

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

CONFERENCE OF SOUTH ASIAN WOMEN

January 9-10, 2009

SAAPE Secretariat, Kathmandu

Organizer

**South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)
Gender Thematic Group**

Coordinated by

**Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangh, (BNPS)
Bangladesh**

Local Host

Sanyukta Mahila Sangh Sangharsha Samiti

Jagaran Nepal (For women rights, peace and governance)

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Acknowledgement

The South Asian Conference on 'Breaking the Barriers: Claiming Women's Space in Politics in South Asia' was a landmark event to commence a united effort for advancing political participation of South Asian women. It wouldn't have been possible if a number of enthusiastic organizations and individuals had not come out of their way to assist and participate in the process.

The Gender Thematic Group (GTG) of SAAPE would like to convey its heartfelt gratitude to the Sanyukta Mahila Sangh Sangharsha Samiti and Jagaran Nepal for their kind hosting to organise the conference and tremendous efforts to make the event a meaningful success. Ms Sharmila Kharki, President of Jagaran Nepal led and coordinated the entire organizing process. This conference report also is an outcome of her hard endeavor. Any lexus of gratefulness may not be enough to acknowledge Ms Karki.

We are especially grateful to Dr. Arjun Karki, Regional Coordinator of SAAPE for his overall guidance and direction. Sometimes only the belongingness of such a personality is enough for inspiration. We are also grateful to SAAPE Regional Secretariat specially to Rachita Sharma Dhungel and to Sarba Raj Khadka for their all time cooperation.

We are indebted to Ms. Sahana Pradhan, former minister of Nepal and senior politician of South Asia who enriched the movement by her gracious presence and contribution as the Chief Guest of the opening session of the conference. We like to mention the name of Ms. Bidhya Bhandari, Chairperson of the inaugural session and United Marxist Leninist leader; Ms. Uma Adhikari, President of Inter Party Women's Alliance of Nepal and Constituent Assembly (CA) member; Ms. Sita Khadka, CA member and member of Sanyukta Mahila Sangh Sangharsa Samiti; Eng. Najia Kharoti, Director of Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development of Afghanistan; Ms. Radha Adhikari of Bhutan, Ms Amna Buttar, Member of Assembly in Pakistan; Ms. Shanthini Konghage and Ms Shrama Shakthi, Provincial Council Member of Sri Lanka; Ms. Anu Verma, Astha Sansthan, India and Mr. Zahir of Maldives for their kind presence, valuable contribution and pledge for being with us.

We express special thanks to Ms. Bushra Khaliq, Pakistan; Dr Ujjaini Halim, India; Nimalka Fernando, Sri Lanka; Dr. Gitiara Nasreen, Bangladesh and again Ms. Sharmila Kharki, Nepal for preparing and presenting their respective Country Status Paper on women in politics.

We would also like to recognize Ms. Shahnaz Sumi, Mr. Faisal Bin Majid and Ms. Priyanka Kabir of SAAPE GTG Secretariat in Bangladesh for their remarkable effort to coordinate with the participants and for developing the Regional Status Paper.

Last but not the least, we express our thankfulness to all the members, guests, participants, media representatives, volunteers and rapporteurs whose involvement were our incentive behind the initiative.



Rokeya Kabir
Coordinator
Gender Thematic Group
South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)

Acronyms

ANWA	All Nepal Women Association
BNPS	Bangladesh Nationation Pragati Sangh
BPFA	Beijing Platform of Action
CA	Constituent Assembly
CEDAW	Convention on Ellimination of all Forms of Discriminaiton against Women
CPN Maoist	Communist Party of Nepal Maoist
DDC	District Development Committee
EC	Election Commission
FTPP	First Past the Post
ICCPR	International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights
ICESR	International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights
MPs	Member of Parliaments
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Reconstruction and Development
NGO	Non-Government Organizations
SAAPE	South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAW	Violence against Women
VDC	Village Development Committee
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive Summary

Women in South Asia have been contributing to the mode of production and economic growth for a long time. However, traditional socio-cultural values restrict the South Asian women within a limited domestic periphery. The states and the societies do not give women equal status with their male counterparts, which results in rampant discrimination. Inequality and violence against women have been major barriers to their empowerment. The patriarchal societies compel girls to accept early marriage. As a part of reproductive health, women have few choices of spacing birth, sexual behaviour, use of contraception and/or unwanted pregnancy. The societies in South Asia are deeply rooted with nutritional discrimination against girls from the time of breast-feeding. The mortality rate of mothers and female children is higher than that of boys and men.

Women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, have been exemplary to provide political leadership to their nations. 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. Unlike these countries, only a few women are able to demonstrate their representation in policy and decision-making in Nepal. 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, several women's organizations came into being to raise the political and social awareness among women in Nepal. In Nepal's 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 CA election in 2008 gave 197 women to representation as legislation. Few women were included through the pressure from women's rights activists in the Interim Constitution Draft Committee in 2006. Women now demand equal rights as citizens. Discrimination and injustice against women will soon end in Nepal. Such representation of women in the CA will bring about positive results in the system for women's diverse representation and participation. This new paradigm of women's inclusive participation in the constitution making process will lead towards the drafting of a women friendly constitution in the republic of Nepal.

Few women in the region have been successful convincing their societies that they could lead the country. Benazir Bhutto, during her premiership in Pakistan, appointed women judges and bankers. 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 woman always remained limited.

Women in Bhutan 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.

In Bangladesh, the State has protected women's rights through its Constitution. This policy provides opportunity for the political empowerment of women in the country. However, in the 8th national election held in 2001, 32 women stood for election from 40 constituencies. Out of 52 women candidates, only 19 were elected for the 300-member ninth parliament of

the republic which is only 6.33 per cent. Within the 32 member ministerial cabinet, five are women including the Prime Minister.

In India, women currently lead many of the dominant national and regional political parties. The Indian independence movement also saw participation of many women leaders. Right after independence, women's political participation was negligible. During the 1952 elections, the percentage of women contestants was only 2.29. Political parties seem 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.

In Sri Lanka, the women's struggle in 1931 achieved voting rights for all women over 21 years of age. The second woman to enter the State Council was also the first Tamil woman, Nasyum Saravanamuttu (1897-1940). Women are the major contributors to the country's foreign exchange earnings and the Sri Lankan women's literacy rate is higher than that of other South Asian countries. Despite the experience of seven decades of a democratic system of governance, women voting in elections and women's leadership at the national level, women's political representation at the national, regional and local levels are abysmally low. For instance, women's representation slumped to 4.4% in the General Elections of 2004. Sri Lanka ranks 97th position in the world's representation of women in Parliament.

Some key factors contribute to hinder women's participation in mainstream politics. They lack knowledge of their rights. Gender-based violence has also restricted women's effective participation in political processes. Although, both international and national legal frameworks in the region ensure the rights of women, they 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. Lack of financial resources is another major impediment for the political participation of women. The climate of political violence discourages women participation in politics. Seven decades have passed from the universal franchise for women but only a few women represent in political bodies.

Today women constitute half of the population of South Asia. Women's rights activists, organizations and networks in all countries of South Asia have initiated a campaign for women in politics. They have started collective, unionized and freedom movements despite their ideological and political differences. Political campaigns and street demonstrations have drawn a considerable number of women. Moreover, many women joined the Maoist battalion in Nepal, and the Nepal Army has also begun to recruit of women. Many women are now looking at their own entrepreneurship. In public and private sectors, special measures for the capacity development of women have been initiated.

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 South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) is leading the movement for women's participation in politics at the regional level. SAAPE is a network of like-minded NGOs, mass-based organizations, academics, trade unions and community based organizations from South Asia, working for poverty eradication through policy research, advocacy, lobbying and campaigns.

Having considered women's predominantly subordinate role in Asia, some campaign strategies need to be adopted for there to be active participation by women in politics. These strategies should cover opportunities for schooling of women in political leadership, easy access to political spheres and active participation in election. Legal provisions for women's positions on election commissions, their representation in peace building and regional and international alliances would be praiseworthy. The State policy should guide political parties to have enough space for women and women-friendly legal provisions. Clear and enforceable structures in the political parties and sustainable policies and plans for the economic empowerment of women will help guide the political future for women. Political parties should draw codes of conduct to end the violence against women in politics. Men should engage in campaigns for women's rights and justice. Various stakeholders such as media, civil society, and political organizations should support the mission for political participation of women. There is a need for a strong common platform such as an inter-party women's alliance.

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Women suffer from domestic violence and cultural malpractices. Examples of violence are sex selective abortion, wife battering, child marriage, polygamy, rape, sexual violence, trafficking of women and forced prostitution, sexual harassment, dowry, the Tilak system, suicide, killings, and domestic violence.

Women live under the same conditions as men but women suffer from additional social and political prejudice. The traditional view of politics is that it is an articulation, or working out of relationships within an already given power structure. It is considered an activity, a conscious, deliberate, participation in the process by which resources are allocated among many citizens. This concept divides politics into two dichotomies – public and private, which excludes women from public political sphere. Political participation of women in the State mechanisms has remained a far-fetched dream even in the 21st century. The Constitutions of all the countries in South Asia have ensured equal status and opportunities to all citizens. However, the political participation of women in South Asia is extremely low. Males occupy and dominate the decision and policy level positions, most of them with a patriarchal psyche.

