

PROCEEDINGS

South Asian Women's Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Political Participation

6-7 August 2017, Kathmandu, Nepal



All Nepal Women's Association (ANWA)
South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)
Women Welfare Society (WWS)

*Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia:
Expanding Spaces and Enhancing Rights for Equality and Justice*

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Jointly organised by

All Nepal Women's Association (ANWA)
South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE)
Women Welfare Society (WWS)

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Chief Guest

Former Prime Minister of Nepal K. P. Sharma Oli

Keynote Speaker

Joanna Mahjebeen, Gauhati University, Gawahati, India

Speaker and Panellist

- Rokeya Kabir, Bangladesh
- Sadeka Halim, Bangladesh
- Abir Neogi, India
- Mariya Salim, India
- Aminath Shazly, Maldives
- Sushila Nepal, Nepal
- Binda Pandey, Nepal
- Bimala Rai Paudyal, Nepal
- Sharmila Karki, Nepal
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Acronyms

ANNFSU	All Nepal National Free Students' Union
ANPFa	All Nepal Peasants' Federation
ANWA	All Nepal Women's Association
BNPS	Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women
CPN-UML	Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist–Leninist)
DTDH	Das Theke Das Hajar
FNCCI	Federation of Nepalese Chambers of Commerce and Industry
GEFONT	General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions
HDI	Human Development Index
ILO	International Labour Organisation
LEF	Labour Education Foundation (Pakistan)
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MP	Member of Parliament
MDL	Mothers and Daughters of Lanka
SAAPE	South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
UN	United Nations
UN-OHRLLS	United Nations Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States
VAW	Violence against Women

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Context

Women's participation in the democratic process and politics is one of the crucial and indicative measures of development and gender equality and women's participation in the democratic process from a local level to a national level has always been the discourse of discussion in the development of a country. Furthermore, women's political participation in local governance, being the democratic process at grassroots level, is significant to achieve gender equality. But in South Asia, women are marginalised, enjoying only the tokenistic space and rights at the higher level of governance, being inferior to their male counterpart.¹

Women's actual and equal political participation in local governance, whether by being elected, appointed or through merit, provides an opportunity for the women to make public decisions for their community. This further promotes gender equality and in itself is a genuine democratic practice. Moreover, women's participation in local governance significantly increases the service delivery to marginalised women and generally contributes to a stronger attention to women's issues. One other major benefit of women's participation in local government is that it greatly contributes to making local mechanisms gender sensitive.

Despite comprising 50 per cent of the world's population, women continue to lack access to political leadership opportunities and resources at all levels of government. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy, but a necessary pre-condition for women's interests to be taken into account. Governance structures which do not result in the equal participation of men and women, or their equal enjoyment of benefits from State interventions are by definition neither inclusive nor democratic.² The discrepancy directly infringes on women's political rights and can restrict rights in other areas, given the central role that national legislatures and local bodies have in formulating, implementing and monitoring laws and budgets.

1.2. Existing Scenarios

Globally, the number of women in executive government and in parliament has stagnated, with only marginal improvements since 2015. As of January 1, 2017, women occupy only 23.3% of the total parliamentary seats around the world,

¹ Women's Political Participation at the Local Government Level: A case study of Akoko South-West Local Government Area, Nigeria, 2014

² International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics: Women's Participation in Local Governance, <http://iknow-politics.org/sites/default/files/cr20women27s20participation20in20local20governments20en.pdf>

whereas the Asian region holds 19.3 per cent of women in parliament. The number of women as head of state or head of government fell from 19% to 17% since 2015. According to the study, most women leaders get ministerial portfolios like the position of the minister of environment, natural resources and energy, family affairs, women's affairs, gender equality, education and culture. In contrast, very few women ministers are responsible for information and media, parliamentary affairs, finance, population and defence.³

South Asia comprises eight nations where the interplay of religion, culture and colonisation has influenced the modern identities and processes in South Asia. The sub-region is shaped by postcolonial State formation and political systems that range from parliamentary democracies to presidential governments, as well as authoritarian regimes. Broader political and historical processes have influenced local governments. The deep-rooted patriarchy and strong religious influences have had an adverse impact on gender norms for women to participate in political life.

According to “Women in Politics”, a data map launched by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and UN Women, Nepal has topped other South Asian countries, with a 29.6 per cent women representation in its parliament. Among the SAARC nations, Afghanistan (27.7%), Pakistan (20.6%), Bangladesh (20.3%), India (11.8%), Bhutan (8.5%), Maldives (5.9%) and Sri Lanka rank second to eighth respectively. Although the number and percentage vary from government to government, India has topped other South Asian countries in the number of women ministers with five women ministers, which equates to 18.5% in the cabinet. Maldives has a figure of 17.6%, followed by Afghanistan (16.7%), Bhutan (10%), Bangladesh (6.3%), Sri Lanka (4.3%), Nepal (3.7%) and Pakistan with no woman in the ministerial positions.⁴

1.3. Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia

After two decades, Nepal held its local government election to gear up the democratic practice. On the backdrop of this election, being contextual to the scenario, on the 6 and 7 August, 2017, All Nepal Women's Association (ANWA) and South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE) jointly in coordination with Women Welfare Society (WWS) organised the “Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Participation in South Asia.” More than 90 participants representing six South Asian countries, namely Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, attended the convergence.

³ Inter-Parliamentary Union and UN Women: Women in Politics 2017 Map, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/4/women-in-politics-2017-map>

⁴ Ibid

1.4. Objectives

- To converge the idea for expanding spaces and enhancing rights of women's participation at local governance in South Asia.
- To design a South Asian level collaborative strategy for ensuring an active engagement of women at all mechanisms.

By the end of the convergence, an advocacy strategy for "Women's Participation in Politics and Local Governance in South Asia" is expected to be developed. This strategy shall guide organisations and alliances in South Asia to advocate with national, federal and local governments for increasing as well as ensuring actual and meaningful participation of women in the political and democratic process.

1.5. Participants

The convergence sought professors, academicians, social activists, political leaders, parliamentarians, development practitioners, feminist leaders and civil society representatives from six South Asian countries. More than 90 participants attended the programme. This includes participants representing universities, the civil society and governments from Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Pakistan, while the other participants were political leaders, feminists, social activists and civil society representatives from Nepal. Members from ANWA and SAAPE were engaged in making the entire programme constructive and result-oriented.

The programme was chaired by Goma Devkota, chairperson of ANWA. Former Prime Minister and leader of CPN-UML, K. P. Sharma Oli, was the chief guest. The presence of the distinguished guests, the parliamentarians from Pakistan and Nepal, Hon. Mahtab Rashdi and Hon. Sushila Nepal, added more essence and gravity to the programme.

Joanna Mahjebeen, assistant professor at Gauhati University, Assam, India, led and set the environment of the programme being the keynote speaker. Besides, other respected guests included: Gauri Pradhan (LDC Watch), Rokeya Kabir (Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha), Abir Neogi, (Das Theke Das Hajar), Aminath Shazly (Maldives National University), Shanaz Iqbal (Labour Education Foundation), Mathini Nelson (Women's Right Activist) and Netra Prasad Timsina (SAAPE).

1.6. The Convergence Mechanics

The convergence included an inaugural session wherein the poverty report 2017 was launched and a solidarity message was expressed by the distinguished guests. This was followed by country-wise presentations on key challenges and emerging opportunities of women participation in local political governance. The participating member countries discussed on each country's presentation

reflecting to their own country scenario as well. The discussion was constructive wherein participants were learning from each country's experience.

The convergence reviewed, reflected and critically discussed on the current context, key challenges and learnings of countries with regards to women's participation. They were of the opinion that women's participation in South Asia has gained a significant momentum and attention, but the participation is not sufficient. By the end of the second day, the convergence came up with a commonly agreed declaration as a way forward for women's rights movements in South Asia to enhance women's participation in politics and local governance. This declaration is the outcome of the convergence, which draws a common advocacy strategy for women's engagement at national and regional levels. The report contains the details of the presentations, review, reflection and the declaration.

