

SOUTH ASIA ALLIANCE FOR POVERTY ERADICATION (SAAPE)

# Women's Participation in Politics/Legislative Bodies

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Challenges in South Asia

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## **Introduction**

The concept of political participation from a gender perspective involves considering women as responsible individuals, capable of taking decisions and indispensable for their societies democratization processes. This approach aims at pointing out the causes of inequality within their contexts, and at finding ways to eliminate the barriers preventing women's participation and their representation in decision-making processes. The relation between political participation, gender equality and democratic process is interdependent, since the implementation of each of these concepts depends on the implementation of the others and vice versa.

Full equality between men and women in all aspects of life cannot be achieved if equality between men and women is not achieved in the area of governance and political representation. Thus women's political participation is pre-requisite to just and democratic governance. However, in no society women enjoy the same opportunities as men.

Seven decades have passed from the universal franchise for women but women do not represent enough in political bodies. A decade ago the women's representation in parliaments across the world was as low as 5 per cent. However, during the last decade, it is increased gradually and in 2011 it is now 19.2%<sup>1</sup>, thanks to women rights global movements. On the one hand, such example is very positive for increasing women's participation in politics but on the other hand, women leaders in the highest ranks do not automatically ensure better opportunities for women to participate in political processes. This reality has not had an impact in the lives of most women.

In this context the women's political representation and participation in South Asian region is still very low as compare to other parts of the world. Obstacles to their participation at economic, social and political level limit their contributions to decision-making bodies and planning, and their needs and interests are hardly ever taken into account.

The recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action have set the target of 33 per cent for women in national decision-making positions by 2015. It is a long way to go, however, only a milestone on the road towards the objective of ultimate equality. Within the paradigm of women political participation, the question of true representation is separate aspect which can be put forward along with mainstream debate.

The aim of this briefing paper is to show a picture of the current situation regarding women political participation in legislative bodies in the south Asian countries, stating the barriers in this process. The paper also suggests way forward to increase permanent presence of women in power structures and decision-making positions.

## **South Asian Context**

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<sup>1</sup> (<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>)

The case of the South Asian region is quite surprising, especially with regard to women's political participation and representation. Despite the strong local patriarchies reflected in various gender coercions varying from one country to the next, with a very clear separation of roles, stereotypes and prejudices regarding women's role in society, this region has an outstanding trajectory in women's political participation and representation.

South Asia has witnessed a paradox in politics. This paradox can be explained in terms of a unique phenomenon termed as 'over-the-dead-body syndrome' by Diane Kincaid. She observed that between 1920 and 1970, American women legislators assumed political roles after the deaths of their husbands. The same is true with women leaders of South Asia. A woman leader derives her legitimacy for leadership from being a close relative of a dead leader, as a wife or a daughter. This phenomenon of catapulting women as leaders from 'dynastic' families and offering limited options to the others for contesting elections is a part of the common patriarchal legacy of South Asia.

Most countries in the region have had a woman leader at some point in time, a phenomenon unparalleled to other regions of the world. Women in South Asia, though not in quantity but in small number rose to power. Indira, Benazir, Khalida, Hasina, Chandrika, Sonia can be quoted as examples. Though these women undertook some pro-women affirmative actions; however, they could not translate political empowerment of common women at grass-roots level in their respective countries.

Therefore the dream of common women at top of political discourse in South Asia is yet to be materialized. And some fundamental issues of critical concern such as women's control over the State mechanism, increase of women's meaningful participation in politics, adequate opportunities for women to have access to and control over resources are a far cry from reality. Women's lack of resources and time for political participation because of their dual roles needs to be addressed through alternative arrangements.

The common challenge to women of South Asia is the oppressive patriarchal structure of society that hinders women from social, cultural, economic and political participation. Low rate of literacy among women, rampant poverty, ill health, gender and cast discrimination, violence against women, political conflicts; cross borders tensions and religious fundamentalism and neo-liberalism have still been barriers for women's active participation in politics and governance.

### **Women representation in legislative bodies**

**In Nepal**, political participation of women dates back to the 1950s when leaders like Mangala Devi Singh and Sahana Pradhan worked for democracy and human rights and from 1947 until 1952. During General Election of 1999, only 12 women out of 205 seats were elected and very few women were elected to executive positions in local elections. However, the Constituent Assembly elections in 2008 gave 197 women to representation, which is 33.2%, highest in South Asia. However, institutionalization of this achievement is yet to be achieved.

