

Women and Youth in Politics the Prospects of Art for Political Literacy Among Young Women: A Case Study of Ratmalana University College

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Submitted: 06 August 2024 **Accepted:** 12 August 2024 **Published:** 19 August 2024

doi <https://doi.org/10.63620/MKPJSSHR.2024.1009>

Citation: Dahanayake, T. H. (2024). *The Prospects of Art for Political Literacy Among Young Women: A Case Study of Ratmalana University College*. *Planetary J Soc Sci & Hum Res* 1(2), 01-08.

Abstract

To enact meaningful change within a society, it is essential to transform its foundational structure or substructure. This paper explores how art can be leveraged to foster political literacy, with a particular focus on the use of art media by young women aged 15-29 at Ratmalana University College. The study examines the differences, peculiarities, and possibilities of various art media as a foundation for enhancing the political literacy of Sri Lankan girls.

Keywords: Political Literacy, Girls, Art

Introduction

Although literacy has traditionally been defined as the ability to read and write, this conceptual idea has been challenged in modern times. With the advancement of computer technology and internet services, many new dimensions of literacy have emerged. These include economic literacy, political literacy, cultural literacy, ethnic literacy, religious literacy, functional literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, computer literacy, and digital literacy, among others. Among these, political literacy is the ability to understand oneself and the surrounding society and its social processes from a political perspective. More broadly, it refers to a person's ability to critically analyze social and human relations politically, including understanding political institutions, government, and the capacity to exercise rights and responsibilities.

According to the National Human Development Report released by the United Nations Development Programme in 2014, women's representation in Sri Lanka's politics was relatively low compared to neighboring South Asian countries in 2010. In Nepal, women's representation in national-level politics was 32%, while in Bangladesh and India it was 19% and 10%, respectively. The participation of women in politics in Sri Lanka remained significantly lower than in other Asian countries. By 2019, the representation of women in Sri Lanka's Parliament was 5.3%, compared to 12.6% in India, 32.7% in Nepal, and 11.32% in

Myanmar. Notably, women make up 52% of Sri Lanka's population and 56% of the electorate. Therefore, emphasizing the importance of political literacy in individual, community, and social diversity is crucial.

On October 26, 1966, during the 14th session of the UNESCO General Assembly, September 8 was declared International Literacy Day to highlight the significance of literacy. Recognizing the potential for literacy to empower individuals to change their lives and envision a better future, this research focuses on the political literacy of young women, particularly those aged 15-29. The active contribution of young women to the political process in 2022 has been more prominent than in previous years. This research aims to examine how the art streams, which provide both information and entertainment, influence the political literacy of young women studying at the university level. A group of 55 young women aged 15-29 at Ratmalana University was selected to determine the role of art media in their political literacy.

Research Methodology

Based on the objectives of this study, a mixed-method approach incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed in the research design. Utilizing multiple data collection methods enhanced the validity of the study by allowing for the collection of diverse perspectives from mem-

bers of the target groups and stakeholders. This approach provided a multifaceted and holistic view of the findings, accurately reflecting the participants' experiences.

Analysis

Karl Marx conceptualized human society as consisting of two main components: the substructure (or base) and the superstructure. The substructure represents technology and productive (economic) forces, while the superstructure encompasses cultural elements such as law, religion, ideology, art, knowledge, and concepts. The superstructure both directly and indirectly reflects the wants and needs of the substructure. The substructure exerts direct influence on the superstructure through phenomena like law and religion, while ideology serves as the medium through which this influence is exerted. Art acts as an instrument through which the substructure indirectly affects the superstructure. According to Marxism, ideology is a tool that represents the interests of the capitalist class or the economically powerful class. Marx argued that a real change in society requires altering the base structure or substructure, as this alone can lead to a change in concepts and bring economic power to the proletariat.

The Relationship Between Art and Politics: Ideological and Cognitive Impact

The relationship between art and politics is multifaceted, with various ways in which art has been recognized as illustrating the interrelationship between the two. Understanding these components is crucial to demonstrating that art contributes to political literacy in diverse contexts around the world.