1.7. Setting the Tone

Inauguration Ceremony

In presence of political dignitaries of Nepal, Speakers included political leaders, parliamentarians, academicians, professors, social activists and civil society members from Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the formal inauguration of the convergence took place at Hotel Airport, Kathmandu on the 6 August, 2017. The programme commenced with Ms Sharmila Karki, Women's Campaign Right Coordinator, SAAPE, welcoming the guests and participants to the platform to discuss on women's participation in politics and local governance in South Asia. The speakers expressed their solidarity and highlighted the importance of women's participation in politics and governance for practicing genuine democracy.



Representatives from South Asian Countries

"We are here to celebrate Nepal's achievement on securing 33% women's participation in parliament and 40% women's participation in local governments, as has been guaranteed by the constitution" pinpointed Ms Sharmila Karki. She introduced SAAPE, ANWA and highlighted the work done by SAAPE basically in three major themes; (i) right to food and food sovereignty, (ii) demilitarisation and social protection and (iii) women rights.

Welcoming and Objective of the Programme

Ms Sita Paudel, vice chair of ANWA as well as the leader of CPN-UML and South Asian Women Rights Campaign, welcoming the guests and participants stated that South Asia still has the poorest people in the world and women are the major victims of poverty and violence in this region. She expressed, "This region has not yet achieved gender equality hence the theme, 'Women's participation in Politics and Local Governance' has been chosen for the convergence." She further explained that until women's rights are guaranteed in the constitution, policies, also in practice and until gender equality is achieved, the women's right campaign should be continuous.



Sita Paudel, Nepal

Ms Paudel specified the objective of the convergence as to have a common action plan – a collaborative strategy for ensuring active engagement of women at all mechanisms for fighting together to end the common problem of gender inequality in South Asia. Concluding her speech, she thanked the guests and participants and hoped to come up with declaration by the end of the programme.

Guest Speakers and their Deliverance

Honourable Member of the Parliament of Nepal, Ms Sushila Nepal, spoke about the struggle of women's movements and the achievement: she congratulated women's right campaigners for making Nepal achieve 33% women's participation in the Nepalese Parliament. She said, "The Constitution of Nepal 2047 (1990 AD) had provisioned only a five per cent reservation to women participation in the parliament, while 33% and 40% women participation in the parliament in federal, central and local government respectively has been guaranteed by the Constitution of Nepal 2072 (2015 AD)." Furthermore, she noted the works of ANWA in women's movement in Nepal are



Sushila Nepal, Member of Parliament, Nepal

remarkable. “We (Nepal) are honoured to have the first women president of Nepal from ANWA,” she said. Talking about securing women’s position in leading roles during the election, she mentioned “First-past-the-post” (FPTP) so, that competition takes place between women only. Finally, she envisioned achieving gender equality in the South Asian region.

Mr Balram Banskota, the thematic leader of right to food and food sovereignty representing All Nepal Peasants’ Federation (ANPFa), talked about poverty in South Asia and food sovereignty. He described, “Food sovereignty is guaranteed as a fundamental right and farmers’ rights have been included in the Constitution of Nepal. But still it remains only in policy.” He stated South Asia is home to the poor and oppressed. Most countries in South Asia are still based on agro-economy with small land holders and many families are still relying on family farming where men and women both work on a farm. According to him, “Globalisation is a struggle as well as a hope.” Supporting his statement, he specified that small farm owners and farmers in South Asia have suffered most due to globalisation. According to Banskota, women who supply labour force to agriculture, suffer the most, being least powerful and not having equal say at decision-making. Thus, he ended by talking about the importance of and expressing solidarity with women movements in South Asia.



Balram Banskota, Nepal

Dr Netra Timsina introduced SAAPE and its work to the audience. “For 16 years, SAAPE has been fighting against unfair capitalistic development.” Moreover, he put forward that SAAPE has been publishing poverty reports in South Asia, which is a method to put alternative pressure on the governments. “This year we are publishing the fifth report; justice and social mobility have been major themes of the report,” Timsina reported. Referring to history, he quoted that Nepal has a neoliberal economic policy and

according to him, “Capitalistic development has pushed the development of the women’s position backward. Social protection policy to some extent has neutralised the negative impact, but not all poor women receive social protection.”



Netra Timsina, Nepal

He was of the opinion that with the increase in military budget in India due to conflicts with Pakistan, the rest of South Asia is suffering because of ripple effects. Timsina coined this situation as very dangerous to South Asia and hence urged that women's movements should also campaign on demilitarisation.

Paying homage to women heroes for their sacrifice for the cause of emancipation, justice and freedom of women, Mr Gauri Pradhan from LDC Watch thanked the organisers for holding the convergence in Nepal when the world is keenly observing Nepal for the implementation of the policy "33% and 40% women participation in federal, national and local government respectively."

Furthermore he stated, "Women hold 50% of the world population, but their political representation in the States lags far behind. We still live in a world where women have very little access to decisions that directly impact them for their development and empowerment." Quoting UN Women reports, Mr Pradhan told, "The average share of women MPs was 22.8% in the world and 19.2% in Asia as of June 2016." He mentioned that Rwanda, has the highest portion of women in parliament with 64 per cent (UN-OHRLS, 2016), even higher than the Nordic countries with 41.1%. Similarly, he exemplified the achievement of Nepal and Afghanistan on having 33% and 28% women's participation in parliament respectively, he stressed upon addressing the situation of women under-representation in the highest positions in politics as well as public and private sectors. Additionally, he explained that the reason for the low women participation is due to patriarchal structures and conservative attitudes that permeate political participation in South Asia. Moreover, he also told that the absence of a well-developed education and training system and limited access to political networks have also impeded to promote women's leadership and orient women in politics. Talking about the role of LDC Watch in advocating for ensuring women's fair participation in decision-making, Pradhan ended his speech with stressing brighter hope emerging from the convergence.

Appreciating the work of ANWA and SAAPE for organising the programme, the former Prime Minister of Nepal and Chairperson of CPN-UML, Khadga Prasad Sharma Oli, spoke about the political reforms in Nepal and women's participation. He affirmed prior to the constitution of 1990, no constitution ensured women's participation in politics and government. "The constitution of 1990, granted a 5% quota for women candidates, but with efforts



Chief Guest Former Prime Minister of Nepal K. P. Sharma Oli

from ANWA a 20% women participation was secured in local government elections and now the present constitution provisions for 33% and 40% reservation for women's participation in local government", explained Mr K. P. Oli. Through his deliverance, being concerned with the low female literacy rate in the Terai region especially among the Musahar ethnic group which accounts only 21%, he emphasised on girls education and the changing of traditional patriarchal attitudes to achieve women's empowerment. He considered child marriage as a deteriorating factor for achieving 100% girls education; although net enrolment rate in primary education is 96.56% ⁵, only 55.74% of girls are enrolled in the secondary level⁶.

Expressing his solidarity with women campaigners and participants, he said, increasing women's participation in every aspect of society is crucial and programmes like such enable to overcome discrimination and marginalisation of women in South Asia.

The assistant professor of Gauhati University and keynote speaker of the event, Joanna Mahjebeen, started by stating, "We have met here at the very opportune moment, we are grappling with opportunities and challenges we have also set forth the guidelines with SGDs." Further, quoting 80% of the women are vulnerable and in informal jobs in South Asia, she declared that there is crisis in women's status in this region. "In this region, women are not invisible



Keynote Speaker Joanna Mahjebeen, India

in politics. There is unique experience of women participation in politics. Women's movement in this region has ensured for reforms. The institutional measures are being put in order to bring par with the other gender and this has helped to improve the situation as Afghanistan has 28%, Bangladesh has 14%, Maldives has 14%, Nepal has 33% and Sri Lanka has 5% of constitutionally reserved women's participation in parliament." She critically questioned the mass, "Why settle with only a 33% women's political participation in South Asia? Why is it not 50%?" Evoking the mass to critically think, she continued discussing about the situation

⁵ World Bank: School enrollment, primary, female, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.NENR.FE?locations=NP>

⁶ World Bank: School enrollment, secondary, female, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.NENR.FE?locations=NP>

and common problems of South Asia such as the fact that South Asian countries have the lowest female HDI in the world which is reflected by the high rate of anemia, patriarchy and traditional harmful practices, like the existence of the Parda system, high female dropout rate, violence against women, land reform-caste and gender, vulnerability faced by women due to environment to name a few of the issues. Talking about women political participation and patriarchy in South Asia, she postulated, "Empowerment of women took place in the context of patriarchal dominance and the political scenario ensures that politics were always centred in the masculine identity."