1.2. Objectives of the conference

Following are the main objectives of the conference:

- To identify the status of women in politics in South Asia and build a common understanding of the status and key issues of women;
- To strategize campaign and advocacy initiatives to increase the meaningful participation of women in the political arena of South Asian countries;
- To increase coordination and collaboration between the actors of the campaign on 'Women in Politics in South Asia';

1.3. Participants

The conference welcomed around 50 participants from eight countries of the South Asia region. The women's rights activists, parliamentarians, government representatives and civil society actors participated in the conference. The conference began with the formal opening session on January 9 and concluded on January 10, 2009, with declarations and recommendations for a future campaign on women in politics, in South Asia.

1.4. The Conference Mechanics

The conference included extempore speeches by the political leaders, gender experts and civil society representatives and thematic presentations by gender experts from the countries of South Asia. Roundtable discussions and plenary sessions were conducted. The focus of the presentations, workshops and discussions has been documented under the relevant topics.

The conference reviewed and reflected the constitutions along with other legal tools in relation to international human rights instruments, including CEDAW and the Beijing Platform of Action. Insights were drawn from women's adventures in politics, their

contributions towards democracy, human rights and political inclusion in South Asia. The conference viewed the urgency to institutionalize the achievements and to adopt a campaign strategy for women in politics.

1.5 Setting the Tone

The tone of the conference was set in the inaugural session held on 9 & 10 January 2009 at the RRN Conference Hall in Kathmandu. Among the speakers were key women political leaders of Nepal, civil society women leaders of the SAARC regions and representatives of the organizers of the conference. Ms. Sharmila Karki, Chairperson of Jagaran Nepal facilitated the inaugural session. Ms. Sahana Pradhan, former Minister for Foreign Affairs of Nepal was the chief guest of the inaugural ceremony in which other distinguished guests from Nepal and South Asia were present. Ms. Bidhya Bhandari, former minister and female leader of Nepal presided over the session. The chief guest and representatives of the eight countries of South Asia inaugurated the opening session. The session included a welcome speech, objective highlights, SAAPE briefing and greetings from the representatives of all countries.

Ms. Sahana Pradhan - *Former Minister of Nepal*

Mrs Pradhan, sharing her six-decade long experience in politics said that it was her great pleasure to meet the participants and hear their voices in the regional conference on women's movement in South Asia. She reiterated that the women's movement was started two centuries ago in India and over 90 years in Nepal. She expressed her dissatisfaction that though she has 61 years of experience in women's movement, she has seen that the women's issues of critical concerns are not addressed adequately in the region. Highlighting women's contribution in the Nepali politics, she said that a large number of women joined the April Movement in 2006, which made possible to uproot more than a two-century long history of autocratic monarchy and set up republicanism in the country.

Ms Pradhan opined that the patriarchal reign across the world has continued women's problems. When the UN was established, the participants forgot to utter women's representation and said that 'we men gathered have declared

She reiterated that the patriarchal society would like women to be beautiful, loving and caring. She had a very tough time to be a woman politician for last six decades because politics was not the domain of women. So far, men have been occupying the territory of politics, the world has become more and more unsecured. Women have the capacity to correct all the wrong happenings in the world. Although, politics and economy are closely related, women do not have right to the land and property.

Ms Pradhan is on the one hand encouraged to see remarkably increased number of women in the Constituent Assembly in Nepal but on the other hand, she finds extremely low number of women within her party - UML. Participation of women has been changed from 6 to 33 percent in Nepal due to the proportional representation system which would have been only 40 instead of 197 seat if depended upon the FPTP alone. Therefore, her party would like to enroll more women. Ms Pradhan expressed her firm belief to change political structure of a party..

Ms Pradhan has expressed her dismay that though the UN has promulgated the international instruments such as CEDAW and UN Resolution 1325 in favour of women, governments of those States who are the parties to these instruments have shown resentment to implement

them. Therefore, it is women who need to press the government to enforce the UN resolutions and declarations unconditionally. She urged women of South Asia to join hands to fight against the common problems, by developing strategy and action plan. Highlighting the value of solidarity, she expressed her confidence that women can make the world a better place to live in.

Ms. Sita Khadka, *CA Member and Member of Samyukta Mahila Sangh Sangharsa Samiti*

Ms Khadka said that women in Nepal have come a long way of struggle and women movements to achieve the 33% (197) women members at the Constituent Assembly. Now they have an important responsibility to write a gender-friendly constitution. Women have proudly fought for their rights and for a republican set. The rights movement in Nepal started in 1946 and it has taken more than 60 years to achieve the result. She highlighted on the need of a responsibility for ensuring women' rights in new federal Nepal.

Ms Khadka expressed her optimism to be able to bring change while women work hand in hand in South Asia. The objective of SAAPE is also to 'make the change happen in South Asia' for which this conference could show the seed. She appealed the participants to work together to be an example in South Asia by ensuring women's rights and their higher representation in politics.

Dr. Arjun Karki, *President of SAAPE*

Dr Karki briefly highlighted that SAAPE, a vibrant, active, pro-poor and pro-people organization working in South Asia, is an alliance of civil society organizations, trade unions and women rights defenders. A group of civil society activists created SAAPE. The idea at the time of forming SAAPE is that poverty was not a technical issue; this is not the issue of lack of food, and not a result of natural calamities, but this has to do with politics. SAAPE works for justice in South Asia for which movement against poverty and injustice needs to continue.

“We really need to look at the gender justice in South Asia, where violation against women rights exists. We need to work on women rights and we collectively decided to organize gender thematic group led by Rokeya Kabir. SAAPE has also other five thematic groups to deal with each issue. The other thematic groups also consider gender as a cross cutting issue”, Dr Karki Said.

Dr Karki expressed his gratitude to Rokeya Kabir, Sharmila Karki and ANWA leaders for organizing this awe-inspiring conference of South Asia on women in politics. SAAPE would like to encourage for preparing the advocacy campaign strategy to mobilize women activist across South Asia. It is a coincidence that this conference has taken place in Nepal at the time of big political change in the country. The level of women's participation in Constituent Assembly is 33%, which is quite high. Others can learn and share many things from Nepal. Dr Karki stressed on a need to achieve at least 33% participation of women in politics in South Asia. Politics is the key to all and nothing can be done for justice without participation in politics. He expressed optimism that this programme would be able to design campaign strategy for women in politics in South Asia.

Ms Rokeya Kabir, *Bangladesh, Coordinator for Gender Thematic Group, SAAPE*,

Ms. Kabir highlighted the objective of the two-day regional workshop. In her speech, she shared the rationale behind choosing Nepal as a venue, where some remarkable political changes have taken place, and all the participants want to see the big political changes. Bangladesh recently had an election and greater number of women than men did vote. This is the first time in Bangladesh that large number of women exercised their voting rights and large number of women now represents in the parliament. All election observers say that the youth and women played a vital role to change the existing scenario. Women were mostly in the street at the time of election campaign.

Ms Kabir said that South Asia is facing extremism in social and political life. Women are suffering from all forms of discrimination. The highest numbers of rich and poor people live in South Asia which needs to be changed. Women do not only want participation in politics but also in decision-making. We are working to bring some kind of justice to those who can take the lead role of the majority i.e. women.

Despite geographical proximity among the SAARC countries, traveling is difficult for some of them. The meetings she considers will help break the difficulties. The participants will learn something to take back home. She stressed on the needs of solidarity, which helps achieve their goals.

Ms. Uma Adhikari, *President of Inter Party Women's Alliance and CA Member*

Ms Adhikari said that she is happy to share some experiences with the delegates of South Asian Countries. The problems of women all over the world are almost similar. Women have been fighting for equal rights in Nepal for a long time. It was a great struggle for women to achieve 33% representation in the Constituent Assembly. Nepal ranks 17th position in the world with higher participation of women in the Parliament. She said that just having a woman Prime Minister or President is not enough. There are examples in South Asia like India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan where women have become Prime Minister and President but the representation of women in parliament and in politics is very low.

Ms Adhikari reiterated that women are fighting for 50% share in politics and decision-making. They have the right to get 50% seat in the parliament. Nepal is writing a new constitution. Solidarity from the people of South Asia will be instrumental to achieve a woman friendly constitution in Nepal. She expressed her solidarity to the movement of other countries in South Asia for democracy, human rights and women's equal participation in politics. She also suggested SAAPE to build solidarity among women activist of the eight countries to help fight for equal rights and expected that the two-day workshop would prepare a detail plan for ensuring women rights.

Ms. Anu Verma, *Astha Sansthan, Rajasthan, India*

Ms Verma said that the conference has been insightful for the journey of learning. Politics, she said, means the ability to influence people. She would like to understand how patriarchy

is rooted in social, economic and cultural realms. Ms Verma hoped that the conference would be able to prepare the campaign for increasing women's number in politics and decision making in South Asia.

Ms. Shanthini Konghage, *Shrama Shakthi, and Provincial Council Member of Sri Lanka*

Ms Konghage said that women are not alone in their countries and region but they have strong barriers to fight against. The people of Sri Lanka are proud to make first women Prime Minister and President in the world. However, women still have poor representation in the parliament. Therefore, they are fighting for equal representation. She said that she belonged to the opposition party of Sri Lanka. There is election on February 14. She was in Nepal amidst the election campaign to express solidarity with the South Asian friends.

