

Breaking the Barriers:
Claiming Women's Space in Politics in South Asia

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Background

The average woman in South Asia wakes each morning to a myriad of responsibilities and concerns. These concerns range from the quality of her children's education to the stability of the family's source of income to her ability to safely walk the streets near her home. What most women do not focus on, however, is how political and governmental actions affect "their" issues. Many do not realize that they can do something to improve the quality of their lives and that of their families and communities by reaching for political leadership or becoming involved in political and civic activities. If democracies are to function and to better their citizens' lives, women's voices need to be heard at the political level and the barriers to their participation have to come down.

In the world even though women are the major founders of the society, yet women have not achieved equality with men. Of the world's 1.3 billion poor people, it is estimated that nearly 70 per cent are women. Between 75 and 80 per cent of the world's 27 million refugees are women. There are many countries where women are second-class citizens. No matter how talented they are, they never get a chance to develop. A lot of countries are there where women are treated as subordinate and second class citizen, though the equal right is preserved in the constitution.

The political participation of women in the world seems relatively low and it is duly because of the existence of the patriarchal mindset even in the political parties in almost all countries in the world no matter how advanced and socially, economically, culturally and politically sound the countries are. The participation of women in parliament of Japan and USA is only 7.1% and 17% respectively. While in the countries like Rwanda it's 49% and in Sweden it's 46%. The status of women in the developed countries is also lower in all sectors. Leaving some exceptions of Scandinavian countries and some European, American and Asian countries, women in the world are socially, economically, culturally and politically dominated and they are excluded from the opportunities. Throughout the world, women face violence every day. From the battlefield to the bedroom, women are at risk from violence in all areas of life. Violence against women persists because of society canopy. Virtually every culture in the world contains forms of violence against women that are often invisible because they are seen as normal or acceptable. The underlying cause of violence against women lies in gender discrimination – the denial of women's equality with men in all areas of life.

South Asian countries are primarily linked with the status of women in family, society and the state structures. Traditional ethical code of the society expects women to remain restricted within four walls of home, which is still a common occurrence. In some of the countries of South Asia women are outlawed even to cast votes. In South Asian region, women are discriminated, because of son preference traditions of the society dominated by religious beliefs. Daughters are discriminated from birth to funeral ceremony. Women are also suffering from domestic violence, wrong tradition and cultural malpractices. Some awful

examples of violence are: sex selective abortion, wife battering, child marriage, polygamy, rape, sexual violence, trafficking of women & forced prostitution, sexual harassment, dowry, Tilak system, suicide, killings, and domestic violence, still prevailed. They are still accused in the name of Witchcraft. These all are happening only because of the patriarchal mindset and structures of south Asian society.

Women in South Asian countries are witnessing changes through development initiatives. Women are considered as poor of the poor people in developing countries, live under the same conditions as men, but suffer additional social and policy biases. Though this problem affects almost all sections of the people, women are recognized to be among the most disadvantaged groups. Political participation of women in the state structure and mechanisms is still a far dream even in this advanced century. Though, constitutions of all the countries have ensured equal status of all citizens without discrimination based on gender in every layers of governance, political participation of women in South Asian countries is very low. The decision and policy level positions are remains occupied and dominated by males' majority of them with the patriarchal psyche.

Those embracing facts and figures....

Indira, Benazir, Khaleda, Hasina, Chandrika, Sonia. These names from South Asia represent the glory of women's political history of the world lead their countries in times throughout last three decades. South Asia even boasts the world's first woman Prime Minister in nineteen sixties, ***Sirimavo Bandaranaike.*** It seems that south Asia is a fertile land of producing women leadership in politics. But the reality is totally inconsistent!

South Asia presents a unique paradox. Most countries in the region, has had a woman leader at some point in time, a phenomenon unparalleled in other regions of the world. Bangladesh has a unique distinction of two women leaders for last 25 years. This is in stark contrast to the minimal numbers of women who are elected to national parliaments and legislatures. The rate of women representation in South Asia in national parliament is the lowest in comparison to other part of the world.

The world average of women representation in national parliament is 18.4 while the average of South Asia is only around 9 before 2008¹.