Democratic leader Nimalka Fernando from Sri Lanka pinpointed that a constitution only is a framework providing guidelines and structure. She claimed, "It is politics that touches the base of reforms with regards to consequences, inequality, feminisation and poverty. These cannot be overcome by constitution. The constitutional law are not the end of, it is a guiding principle." Fernando expressed that in neoliberal politics, we are afraid to use words like revolution and liberation, but SAAPE has always believed and encouraged transformative politics. Moreover, she



Nimalka Fernando, Sri Lanka

believed in building a critical mass not just questioning and suggesting opinions, but rather encouraging changes. She proposed women in politics to be this mass and start questioning the role of women in politics and the limited political participation of women. Complaining about Sri Lanka's women's political participation, she admitted, "Women constitute 52% of Sri Lanka's population but only 5% represent them in parliament. Why? Sri Lanka is an example in women's education and health, but it only has one per cent women representation in local government." Along with this, talking more on women's political participation, Fernando inquired whether women in politics can continuously contribute commitment and whether society can commit to continuously promote them. Critically, Ms Fernando added, "Changing patriarchal politics is tough and a sense of femininity has been transformed into politics like Mamta Banerjee is called Didi (elder sister), Jayaram Jayalalithaa was known as Amma (mother) and Mayawati Prabhu Das is referred to as Behen-ji (sister)." She critically questioned women in leadership accepting the nurturer and caretaker role and accepting the condition applied and image provided. Winding up her say, the women's right activist Fernando suggested that if we desire to end poverty, combat violence and conflicts, reforms from a local level should be started; revolutionised thinking has

to be adopted and women's participation is one measure to do so.

Starting with expressing her solidarity with the women and people of Nepal for achieving excellent results in women's participation in politics, Ms Rokeya Kabir, representing Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha, emphasised more on the gender-based division of labour and underpay, as well as the recognition of unaccounted women's work. "Women in South Asia are in poverty, they do two thirds of the work and are still underpaid compared to their male counterpart, according to statistics of the World Economic Forum," commented Ms Kabir. Invoking the mass with her radical



Rokeya Kabir, Bangladesh

view on women's liberation, she suggested to fight for institutional arrangements and bring in a notion of change in the mindset of people, she said, "We need to have a sense of equality. Women need to know this. We still do not consider it as important for women to have equal rights." In addition she talked about challenges of the reproductive role and the burden women bear, women's participation in family and the market and being considered as cheap labour. Ms Kabir concluded her speech by conveying, "Through revolution we have captured State power, but the society has not transformed and we have to work for societal transformation."

Abir Neogi laid weight on building a stronger alliance within the subcontinent. She said, "We are not having peaceful times but a troubled one in regard to women's status. The spaces are shrinking and there is a need for alliance or else the subcontinent will be harmed if we are not alerted on violence against women." Further, he underpinned that violence against women is not just a violation of women's rights but rather human rights and alliances would be a tool for women to fight against inequality.

Aminath Shazly, Maldives National University, portraying a picture of women's under-representation explained the situation of women in Maldives. According to her, women constitute 49% of the total population of Maldives. They are marginalised and under-represented in economic spheres. Fishery and tourism (23.9%) are a chief source of income where even the women contribute, however, both sectors are dominated by men. Institutions like the parliament and cabinet are male-dominated and there is a poor representation of women in both. Despite of the high literacy rate in the country, women are restricted from receiving higher education and are forced to leave school after primary education, get married and

remain housewives. Currently only one party is following the policies and rules of engaging women in politics. She ended her speech with noting, "In Maldives cultural restrictions are imposed on women due to which women's participation in politics and governance is poor. Being a young democracy, women face a lot of challenges."

Shanaz Iqbal commented on the situation of women in Pakistan. She argued that the State's data shows low participation of women in economy but in actual, women participation is higher because of their involvement in the informal sector. Until 2001 AD, only a 10% reservation was ensured for women. In the last few years, the Women's Act has been introduced and a 33% women participation has been ensured in all sectors. She expressed the problem faced by activists; women were stopped in casting their votes and shared that the implementation of the policy is somewhat lacklustre. Additionally, she mentioned that in Pakistan women currently have to struggle for a proportional representation of women, proposal of laws and policies and then its implementation. Iqbal concluded by saying, "Our issues and challenges are similar, that is why we have to strategise to go together to improve women's conditions. We should develop a common strategy."

Ms Mathini Nelson delivered her speech in Tamil and it was translated by Nalini Rathnarajah. In her speech she talked about the conflict in Sri Lanka and women's participation in the government. Further, she shared, "We had the first women prime minister in the world, [as Sirimavo Bandaranaike served as the head of government between 1960 and 1965 and then later also between 1970-1977 and 1994-2000], but that is not enough. During 30 years of war, the budget was heavily spent for militarisation, which is now overshadowing other issues. After eight years, the development is at a slow pace and not yet people-centred, where the victims are marginalised. The government is focusing on developing the country, but not properly focusing on the people. One achievement is that women's participation in the public and private sector has increased to 25%." Besides, she also mentioned that monitoring of violence against women and mechanisms to protect and promote women's rights are important in Sri Lanka.



Mathini Nelson, Sri Lanka

Ms Goma Devkota, chair of the session, thanked everyone for their overwhelming participation and closed the session.

2. WORKING SESSIONS

2.1. First Day: Presentation and Discussions

2.1.1 Formation of a Drafting Committee

The afternoon session started with an introduction of the participants. 23 participants including international and national guests, academicians, leaders, activists, journalists and members of SAAPE attended the session. The afternoon session was chaired by Ms Nimalka Fernando. The committee for drafting the declaration was established. The list of the members of the committee is as follows:

Drafting Committee

1. Rokeya Kabir, Bangladesh
2. Nalini Ratnarajah, Sri Lanka
3. Sharmila Karki, Nepal
4. Mariya Salim, India
5. Praman Adhikari, Nepal

2.1.2 Overview of SAAPE Women's Rights Campaign in South Asia

- Sharmila Karki, Nepal

Ms Sharmila Karki discussed about SAAPE and its work. She presented different working themes of SAAPE:

- a) Campaign against Land Grabbing/Food Sovereignty
- b) Women's Rights Campaign
- c) Demilitarisation and Social Protection

The core of her presentation was about the necessity of an alliance such as SAAPE in South Asia. Karki presented the situation of South Asia and expressed, "South Asia is known as the poorest region and women are the ones most affected by it. All these issues affect the women directly." She pinpointed, under the SAAPE umbrella, these problems are observed from the women's perspective and various campaigns led by the alliance help to improve the women's position. Emphasising the importance of campaign as, "women rights movements are of high importance. We have to



create pressure, work as watch dogs, be aware,” she introduced campaigns of SAAPE.

Campaign Activities: She mentioned that SAAPE has been conducting various campaign activities like policy advocacy, demonstrations/sit-ins/protests/rallies/memorandums/petition submission to concerned stakeholders, press meetings/press releases, developing and disseminating posters/pamphlets, capacity enhancement for the promotion of the critical mass, regional convergences etc.

Regional Convergences: This is the third convergence. Nepal has consecutively organised all three events.