Ms Konghage expressed her gratitude to SAAPE for its support in increasing women in Parliament. In the election, finance is supposed to play important role because there is a huge financial commitment for each candidate. However, she said that women could not make financial commitment in election, which they need to overcome. She expressed her optimism that the discussions on two-day conference would be very fruitful for designing campaign for women's movement for women in politics.

Ms. Amna Buttar, *Member of Assembly in Pakistan*

Ms Buttar said that the gender would create difference between men and women. She would like to see more men in women's movement. She stressed on the issue of women rights as human rights. She informed that they confounded an organization in Pakistan with equal number of men and women which she believes would create synergy in women' movement. Women and men both have feeling of unity. Poverty eradication is only possible if men and women work together.

Ms Buttar reiterated that in South Asia, more and more women are coming in politics, as head of States but not in parliament and State positions. Benjir Bhutto made women judges, bankers etc. She supported women to enhance their competence. It is not only important for women to engage in politics but is also equally important that many more women should vote as they have rights to participate in the political process. Not only in South Asia, but in other parts of the world as well, women in politics come from elite group. That is why more women should come into politics from middle and lower classes.

Everybody should work hard to make South Asia a better place. She expressed her solidarity for the women' movement in this region.

Ms. Radha Adhikari, *Bhutan*

Ms Adhikari said that 130,000 Bhutanese are living in Nepal as refugees and she belongs to the same group living in Nepal for 17 years. The Bhutanese are facing severe problems of human rights violation. They do not have right to express; they cannot wear clothes of their choice. The Government of Bhutan considers that the Bhutanese people living in the lower belt of Bhutan are all criminals as it is a crime to speak against government and the king. Women in the refugee camps want to return Bhutan and Radha would like to see women in

the Bhutanese parliament. She said that solidarity of South Asian people is inevitable to break the barrier of the Bhutanese women to participate in political process and in decision-making.

Eng. Najia Kharoti, *Director in MRRD, Afghanistan*

Ms Kharoti expressed that they spent dark time during Taliban's regime in Afghanistan. Though she is not a political woman, she is in favour of women's empowerment. Women take roles in decision making at grassroots. Women in rural areas are poor. Men and women should work together to fight the situation. The Afghani people worked hard after Taliban and got big achievements.

Ms Kharoti said that when they work for development, one is man and another is woman. There are 34 provinces in the country. They have big group of people in parliament, ministry and directors as women. She expressed solidarity with the South Asian people for the movement of women rights and equality.

Ms. Bidhya Bhandari, *Chairperson of the programme, and UML leader*

Ms Bhandari in her closing speech thanked all the participants for their input and thought provoking statements. She expressed her earnest wish to have a plan in such a way that the objective is achievable so that women of South Asia can move ahead together.

Ms Bhandari wanted to urge all to fight violence against women, create space in politics, economic independence and social and cultural rights. The challenges are more or less the same in South Asia. The society is embedded with patriarchal and feudal mindset so that they should have a right target to bring about change. Discrimination against women has become a regional and global issue. Women's struggle for rights should be two pronged i.e. top down and bottom up.

Ms Bhandari said that they are not fighting for the space of the handful of women but for emancipation of great number of women. Women are capable of performing as good as or better than men are. Women's representation was merely 8% before the movement. After the people's uprising, women persuaded the parliament to pass a political commitment for greater representation. Women claimed 50% of share but they have started the journey from 33% representation at all levels of State mechanisms. She emphasized on the need to have a provision for women in the laws and constitution for real and effective change. Otherwise, patriarchal society is not easy to change. In Nepal, this is appropriate time to write a new constitution, which should be gender friendly.

Ms Bhandari hoped that the conference would be able to design campaign strategy. One of the key strategies she emphasized is poverty eradication. She stressed on the need of high level as well as grassroots programmes. She said that she has envisioned beautiful future of

2. Overview of Country Experiences

2.1 Afghanistan

Eng. Najia Kharoti

The situation of women was worse in Afghanistan before 2002 because women did not participate in politics. The Taliban regime was a dark age. The situation after 2002 has positively changed because many women have taken positions in the governance. Women from diverse vocations now support other women to improve their life conditions. Women take a role in decision making at a grassroots level. Women in rural areas are poor. Men and women work together to fight the situation. We worked hard after Taliban regime and got big achievement. Now, woman's ratio is considerably high in the area of social and development activities. Afghanistan has a big group of people in parliament; ministry and many directors are women. One of the pertinent reasons of hindering women in politics is lack of security and low level of political education in the rural area.

2.2 Bangladesh

2.2 1. Introduction

The sex ratio among the 123.1 million population of Bangladesh is 106 males for every 100 females. Therefore, women constitute about 49 per cent of the total population. Women in real sense are not considered equal to men not only because of the income poverty but also for their positions in the society embedded in patriarchy. Though a lot of efforts towards women's empowerment have been appreciated, for example, NGOs' interventions on poor women, there are still a range of challenges, particularly in the area of "political empowerment" which has been a significant issue for various development practitioners and women's organizations .

2.2.2 The Constitution and Legal Framework

In Bangladesh, the State has protected women's rights through its Constitution. Under the Section 28(8) of the Constitution, nothing can stop the government to take any step for the sake of development of any backward community. Article 10 ensures participation of women at all levels. Clause 1 of Article 19 directs that the State will take an effort to provide equal opportunities for all its citizens. The Chapter on 'Fundamental Rights' contains that all citizens are equal before law and should receive equal legal treatment (Article 27). The Articles 36-39 regarding citizens' political rights and activities do not discriminate between men and women. Following are the major constitutional provisions:

- The State does not allow discrimination against any citizen on the basis of religion, race, sex, case or place of birth (Article 28 (1));
- It also guarantees women equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life (Article 28 (2));
- It entitles all citizens to equal protection of the law (Article 27) and endeavours to ensure participation of women in Bangladesh
- Article 9 commits that State shall encourage Local Government Institution composed of representative of area concerned and in such institutions, special representation shall be given, as far as possible to peasants, workers, and women.

Bangladesh is also a signatory of Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) and Platform for Action (PFA), Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 are notable. The country also adopted a National Women Advancement Policy 2008, which was first declared in 1997. This policy clearly provides opportunity for the political empowerment of women in the country. Recently, the Local Government Commission has proposed 40% reserved seats for women in the local government through rotation for the next three elections.

2.2.3 Women and Political Participation

The actual number of women members in different political parties cannot be determined because gender-specific records are not avoidable. Nevertheless, a slow trend towards women's greater participation has emerged over the decade. Though women's number in leadership position has increased over the last two decades, there is a limited females' involvement in party structures. However, between the two large political parties of the country, Bangladesh Awami League and BNP, Bangladesh Awami League has eight women among 17 members in the central Executive Committee.

Apart from the party President Sheikh Hasina, there are three women in the Presidium and three in the Secretariat and a single one as a general member. The metropolis and other committees lack 33% women's representation. Another large party BNP has 11 women in their 148-member central Executive Committee. Apart from Begum Khaleda Zia, the party President, there are six women in the Executive Committee and three as central members. This is even less than 6% of women representation. Jamayate Islami, Bangladesh, for its ideological nature, did not allow women members in their Central Committee or 'Majlish e Shura' in the past. However, the party has very recently amended its constitution to have a particular number of women members in committees. The leftist party CPB has four women members out of 45 in its central Committee which translates to slightly over 6% of representation. The district level committees of all these parties have very few women representation with some of the parties having no women at all in the district committees.

2.2.4 Electoral Process and Women's Rights

In Bangladesh, women leaders and party workers engage in the task of mobilizing and canvassing voters, particularly women, in favour of their party candidate(s). By making special arrangements such as separate election booths for women and female Presiding and Polling Officers, the turnout rate of women voters has increased. During the general elections of 1991, 1996, 2001 and local level elections in 1993, 1997 and 2003, the level of enthusiasm among women to exercise their voting rights was very encouraging.

Almost half of the total voters in Bangladesh are women. In the 2001 election, 78 per cent of women cast votes which is greater than 76.6 per cent. This statistics adequately indicates the importance of women's participation in the elections. Women's social, political, economic and legal needs and wants are vastly different from that of men. Therefore, if the political parties want women's vote they need to realize the needs of women and respond positively.

2.2.5 Women's Participation in National Parliament

In the 8th national election held in 2001, 32 women competed from 40 constituencies. The major political parties nominated 19 women only in 29 seats where Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina competed from 5 constituencies each for each seat, and Begum Rowshan Ershad of Jatio Party from 3 constituencies. On the other hand, in the 7th national election held in 1996, 36 women competed from 44 constituencies. Representation of women in national parliament and election candidature was one of the lowest records in the world in Bangladesh. However, the situation becomes changed in the national election of 29 December 2008. For the first time in the history of Bangladesh, record number of women candidates participated in the national poll. Out of 52 women candidates a total of 19 (36.53%) have been elected for the 300-member ninth parliament (6.33% women) of the republic. Compared to the eighth parliament, this is a three-fold increase. Only six women from three parties became MPs of the former parliament by the direct vote. Under the premiership of Sheikh Hasina, the new 32-member cabinet has sworn in on January 6, 2009. Out of 32 ministers, five ministers including the Prime Minister are women. Three female MPs are the ministers and one as State

minister to head at least three key ministries i.e. foreign affairs, home, and agriculture. Moreover, 3 topmost positions of national parliament (Leader of the House, Opposition leader of the House and Deputy Leader of the House) are also led by women at the present national parliament. The women politicians in Bangladesh had never have placed themselves in the front seats of politics and decision-making level like in 2009.

