because “There is a ‘fit’ [*cocok*], because for us, our understanding is that there is no separation between religion and politics. The point is [that politics] is part of the way we practice our religion.” The use of the word “*cocok*” is significant, as related to the theories of personhood that one’s *jiwa*, or nature, fits with certain activities; one can achieve satisfaction in that realm (Jakimow and Harahap 2016). For many women, religion is now compatible with politics, and hence women’s activities, including religious leadership and acts of piety, are congruent with practical politics. In Sri Lanka, ethno-religious identity, particularly for minorities, motivates many women to enter politics. While they may not feel at ease entering politics for selfish reasons, fighting for social justice on behalf of their communities is appropriate to who they feel themselves to be.

Acts of translation are required to show the compatibilities between different realms – social, religious, ethno-religious and political – not only to the women, but also their families and supporters. Processes of self-making and the production anew of the political field as dirty and masculine are interconnected. While much attention has been placed on how ideal models of womanhood make women “out of place” in politics, less attention has been placed on how hegemonic masculinities and models of manhood reproduce the political field in ways that privilege men (see Bjarnegård 2013; Michelutti 2007 for notable exceptions). While we need to broaden the possibilities of personhood for women, perhaps of greater import is challenging the general perception of politics. Having a critical mass of women (and men) from grassroots social and political action will contribute to changing the practices that perpetuate these perceptions. The task for agencies seeking more women, more

grassroots activists, and better democratic practices, is to facilitate translation between the realms of social work, and politics.

Conclusion

A starting point for any program that seeks to increase female representation in politics is to identify and support women who are qualified and suitable candidates. Our research has examined why good female candidates are not standing for election in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. There is a pathway to election for these women who have many of the preconditions required to be a credible candidate. Yet the pathway is overgrown (that is, not clearly identifiable), potholed (missing certain preconditions), or broken (the resources they have are mismatched with what they need). Fixing this pathway will not only increase the number of women standing for, and winning elections, but also their diversity, as non-elite women see politics as a viable and desirable realm to pursue their objectives. We have developed an analytical framework that describes the key operations that women active at the grassroots need in order to enter politics. The approach is to identify what they have, compared to what they need in order to (want to) become a political candidate with a credible chance of winning.

We pinpoint four operations, each with different implications for practice. Transference refers to the conversion of skills, knowledge, and experience gained through grassroots political and social activity to the political field. The aim is not to identify and fill knowledge and skills “gaps,” but to help women gain the recognition for what they already bring to politics. Extension refers to the operation in which women’s preexisting infrastructure (in terms of constituency, network, and finances) is made sufficient and matched to what is required to contest elections. The implications for practice are three-fold: encouraging women to undertake social activities aligned with electoral borders; building capacity of a women’s network, rather than focusing on the candidate; and reducing campaign costs through reliance on the other two pillars. Amplification refers to the promotion of what women are already doing for the community so that it builds political capital useful in the campaign. Investment is needed to help women build a media profile, or plan events that create a positive impression of the candidate, engage gender-conscious media, and avoid women-unfriendly media opportunities. Again, a long-term approach is required, so that women are increasingly better-known rather than relying on a media blitz at the time of election. Finally, translation is required so that women’s sense of self is congruent with the political realm. Programs are required that both increase the possibilities of personhood for women (early socialization, including in schools for example), and which disrupt the reproduction of the political realm as a masculine dirty realm hostile to socially active women.

We argue that these four operations – transference, extension, amplification, and translation – are relevant beyond Indonesia and Sri Lanka. We offer them as a heuristic to identify practical measures to increase the number and diversity of women in politics. Globally women are more engaged in volunteer activities and community work. Providing the conditions in which they can turn this political apprenticeship into political opportunities will arguably improve the quality of representation. For success, agencies must be committed to the following. First, a long-term approach is required to work with women to shape the trajectory of their grassroots social activity from the start so that it is compatible with entering representative politics at a later stage. Agencies need to encourage women to be strategic, to leave open the possibility of becoming a candidate, rather than simply identifying women to contest when elections near. Second, ensuring that women active at the grassroots have the *possibility* of entering politics at a later stage means that the majority will not move into politics, despite the investment. Agencies must be committed to casting a wide net, seeking to produce a cohort of women able to enter politics, knowing only a fraction will. The four operations help to identify both long-term strategies to build political possibilities alongside careers at the grassroots, as well as the short-term tactics to help women bridge the gap between what they have, and what they need.

Notes

1. RDDs took place in Indonesia in April 2022, but have been delayed in Sri Lanka due to the political turmoil.
2. Participants in FGDs are denoted by group. For interviews, we use pseudonyms.
3. All names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.
4. Indeed, Sri Lanka's former female president, Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, was chided for usurping the interests of grassroots women who mourned the loss of their husbands' sons as a result of civil war; her suffering and status as a widow not seen as a legitimate parallel (Vijeyarasa 2022).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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