¹ After adopting 33% reserve quota for women in 2007, the share of women in Nepal national parliament become 33.20 % after April 2008 election.

| Regional average of women representation in parliament (single or lower house) | |
|---|---------------|
| Americas | 21.4% |
| Europe - OSCE member countries including Nordic countries | 20.9% |
| Europe - OSCE member countries excluding Nordic countries | 19.3% |
| Asia | 18.1% |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 18.2% |
| Pacific | 14.9% |
| South Asia | 13.92% |

| <i>South Asian women in national parliament</i> (single or lower house) | |
|--|---------------|
| Nepal | 33.20% |
| Pakistan | 22.50% |
| Maldives | 12.00% |
| India | 9.10% |
| Bhutan | 8.51% |
| Bangladesh | 6.33% |
| Sri Lanka | 5.80% |

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union www.ipu.org

Over-the-dead-body syndrome

This apparent 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.

Country Wise situation

Bangladesh

The 1972 Constitution of Bangladesh reserves 15 seats for women in parliament. In 1976 quota was increased by 100% (30 seats). This provision laps in 1987. It was revised in 1990 and increased to 45 in 2003. In 1991 election 36 women contested in the National parliament and 4 were elected. At present percent of women in parliament is 2 %

In the National parliament of Bangladesh, with 30 reserve seats in the parliament in the elections of 1991 and 1996, the number of women in general and the reserved seat was 35 and 37 [5+30 or 10.60% and 11.20% respectively] Now with the withdrawal of

the reserve seat in April 12, 2001 the number of women declined from 37 to 6 during elections held in 2001[only 2% of total MPs]. In last parliamentary election 2008, 19 women have been elected through direct election in general seats.

Sri Lanka

In Sri-Lanka, the high literacy and education status of women has made little difference to their representation in institutions of governance. Though the majority of women exercise their political rights as voters or campaigners during election times, there was only less than 5.80 % of female representation in the parliament in 2005 and in the municipality and local government level participation was 1.7% in 2004. The percentage of women in parliament between the 1930s and the present has never exceeded six percent.

Bhutan

Bhutan is one of the few countries where there are no political parties. However, at the district and village levels there are established mechanisms that foster active people's participation in the policy making process. Women in Bhutan enjoy economic and political equality with the men. Bhutanese women are free to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programs. At the national level, 14 out of the 150 National Assembly members are women.

Maldives

The political system of *Maldives* is quite different to that of the rest of the South Asian countries. There is no special quota system in the parliament. In the absence of constitutional barriers to women's participation in top management, the main constraint of women's access to this position is the attitude of women themselves. The culture of female subordination has so much deeply rooted that the women generally believe that they are less capable than their male counterparts. At present women's participation at the parliament is 12 %.

Pakistan

In Pakistan, the system of the reserved seats for women in legislative assemblies has existed in one form or the other since its creation. In the 1956 constitution provided for 10 reserved seats for women in the National Assembly. In January 1999, the PPP introduced a bill in the Senate, proposing 9 reserved seats for women in the Senate, 40 in the NA (double the previous number) and 22.5 % in the provisional assembly (four times the previous reservation). However reserved seats have been reintroduced in 2002. 60 seats are reserved for women in Pakistan National Assembly. Presently a total of 71 women have obtain representation at national level, 60 on reserve seats and 11 on general seats. Women occupy

a total of 128 seats in provincial Assemblies. In local government presently 33% seats are reserved for women and a total of 36,191 women have been elected to local councils.

India

In the case of India, a land of one billion people and the world's largest democracy, representation of women in parliament is very low. With 545 members from across the country, the Lok Sabha, or the lower house of parliament, is a major decision-maker that charts the socio-economic and political lives of the people of India. Although the constitution of India guarantees equal political rights to women under Articles 15 (1) and 15 (3), the proportion of women members in the Lok Sabha, since 1950, has ranged from a low of 3.4 per cent in 1979-80 to 8.3 per cent at present one. In the Rajya Sabha, only 28 of 242 seats are held by women. Parliament has repeatedly witnessed ugly political exchanges and male lung power battles over the Women's Reservation Bill, which proposes 33% reservation for women. One government after another has put forward planning meetings that never arrived at a consensus.