2.2.6 Reserved Seats in the National Parliament

The Article 65, Clause 3 of the Constitution (1972) reserves fifteen seats exclusively for women members. However, within less than ten years time, this number increased to 30. The term for the constitutionally guaranteed reserved seats for women was expired in December 1987 which would mean that there was no longer any reserved seat for women in the Parliament. In 1990, the tenth amendment of the Constitution, Article 65 revived the reservation for women again with for 30 seats for 10 more years. Consequently, 30 women were elected on March 30, 1991 in the fifth Parliament. Currently, there are only 45 reserved seats in the parliament, and according to the existing provision, they are elected by their male counterparts (male members), not by the voter. On the occasion of International Women Day 2009, the Prime Minister declared 100 reserved seats for women through direct election.

2.2.7 Pursuing Political Empowerment: The Barriers at a Glance

Women face a number of obstacles for political representation. Some of the obstacles include lack of finance, restrictive movement, and a limited scope to influence the organization because the political networks are intensely dominated by males. The male leaders on the one hand ignore women leaders and their potentials and on the other hand do not have confidence that women are capable to win an election for their party. Moreover, owing to the socio-economic conditions of Bangladesh and lack of equal rights for access to the family property, the middle class women lose their political strength from the financial perspective. The 8th amendment of the Constitution in 1988, which declared Islam as the State religion, is being considered an attack on democracy, women's equal rights and overall human rights. The religious fundamentalists quite often use this amendment as a powerful tool to prevent women from joining politics and other mainstream development activities.

Although the constitution of Bangladesh clearly acknowledges equal rights for women, they are still victims of oppression, subjugation and discrimination in economic, political, social and legal arenas. Women are not considered as human being, they are viewed as a means of production and source for reproduction. Women have very limited opportunity to participate in social and State institutions i.e. the decision making process.

2.2.8 Conclusion and Recommendations

Many sections of the population still continue to be excluded in Bangladesh. One of them is women who are still fighting for their just and equitable participation in political processes especially in the decision-making. They have a greater ability to influence the issues that affect their lives in the community and larger society. It is imperative today that women participate in politics to enable them to influence policies and enact laws to benefit them. Within these circumstances, the followings, but not limited to, could be the major recommendations in favour of women's political empowerment:

- Full realisation of women's civil and political as well as economic, social and cultural rights should be ensured.
- Many movements have given birth to powerful women leaders in the region. Therefore, women at grassroots should be encouraged to participate in collective interventions and movements. Women should get opportunity to serve at various levels of the State structures so that they can influence policy system and implementation mechanisms.
- Ministry for Women should be set up to serve women.
- Effort should be made to ensure gender responsive budget. A reform has to be taken with the existing education system to make it gender sensitive and pluralistic in order to bring a change in people's gender stereotypical perception.

2.3 Bhutan

Radha Adhikari

Bhutan comprises of three ethnic groups - Naglang, Sarchhop and Nepali origin. Approximately 130,000 Bhutanese of Nepali origin have been living as refugees in Nepal for last 17 years. Naglang occupies the bureaucracy and ministry. The royal family occupies everything. The Government has applied dress code so that every citizen should follow food and clothes habits of Naglang ethnic group. Autocratic regime has been prevalent in Bhutan for long time.

When the people of Nepali origin started demanding democracy and human rights, they were imprisoned; women were raped. When the people came to Indian border and tried to set up camps there, the Bhutanese were loaded up in trucks and dumped into Nepali border. Many talks were held between Nepal and Bhutan about the Bhutanese refugee issue but no achievement has been made so far. The United Nations is tired of feeding up 130,000 people and now the refugees are in the process of the third country settlement.

Women in Bhutan are not educated. They are suffering from the polygamy system and the example is king himself as he has four wives. There are between 2 to 3 per cent women who work in lower job.

In Bhutan, only two women NGOs operate for skill development which are headed by the queen. UNDP and WHO are only two international agencies working in Bhutan for development programmes. Women do not have adequate awareness about their rights. The Bhutanese citizens who are expelled from the country are fighting for their rights from outside. Though there was some change in the previous election, the changes in Bhutan are fabricated to the great extent to give an illusion to the international community. There are two political parties created by the king. These parties do not represent the citizens of Bhutan.

2.4 India

2.4.1 Women's Participation in Politics in the Past

The history of India reveals that woman like Gargi was involved in the most celebrated dialogues. The verbal combat in the Brihadarnayaka Upanishad bears testimony to this fact. The *Swadeshi* movement in Bengal (1905-8) marked the beginning of women's participation in political processes in India. The independence movement bore all the elements of women's suffrage. In December 1917, Annie Besant and few other women met Mr Montague demanding voting rights for Indian women. The All India Women's Conference was extremely active on the question of women's suffrage, labour issues, relief and nationalist work.

Many of the dominant political parties, both national and regional are currently led by women. Indian independence movement also saw participation of many women leaders. Sarojini Naidu, the first woman President of the Indian National Congress was selected in 1925, fifty years earlier from the woman leader of a major British political party.

Right after independence, women's political participation was very negligible. During the 1952 elections, the percentage of women contestants was only 2.29. However, the number of women contesting elections increased to a considerable extent between 1980 and 1998. According to the Coordination Unit (1994), "the number of women contestants in parliamentary elections has not increased significantly over the years. Political parties seem reluctant to file women candidates." In 1998, women constituted 8 per cent of the Lok Sabha. In 1991, women in Lok Sabha won 36 seats out of 509 (7.1 per cent) and in the Rajya Sabha they had a slightly higher representation of 38 seats out of 245 (15.5 per cent) that they were elected or nominated. In 1996, the number of women who contested the elections for Lok Sabha seats were 599 of which 34 won (6.5 per cent). Therefore, while women constitute only 6.5 per cent of the Lok Sabha polity, their chances of winning an election are almost double than that of men. One encouraging fact that emerges from the data available for the Lok Sabha elections from the year 1952 to 1996 is that the total number of women who contested the elections has been consistently increasing.

2.4.2 Representation of Women in State Legislatures

Women's political representation at the State legislatures is abysmally low. The latest data from the States show that Delhi (12.86 per cent) has the highest proportion of women members followed by Andhra Pradesh (9.52 per cent) and Kerala (9.29 per cent). Other States with relatively high proportions of women in the State Assemblies include Orissa (8.84 per cent), Himachal Pradesh (8.82 per cent) and Madhya Pradesh (8.13 per cent). Therefore, the data indicates that women's participation in the State legislatures is even lower than their participation in the parliament. The State should take affirmative initiative to facilitate and enable women to participate at these levels of political action. In this context, the 85th Amendment Bill seeking one-third reservation for women in the parliamentary and legislative seats becomes an extremely important alternative.

The 73rd and 74th Amendments (1993) to the Indian Constitution have served as a major breakthrough towards ensuring women's equal access and increased participation in power structures. These amendments undoubtedly have provided for reservation of 33.33 per cent of elected seats for women at different levels of local governance in both rural and urban areas. These amendments have initiated a powerful strategy of affirmative action for providing the structural framework for women's participation in political decision-making leading to women's advancement in large numbers.

The 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendments in 1993 have brought a definite impact in women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions and local bodies. In fact, these amendments have helped women not only in their effective participation but also in the decision-making process. Of the 475 Zilla Parishads in the country, 158 are being chaired by women. At the Block Level, out of 51,000 members of Block Samitis, 17,000 are women. In addition, nearly one-third of the Mayors of the Municipalities are women. In the elections to PRIs, held between 1993 and 1997, women have achieved participation even beyond the mandatory requirement of 33.33 per cent of the total seats in States like Karnataka (43.45%), Kerala (36.4%) and West Bengal (35.4%).

Women's political representation varies widely across the states. Despite most states having at least 33 per cent women as a direct consequence of reservation, some states have even exceeded the 33 per cent quota. These include the states of Karnataka (46.7 per cent), Kerala (36.2 per cent), Rajasthan (35.4 per cent) and West Bengal (35.2 per cent). Karnataka, the State with the highest proportion of women elected representatives in 1993 had 5,641 GPs

with 80,627 members of which 37,689 were women constituting 46.74 per cent of the total membership. Kerala follows closely, with 990 GPs and 10,700 members, of which 3,878 were women (36.2 per cent). Besides, there are states like Punjab where only 14.9 per cent of the GP membership is women, which is less than half that is mandated in the 73rd constitutional amendment.