- The Art of Political Memory
- Art as Political Propaganda
- Art as a Means of Expressing Opinion, Consent, or Opposition
- Activist Art
- Strengthening Communities Through Participatory Art

Memory Conservation

Art can serve as a means of preserving important historical and political events. Consider the collection of images at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Each year, the Smithsonian permanently adds portraits of a U.S. President and First Lady to the gallery's collection. In addition to being great works of art in their own right, these images also serve as chronicles of American history. The 2018 unveiling of the portraits of Barack and Michelle Obama was particularly significant.



Figure 1: The National Portrait Gallery's Obama Portraits Will Embark on a Five-City Tour | Smart News| Smithsonian Magazine

Art as a Medium of Political Propaganda

Not all political art aims to make the world a better place or challenge the status quo. Some works of art are deliberately created to support existing power structures in society. In some cases, artists may even end up endorsing a particular political ideology. This type of politically charged art is known as propaganda. Propaganda art is used to distort reality by disseminating ideas that promote one cause and/or harm an opposing cause. It can take many forms, including songs, paintings, sculptures, and public art. Political posters created during the Cold War are often considered one of the most effective forms of visual art propaganda.

Art as a Means of Expressing Public Opinion, Will, or Protest The Politics of Dissent Through Comedy

Political humor, a special category of political art, is typically used to confront the existing political situation, criticize it, or popularize a particular discourse within society. Throughout re-

cent history, political humor has emerged as a form of protest against violent politics by largely non-violent and disempowered groups. It also serves as a discursive response to prevailing conditions. For example, studies have shown that during the Second World War, Jews imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps, especially in Eastern Europe, created many short, humorous speeches against the Nazis who persecuted them, as well as about their dire circumstances. Historians have pointed out that in such situations, humor functions as a discourse for hidden and powerless groups within society.

Professor James Scott's book *Weapons of the Weak*, based on field research in Malaysia during the 1980s, illustrates how disempowered poor farmers resisted the landlords who controlled them, albeit indirectly and covertly, within unequal power hierarchies. This resistance manifested through actions such as underperforming in their assigned tasks, neglecting their duties, or

responding comically in socially accepted ways to the landlords' control. These subtle forms of resistance were accepted within the existing conditions, and the landlords lacked the authority to punish the villagers for these responses.

Similarly, Professor Sudhir Kakar's research in the 1980s demonstrated that during the process of possession by spirits or gods in India, socially powerless individuals could behave in ways not generally accepted by society. During possession, these individuals were not punished for their actions. In these conditions, women could scold their husbands harshly in public, and those in lower social positions could insult more powerful social leaders. However, these behaviors were regarded as actions that occurred only under extraordinary circumstances, not in normal conditions.

In Sri Lanka, similar opportunities for mocking the powerful through humor were present in various ritual performances such as Yatukarma, as well as in traditional dramatic forms like Kolam and Nadagam. Contemporary Sri Lankan art underwent significant changes in the 1990s, a transformation common across the South Asian region. This shift was primarily a response to the prevailing socio-political climate and cultural concerns. During the 1980s and early 1990s, Sri Lankan youth were caught up in two intense political struggles: the Tamil armed struggle based in the north-eastern regions and the armed rebellion of Sinhalese youths in the southern regions. Both uprisings were met with extreme violence by state forces, with men aged 17 to 35 being the main victims. The brutal suppression was directed by both state forces and the armed groups involved in the conflicts.

During this period, the main slogans of university-centered youth politics reflected the frustration and political confusion of the time, as well as the negative impact these feelings had on society. In this context, art became a platform for critiques of the widespread frustrations and societal discontent. By "art," I broadly refer to drama, music, and visual arts. As a result, art had to adapt its structures and forms to create spaces that could represent the existing socio-political sentiments.