1. Breaking the Barriers: Claiming Women's Space in Politics in South Asia, 9-10 January, 2009, Kathmandu, Nepal
2. “Engender Politics and Governance in South Asia” South Asian Women's Conference on Women's Political Participation and Representation, 11-12 September 2013, Kathmandu, Nepal
3. South Asian Women's Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia: Expanding Spaces and Enhancing Rights for Equality and Justice, 6-7 August, 2017, Kathmandu, Nepal

The chair of the session remarked her presentation about the work of SAAPE and proclaimed that local governance and local government structures are the bedrock of democracy. It is very important to focus on local governance in South Asia. The country does not exist without the communities.

2.1.3 Country Presentation

I. Women in Politics in Bangladesh

- Sadeka Halim, Bangladesh

Sadeka Halim presented a paper on “Women in Politics in Bangladesh.” Her presentation described how women are under-represented in politics and the relation of politics with justice was clearly defined by her. Furthermore, she talked about the “Salish-traditional justice system” which discusses the cases of rape, dowry assault and holds local power to mediate the cases. She presented that as very few women participate in the Salish executive body justice are mostly in favour of men



and women, despite of having access to be heard, have no access fair to a justice system at local level. Halim also presented a declining data of women's participation in the election. She mentioned that during 2009, 2,900 female representatives participated in Upazila (sub-district in Bangladesh) elections, while only 1,507 women participated in the 2014 elections in 458 Upazilas. According to her, in the span of 15 years, political candidacy of women in Union Council elections has slashed down by 50 or 48 per cent. Patriarchy, religious taboo, monetisation of elections and a violent nature of elections were some of the explained reason of such decline in women's participation. She also mentioned that since 1991, 33% of the seats are reserved for women.

Challenges in Bangladesh

- Equality perception and discourse is completely missing. Women are seen as beneficiaries, not as active members.
- Anti-poverty approach, empowerment approach has been undertaken and it challenges the inequality between men and women, but the reality check is women are not a homogeneous group, they represent different classes, castes, religions, regions etc.

II. Issue of Violence

- Abir Neogi, India

Abir Neogi started off by saying, "Be it in ten or be it in thousand, we will come down on the road and protest".

In addition, Neogi talked of the existence of hetero-patriarchy, when women are coming to grab the positions and rights of men, they become victims of violence. Further, Neogi explained that this situation makes women regret approaching to claim rights and many refrain by not approaching at all. Neogi also put forward, "Rights are not given, they are already ours." But in South Asia even claiming rights creates problems for women. Neogi presented a case of a 61-year-old woman, who was raped in Kolkata, leaving her paralysed. The government has taken some good steps with campaigns like "Save girls, educate girls," but this is not enough. Progress has also been observed after the Mathura and Nirbhaya rape cases with enactment of a rape law and a law about dowry in India. Neogi also mentioned the rise in Hindutwa and the flaws/gaps in law challenge at policy and executing level.

The chair of the session commented that Neogi addressed important issues about violence against women despite of protection from the law, explained Hindutwa and the chair asked to what extent Hindutwa is important to her.



III. Women Situation in Maldives

- Aminath Shazly, Maldives

Aminath Shazly, an academician from Maldives, presented the women situation in Maldives and also presented research data on the impact of climate change. Her presentation delivered information like the fact that Maldives is much more behind looking at the other countries in South Asia with regards to gender equality. Despite of a 95.5 female to male ratio, political representation of women is very low in Maldives. Women representation at the leadership level is inadequate. Among six political parties in Maldives, only one party has reserved slots for women at the council level, yet no reservation for the participation of women in the parliament has been ensured. The 2008 constitution has been revised and some gender friendly laws have been introduced. A national gender policy (2016-2021) has been launched which focuses on women participation.



The chair suggested Ms Shazly to discuss more about women's participation in politics in Maldives.

IV. Status of Gender Participation in Local Government

- Binda Pandey, Nepal

In her presentation, Pandey discussed some historical and current scenarios of women's political representation in Nepal. She informed the audience that in 1953 Sahana Pradhan was first elected in the Kathmandu municipality; she was the first elected women in the history of Nepal. Further, Pandey displayed examples of women leaders in various institutes and organisations like FNCCI, the head of justice committee, NGO Federation or All Nepal National Free Students' Union. She told that in Nepal women are also in executive positions and highlighted a number of bills and international laws ratified by Nepal like CEDAW, ILO Convention 100 and 111 and other national bills against domestic violence and



violence at the work place, labour law and social security act. She ended by saying we should have a common strategy to change the patriarchal base of society.

The chair of the session appreciated the presentation as comprehensive and interesting.

V. Key Challenges and Emerging Opportunities

- Shanaz Iqbal, Pakistan

Shanaz Iqbal, in her presentation, talked about the overall situation of women, economic activities and women's political participation in Pakistan. She talked about institutional, structural obstacles and functional problems in obtaining gender equality in Pakistan. Moreover, she stressed that according to the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Report 2016, Pakistan ranked 130th out of 157 countries on the gender inequality index.



Her presentation included information that 70% of the women are actively involved in farming, livestock and off-farm activities in rural Pakistan and 78% in urban areas are in the informal economy (home-based work, piece rate sub contract, domestic work, etc.). But the State's data system does not include informal work into the national account and women's participation in the economy lacks documentation. Further, she emphasised that market conditions are unfavourable for women and trade unions are male-dominated and women are not in leadership. She also discussed the rights guaranteed by constitution like the freedom of assembly, prohibition from slavery, forced labour, prohibition of discrimination and right to enter lawful occupation. The Constitution of Pakistan provisions equal rights for women to work and has a provision for securing just and human working conditions, ensuring that children and women are not employed in vocations unsuited to their age or sex and for maternity benefits for women in employment. Ms Iqbal also talked about property ownership; she stated that there is no legal bar for inheriting property in Pakistan but the patriarchy ideology imbedded deeply in society challenges the inheritance of property. She reported, "Pakistan ranks as 121st out of 128 countries regarding property ownership by women.

Talking about women's political participation, she mentioned that 60 seats are reserved for women in the national assembly and 17 in the senate, but political participation is very low. She commented that there is only a 20.5 per cent

representation of women in the lower house and 18.3 percent in the senate in Pakistan's political scenario. Structural, institutional and functional obstacles to women's political participation were also underlined.

Structural Obstacles

- Traditional ideology attached with the sexual division of labour, functional barrier like women's role confined to household activities
- Inability of the State to provide equal opportunities to its citizens

Institutional Obstacles

- Lower representation in government, public and private institutions
- Election commission is not sensitive about gender issues
- Political parties are male-dominated with less women in leadership roles

Functional Obstacles

- Low social, economic and political investments in promoting women's rights remain a major functional problem
- Women often lack opportunities for education, economic resources – these factors undermine women's capacity to participate in governance structures

Besides this, other issues and challenges are apparent; although transportation arrangements were done, many women did not cast their vote due to the low mobility's practice of women, which is a major problem in achieving women's political participation. This includes problems faced by women party workers in the public and private sphere of society, language constraints that are being faced by women to communicate, etc.

Concluding her presentation, Ms Iqbal portrayed that the gap is in the government department, where it lacks the capacity in working and designing programmes being specific to women work. She also suggested that Pakistan needs to acknowledge and value women's work.

VI. Women's Participation focused on the War-torn Sri Lanka

- Nalini Ratnarajah, Sri Lanka

Nalini Ratnarajah's country presentation of women's participation focused on the war-torn Sri Lanka and following political changes. She also emphasised the progress in the making of bills and delay in the transitional justice system. Moreover, she pinpointed that Sri Lanka is at a very critical junction, the civil war just ended in 2009 and the new president has been elected in 2015 with a coalition government. According to her, this has brought about relief to women. She informed that the domestic violence act was passed in 2005 which ensured

women's and gender rights, but due to a lack of will of the government, a slow process of transitional justice can be observed and this is one of the institutional obstacles in access to justice for women.