Nepal

In Nepal, women were proactive participants in all the recent major political movements. But before the last election held in April 2008, women's share in national parliamentary seat was only 5.8 percent. The recent elections for Constituent Assembly in Nepal were transformational in ways more than one. It not only marked the end of oppressive monarchy and ushering in of a republic and a democracy, but also paved way for increasing role of women in governance.

As a result of adopting 33 percent quota in GENERAL seats, the present Constituent Assembly consists of 191 women member in the 601-member assembly. Despite concerns before the election that women members might not reach the 33% ratio stipulated by the interim constitution 30 women won seats via the first-past-the-post ballot. The proportional representation ballot allocated 161 seats for women, making the total number 191, which is 33.21% of the 575 elected representatives.

Why women are invisible in South Asian politics?

In many countries of South Asia women have played a very important role during the democratic movement, but their participation in the various spheres of public life has continued to remain minimal in comparison to their male counterparts.

There are various reasons and issues that are inherent in South Asian politics that impeded women's political participation. The political party systems in this region are highly male dominated. Due to stereotyped attitudes prevailing in the society towards women, they are not encouraged to be involved in politics. Further, the lack of child care support system

at the community level and women's multiple reproductive roles have taken away a lot of time that could have helped women engage in social networking. Lack of financial resources is also a major impediment for women's political participation. In South Asia, politics is always considered a dirty game only for 'big boys'. This is quite evident in election times when high incidence of violence takes place. The prevailing climate of political violence including corruption and manipulation discourages women in participating politics. In this scenario women are reluctant to participate in politics. In addition, there are cultural barriers which increase the existing gender gaps. This is because South Asia is a conservative society with deeply rooted prejudices that reinforce gender stereotyping.

In general perception, the following are detected as constraints behind the nominal participation of South Asian politics:

- Wrong Social and Cultural values
- Patriarchal Values and Norms
- Criminalization
- Lack of Family Support
- Lack of Institutional Support
- Economic Dependency/Lack of employment
- Lack of Education and Awareness

Why the quota system is essential?

While common belief stated in many reports relates this poor women representation to mainly to lack of education and employment and suggest that improving these two sectors will automatically increase women's political participation and representation; we beg to differ. If we emphasize solely on improving education, employment and other opportunities (family and social support, access to resources) for women and leave the area of their political representation/participation as a natural outcome of all this, the question may arise 'why do we need to artificially enforce women's participation by reserving as much as 33% of the seats to be filled with direct election in the national parliament?'. We believe this enforcement is very important and would like to answer this question starting out with questioning some of the most common misconceptions:

Improved education does not necessarily lead to greater participation of women in politics. Vice versa, lack of education is not the biggest obstacle in developing women (or male) leadership. The history of South Asian region suggest in favour of this observation. Countries like India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have gained significant success over the years in educating their female population. Unfortunately this did not reflect in the political scenario of these countries. For example, Sri Lanka has achieved a literacy rate of 100%, however female participation in the parliament is only 4.4%. India has a large mass of educated women as opposed to their poor presence in the parliament (8.8%).

Therefore, as it did not pose a big challenge to men, formal education should not pose a major obstacle for women in terms of political participation and leadership. However, political awareness is important and we believe it will not be long before women in Bangladesh start taking politics more seriously - as soon as they see that they have a meaningful representation in the parliament. This is why we strongly support the call for reservation of 33% seats for women in the parliament and direct election in those seats.

As with education, lack of employment is also not the biggest constraint in woman's access to politics. Over the years more and more women have entered job market but their political participation did not improve accordingly. While education and employment are very useful means for empowering women, these need not be constraints for women's political life and achieving these do not automatically ensure greater and active participation in politics. So we demand reserving 33% seats for women in the parliament and direct election to fill these seats in order to jump start women's meaningful participation in politics.

We believe the main challenges for women lie in the structure of our political system and political culture. As stated earlier, in South Asia political achievements often rely heavily on money and muscle power and our political system is very patriarchal. As a result of women's limited access to family property as well as other resources as opposed to men, women do not often get a level playing political ground to compete with men.

The wind of change: Emerging Women in Local Government

In 1990s, three countries of South Asia: India, Bangladesh and Nepal made especial provision to increase the participation of women in local govt. through direct election.