The trend shows that reservations have strengthened women's participation in mainstream political processes. However, the reality indicates that reservation alone will not be able to ensure effective and quality participation of women in political processes in the country at micro and macro levels. Political empowerment cannot take place in isolation. It should be coupled with social, economic and cultural empowerment of women within households and outside in the society. Policies should be adopted to have women's access to productive resources and entitlements. Thus, it is imperative to create a space for women in local level power structure enabling them to play role of powerful actors. This calls for a holistic approach to development in general and women empowerment in particular. Absence of such an approach will result in symbolic participation of women in political processes through reservations while men will continue to enjoy the real 'power'.

2.4.3 Instruments in Favour of Women

The ICCPR and ICESCR to which India is a party clearly State equal rights and opportunities for both men and women. Part of socio-economic rights, right to work is guaranteed in Articles 16, 19(g) and 21 of the Constitution. Article 16 deals with equality in employment and Article 16(3) provides for reservation.

Civil and political rights have the most important gamut of rights encompassing individual existence. Article 326 of the Indian Constitution guarantees political equality to women granting a right to adult franchise to all its citizens. Article 325 further prohibits exclusion from the electoral rolls based on sex, caste, religion etc. Article 14, 15, 16 and 19 of the Constitution of India and the Representation of Peoples Act, 1951 further provide for equal participation of women in political process. Article 243(D) and 243(T) of the Constitution provide 33 per cent reservation for women in panchayats and municipalities. While the 73rd constitutional amendment provided for increased participation of women in the political institutions at the village, taluka and district level. The 74th constitutional amendment provided for increased participation in municipalities and nagapalikas. Article 9 (1c) of the Constitution further guarantees to all citizens the right to form associations or unions. Therefore, India has no legislation restricting participation of women in political and public life.

India is also a signatory to the Convention for Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) since 1993. CEDAW stipulates international standards of women's rights, meant to be incorporated into the laws and policies of each country that has ratified the Convention. Once it is signed, Government of India should be voluntarily accountable to implement it.

2.4.5 Factors Hindering Women's Participation in Mainstream Politics

The factors, which have hindered women's participation in mainstream politics, are as follows:

First, women's access to productive resources like land, water, forest and credit becomes increasingly competitive and women's scope for participation in local governance more

challenged. The rural women face several impediments while participating in politics at the local level bogged down by the triple burden of housework, childcare, wage and non-waged works along with the patriarchal controls, and caste/class oppression, illiteracy, familial and social resistance. Even women, in most cases absolutely have no access to resources.

Second, patriarchal domination is a historical legacy in India. Reservation will go a long way in creating motivation to participate in politics. However, reservation alone will not be sufficient if women have no access to the decision-making. Men and women both lack adequate knowledge of their rights. Until and unless awareness could be raised among men and women, women will continue representing their father, husband or son in various political positions.

Third, the average women have been marginalised in politics because often celebrity women leaders come into power to fill-in the vacuum created by the sudden demise of their father, husband or son.

Fourth, gender based violence has also restricted women's effective participation in political processes. The traditional mindset of the society, i.e. perceiving women at the receiving end has further limited women's ability to assert their rights of equal participation in political process.

Fifth, the 33 per cent reservation policy has failed to comply with its objective because the provision has been misinterpreted in such a way that a woman can contest only for the reserved seats. Consequently, women are deprived of the opportunity to contest the elections under the general category defeating the core objective of the reservation policy.

2.4.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

In India, women have equal rights and access to productive resources and rights to take part in democratic decision-making processes. Both international and national legal frameworks in the country ensure the rights of women. However, the irony is that these rights are often rhetoric for women and are not enforceable in reality due to various complexities of the socio-economic and cultural settings of the country.

Women need opportunities to play a vital role in power relations in the socio-economic sphere of life. Thus, women will gradually emerge as powerful actors and will ensure full realization of their economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. A starting point would be economic empowerment of women by ensuring their access to productive resources like land, seeds credit and entitlements without discrimination. Awareness raising and educating women about their rights and about their roles and responsibilities as a citizen in a democratic country, focusing on their role in decision-making process at all levels would be crucial for sustained political empowerment of women. The knowledge of rights would enable women to assess their existing positions in the society and will help them to analyze the root causes of discriminations. This in turn will help women to develop appropriate strategies to overcome the obstacles and to take effective part in politics.

Social and political movements are powerful tools of social, economic and political empowerment of women. The movements provide women with opportunities to express their voices, to exercise their abilities and to claim their rights collectively. Many movements have given birth to powerful women leaders in India and they have played very significant role in shaping the politics of the country. Therefore, women at grassroots should be

encouraged to participate in collective interventions and mobilizations, which will also broaden their social, cultural and political horizons. There is an urgent need to involve women in the functioning of the State, which would help preserve justice, monitor the existing situations and usher in the necessary policy changes needed for the restructuring of the society. The social status of the women would be greatly enhanced by the establishment of statutory women's panchayats at the rural level. Through concerted efforts and initiatives by the government, various women's organizations and NGOs, the process of capacity building of women, in particular elected women functionaries could be accelerated which would in turn facilitate greater participation of women in politics.

2.5 Maldives

Zahir

Maldives is a small island where only 330,000 people live in. In Maldives, there is equal ratio of boys and girls in school. However, the girls' ratio is lower than that of boys in higher education. There is only a woman in Parliament out of 48 members and she is the Deputy Speaker. There are women activists in the field of development but not in politics. The government of Maldives constitutes six party coalitions. The new Constitution in 2007 accommodates multiparty democracy. The women's condition in the country is poor and very few women are engaged in politics. However, there are many more women in the local committees. Government of Maldives dissolved the Ministry of Gender and Family in order to downsizing the number of ministries. There are 14 ministries but not a single minister.

2.6 Nepal

Sharmila Karki, President, Jagaran Nepal

2.6.1 Status of Women in Nepal

Nepal has diversity of geography, culture, ethnicity and religion. Across such diversity, majority of the communities in Nepal are patriarchal. Therefore, a women's life is also influenced strongly by the patriarchy. Women's relative status, however, varies from one ethnic group to another. The economic contribution of women is substantial, but largely unnoticed because their traditional role is taken for granted.

The country's national statistics show that women's literacy rate is 30 percent compared to 66 percent of male and 40 percent of the national literacy rate. The enrollment of women in higher education is only 24.95 percent. Women's involvement in technical and vocational education is also lower than that of men. In rural areas, girls are considered as "paraya dhan"(others' property) and they don't have access to education. Only 45.2 per cent of women as compared to 68.2 per cent of men are classified economically active. Women's participation in the informal sector has increased significantly in both urban and rural areas - for example vending, petty trade, liquor making and vegetable selling are some of the common employment ventures of women. Very few women are engaged in the profession such as education, law, technology, bureaucracy, diplomatic mission, etc. Women have no access to policy and decision making process.

2.6.2 Women in Politics

Women's political participation dates back to 1950s when leaders like Mangala Devi Singh and Sahana Pradhan worked with unity, and from 1947 until 1952.

Several women's organizations came into being to raise the political and social awareness among women in Nepal. In the People's Movement of 1990, women actively participated to topple down the autocratic Panchayat system and establish multiparty democracy. The movement for the restoration of democracy in 1990 opened an avenue for different civil society organisations and political parties. After the restoration of democracy in 1990, only 32 women were elected as the Members of Parliaments (MPs). In General Election of 1999, only 12 women out of 205 seats were elected. That is hardly six percent of the House of Representatives.

There had been a violent movement of CPN Maoist for more than a decade which caused loss of more than 13,000 people's lives in Nepal. The movement, however, challenged the stereotypical notion of gender role because the CPN Maoist constituted more than 30% women in its battalions. Evidently, women were involved in major attacks waged by the groups during the 'People's war'.

The people's Movement of April, 2006 is the historical event for Nepal that compelled the monarchy to give up its executive power. Almost six million people, half of them women, came down to the street to protest against the royal regime. Finally, Nepal became Federal Republic from May 28, 2008 uprooting the two and half century long monarchy. This is the end of feudal political era though it would take quite some time for its implementation. After the April Movement, the Parliament that was dissolved by the King during his autocratic regime was reinstated. On May 30, 2006 the reinstated Parliament declared 33 per cent seats reserved for women but with no any action plan for its proper implementation.

As far as women's representation in the local level is concerned, only a few women were elected for executive positions in local election. For instance, only 289 seats of the 3993 wards returned women chairpersons in the last election for VDCs and municipalities. Not a single woman has been elected as Mayor, Deputy Mayor or DDC Chairperson. There was no any women representative in constitution making body in 1991 and after pressure from women rights activists very few women were included in Interim Constitution Draft Committee in 2006. Moreover, women members occupy only 9.1 per cent in central committee and 9.5 per cent in district committee of the political parties.

2.6.3 Constituent Assembly: A Historic Achievement

Nepal has entered a new political milieu with the successful completion of the long due Constitution Assembly (CA) election which elected 197 women parliamentarians among 601 seats. These women members have come from the diverse ethnic cultures, traditions, groups and geographical areas. They represent the grassroots, district and national level. Women now demand for equal citizen rights. Discrimination and injustice against women will soon end in Nepal. Women's representation in the CA will bring about positive results in the system for women's representation and participation. Purna Kumari Subedi of CPN, Maoist has been elected for Vice Chairperson of CA after continuous advocacy and lobby of civil society and women rights activists. This new paradigm of women's inclusive participation in the constitution making process will lead towards drafting of a women friendly constitution in Nepal.