Ratnarajah also mentioned that over ten million women are the backbone of the Sri Lankan economy. Women are in tea plantation and have migrated abroad. The women face a maximum of domestic violence, VAW is an issue in the Middle East concerning female Sri Lankan migrants and even in tea plantation they face violence, but the justice process is slow.



In the name of anticipating women's grievance, many women are mobilised by parties in campaigns, however, women's voices have yet to be heard. The constitutional reform process is going on and there is a hope that the women's participation in politics will be increased to 25%. But the challenge in achieving this is that smaller political parties are not willing to accept this reform. Besides, other challenges were shared by Ms Nalini Ratnarajah in achieving women's participation in politics; women do not have the money and physical power to support themselves during elections. Transitional justice to families is delayed, as perpetrators themselves are in parliament.

Ratnarajah suggested that the Sri Lankan Government needs to promote justice and invest in women's political empowerment. Furthermore, women activists need to focus on empowering women for challenging the patriarchal system, power structure and only then gender equality can be promoted in the country.

2.1.4 Open Floor Discussion

Mariya Salim from India raised a question on Maldives' presentation, "Maldives has ratified CEDAW but it has two reservations."

Shanaz Iqbal pointed out that in regards to the women's rights convention, "Pakistan struggled for 15 years to ratify convention 177 and 189."

Hon. Ms Mahtab Rashdi, Member of the Parliament of Pakistan stated two important things in Pakistan:

- i. International laws are ratified because we have to survive in the international community.
- ii. But, the ratified laws have not been implemented because they are not serious about it. They do not believe in it because it is imposed.

It was added that Pakistan has come up with good laws but they are not implemented.

Abir Neogi added: "Before we move out tomorrow, how do you define women? Who is a woman? This is a very critical issue, it remains at the root of the issue."

Rokeya Kabir said: "Militarisation in the form of arms industry or in the form of building militarisation in the country like ours, old patriarchal, feudal structure, new challenges are coming in, while developing the strategies we have to think about it." Referring to Sri Lanka's country presentation, she noted, "Women are becoming the sources of cheap labour. Men are moving to cities and women are taking their place. How do you see this issue?"

Nimalka Fernando asked: "Is it equality for women that we are fighting for in politics? Should the terminology of the Beijing Platform of Action (discrimination, unequal power relation) be revisited? What should we do as women in politics? Critics are arguing that quotas and numbers have endangered women's conditions. Political parties are not feminist organisations. How do we assess the impact of female politicians? Who is the role model for women? What kind of indicators should we need to build? What is your plan to reduce poverty? The women who entered Nepal's politics have experience at the grassroots level. I like the Panchayat (political system) because even the illiterate can be a member of it."

Moreover, Binda Pandey described: "Feminism has a connection with a political party, the policy of a communist party of Nepal, in 1949 – after the establishment of the communist party of Nepal – the CPN-UML talked about liberal feminism. In 1978, we started to talk from the Marxist point of view, women to be part of economic activity. Then in 1992, we lost women from the movement - those who were part of economic activity. Later we followed the principle of People's Multiparty Democracy (PMPD). Accordingly, women should be part of politics and male should also be part of all kinds of activities; social, political, economic. That is one aspect encouraging women to be part of politics. Care economy is one major part and domestic work of women should be counted in national accounts. The deputy mayor is not just a ceremonial role, they are chair of the justice committee at the local level and this has to be acknowledged.

Sujita Shakya, a former student leader and currently a social activist asked: "How can women continue in politics? After marriage, how can women continue in politics? We discussed this in our organisation, ANWA. In this regard, we see women's inactivity in politics after marriage as continuation of politics. As a role model, we can follow Kamala Bhasin who is the socialist model of a feminist. Besides, quantity in forms of quota should also be transformed to quality and competency."

Kalpana Waiba, also a student leader and the student union representative from

Nepal believes: “South Asian countries have similar problems like in Nepal; according to a labour report, land and house ownership of women is 19% and 25% respectively. Political participation is not just enough – though we have political participation we have not been able to address the social aspects or structural aspects. There are still cases of chhaupadis and violence against women in Nepal and these women in politics need to address such issues for fair justice.”

The chair, Nimalka Fernando, concluded the session informing about the next day session on challenges and development of the plan of action.

2.2. Second Day: Challenges and Development of the Plan of Action

Day two was chaired by Rokeya Kabir and Abir Neogi was the vice chair of the session. Dr Netra Timsina facilitated the review session of day one. Ms Nimalka Fernando delivered a short synopsis of the day one presentations and discourses on governance, women’s participation, violence against women and achievement so far in women’s participation in politics. During the review session, the Honourable Member of the Parliament of Pakistan discussed the common problem of South Asia which is that laws are made, but they are not implemented. Dr Timsina summarised the discussion saying there are many commonalities among South Asian countries and this has to be sorted out together.

2.2.1 Sharing Session

I. Expanding Space and Enhancing Gender Equality in Nepal: Learning, Challenges and Opportunities

- Dr Bimala Rai Paudel, Nepal

In her presentation she discussed about translating political progress into development and emphasised not just on making policies gender sensitive and responsive, but rather the mechanism and practice to be the same. In addition, she gave a short overview of the journey of women’s rights campaigners to achieve success to date in Nepal. She pointed out, “The positive outcome of women’s struggles and movements is the achievement of a one-third women representation in parliament and 40% in government. We have expanded the space in politics but the critical question is why we need this women’s participation in politics and the answer is gender equality at a national to grassroots level. Thus, the focus has to also be drawn towards achieving the real goal of enhancing gender equality at a



“Patriarchy itself imposes challenges to women’s political participation; candidates are being given secondary roles (vice positions) with no authority, workload, restricted mobility, control to mobilise financial resources, family threats, lack of family support are major gender constraints faced by women political leaders.”

grassroots level as women participation is an entry or measure to do so. Our policy makers are not gender sensitive and so we have to target women’s access to information, technology, gender responsive policies/budget, gender focal points and justice to achieve results.” She also stated that patriarchy itself imposes challenges to women’s political participation; candidates are being given secondary roles (vice positions) with no authority, workload, restricted

mobility, control to mobilise financial resources, family threats, lack of family support are major gender constraints faced by women political leaders. Demoralisation due to vice positions and criticism of not being able to do substantive work.

In her presentation she also discussed about the challenges women leaders in local governance would face in the upcoming days, challenging gendered constraints where they need to show their competencies by performing more, enhance their capacity and knowledge about role, responsibility, system development, negotiation skills, just and fairness and accounting/finance as well as work and life balance.

She mentioned some of the challenges in expanding spaces and enhancing gender equality as:

- We lack gender policies in sectoral ministries and gender focal points.
- If we compare Nepal in South Asia, we are good in formulating gender sensitive policies but we lack implementation.
- Economic independence: Women have limited opportunities. Most work is in the informal sector. Male migration is increasing and agricultural work is feminised. Workload has increased for women.
- There is less participation of women at the executive level, despite an increase of women’s participation in politics.
- Though the space for women in the public sector is expanding, the challenge is to make the best use of it as women need to prove by doing more, increasing knowledge, capacity and striking balance in work and personal life.
- Violence and crime against women and children is increasing and being reported, however, the perception regarding VAW has not changed and service providers are not gender sensitive; there is a lack of profound

practices. In addition to this, the protection mechanism is also not very strong, sufficient and effective.

- The political will is still questionable. There is no 33 per cent representation in the cabinet (only 9 to 10 per cent). Out of 27 ministries, only 3 are headed by women. There are very few women at the secretary and joint-secretary level. These are the people who make plans and policies.
- Institutional obstacle: How powerful is the ministry? Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare cannot implement all women-related policies; it has a limited say over other sectoral ministries.

She left the floor recommending some major points:

- It is necessary to figure out who benefits from gender equality. It is thought that the integration of women's issues benefits women but in reality it benefits the entire country from the perspective of economic growth and prosperity. Thus, the mindset that only women benefit should be changed.
- The country is restructuring and hence following these points needs to be ensured:
- Ministry of Women, Children and Social Welfare should be made stronger by building up its capacity, resource and authority.
- Women's issues should be integrated into the annual plan and there should be capacity building and monitoring.
- Gender experts should be in all State institutions; the problem is that all the gender experts are outside the State structure. In the new federal setup, the local level planning mechanism is more important. So, expertise should be consulted.