**In Pakistan** Benazir Bhutto, during her premiership in Pakistan, appointed women judges and bankers, set up women police stations. She supported women for their capacity development.

However, women in Pakistan are not appointed to key positions within party organizations. The level of political participation of the common women always remained limited. However, in 2001 women got 17% representation in legislative assemblies and 33% in union councils. After 2008 elections, there are 80 women in 342-member National Assembly and 17 women in 100-member Senate. In total there are 232 women out of 1165 members, making it total 19 % women representation in the six legislative bodies, including 4 provincial assemblies, National Assembly and Senate. But sadly this enhanced representation in legislative assemblies could not cater benefits to common women and the upper class women remained main beneficiaries.

**In Bhutan**, women particularly those who have been victimized by the State and are compelled to languish in Nepal as refugees have an ambition to return Bhutan so that they will have opportunity to lead the Bhutanese parliament. They would like to see significant contribution of women in democratic movement in Bhutan. Bhutan has a long way to go with regard to have women's political voice. There are only 10 women in Bhutan's 72-member two legislative houses, giving over all representation as 13.8 %.

**In Bangladesh**, during the 8th national election held in 2001, 32 women stood for election from 40 constituencies. In elections for ninth parliament, out of 52 women candidates, only 19 were elected for the 300-member which is only 6.33 per cent. The current parliament of Bangladesh contains 345 seats including 45 women, reserved seats distributed on elected party position in the parliament, making it 15% women representation. Bangladesh is all set to increase by more than double the number of reserved seats for women in parliament. "The number of reserved seats for women in parliament will be increased to 100 and there will be direct election in these seats<sup>2</sup>."

**In India**, during the 1952 elections, the percentage of women contestants was only 2.29%, as political parties were reluctant to file women candidates. In 1998, women constituted 8 per cent of the Lok Sabha. However, the reservations have strengthened women's participation in the mainstream political process. 59 women MPs have been elected to the new Lok Sabha after 2009 general elections - the highest since independence. In all, 556 women had contested the 2009 general elections, of which 59 were elected, (10.8%). On 8 March 2010, a Bill to provide 33% reservation of seats in Parliament and state legislatures to women was passed with an overwhelming majority in the Upper House<sup>3</sup>.

**In Sri Lanka**, the women's literacy rate is higher than that of other South Asian countries. Despite the experience of a democratic system of governance, women voting in elections and women's leadership at the national level, their political representation at the national, regional and local levels have been abysmally low. For instance, women's representation slumped to 4.4% in the General Elections of 2004. In latest general elections of 2010 there is marginal increase to 5.3% with only 12 women in 225-member Parliament. Sri Lanka ranks 97th position in the world's representation of women in Parliament.

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<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.zeenews.com/news538850.html>)

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/politics/15th-lok-sabha-has-highest-number-of-women-mps\\_100194617.html#ixzz1K3jt73b5](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/politics/15th-lok-sabha-has-highest-number-of-women-mps_100194617.html#ixzz1K3jt73b5)

**In Afghanistan**, the 2009 elections saw an historic increase in the numbers of women engaged in the political process. More than 300<sup>4</sup> women ran as candidates -- many of whom did so in spite of enormous barriers and at great personal risk. Today, women represent 27.7% of the National Assembly of Afghanistan; 69 out of 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga and 28 out of 102 seats in the Upper House (Mesherano Jirga) are women.