Major artists representing the art trends of the 1990s, such as Jagath Weerasinghe and Chandragupta Thenuwara, used khaki-green, dark-brown, and black on very dark canvases to paint their Sankas (symbols). The themes of these artworks included titles like *Soldier, Who Are You?* and *Thousands of Dead: In the Name of Religion*. Chandragupta Thenuwara developed the

concept of "barrelism," in which he applied camouflage motifs to painted empty barrels, transforming them into artworks symbolizing war. This artistic discourse highlighted the widespread political violence in society and partially attributed responsibility to institutionalized Buddhism, which served as the political adviser and spiritual guide of the state. Accordingly, the art of the 1990s was not reverent in its approach to political violence but instead adopted a more mediating role.

Similarly, in the realm of newspaper cartoons, Dasa Hapuwalana's political cartoons were distinct in their style, portraying unique political ideologies in Sri Lanka. For example, he consistently depicted J.R. Jayawardene with an exaggeratedly large nose, and Ranil Wickramasinghe with white hair, always holding a cane in his hand.

As a Means of Presenting Opinion, Consent, or Opposition

Rembrandt's 1632 masterpiece *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* has been reinterpreted in various ways throughout history. In 1972, Indian artist Krishen Khanna created *Anatomy Lesson*, a powerful update on Rembrandt's work. Rather than depicting a social phenomenon for affluent audiences, Khanna's piece portrays a bewildered crowd of pale, sharp-faced military figures preparing to execute a human figure in a corpse suit. The muted color palette and monotonous depiction of war officials convey a strong condemnation of the 1971 Indo-Pakistani War and its devastating death toll.

Khanna's work, created in the aftermath of the war, is one of the most successful artistic interpretations of the bloody conflicts and partition of the Indian subcontinent. It reflects the broader mission of the Progressive Artists' Group (PAG), which aimed to represent the genuine democratic and anti-imperialist aspirations of the people of the Indian subcontinent. However, the PAG's goals were ultimately hindered by the inability of the Indian bourgeoisie—along with the bourgeoisie of other nations historically oppressed by imperialism—to fulfill the extensive democratic tasks that were fought for during earlier bourgeois revolutions, such as the French Revolution.

Anatomy Lesson is emblematic of the PAG's efforts to critique the social and political turmoil that marked the era, particularly the rise of the military in India, the deepening of religious and communal tensions, and the mass killings and atrocities that occurred on all sides.



Figure 2: F.N. Souza *Tycoon and the Tramp*, 1955

Among the paintings that express social divisions in post-independence India, some of the most successful works are F.N. Souza's *Millionaire Businessman and the Tramp* (1956) and Ram Kumar's *Unemployed Graduate* (1956). The title reads as a large oil painting of two human figures walking from place to place. Dressed in a blue suit with a shirt and tie, the millionaire businessman is a pale, lanky man with a bewildering fake smile on his fat pout. The walker, in dark red and black robes, is a gaunt

man with a scrawny face and a deep red beard. Both human figures are painted with heavy, rough, glossy black lines that clearly delineate the boundaries of the outer figures and foreshadow Souza's later works—his heavily diagonalized women and figureless Christ figures. They stand out against a background woven of abstract, pale greens and dull browns, and their eyes, framed by heavy lines and shadows, stare through the center of the artwork.



Figure 3: Ram Kumar -Unemployed Graduates – 1956

Souza's paintings are crude expressions of class disparities between the parasitic bourgeoisie and the working class, deeply rooted in the context of post-independence India. Kumar's *Unemployed Graduates*, created after his return to India from Paris, is an oil painting depicting four ghostly youths with elongated bodies hanging from their suits, worn out by oppression. The faces of the figures are long, plastered, and painted in dark brown and gray hues, similar to much of the painting. Of particular note are the pupils of the figures, which are dematerialized into black-and-white orbs sunken into their faces. *Unemployed Graduates* is a haunting evocation of the economic struggles faced by ordinary people in post-independence India.

George Michael is at the forefront of those who have infused politics into English pop music. Released in 1982, the song "Wham Rap!" is a political statement in which the youth asserts that, whether employed or not, he will still be respected on the

street. "Wham Rap!" suggests that life should be enjoyed in the urban tradition, regardless of one's employment status. Similarly, our lives in Sri Lanka were confronted with an intensely political reality. This is why questioning society with an alternative expression of the British spirit that once colonized Sri Lanka became a powerful political phenomenon.