2.2.2 Query and Response

Abir Neogi raised a question addressed to the presenter from Nepal: "What is the sex ratio, do we have female foeticide, property right, inheritance, executive lacks behind? Who is a woman?"

The presenter responded by saying: "In Nepal 51.8% of the population are women. Female foeticide is a criminal act in Nepal and so is sex identification of a child before birth but it is in practice, though not widely." The role of women in the family: the number of women-headed households is increasing due to emigration of men. They are de facto leaders but no de jure. They are house managers but they are excluded from any transactions. In regard to property rights, the constitution has made clear provisions. But all women have not been able to claim it since it requires greater bargaining power. Laws and byelaws are to be made. Violence against women: domestic violence persists (example: chhaupadi). It is a

human rights issue, but we have not been able to recognise it as a development issue.

2.2.3 Floor Discussion

Binda Pandey added to the query saying, “In the Aryan community, mostly we do not have women family leaders. In the Mongolian community, we do have women family leaders. Regarding the property ownership, we have a joint ownership provision in which men cannot sell land without women’s permission.”

Nalini Ratnarajah from Sri Lanka explained: “There are three ethnic groups in Sri Lanka – Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. The problem is that during election, political parties will have their women candidates but they stick to the party. Ethnic background is given more priority than gender. If a Tamil man and a Muslim woman contest in the election, Tamil women voters will vote for the Tamil man. Party and ethnics play a bigger role than gender. Women will run behind money. I contested in the election in 2010. I personally asked women’s organisations for support. But they did not support me even morally. However, they say they are providing training to women and helping them participate in politics. Women’s participation in development is not just about women’s welfare. We need a strong alliance-building. If 52 per cent of the population boycott the election, no one will be elected. More than the training, we have to put women to learn through experience.”

Mahtab Rashdi, Member of the Parliament of Pakistan expressed: “We have formed the women’s caucus and have decided that if any issues come related to women, we will not consult parties but will rise above it. In Muslim families, there are even more restrictions. Property rights have been given to women 1,500 years ago by the Islam but it is the society which prevents them from claiming their rights. I am going to share the example of Nepal’s joint property ownership system in our country. The change of mindset is difficult. First of all, we have to change our mind-set. It takes time and I do not see it happening in my generation. Legislation is a weapon in hand. It comes handy when you actually want to use it. If women are harassed, it requires a lot of courage. You have to be very courageous and even the male counterpart has to support. You have to come forward and the society has to support it. We have to do something about it but it will take time.”



Mahtab Rashdi, Member of Parliament, Pakistan

Aminath Shazly believed that empowerment within women is necessary. Women are busy with the domestic role. There is a lack of will power and there is no higher study in politics for women. It is recent that in

our university, we have started teaching politics and only men are there. This is reducing women empowerment and restricting their leadership role. A lot of skills and training is needed. The gender equality bill 2016 was presented in the parliament but it was turned down since male representatives dominate the parliament. A survey was conducted if people want women presidency and only 39 per cent said yes. So, there is still a long way to go. Legally, there is no restriction for women to participate in politics but still a lot of challenges persist.

Ms Mariya Salim shared the status of muslim women in India and emphasised on expanding spaces them in all spheres of life. By highlighting the importance of gender equality she talked about the Haji Ali Victory as a victory for women's movement in India. She also highlighted the importance of education, the gap in equal pay, the impact of violence and conflict on pushing women back.

At the end, she shared her poem, "I will shine", a tribute to sexual violence survivors.

*Two strange hands,
an unwanted touch.
Struggling eyes,
Might, that momentarily couldn't do much.
A battle lost,
A war yet to be fought,
Strength of a soul
that remains untouched.
Punish the guilty
Why blame the prey?
Why predict a dark future?
What fault was theirs?
Why associate honour, dignity and pride
Why make her feel its almost like she died!
Why blame the dusk, the dress, the time
Why charge the wounded, why hide a crime?
The body may be bruised,
The soul no beast can destroy
For no fault of my own
Shall I be forced for life to cry?
Rise , shine, a war is waiting to be won.
Life is to be lived,
Darkness will soon sublime.
Have faith in the slowly rising sun.*



Mariya Salim, India

Sadeka Halim commented that in the South Asian region three countries are Islamic republics (Afghanistan, Maldives and Pakistan), two are Buddhist States (Bhutan and Sri Lanka), two secular states with a Hindu majority (India and Nepal) and one secular state with Muslim majority (Bangladesh). In patriarchy families, a unit is observed as discriminative. Family definitely determines the mindset, but is not the only institution for prevalence of discrimination. For instance, if we come

across terrorist attacks in Bangladesh, children from both the rich and the poor got together to kill people in the name of religious terrorism.

We need to be clear on this that certain forces are dictating through policies with the idea that women should not be given equal rights.

In Bangladesh itself, in 1997, equal property rights were provided to women. In 2004, the policies were changed and reverted to prior 1997 policies. In 2006/07, the 1997 policies were reinstated but without equal property rights to women.

Currently, 50 seats have been reserved for women in parliament. But these 50 representatives are selected by men and very few deserving women have chances and therefore diversity is not addressed. Our society follows the stereotypical division of labour: women are responsible for the household and men are responsible for politics.

Mohammad Yunus – the Nobel laureate – had also started his credit institution Grameen Bank with men. But now 99 per cent of Grameen Bank's credit clients are women because they have less probability of default. It is very difficult for women to manage money because the market is not gender friendly (for example: eve teasing, violence against women, etc.).

It is difficult for women to get into politics due to less access to financial resources.

In education, the girl child enrolment met the MDGs. However, a law has been brought in which if a girl, older than 16 years, eloped with somebody, the court will allow them to marry without paying attention to the real issue.

In the government sector, many women are recruited (85 per cent are women) because they are regarded as cheap labour.

Out of the total export, 64 per cent is possible due to women's labour; so the current government is giving more priority and also acting as a supervisory role.

We need to document best practices, also in other sectors, not only in politics.

We need to focus on the issue of capability, as highlighted by Amartya Sen.

Beli Maya Ghale from GEFONT underlined: "Women are victims and mostly we are victimised by men, may be it is high time for us to take men along with us to bring significant change." Ghale represents trade unions. "On women's programme, we decided to have at least a proportion of 25% men in every programme. Most of the men are in the policy-making, so we have to bring them into our programmes."

A Sri Lankan participant raised the question: "You have women in the development sector, why can those organisations not bring those women into politics?"

Kalpna Waiba stressed that Nepal is a very diverse country – literacy rate, sex ratio, religion. There exists a gender gap in literacy. The constitution has guaranteed

women's right as a fundamental right, but change in political participation solely will not just bring changes in all sectors.

Nimalka Fernando described, "It took me three years to have women's rights be discussed in the core committee. There has been a very dismal performance of women in leftist parties. In capitalist parties, women representation is better. When we say we have to encourage women in politics, there is a big question. Leftist parties in Sri Lanka have a good policy for economy but are not gender friendly for women, whereas capitalist parties have a poor policy for economy, but a good policy for women; capitalist parties are the ones who spoke about quota. Trade union leaders in Sri Lanka have not promoted union leadership. Moreover, trade unions in Sri Lanka are the most militant ones in South Asia. However, they did not mention the issue of protection of women in the garment industry in the collective bargaining. We also accept the fact that political change is a must, but women coming into politics should come up with an agenda."

Sharmila Karki suggested: "We have been discussing about the problems of women stepping into politics for a long time, but now let us come up with 10 to 12 strategies and a collective campaign."