2.6.4 Conclusions

In Nepal, men are always considered superior to women, breadwinner, head of the family and the caretaker. The major issue that needs immediate attention is of those women who are affected by war, violent conflict and other cases of human rights violations. In all situations, women have paid high price. However, their contribution is neglected in most cases. The women's issues are not getting enough attention even in the conflict transformation process. There is a need of 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 equal share in politics.

Nepal has ratified important UN human rights Conventions and these rights have legal validity under the Constitution and the laws but the State has not enforced them. The government and political parties are resentful to obey the letters and spirits of the UN Declarations and Resolutions. The State and other political forces are insensitive towards women's involvement in the peace process. There are different agreements between the seven party alliance and CPN Maoist for restoration of democracy and peace process starting from 12 points agreement in November 2005. CPN Maoist and Seven Party Alliance have signed a 23-point agreement in December 2007. However, neither any woman was authorized to sign any of these agreements of peace process nor was given responsibility to represent the political parties in the discussion and agreements. The Constitution Drafting Committee was formed without any women and after pressure from women rights groups, four women were added in the committee.

One of the biggest achievements for women was the resolution of the parliament in June 2006 which created a provision for at least 33% representation of women in all mechanisms of the State. However, it is not implemented in the party decision making process. Now, women are creating pressure to the government for the proportional representation of women in all the State mechanisms. The State has not paid attention to other issues of women because they are super shaded by the issues of the peace process.

2.6.5 Recommendations

The State policy should guide political parties to have enough space for women and women friendly legal provisions. Clear and enforceable structures in the political parties and sustainable policies and plans for economic empowerment of women will guide for women's political future. Having adequate knowledge of national and international human rights instruments among the political leaders will help improve internal governance of the parties. Political parties should draw code of conduct to end the violence against women in politics. Women should launch strong and meaningful movement for ending the patriarchal social structures. Men should engage for women rights and justice. Various stakeholders such as media, civil society, and political women wings should support women's mission for political participation. There is a need for strong common platform like inter party women alliance, women wings, etc.

2.7 Pakistan

2.7.1 History of Women's Political Participation in Pakistan

The history of women's participation in politics in Pakistan dates back to the first Constituent Assembly of 1947. Only two women represented this Assembly. Women had right to vote in 1951. Fatima Jinnah (sister of Muhammad Ali Jinnah) and a few other elite class women actively participated in the 1940s freedom movement. The Muslim League also encouraged their women to participate in the political process but not a single woman was elected in the 1956 Assembly. The Constitution of 1956 accepted the principle of female suffrage with some reserved seats for women. However, the Constitution of 1962 abolished female suffrage based on women's territorial constituencies. Consequently, only six women were able to sit in the Assemblies through indirect elections.

The first important event that changed the electoral landscape for women was when Fatima Jinnah decided to contest elections for President's office in 1965, challenging the incumbent President Gen. Ayub Khan in the indirect elections. But she was defeated. The second major political breakthrough began when the charismatic Nusrat Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto came into politics in late 1970s, after General Zia-ul-Haq hanged their father ZA Bhutto in 1979. However, in 1970, no one among nine women constants in the national elections won any seats. In the political history of Pakistan, only a few women contested for political representations and very few secured the seats between 1977 and 1993.

2.7.2 Political Marginalization

The level of political participation of common women always remained limited in Pakistan. In successive assemblies, there have been women representatives. However, most of them have inherited their constituency from their family. In NWFP, a socially conservative province, Begum Nasim Wali Khan has become the leader of the opposition in the provincial Assembly. Some religious conservatives also supported women leaders. Fatima Jinnah was supported up by the Jamaat-e-Islami, while Benazir Bhutto received support of Jamiat-e-Ulema-e-Islam.

The representation of women in the Assemblies reached double in 2002, when Gen. Musharraf introduced 17 per cent quota for women in Assemblies and 33 per cent representation in local government. However, women continue to be marginalized in the political process resulted from the traditional cultural norms loaded with religious and feudal notions of the male-dominated society, very low literacy rate for women and the lack of political will of the successive governments to increase women's participation in the political process.

2.7.3 Disenfranchisement

In Pakistan, keeping women in seclusion has been a political culture. Men do not like their women to reveal their names to male enumerators. Therefore, women have always been under-registered in voter lists. Between 1993 and 1997, the percentage of difference between men and women registered voters had increased to 10%. Despite a drive to register women by various NGOs during the last decade, the male-female ratio of registered voters was 75 and 25, when the population ratio was 55 and 45. According to a list released by the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP), a constitutional body entrusted with the duty to organize and conduct elections Feb 2008, excluded 38 million people from their right to vote resulting denial of voting rights to nearly 59 per cent of women. This poor representation of women is a visible indicator of lack of commitment on the part of the political parties. In the absence of

their own constituency and political training, it is highly likely that women will be dependent on the male leadership of their political parties.

2.7.4 Women from Elite Class Capture Political Space

Pakistani politics is typically structured to suit the elite, serve the feudals, empower the military and enslave the populace. Though the elections of 2008 saw a record number of women contest the national and provincial assemblies, this does not guarantee that those elected will push the reforms needed in a conservative country where fundamentalism curtails women's rights.

Most of women awarded tickets for the general elections of 2002 and 2008 by mainstream political parties belong to the feudal or the upper middle class. The most winning women are related to male political leaders who have not been able to contest elections due to education bar (Graduation) set by the military government, Musharraf. In 2002 general elections, like other mainstream political parties the religious political parties Jamat-e-Islami and Jamiat-e-Ulma Islam also got their relatives inducted on reserve seats for women. Maulana Fazal-ur Rehman of Jul managed five seats in NA and Provincial Assembly of NWFP for her two sisters-in-laws and three other close relatives. Similarly, Qazi Hussain Ahmed of Ji got her daughter inducted in National Assembly on reserve seat. Former President Farooq Ahmed Laghari and other feudal lords nominated their relative ladies on reserve seats. The analysis of women representation in current assemblies from rural/urban perspective also shows interesting results. Out of 80 women in National Assembly, 47 belong to two cities of Lahore and Rawalpindi, which makes about 70 per cent representation, while rest of Pakistan got 30 per cent representation. The figures speak volumes about the exclusion of rural women from mainstream political participation. The results of recent general elections 2008 show that the elite class women living in provincial capitals have occupied most of the women reserve seats at all levels in all assemblies.

2.7.5 Women's Membership of Political Parties

Women in Pakistan do not have access to the key positions within party organizations. Their representation in the central executive committee of the two major political parties is negligible. For example, there are only 3 women out of a total membership of 21 in the central executive committee of the Pakistan People's Party (PPP) and 5 out of 47 in the Pakistan Muslim League (PML) Nawaz faction. There are 5 women in the history of Pakistan, i.e., Fatima Jinnah, Banazir Bhutto, Nusrat Bhutto, Ginwa Butto and Nasim Wali Khan who have become the leaders of their parties. However, all of them inherited their political career from their husbands or fathers or brothers and later became politicians in their own right.

2.7.6 Factors Hindering Women's Political Participation

The common patterns of women's political exclusion stem from (a) social and political discourses, (b) political structures and institutions, and (c) the socio-cultural and functional constraints that put limits on women's individual and collective agency. Therefore, following are the key factors that hinder women's political participation in Pakistan.

First, ideological factors which consider patriarchy as a system of male domination thus shaping women's relationship in politics. While intersecting with economic, social and political systems, women continue to be defined as private resulting in their exclusion from politics. Often male dominated political parties have a male perspective on issues of national

importance that disillusions women as their perspective is often ignored and not reflected in the politics of their parties.

Second, political factors, which restrict political activity only in public arena and the private sphere of family life is rendered as apolitical. This public-private dichotomy in traditional definition of politics excludes women from public political sphere and even when women are brought into politics, they are entered as mothers and wives.

Third, socio-cultural factors which is one of the detriments to women's political participation in public political domain. Women in general find it hard to participate in politics due to limited time to fulfill their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Women also face cultural constraints such as sex segregation and *purdah* are used to restrict their mobility. Politics requires women's exposure to interact with male and female constituents and address public meeting.

Fourth, economic factors have restricted women to join politics because politics is increasingly becoming commercialized needing huge amount of money to participate in politics. Most of Pakistani women lack access to and ownership of productive resources to have access to political activities. Women also lack social capital because they are often not head of communities, tribes or kinship groups, resulting in the absence of constituency base for them and means of political participation such as political skills, economic resources, education, training and access to information.

2.7.7 Conclusion

Today women are about 52 percent of the Pakistani population but their role in nation building is almost negligible. The socio-political indicators such as education, political participation and involvement in decision-making at different levels are so poor that Pakistani women are struggling at the bottom as compared to other South Asian countries. Their contribution to the socio-economic development of the nation is more than half as compared to that of men by virtue of their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Yet their participation in formal political structures and processes, where decisions regarding the use of societal resources generated by both men and women are made, remains insignificant.

A strong women movement and civil society is desirable for creating an enabling environment that can influence the direction of politics and development in favor of women. Triple roles of women in productive, reproductive and community management must inform the efforts for creating supportive environment for women's political participation. Provision of childcare and care work is vital to enabling women to participate in the development processes.