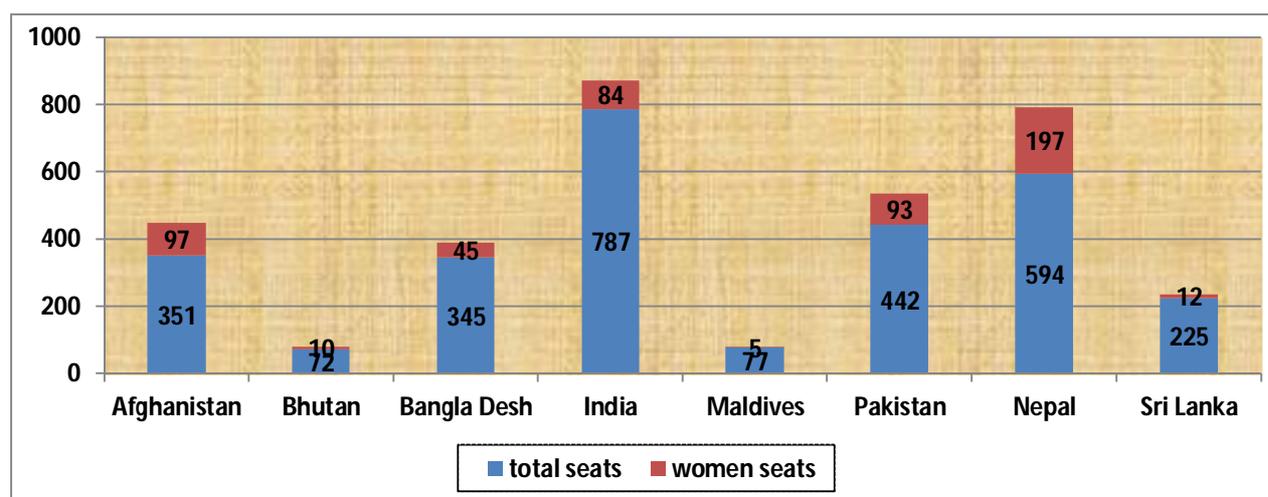
**In Maldives**, the under-representation of women reflected in the low proportion of seats held by women in national parliament and other decision making bodies is indicative of the challenges to gender equality and women's empowerment. Women represent only 6.5% (5 women) of a total 77-member Parliament. At local level there is no female Atoll councilor out of 15 Atoll Councilors. While out of 167 Island Councilors<sup>5</sup>, there are only two female councilors.

**Table- 1: Women representation in legislative assemblies of South Asian countries**

Country	Election year	Lower House/National Assembly			Upper House/Senate			Over all Women %
		Total seats	women	%	Total seats	women	%	
Afghanistan	2010	249	69	27.7%	102	28	27.5%	27.7 %
Bhutan	2008	47	4	8.5%	25	6	24.0%	13.8%
Bangladesh	2008	345	45	15%	---	---	---	15%
India	2009	545	59	10.8%	242	25	10.3%	10.6%
Maldives	2009	77	5	6.5%	---	---	---	6.5%
Pakistan	2008	342	76	22.2%	100	17	17%	21%
Nepal	2008	594	197	33.2%	---	---	---	33.2%
Sri Lanka	2010	225	12	5.3%	---	---	---	5.3%

Source of Information: <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm> (women in national parliaments as of March 2011)

**Figure 1- Percentage of women in lower & upper houses of the South Asian Parliaments**



<sup>4</sup> <http://www.ndi.org/node/15752>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.mv.undp.org/v2/publication\\_files/4d888bb4e97ae.pdf](http://www.mv.undp.org/v2/publication_files/4d888bb4e97ae.pdf)

## **Challenges to women political participation**

The key factors contribute to hinder women's participation in mainstream politics and governance, include nefarious nexus of feudalism, fundamentalism and neo-liberalism. Majority of women lack resources and knowledge of their rights, have to face gender-based violence, corrupt political culture and double burden of family role that restrict their effective participation in political processes. Although, both international and national legal frameworks in the region ensure the rights of women, the same are either not reflected in the local laws or not effectively enforced.

The gender intensive preferential electoral system and stereotypical social attitudes towards women have discouraged participation of women in elections. Electoral patterns and lack of financial resources is another major impediment to political participation of women. Then there is climate of political violence discourages women participation in politics. Lack of state level efforts to forge durable regional peace among South Asian neighbors is multiplier challenge, hindering cohesiveness among social movements and women struggles for the greater women solidarity and empowerment at South Asia level.

Lack of access, control, ownership of resources, power, information, social network etc, are the most common features of majority of South Asian women lives which shows an overall subordinate status and position of women. The social and economic attacks and neoliberal counter reforms against the working classes are also going to increase in the region, which ultimately is hitting the common women, restricting their possible participation in political processes.

Rising Religious fundamentalism is being used as the ideological underpinning for attacks on women, especially in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Brutal oppression of women in the name of religion is among the major challenges. Women are commonly exploited in the name of religion. Religion has a deep impact on human life but in South Asia the place of women is basically determined by local cultures and the value system. The observation of Purdha which is also common in south Asian societies is enforced and used as barrier in women way to political participation.