Sita Paudel mentioned that without cautioning the government, women cannot get their rights. "I am a CC member and have 45 years of experience in politics. I have been in politics since the age of 15 and I have also been a parliament member. I heard the discussion that only political change cannot suffice and social reform is also needed. If we look back at history, the need has created changes. 33 per cent of women's political participation is the common agenda for South Asia. We need one coalition committee in South Asia. We had formed one but we did not choose the leader and we must continuously form leadership. Furthermore, we should not give up when we get no results even after years of struggle. Politics determines every other sector and so we need to focus on politics. Women in Nepal have reached local governance. Now we should help the local representatives to draft gender friendly policies. We should not conclude that politics does not take us anywhere."

Sabitri Bhusal emphasised that the things to focus on are as follows:

1. How does one draft gender sensitive policies and programmes? What is a gender sensitive budget? How does one contribute to women's capacity building and how does one help women continue their involvement in politics?
2. We need to raise the issue of guaranteeing more than 50 per cent representation of women.
3. Women politicians should be supported by research wings. How can one win the election? How is it possible to make the performance of elected women representatives more effective? These things must be supported through

research wings.

4. We say women must contest elections. But they are not taught how to raise funds. Women politicians must be trained on this.

Mahtab Rashdi said, “We should grab power and make use of it.” More women should be at lower level and learn the art of politicking. Further, parties should have democratic principles within the party themselves. At least 10 to 15 per cent of the seats should be given to women only to compete in election. Women should be called to mainstream politics rather than limit them to a few seats.

Ratna Gurung added, “Women should be economically empowered. They should have executive leadership. She also raised the issue of family planning.”

Jayanti Paudel ANPFa stated: “I came into politics with the struggle for women’s rights. We have not been able to use political rights. There are still instances of chhaupadi and rape. Women should have the right over parental property. Currently, only 19 per cent of women have ownership over land. Even if the women are owners, they cannot make financial decisions relating the land.”

Tulasa Dahal from ANWA expressed that we should also think about making the institutions stronger. If institutions are poor and dysfunctional, we become unable to continue the campaign.

Sadeka Halim: “There are two different approaches: Equality and Equity. Equality is very difficult while equity is easier and fair too.”

GEFONT displayed the three following aspects:

- Women should be a part of the economy
- Organisation should be expanded
- There should be equality in the family duties

Abir Neogi highlighted: “All women are not heterosexual. We need to look into this realm too. Homosexual, and this all leads to huge poverty. It is a crime in India to have sex within the same sex.”

Moreover, Nimalka Fernando said that we need to strengthen local government, encourage women into politics, fund for election, focus on capacity building, strengthen the network, form local women’s groups, empower women in terms of economy, increase their access to resources and reduce women poverty in line with SAAPE’s objective of poverty eradication. There should be a SAARC level mobilisation campaign and also recognition of the women’s role in family. There should also be a referral point for LGBTIQ.

Dr Netra Timsina summarised the entire discussion in the following points:

1. SAAPE had come up with a 33 per cent women’s representation in every

mechanism. We contributed in this discourse. Now we can claim we did it. 33 per cent is our major call for action for lobby and there should be constitutional guarantee for it.

2. How can women scale up their political arena?
3. Women's work in the informal sector should be acknowledged and counted.
4. How does one build a campaign in each individual country?
5. Art of politicking
6. LGBT issue should also be in the campaign

2.2.4 Discussion on the Declaration Draft, Revision and Adoption

Mahtab Rashdi said: "Following the steps of Nepal, other countries should follow the 33 per cent representation in every State mechanism. Inside every political party there should be provision of reservation for women."

Further, Nimalka Fernando added that the term fundamentalism should be replaced with religious extremism. "We agree to 33 per cent, but our entitlement is 50 per cent. And Nepal needs to focus on a 50 per cent women's political participation."

Netra Timsina – Add CEDAW and define the term 'gender friendly market'

Abir Neogi stressed that discrimination is also done based on sexuality. Homosexuals are doubly discriminated. Women are not a homogeneous identity. Carrying forward the declaration is crucial and it is one of the responsibilities of SAAPE.

Sharmila Karki: "Women's right campaign has been handed over to Sri Lanka. From now on, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka (MDL) will be coordinating the SAAPE women's rights campaign."

3. Vote of Thanks

Ms Goma Devkota, the chair of the session, humbly thanked everyone for their enthusiastic participation and shared the message: "I believe the declaration will be carried forward and I would like to request you all to promote it."

4. Way Forward

The women rights campaigners from South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) working as members of parliament, in political parties, civil society organisations, business and academia, gathered in the



Goma Devkota, Nepal

Convergence on “Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia: Expanding Spaces and Enhancing Rights for Equality and Justice” in Kathmandu on 6 and 7 August 2017 and agreed that despite of the significant achievement in women's political participation in South Asia over years, their participation and presence in local governance has been inadequate and their existing participation is overshadowed by being the secondary role to that of their male counterpart. Hence, to increase and enhance women's meaningful and fair participation in politics and local governance the participants came up with a ten point declaration as a way forward to expand women's meaningful participation in politics and local governance. The declaration targets on ensuring a minimum 33 per cent of seats for women's representation in political party and governance in South Asia and increasing it up to 50 per cent at all levels. The declaration also talks about different strategies to be adopted for achieving a minimum reservation for women's political participation.

The full text of the ten point declaration of the Convergence on “Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia” can be found in Annex I.

5. Conclusion

The two day convergence among women's right campaigners from six South Asian countries representing parliament, political parties, civil society, academicians, students discussed on the achievement made so far in women's political participation respective countries and in South Asia in large. Learning from each country was shared and discussed. The participants had a common understanding that the so far achieved significant progress on women's political participation is not sufficient. They were of the opinion that the women's participation is simply representation, a tokenism and still women in politics have secondary role in comparison to their male counterpart.

In a nutshell, the participants also discussed about the challenges faced to achieve gender equality in political participation. Some countries in South Asia are in a transitional phase from yearlong conflict while in some countries patriarchal mindset, political structure, social values and extremist fundamental religious influences stand as strong obstacles to achieve equality in women's fair and meaningful participation in politics and local governance. Some countries like Nepal have come up with good achievement in women's participation but the roles are still secondary. Women in South Asia are still under-represented in decision-making and the leadership role was the gist of the discussion. Therefore, to increase women's meaningful participation in politics and governance, a ten point declaration was commonly agreed and endorsed through the convergence. The convergence concluded committing to achieve 33 per cent women's participation in political parties and local governance.

Annexes

Annex I

Declarations

*South Asian Women's Convergence on
Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia:
Expanding spaces and enhancing rights for equality and justice*

We, the women rights campaigners from South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka) working as members of parliament, in political parties, civil society organisations, business and academia, gathered in Kathmandu on 6 and 7 August 2017 on the invitation of All Nepal Women's Association (ANWA) to acknowledge and extend solidarity to the women's struggle and to converge the idea for expanding spaces and enhancing rights of women's participation at local governance in South Asia. We collectively acknowledge that including women in local governments is an essential first step towards creating gender equal society, governments and gender sensitive policies in the South Asian region.

Local government ensures people's access to politics at a very grassroots level and is a vital building block for any democracy. Although women's political participation in South Asia has received significant attention over the years, their presence in the local level of democracy has been inadequate and even their existing participation has been overshadowed by their secondary role to that of their male counterpart. Patriarchal mindset and political structures, social values and traditions and extremist fundamental religious influences stand as strong impediments against enhancing women's meaningful engagement in politics and local governance. Some progress has been made but the progress is insufficient provided that women in South Asia are still underrepresented in decision-making and leadership positions and the lackluster implementation of the internationally agreed agreements including the Beijing Platform for Action and currently the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). We recognise that women's participation in local governance not only enhances their rights and space but also strengthens democracy, and their exclusion is a violation of fundamental human rights and a breach of the spirit of universal declaration of human rights.

Reconfirming that women's participation in politics and governance is not an endowment rather entitlement of women and compensation for historical and structural exclusion of women, we call upon political parties, governments, civil society organisations, and mass media in South Asia to take adequate steps to ensure women's equal representation and political participation in local governance. It is men who have been exercising power in most spaces, political and otherwise.