In Nepal, the ordinance of 1997 ensured a 20 per cent reservation of seats for women, which has been a breakthrough, and has contributed to the increased participation of women in local elected bodies. One seat is reserved for women in each ward of the Village Development Committee. The new ordinance forced all political parties to support at least one female candidate. This fact encouraged women to get more involved in political activities in Nepal. About 40,000 female candidates were elected in the local elections of 1997. This provision has increased the numerical involvement of women in the local government units.

In Bangladesh, 33% reserve seat for women through direct election introduced in 1997. In consequence, the 1997 union parishad election significantly increased the participation of women as voters, as contenders for general seats with men and as candidates for reserved seats. Although there was some confusion about whether or not women should contest from the general seats, they did contest. The 1997 election saw more than 46,000 female candidates competing for 12,828 reserved seats. Nearly 4,000 female candidates competed for the general seats. In Gaibandha district, northwest of Bangladesh, 25 female candidates won the elections, defeating their male counterparts. Furthermore, as many as 20 female

candidates were elected to the posts of chairpersons (PLAGE, 1999). The negligible number of female chairpersons indicates the marginal political status of women in the local power structure. Nonetheless, the massive participation of women as candidates for directly elected positions will be considered a landmark in the institutionalisation process of women's participation in Bangladesh's politics.

In India the 73rd and 74th amendments passed in 1992 has been instrumental in gaining a one-third representation of women in local government bodies. Reservation for women has ensured that one million women have emerged as leaders in the villages of India. The Act also ensures that one-third of the positions for chairpersons are reserved for women. In the first round of elections, five million women stood for elections to the one million seats.

A qualitative change in role local govt. has been marked due to these women leadership. The most common story across India, Nepal and Bangladesh that emerges is one of corruption-free governance strived for by the women leaders. This is not saying that women leaders are not corrupt. But, by and large, the stories that emerge tell of women standing up to contractors, enforcing transparency in the system, and facing violence in return, in some instances.

The other common story is about changing priorities in development. Women's practical gender concerns, like water, sanitation, children's education, healthcare, domestic violence and alcohol abuse, are gaining currency within the development agenda of rural areas.

Increased Women Participation need for qualitative shift in politics

There is a common feminists argument is that pioneer women parliamentarians became substitute men – that they were socialized into the male dominated political culture and became indistinguishable from the men they replaced. But studies say men are known to behave differently when women are absent. Because it upsets gender boundaries, the presence of even one woman will alter male behaviour; the presence of several women will alter it even further. West European experience shows that where women MPs have a mission to effect change even small numbers can produce significant results.

While the presence of even one woman can make a difference, long-term significant change will largely be realized when there is a sufficient number of women in parliament who are motivated to represent women's concerns. This need for a significant minority of women to affect political change has been referred to by feminist political scientists as “critical mass”. According to Drude Dahlerup, the test that a critical mass of women is present is the acceleration of the development of women's representation through acts that improve the situation for themselves and for women in general. These actions are critical acts of empowerment. In her studies of women MPs in Scandinavia, Dahlerup found that women politicians worked to recruit other women and developed new legislation and

institutions to benefit women. As their numbers grew it became easier to be a woman politician and public perceptions of women politicians changed. ²

Without women no equality, development and peace

The Beijing Platform for action in 1995 declared that without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspective at all levels of decision making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved. The rights guaranteed in international conventions states that "women shall be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies, established by national law, on equal terms with men, without any discrimination. The Beijing Platform for Action 1995 Section 181 says that "Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account. This was further elaborated in 2004 General Assembly 58th Session Resolution 58/142 reaffirming that "women's full and equal participation in the political process and decision making will provide a balance that more accurately reflects the composition of society, is needed to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning, plays a pivotal role in furthering women's equal status, including improving women's socio-economic status, and contributes to re-defining political priorities and providing new perspectives on political issues" The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) include female representation in politics as an indication of progress towards the empowerment of women.

In the global development discourse, development requires decisions by those control resources, covering material as well as non-material aspects, including political power. The paucity of female legislators means that the interests of women are not adequately represented in the highest body of the State. Unless women gain leadership in the State governance, market and civil society it will be difficult to transform or shape forces of social, political and economic processes to work in favor of women and gender equality.

² Dahlerup, Drude. 1988. "From a Small to a Large Minority: Theory of Critical Mass", Scandinavian Political Studies. Vol. 11. No. 4. pp. 275-298.