## **Way forward**

Having considered women's predominantly subordinate role in Asia, some campaign strategies need to be adopted for active participation by women in politics. These strategies should include initiation of social programs aiming at women economic empowerment, their enhanced access to resources. Struggle for elimination of discriminatory laws against women is equally vital pre-requisite to increase meaningful political participation of women at south Asia level.

Availability of opportunities for schooling of women in political leadership, easy access to political spheres and active participation in elections need to be ensured. Legal provisions for women's positions on election commissions, their representation in peace building at regional and international alliances would also help enhance the women empowerment process.

Dismal participation of the women in politics can be improved through affirmative action for increased participation in politics, as a goal as well as means for pushing forward equity in other areas of deprivation and discrimination. All the South Asia countries are the signatories of international conventions on women rights and especially the Beijing Action Plan which strongly recommend the reservation of quotas to facilitate women to enter in mainstream of political process. Promoting accountability and transparency within governance systems will also benefit women's qualitative participation and will enhance their confidence on systems.

The main hurdle in women participation in politics is the customary structure of the society where women are considered to be subordinated to men. Media campaign along with high literacy level supported by a strong women sensitive legal system can change the culture gradually.

To forge enhanced coordination, solidarity and greater convergence of social fight back movements and gender struggles existing in different countries of South Asia can help women to reclaim their due right and share in political process and governance.

The State policy should guide political parties to have enough space for women and women-friendly legal provisions. Political parties should draw codes of conduct to end the violence against women in politics. At the same time we must ensure that the women in our own organizations and in the political parties find their full place and that the simple adoption of parity or quotas for leadership bodies or electoral lists is not considered a sufficient answer to the obstacles to women's full participation in the political process.

There is strong need of united women's struggle to break the patriarchy and increase women's share in governance and political leadership. The concept of women as weaker sex and subordinate to men can be changed through women's equal share in decision level at politics. We must undertake efforts, addressing typical insensitivities of the States and the political forces towards women's involvement in the peace process. The women's rights activists, organizations and networks in South Asia, with a desire to make a difference in politics and government, have initiated the campaign of 'Women in Politics'. The Initiative of South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) is appreciable in this regard.

## **Conclusion**

Women of South Asia face many barriers in their attempts to claim their rightful place in politics. These barriers include the patriarchal structures of political parties, political violence, militarization, and globalization, vote buying, caste and minority group discrimination, poverty and deprivation, gender based discrimination and internal conflicts, religious extremism and cultural practices. Political parties neither recognize women as equal partners nor as a major force for political change, which is usually reflected in their constitutions. The stereotypical gender roles of women have further exacerbated the situation.

However, despite this grim scenario, the prospects of increasing women political participation are emerging in some South Asian countries, especially Nepal, Pakistan, India and Bangla Desh. The gains of the women's struggles in these countries for democratic reforms in the recent past heralded in a new era as South Asian countries have started introducing legal reforms for the

advancement of women and further to effect the participation of women in politics and governance. However, there is still a long way to go to achieve the objective of true representation of working class women in legislative bodies and governance. It is only a milestone on the road towards the ultimate equality.

Moreover, the international community's pledges on gender equality, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform efforts to bridge the gap in the formal political arena can help boost the campaign for 33% women representation in governance. Recently, Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have introduced special quotas and reservations to increase participation of women in politics while concerted efforts are needed for Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives, which are lagging behind.

Notwithstanding the fact that women of Afghanistan have better political representation as compare to several South Asian sisters, they are unable to empower themselves in real sense. They are facing multiple challenges in way to genuine political participation. They need conducive, durable socio-political environment to combat the extraordinary difficulties in highly male-dominated and patriarchal society.

Though women constitute the larger portion of the population of South Asia yet, they have not been able to reach the 33% mark at all decision-making levels. The achievement in Nepal in this regard must be recognized, where today 33.2% of the Constituent Assembly is composed of women. However, the major challenge for them is to institutionalize this achievement. In view of the positive legal reforms for women in South Asian countries, the regional women movements and struggles need to do focused and united efforts to achieve the target of 33% women representation in legislative bodies of the South Asian countries.