The convergence appeals the relevant stakeholders to take the following actions to ensure and enhance women's active participation in politics and expand these spaces through democratic processes.

- We urge the political parties of South Asia to provide a minimum of 33 per cent 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 expect this percentage to rise to over 50 percent as women form half of the world's population and their presence in equal numbers in the political and decision-making levels is as important. Reservations in direct elections are also imperative.
- We call upon political leaders to effectively prove their commitment to the non-negotiable cause of equal rights and opportunities for women by formulating policies, enacting laws, creating a conducive environment and allocating resources to increase women's participation at all levels of governance and to respect all international obligations, including the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
- We demand that quotas, reservations and other mechanisms be introduced in all countries of South Asia so that all South Asian countries achieve at least 33 per cent representation of women by the year 2020. Effective implementation of these quotas, ensuring they are filled and making special provisions in countries where such provisions are not yet in existence is necessary.
- We call upon all women and the parties/organisations they belong to, to work towards feminist goals of bringing more women into political decision-making by using their voting rights.
- We urge governments across South Asia to work towards gender friendly markets and economic policies, to economically empower women and on labour laws and social security for women working in the informal sector.
- Ensuring access to education, capacity building and furthering leadership development for women in the region is another challenge that all sections should take up on a priority basis.

- It would be imperative for women's organisations to establish connects with parliamentarians and women in political parties, as one of the means of promoting women's participation and bringing women's issues to the foreground.
- Patriarchy masquerading as religion and majority religious fundamentalism/extremism has adversely affected women's rights, pushing women back into the realm of their homes, thereby hindering the process of their participation in public life. We urge States and civil society to address the issue of religious fundamentalism of all kinds and guarantee women equal rights as enshrined in most of their respective constitutions.
- We urge all those working on issues concerning women, their participation in public life, on securing them their rights to come together, as most of the issues faced by women in South have many commonalities. Hence, learning from best practices wherever possible and standing in solidarity with their counterparts, pressuring governments to take up their cause is also imperative.
- We demand that mechanisms be created for women to be elected and appointed to all decision-making structures and secretariat of the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) ensuring their 33 per cent representation.

We make a solemn pledge to continue to struggle for women's political rights and ensure their fair representation in all State mechanisms at local level.

7 August 2017

Annex II

South Asian Women's Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia: Expanding Spaces and Enhancing Rights for Equality and Justice

06-07 August 2017, Kathmandu, Nepal

Venue: Hotel Airport, Sinamangal, Kathmandu

Programme Schedule

DAY 1 (06 AUGUST 2017)

S. N.	Time	Programme	Remarks
1.	08:00-08:30	Registration, tea/coffee	
2.	08:30-08:45	<p><u>Inauguration Programme</u></p> <p>Dias Call of Guests and Participants</p> <p><u>Chair:</u></p> <p> J Goma Devkota, Chairperson ANWA, Nepal</p> <p><u>Chief Guest:</u></p> <p> J Former Prime Minister and CPN-UML Chairman K. P. Sharma Oli</p> <p><u>Key Note Speaker:</u></p> <p> J Joanna Mahjeeben, Assistant Professor, Gauhati University, Assam, India</p> <p><u>Guests:</u></p> <p> J Rokeya Kabir, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS), Bangladesh</p> <p> J Abir Neogi, Das Theke Das Hajar (DTDH), India</p> <p> J Aminath Shazly, Maldives National University, Maldives</p> <p> J Sushila Nepal, Hon Member of Parliament, Nepal</p> <p> J Shanaz Iqbal, Labour Education Foundation (LEF), Pakistan</p> <p> J Mathini Nelson, Women's Rights Activist, Sri Lanka</p> <p> J Gauri Pradhan, LDC Watch, Nepal</p> <p> J Netra Prasad Timsina, South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication (SAAPE), Nepal</p>	MC: Sharmila Karki, SAAPE Women's Rights Campaign Coordinator, ANWA Central Committee member
3.	08:45-08:46	Playing National Anthem of Nepal	
4.	08:46-08:50	<p>Welcome and highlights of objectives of the programme</p> <p> J Sita Paudel, ANWA Vice Chairperson</p>	
5.	08:50-08:55	Formal Inauguration of the Convergence by lighting eight candles by Chief Guest and Guests	

6.	08:55-09:00	Solidarity message from LDC Watch J Gauri Pradhan, International Coordinator, LDC Watch	
7.	09:00-09:10	Brief introduction of SAAPE and SAAPE Poverty Report 2016 J Netra Prasad Timsina, Regional Coordinator, SAAPE	
8.	09:10-09:20	Launching of SAAPE Poverty Report 2016 by Chief Guest	
9.	09:20-09:40	Inaugural Speech by Chief Guest	
10.	09:40-10:00	Key note speech by Dr Joanna Mahjebeen, Assistant Professor, Gauhati University, Assam, India	
11.	10:00-10:20	An overview on Women's Movement in South Asia and the role of SAAPE J Nimalka Fernando, SAAPE Advisor, Sri Lanka	
12.	10:20-11:45	<u>Remarks and Solidarity Message from Speakers</u> J Sushila Nepal, Hon Member of Parliament, Nepal J Rokeya Kabir, Bangladesh J Abir Neogi, India J Aminath Shazly, Maldives J Shanaz Iqbal, Labour Education Foundation, Pakistan J Mathini Nelson, Sri Lanka	
13.	11:45-12:00	Vote of thanks and closing of inauguration programme by Chair	
14.	12:00-13:00	Lunch	
15.	13:00-13:10	Formation of Declaration Drafting Committee	
16.	13:10-13:30	A pictorial overview of SAAPE's engagements for the promotion and protection of women's rights in South Asia By Sharmila Karki, SAAPE Women's Rights Campaign Coordinator	
17.	13:30-14:45	<u>Session I: State of political participation of women and local governance in South Asia</u> Sharing of country situation on theme of the convergence Bangladesh: Sadeka Halim, Professor, University of Dhaka India: Abir Neogi, Women's rights activist Maldives: Aminath Shazly, Lecturer, Maldives National University	15 Minutes for each speaker
	14:45-15:00	Tea/coffee break	
18.	15:00-15:45	Nepal: Binda Pandey, CPN - UML Politburo member, Ex-MP Pakistan: Shanaz Iqbal, Labour Education Foundation (LEF) Sri Lanka: Nalini Ratnarajah, Mothers and Daughters of Lanka (MDL)	
19.	15:45-16:45	Open floor discussion	
20.	16:45-17:00	Wrapping Up	

DAY 2 (07 AUGUST 2017)

21.	09:00-09:30	Recap of Day 1	
22.	09:30-11:00	Session II: Challenges, opportunities and way forward on expanding spaces and enhancing women's rights for equality and justice in the region <i>Moderator: Rokeya Kabir</i> <u>Presenters:</u> Bangladesh: Sadeka Halim, Professor, University of Dhaka India: Mariya Salim, Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Aandolan Maldives: Aminath Shazly Nepal: Bimala Rai Paudel, Former member of National Planning Commission, Nepal	15 Minutes each to presenter
23.	11:00-11:15	Tea/coffee break	
24.	11:15-12:00	Session II continues Pakistan: Honourable Mahtab Rashdi, MP Sri Lanka: Nalini Ratnarajah, MDL	
25.	12:00-13:00	Open floor discussion	
26.	13:00-14:00	Lunch Break	
27.	14:00-14:30	Discussion on draft declaration, revision and adoption	
28.	14:30-15:30	Plan of action and closing	

Annex III

South Asian Women's Convergence on Local Governance and Women's Political Participation in South Asia: Expanding Spaces and Enhancing Rights for Equality and Justice

06-07 August 2017: Kathmandu, Nepal

List of Participants

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All Nepal Women's Association



South Asia Alliance for Poverty Eradication



Women Welfare Society