- Everyone, look at me for a moment.
- I've got this... street cred.
- I don't have a job, but I still
- Have a good time
- With the guys I meet regularly at the end of the street.
- You said, "I don't want it," and I replied,
- "Who asked for your approval?"
- So, you disapprove of me?
- Well, I never sought your approval anyway.
- (From Wham Rap song)



Figure 4: Whamp Rap Song by George - Andrew - They Question England Life Society and Political System

"Wham Rap!" was a powerful expression of political consciousness. The song's ironic commentary on contemporary English life was conveyed through the dynamic harmony of George Michael and Andrew Ridgeley. It critiqued the dark reality of Conservative Thatcherite politics, channeling a sense of frenzy that mirrored the high-speed intensity of society, amplified through striking imagery.

Similarly, Bob Dylan has encouraged people to reflect on the political system through his politically charged songs. He crafted creative works that captured the shifting mood of the post-war generation and the urgency of the civil rights and anti-war movements. For example, we can consider "Ekadaasaba Saba Ee Asaba" as an illustration. Dylan's compositions often focused on the experiences of those affected by political and military conflicts, especially the casualties of these struggles.



Figure 5: EX: Who killed Davey Moore Master of war

Because he questioned the killings carried out by American presidents in the name of war through his songs, some American leaders harbored animosity toward him. It is also said that Dylan, who advocated for workers and civil rights through his music, insulted politics while receiving the Tom Paine Award after the Kennedy assassination in 1963. The intersection of politics and art is grounded in the belief that art "plays a fundamental role in shaping social life, in how people take responsibility for creating their own histories, and in their participation in managing their own social and political realities." This role can be analyzed not only from an art theoretical and historical perspective, but also from a political science viewpoint. The emphasis is on "being a citizen" as much as "being an artist." Here, new political repre-

sentatives emerge, contributing to the formation of social and political life in ways that challenge traditional political analysis.

It seems essential to consider the role of photography and the visual arts in this context as well. Visual image production increasingly blurs the lines between photojournalism and art photography.

Can art be separated from the artist who creates it? When we learn about the political affiliations, personal lives, and controversies of the artists we admire, our perception of their work can change. This dilemma applies to both historical and contemporary figures: Can Michael Jackson's music be separated from Michael Jackson's personality?

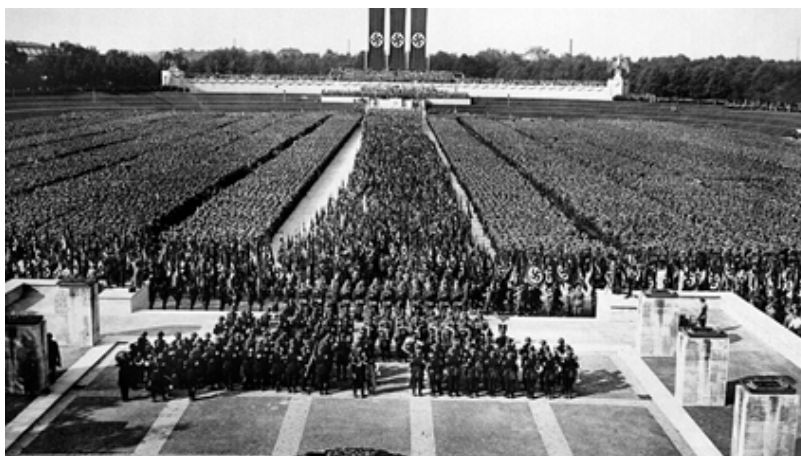


Figure 6: Triumph of the Will (1935)

Was revolutionary filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl any less revolutionary because of her Nazi employers? For some, this is an unanswerable question; for others, it isn't a question at all. When both the art and the artist are political, the distinction becomes even more blurred. Consider the case of Pablo Picasso: a millionaire and a Communist.