2.8 Sri Lanka

Nimalka Fernando

2.8.1 Struggle for Adult Franchise in Sri Lanka

The 19th century saw Sri Lankan women heralding a new era in the political life of the country. Women demanded the 'right to adult franchise' in 1931 thus creating a stir in the society. Women formed organizations and countered the conservative male dominance in

politics causing shock waves among the male political leaders. The women's struggle in 1931 achieved franchise rights for all women over 21 years of age. This was struggle for emancipation of Sri Lankan women. This trend began in the 19th century with the expansion of opportunities for employment and education.

Women did not contest the first elections held under Universal Suffrage, on the 13th June 1931. The first woman entered the Legislative Council in 1931 by winning a majority of over 9,000 votes from a rural constituency. She came from a well-known feudal family and won the seat, which was held earlier by her father. Ms. Adeline Mollamure's historic victory created a stir in the country. The second woman to enter the State Council as a first Tamil woman was Nasyum Saravanamuttu (1897-1940). She substituted for her husband who was disqualified due to administrative regulations. Her husband was a well-known medical practitioner and a supporter of workers rights.

Sri Lanka became a famous country to have the first woman Prime Minister of the world. After her Prime Minister husband was assassinated, Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike was urged to accept the leadership role in Sri Lanka Freedom Party and later became the first woman Prime Minister. Nevertheless, the ability to vote has not resulted in a great deal of participation on the part of women in contesting and securing space in politics and democratizing the political processes.

2.8.2 International Obligations

Sri Lanka ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on 5th October 1981. CEDAW article 7(b) states that 'State parties shall take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in the public and political life of the country by ensuring the right to participate in the formulation and implementation of government policy. However, women do not represent enough in political and public decision-making bodies. Sri Lanka has the worst record of women's overall participation in national and local legislative bodies among the countries in the South-Asia. Though majority of women exercise their political rights as voters or campaigners during election times, there was only less than 4.9% of female representation in the parliament in 2005 and in the municipality and local government level participation was 1.7% in 2004. The representation of women in parliament from the 1930s to the present has never exceeded six percent.

2.8.3 Why are women invisible in politics?

The gender intensive preferential electoral system and stereotypical social attitudes towards women have discouraged women's participation in elections. Moreover, women's multiple roles and lack of childcare support system at the community level have taken away a lot of women's time to engage in social networking. Lack of financial resources is another major impediment for women's political participation. In Sri Lanka, high incidence of violence takes place during elections. The climate of political violence discourages women's participation in politics.

Sri Lanka is a conservative society with strong beliefs in cultural norms and deeply rooted prejudices that reinforce gender stereotyping. Many women are nominated to replace vacancies created by the resignation or death of their male relatives. Therefore, they continue to assist in keeping the 'patronage political culture'. Unlike other South Asian countries, there is no special quota for women or a special political academy for women to address their training needs and develop skills needed to participate in politics.

The Beijing Platform for Action, 1995 has emphasised for active participation of women at all levels of decision-making in order to achieve equality, development and peace. The Beijing Platform for Action 1995, Section 181 states, “Women’s equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but it can also be seen as a necessary condition for women’s interest to be taken into account. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) also include female representation in politics as an indication of progress towards the empowerment of women.

Development requires decisions by those who control resources. 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 social, political and economic processes in favor of women.

2.8.5 Promoting Political Participation of Women in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is characterized by a paradox because on the one hand there are equal opportunities for women in access to education, health and labour participation and on the other hand exist economic exploitation, social oppression, legal discrimination and political exclusion. Despite the experience of seven decades of a democratic system of governance, universal franchise, women voting in elections and women’s leadership at the national level, women’s political representation at the national, regional and local levels is abysmally low. For instance, women’s representation slumped to 4.4% in the General Elections of 2004. Sri Lanka ranks 97th position in the world’s representation of women in Parliament.

2.8.6 Conclusion

Seven decades have passed from the universal franchise for women but women do not represent enough in political bodies. The women’s representation in parliament is as low as 5 per cent. After decades of struggle for gender equality, women are convinced that they have to be in the places where power exists or be in the position to negotiate a better deal for women. Therefore, the Sri Lankan government has to revisit all existing laws and amend them to allow 33 per cent minimum quota for women in Parliament, cabinet in local government bodies, and increase women candidates in the political parties.

3. Discussion and Synthesis

The situation of women was worse in almost every country in the region until a decade ago because only a few women participated in politics. The patriarchy and male chauvinism do not serve women’s issues in the region. The notion of women’s disenfranchisement despite constitutional and legal measures is structural violence of women’s human rights. However, women from diverse vocation now support women to improve their life conditions. Women have started taking a role in decision making at grassroots level. Many movements have given birth to powerful women leaders in the region. Seven decades have passed from the universal franchise for women but women do not represent enough in political bodies. The women’s representation in parliament is as low as 5 per cent. One the one hand, such example is very positive for increasing women’s participation in politics but one the other hand, women leaders in the highest ranks do not automatically ensure better opportunities for women to participate in political processes.

Social and political movements are powerful tools of social, economic and political empowerment of women. The social status of the women would be greatly enhanced by the establishment of statutory women's ombudsmen. Through concerted efforts and initiatives by the government, various women's organizations and NGOs, the process of capacity building of women, in particular elected women functionaries could be accelerated which would in turn facilitate greater participation of women in politics.

There is a need of 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. The State and the political forces are insensitive towards women's involvement in the peace process.

The State policy should guide political parties to have enough space for women and women friendly legal provisions. Clear and enforceable structures in the political parties and sustainable policies and plans for economic empowerment of women will guide for women's political future. Political parties should draw code of conduct to end the violence against women in politics. Women should launch strong and meaningful movement for ending the patriarchal social structures. Men should engage for women rights and justice. Various stakeholders such as media, civil society, and political women wings should support women's mission for political participation. There is a need for strong common platform like inter party women alliance, women wings alliance, etc.

4. Challenges Ahead

South Asia has witnessed in politics with some unique paradox that though half of the population belongs to women, their representation in politics is extremely low. 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.

Internal strife and conflict, militarization and autocratic regime, women empowerment, political campaigns and peace strategies have been issues of critical concerns in the region. 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 though not in quantity but in small number rose to power to give message to the world that no longer is the day to entertain gender stereotypical notions. Indira, Benazir, Khaleda, Hasina, Chandrika, Sonia are the names from South Asia that represent glory of women's political history. They have led their countries for the last three decades. South Asia even boasts the world's first women Prime Minister in the 1960s, Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka. South Asia seems to be a fertile land to develop women leadership in politics but with inconsistency.

Bangladesh has a unique distinction of two women leaders heading the government 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 is the lowest in comparison to other parts of the world. The world average of women representation in National Parliament is 18.4 per cent.

Despite some progress, there are still challenges ahead. The historic accomplishments are yet to be institutionalized. Otherwise, the achievements will not take momentum. 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 yet to be realised. Women's lack of time for political participation because of their dual roles needs to be addressed through alternative arrangements. The issues of human rights, inclusive democracy and women empowerment draw attention. Moreover, ratification and implementation of international treaties is indispensable.

The common challenge of South Asia is the patriarchal structure of society that hinders women for social, cultural, economic and political participation. Low rate of literacy among women, rampant poverty, ill health, gender and cast discrimination, political conflict, religious fundamentalism and violence against women have still been barriers for women's active participation in politics and in the State mechanisms.

5. Campaign Strategy for Women in Politics

In the final session of the conference, strategies for the campaign for women in politics were designed to deal with the issues in South Asia. Following are the strategies that require urgent action.

1. Need to set up a regional school for women political leaders;
2. Advocacy at local, national and regional (South Asian) level;
 - a. Decision making body/authority (Parliament, Government, President);
 - 33% reservation of women in all spheres;
 - Reservation for lower caste or class;
 - Direct elections for reserved seats for women;
 - b. Political parties
 - At least 33% reservation in executive and national committee;
 - c. Election Commission
 - Stringent laws to curb/ban black money, muscle power, corruption and criminalization;
 - Controlled election budget;
 - Free and fair voting;
 - Special action for registration of women voters and their participation in voting;
3. Media monitoring (for their affiliation/influence on votes);
4. Media advocacy/media education, training to women from South Asia;
5. More women representation/women groups for peace building initiations/dialogue at public/private levels;
6. SAAPE member organizations to launch campaign to enhance women participation in women movements and organisations at grassroots;
7. Analysis of national/local curriculum to eliminate stereotype image/discrimination of women and gender;
8. More support, knowledge, training, facilitation to young women for effective and meaningful women leadership with special focus on the involvement of students at college and university level; debates to launch at regional level;
9. Gender sensitization and awareness raising programmes
 - Political leaders (from local to national levels);
 - Voter's awareness campaign;
 - Men, women and youth, in general;
10. State and non-state institutions should have equal opportunity for employment with affirmative action of 33% vacancies for women.
11. Need of a Regional Women Commission and each country to have such commissions to entertain and redress complaints regarding gender discrimination.
12. Arrangement for educational advancement particularly professional education and capacity enhancement with focus on politics;
13. Provision of women members in Election Commission;
14. Incorporation of women rights provisions in constitution;
15. Campaign through electronic and print media on regional basis;
16. Advocacy and campaign through mother's groups and caucus;
17. Encourage women groups especially in rural areas to take advantage of micro credit through low interest rate and interest free scheme.
18. Memorandum and delegation to each Head of State in the region;
19. Regional and international alliance of women to promote and to exchange programs for women Parliament members and the members of local government.
20. Internship for female youth students in the South Asian countries;
21. Assurance of at least 33% of women's participation in government and politics by 2015;

6. Declaration of the Conference

The declaration of the conference is prepared and approved in broad consultation with the participants. The declaration for the campaign call is as follows.

A conference was held in Kathmandu under the auspices of the Gender Thematic Group of the South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication from the 9th to 10th of January 2009 in Kathmandu under the title " Breaking the Barriers: Claiming Women's Space in Politics in South Asia". Women leaders and activists representing eight South Asian countries who participated in this gathering have declared ...

Women of South Asia have since 'independence' remained gripped in poverty, deprivation and violence. They have been experiencing subjugation and discrimination at home and in society. Politics and governance dominated by men have continued to nurture and sustain patriarchal interests and governing practices thereby disinheriting the 'other-half of South Asia'. The women of South Asia are systematically denied access to natural resources and political power. They have been denied the gains of independence and any progress achieved by respective countries other than in a marginal manner. Though women are producers, they remain invisible in the economic life of South Asia; but the contribution of women to socio-economic development is greater than that of men because they bear dual roles - productive and reproductive. Their respectful space in politics is still a dream.

Despite such a grim scenario, several South Asian countries have seen the emergence of powerful women into political leadership. Most of these women brought with them the political legacy of family kinship. Nonetheless, their achievements in the political arena did not result in transforming the political cultures in the male dominated politics of South Asia. The gains of the women's struggles in the countries for democratic reforms in the recent past heralded in a new era as South Asian countries were pressurized to introduce legal reforms for the advancement of women and further to effect the participation of women in politics. With the constitutional reform introduced in India enabling women from the grass root level to come into leadership in the Panchayati Raj in 1993-1994, a large number of women moved into the political space challenging the strongholds hitherto held by men.

Although the international community pledges gender equality, CEDAW and the Beijing Platform have tried to bridge the gap in the formal political arena by stating that very few countries have 33 per cent women in the parliament. Today Nepal, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh have introduced legal reforms promoting quotas and reservations to increase participation of women in politics while Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Maldives are lagging behind and women from Afghanistan are facing special difficulties.

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, 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 reflected in their constitutions. The stereotypical gender roles of women have further exacerbated the situation.

We also recognize a new enthusiasm in women to come into politics and participate both as voters and as candidates during elections. This could be attributed to the awareness raising and empowerment activities facilitated by civil society organizations and networks at the

local, national and regional levels. We also heard the voices of women who have contested elections and won at local government and provincial levels. We salute these women, who, despite all obstacles, have shown courage to contest and remain committed.

Today women constitute the larger portion of the population of South Asia. Yet, we have not been able to reach the 33% mark at all decision-making levels. We recognize the achievement in Nepal in this regard where today 33% of the Constituent Assembly is composed of women. However, the major challenge for them is to institutionalize this achievement. We wish to join hands with them as they struggle to create a truly democratic society and a governing process ensuring gender equality. The biggest challenge we face is to achieve 50% participation in a meaningful and effective manner at all levels of the decision-making process.

Women's rights activists, organizations and networks in all countries of South Asia have initiated the campaign for women in politics. The women who believe that they could make a difference by participating in politics and government and come forward to do so are the key actors to further and intensify this movement. The South Asian Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) has come forward to facilitate this process.

5.2 Our Campaign Call

- We call upon all women fighting for equality, justice and peace in South Asia to unite to claim our space in the political life of our countries.
- We demand our just economic share and seek immediate reformulation of economic policies and national budgets in a gender sensitive manner.
- We urge political leaders to show their commitment by formulating policies, enacting laws, creating conducive environment and allocating resources to increase women's participation at all levels of governance and to respect all international obligations (e.g., CEDAW, UN 1325 and Beijing Platform for Action).
- We demand that quotas, reservations and other mechanisms be introduced in all countries of South Asia so all South Asian countries achieve at least 33% representation by women by the year 2020. Special efforts need to be made in countries where such provisions are not yet in existence.
- We call upon all governments of South Asia to remove discriminatory practices based on gender which prohibit women from voting and participation in active politics.
- We expect the UN's initiation by taking the role of human globalization processes by advocating legislation, providing guidelines for modalities to empower women, promoting research, documentation, dissemination of successful experiences in the world. We affirm the commitment of women struggling for equality and empowerment to reach the level of 50% participation in the political life of all the countries of South Asia.
- We call upon all women to work towards bringing more women into political decision-making by using their voting rights.
- We urge the political parties of South Asia to provision immediately 33% of the seats for women's representation at all decision-making levels in the party machinery and to create a gender sensitive environment in the inner-party culture.
- We condemn all forms of inter-country and intra-country violence and extremism, which create human tragedies; escalate tensions and insecurities among our communities especially exposing women to sexual violence and harassments. Peace

and democracy are essential pre-requisites for women's effective and meaningful participation at all levels from governance to development process.

- We express concerns regarding all plans by external imperialist forces to create tensions and destabilize thereby threatening the peace in the Indian continent.
- We urge SAARC leadership to work towards peace thereby reducing tensions among our countries. Towards this process, we demand inclusion of women, at least 33% at all levels of peace-negotiations and peace building efforts.
- We call upon the SAARC leadership to ensure free and fair elections through the establishment of Independent Election Commissions and stringent laws to deal with violence and corruption during elections.
- We demand that women be elected and appointed to all decision-making structures and secretariat of the SAARC, reaching the international commitment of 33% by the year 2010.
- We call upon the SAARC leadership to declare 2010 as the **YEAR FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS.**

We, the women of South Asia, who have gathered here in Kathmandu on the 9th - 10th January 2009 make a solemn pledge to struggle against corruption, all types of violence and extremism and patriarchal practices at all levels. We envision promoting democracy, equality and non-discriminatory practices and thereby facilitating transformative politics.

ANNEX I

Program Schedule

Conference of south Asian women “Breaking the Barriers Claiming Women’s Space in Politics in South Asia” Kathmandu, Nepal 9-10 January 2009

Day I: January 9, 2009 (Friday)

10:00 - Registration at Conference Hall, RRN, Gairidhara, Kathmandu

11:00-1:00 Inaugural Ceremony

Facilitated by Ms. Sharmila Karki, President, Jagaran Nepal
Lighting the *Panos* by Ms. Sahana Pradhan, Chief Guest
Lighting Candle from the Representatives of Seven SAARC Nations

- Ceremony Chair: Ms. Bidhya Devi Bhandari
- Chief Guest: Ms. Shahana Pradhan, Former Minister of Foreign Affairs, CPN UML Standing Committee Member
- Welcome Remarks and Objectives of the Program (Organizers) Ms. Rokeya Kabir, Regional Coordinator, Gender Thematic Focal Organization, SAAPE
- Senior Women Political Leaders
- Speech by Chairperson of the Session
- Inaugural Speech by Chief Guest

12:00-1:00 pm Lunch

1:00- 3:0 pm Session I: Status of Women in Politics in South Asia

- Session Chair: Mr./Ms Bidhya Devi Bhandari.....
- Presentations on Status of Women in Politics
 - India
 - Bangladesh
 - Open Discussions

3:00-3:15 **Tea/Coffee Break**

3: 15-4:30 Presentations Continued

- Sri Lanka
- Pakistan
- Afghanistan
- Open Discussions
- Rapporteur:

20:00-21:00 Welcome Reception and Dinner

Day II: January 10, 2009 (Saturday)

Seminar

09:00-10:00 Session I: Presentations Continued from Day I

- Nepal
- Bhutan
- Open Discussions

10:00- 10:30 Q & A Session with Nepalese Women CA member

10:30- 10:45 Tea/Coffee Break

Session II: 10:45- 11:45: Identification of Special Issues and Challenges of Respective Country to Promote Women's Effective and Meaningful Participation in Politics

- Formation of groups among participants based on country
- Group discussions

11:45- 1:00 Reporting Group Work

1:00-2:00 Lunch

2:00 -3:00 Exercise to identify regional issues and challenges to promote women's effective and meaningful participation in Politics.

- Formation of Groups among Participants
- Group Discussions

3:00-3:30 Presentation of the Outcome of Regional Exercise

3:30–3:45 Concluding Remarks by Gender thematic group: Ms. Rokeya Kabir

3:45- 4:00 Tea Tea/Coffee Break

4:00 - Session III: Closing Session

- Session Chair: Mr./Ms
- Declaration of issues identified.
- Campaign on Women in Politics in South Asia Declared.
- Declaration submitted to the respective head of the Government of the region

16:30 Dinner

End of Program

Organizer: SAAPE Gender Thematic Group.

Local Host

- *Samyukta Sangh Sangharsha Samiti. (Alliance of Political Women Wings)*
- *Jagaran Nepal (For Women Rights, Peace and Governance)*

ANNEX II

List of Participants

Conference of South Asian Women on Breaking the Barriers : Claiming Women's Space in Politics in South Asia

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