In 1937, Picasso created his largest and most politically influential work, *Guernica*, a painting that made him world famous. *Guernica* depicts a scene of fear, anger, loss, and the fading of hope in stark black, white, and grey. It realistically portrays the devastation in the Spanish village of Guernica after it was bombed by a coalition of three fascist dictators: Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini. This painting exemplified Picasso's political engagement at a critical moment. His homeland, Spain, was in the throes of a civil war, and the shadow of World War II loomed over Europe. Although *Guernica* was a gift to the Spanish Republicans, it also created various commercial opportunities for Picasso, allowing him to exhibit his work and attract new buyers. A Picasso painting became a prized possession for elites

around the world, particularly those with enormous wealth. Consequently, Picasso became the richest artist of the twentieth century in the pre-war period of the late 1930s.

Picasso's decision to join the French Communist Party in 1944 came as a mild shock to some of those around him. How could such a wealthy and talented artist, with no previous political affiliation, seemingly sacrifice his artistic independence and reputation by joining such an overtly political movement? The answer lies, in part, in Picasso's own views on art and politics. He believed that an artist is inherently a political being, bound to observe and respond to the world around them. For Picasso, his art was an extension of his politics and a tool to achieve political goals. As he famously stated, "Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy."

Can art be separated from the artist who creates it? Picasso would have dismissed such a notion as absurd.



Figure 7: *Guernica* - Picasso

Vadasaba Darasa means "join or die," a political cartoon attributed to Benjamin Franklin. Originally published on May 9, 1754, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, it is the earliest pictorial representation of colonial unity produced by an American colonist in colonial America. The cartoon is a woodcut depicting a snake cut into eight segments, each labeled with the initials of an American colony or region. New England is represented as one part of the then-four colonies, while Delaware is not listed separately because it was part of Pennsylvania. However, Georgia is entirely omitted, resulting in a snake with eight segments rather than the traditional thirteen. The cartoon focused on the colonies expressing a shared identity as Americans. It appeared alongside Franklin's "Join, or Die" editorial, helping to convey his views on the importance of colonial unity. The image later became a symbol of colonial freedom during the American Revolutionary War.

Activist Art and Politics

The role of art in today's world extends beyond highlighting injustices; it can also support and even create political alterna-

tives to the status quo. Environmental art is a prime example. By creating works from recycled and eco-friendly materials, or by promoting practices such as reduced air travel, lower meat consumption, waste sorting, and energy efficiency, environmental artists strongly support the goals of the environmental movement. They not only highlight the dangers of the environmental crisis but also suggest solutions to mitigate and overcome these challenges.

Strengthening Communities with Participatory Art

Art can be a powerful tool for organizing people around a common goal, inspiring and empowering them to become agents of change in their environment. These socially engaged practices are typically participatory, bringing together people from a community in a collective effort to improve their neighborhood. For example, an art collective called Ypaika won the Omarabara Prize in 2015 for a participatory art project that helped communities take control of their living spaces by increasing employment in a poor area, providing jobs and training in construction.



Figure 8: Turner Prize: Assemble win for Liverpool housing scheme - BBC News

Sri Lankan society has placed a strong emphasis on literacy from its earliest days, with even ancient civilizations prioritizing education. By the end of the classical era and the Kandy period, particularly in the 18th century, this focus on literacy is evident in works such as the Vadan Kavi book, which reflects an understanding and appreciation of reading and writing.

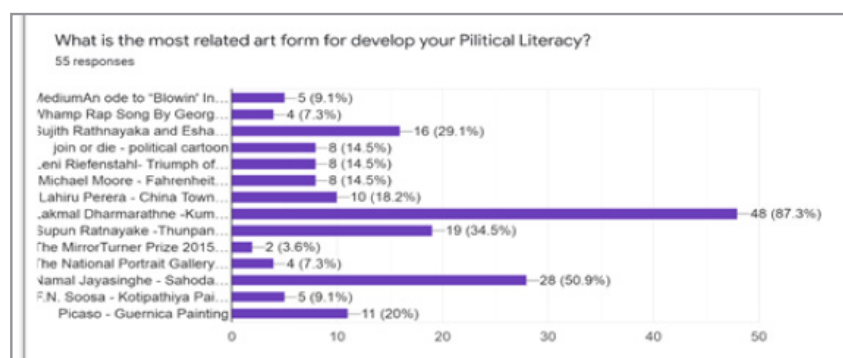
Art can contribute to political discourse by supporting current political and ideological perspectives through the various art streams mentioned above. It can address specific political issues or redefine social structures—artists may act as activists within political movements or organizations, but often they create political change independently, without aligning with any existing political forces. Politics can also unfold in the nuanced space between the artist and the audience. This reinterpretation of art helps reveal power dynamics in society, highlighting what was previously known and considered worthy of analysis, as well as what was once unseen or unknown.

Artists can seek to catalyze political change by bringing to light what has been hidden, thereby making it visible or known. They may be associated with political movements and humanitarian organizations, but they can also drive political change without overtly supporting or joining these movements. Artists can be political without intending to be, while those who aim to exert political influence may sometimes fail in their efforts. Art can also include a utopian element. For instance, Nicholas Mirzoeff advocates for the "psychopathic imagination"

as a necessary cultural response to the pervasive despair that characterizes today's preemptive politics of war and fear. Alex Danchev asserts that "art expresses a vision of the world that is insightful and effective." Three questions arise from this assertion: How can philosophy and insight be analyzed? What methods can be used to analyze manifestos from a political science perspective? What kind of knowledge can be gained by examining art's worldview? Furthermore, what can viewers and readers do with the knowledge thus generated, and for what purposes can they use it?

Such analyses should apply and develop appropriate methodological approaches to the political analysis of art. However, the methods used in other fields of social inquiry are not always suitable for analyzing art; if applied, they would yield very limited results, as aesthetic sources are expressions of "creativity and imagination." It is important to recognize that approaches to studying politics and art necessarily reflect the individual subject positions of those being analyzed. Thus, the "self" element in most writings on politics and art either deliberately limits the analysis to first-person narratives or implicitly acknowledges that no text can be considered apart from its author.

Five young women between the ages of 15 and 29 from Ratmalana University College expressed their opinions on these aspects of art as follows:



1st DATA CHART: The artwork that contributed the most to the political literacy of young women between the ages of 15-29 at Ratmalana University College

The art medium consulted by the largest number of students was Lakmal Dharmaratne's Kumbiyo teledrama, a Sri Lankan teledrama, which was referenced by 48.87% of the total sample. Notably, the first, second, and third most consulted works were all teleplays. Specifically, 28.50% of the participants engaged with Namal Jayasinghe's Comrade teleplay, and 19.34% with Supun Ratnayake's Thunpane teleplay. These works were cited as contributing significantly to the development of the participants' political literacy. Additionally, Sujith Ratnayake's painting Artist and Eshani Yaddahi Arachchi's work Combination of Ash and Blood were used in the Galle Face protest grounds. A painting by 16.29% of the sample was drawn by individuals who had the opportunity to interpret it politically, marking it as a significant work that enhanced political literacy. Among global artworks, Picasso's Guernica was the most closely referenced. However, the art forms I inquired about, such as memory preservation or activist arts, appeared to have minimally impacted their political literacy. Thus, it seems that audio-visual media and painting were more effective in cultivating political awareness.

Conclusion

Literacy is a key indicator of a country's development. Based on data obtained from 50 young women aged 15-29 years at Ratmalana University College, it is evident that audio-visual art media, as the most popular art form, has significantly influenced the political literacy of young women. The narrative concepts presented in engaging and relevant audio-visual media have greatly contributed to these young women's understanding of the political process. Art, as a tool, indirectly illustrates the influence of the substructure on the superstructure. This means that to effect real change in society, the foundational or substructure must be transformed, and art can be an ideal instrument in this process. Audio-visual media, in particular,

seems to be the most advanced medium in this regard. This is likely due to the presence of computer literacy, a new dimension of literacy measurement, which enhances the accessibility and impact of audio-visual media. Rather than closing off spaces for political literacy through art, these medium bridges the gap between political spaces and the audience with numerous new works of art. The data implies that economic power, literacy, and political representation are essential for women, perhaps even more so than for men. This conclusion aligns with Marx's belief that change in society is impossible without the concept of action.

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