

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES: A REVIEW

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### ABSTRACT

Women constitute slightly more than half of the world population. Their contribution to the social and economic development of societies is also 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 series of seminal studies of participation have reported that women's representation in governance structure is not impressive in across many democracies, old and new. In South Asian countries women received the right to vote and stand for election much later than the women of industrial democracies. Due to the continuous Dominance of the patriarchal value system they remain discriminated and treated as second class citizens. The current Constitutions of the south Asian countries incorporate specific provisions to provide some political Support to women. Despite special measures set by the government for women's political Participation, women have not been benefited from such measures. This paper presents an overview of the status of women's participation in governance in five South Asian countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, with emphasis on the local level of governance.

**Key words:** South Asia, Patriarchal, constitution, political participation, special measures.

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## I. Introduction

Over the past three decades, political scientists have developed a significant body of knowledge on women representation and empowerment. Existing research has shown that women are marginalized in political participation and that wide variation exists in the pattern across countries around the world. A series of seminal studies of political participation have reported that women have been less politically engaged than men in many established democracies. Presently, women's representation in legislatures around the world is 15 percent. Despite the pronounced commitment of the international community to gender equality and to the bridging the gender gap in the formal political arena, reinforced by the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform of Action, there are only twelve countries where women hold 33% or more seats in the parliaments. Existing research focuses mainly on the structural and institutional barriers that constrain the participation of women. Research in the area of women and governance is less extensive, with few studies exploring the nature of women's participation and hardly any information being available regarding the impact that participation of women have on governance. The earliest studies of electoral behavior in Western Europe and North America, conducted during the 1920s and 1930s shortly after the female franchise was granted in many countries, commonly observed that men were more likely to vote than women

The global debate on the promotion of women's political participation has been surrounded by intrinsic and instrumentalist argument. However, the number of women in national parliaments in South Asia is below the average 20% proportion globally despite the affirmative actions in most South Asian countries [1]. Governance in all South Asian countries is imbued with a predominantly patriarchal character. This is reflected in the fact that women form a disproportionately small segment of representatives in elected bodies across all levels of governance, and several studies have indicated that even those women who are elected as representatives suffer severe limitations on their participation. In cognizance of this fact, the women's movement in South Asian countries has been gaining strength in the last two decades, and demands for more equitable representation are being voiced across the sub-continent. Although some countries have introduced affirmative legislation to ensure a minimum level of

representation of women in governance, such measures alone have been insufficient to make a significant sustainable impact on the participation of women in governance.

According to data available for 2014 from Geneva based Inter-Parliamentary unit (IPU) Pakistan has 21% of women member in house of parliament, Bhutan has 13.9%, Sri Lanka has 5.7%, Nepal has 29.9%, and Bangladesh has 19.3%, women in the house of parliament fig;1[2].

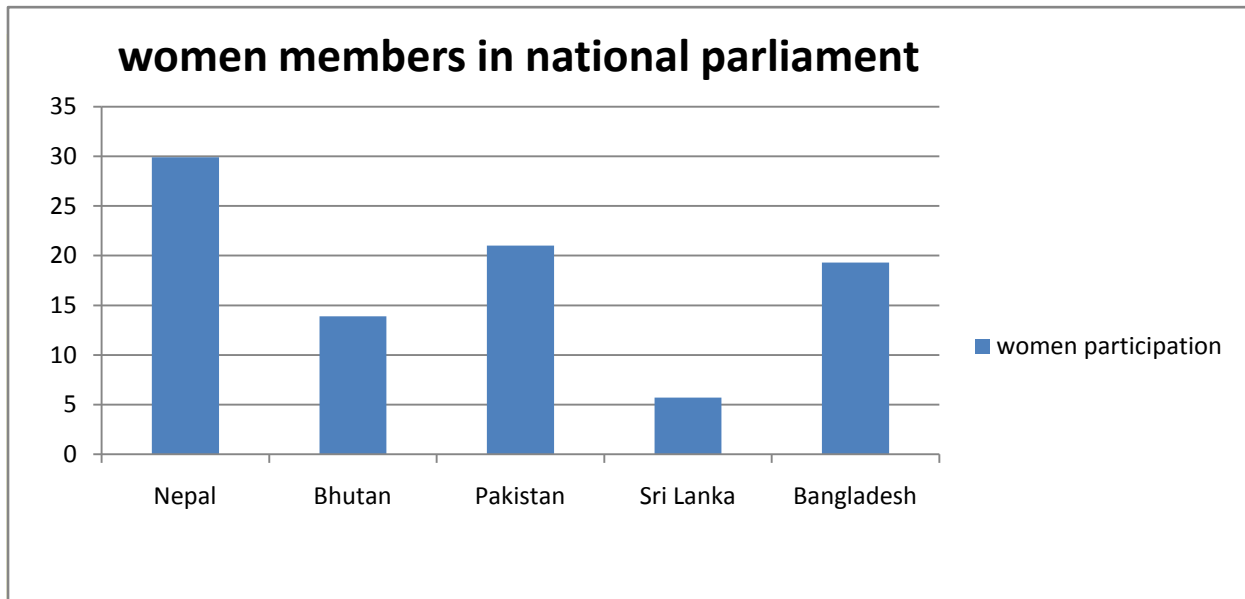


Figure 1: Average of female representative in national parliament in south Asian countries. (IPU)

## II. Women's Political Participation In Five South Asian Countries

### 1. Political Status Of Women In Bangladesh

Bangladesh as a signatory to the Beijing Platform for Action is committed to achieving equal participation of women in politics and decision making. In Bangladesh Women constitute about 50% of the eligible votes. During the Democratic movement of 1990 and the caretaker government of 1995-1996 and in the former election the participation of women has been radically changed. The Government of Bangladesh enacted a law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level elections. In 1997 through an Act, the Government reserved three

seats for women in the Union Parishad where women members are elected from each of the three respective wards.

The number of Reserved Seats are increasing from 1973 to 2008. The number of reserved seats were 15 in 1973 and the number of reserved seats in parliament was fifty. So the percentage of women has been increased from 4.8% to 18.55%. The elections conducted in Bangladesh in 2008 saw women form 18.55 per cent of the strength of the current Parliament of Bangladesh, that is, 64 of the 345 members are women [3]. Although the reservations for women under the 1976, 1983 and 1993 ordinances increased the representation of women in government bodies at the local level, it did not have much bearing on their participation because their entry depended upon nomination, and later indirect election, because of which they lacked the support base of a constituency. Moreover, the roles and responsibilities of the women on reserved seats were left undefined by all three Acts [4]. Even the 1997 Act did not do much to spell out the specific roles of women, but it provided women on the reserved seats with greater legitimacy by introducing direct elections for them. However, these women were at a disadvantage as they had to cover three times the area to be covered by general category candidates, as three wards electing one general category seat each were combined to elect one reserved seat. This also limited the role of women elected on reserved seats, as they did not have a dedicated constituency; they functioned merely as additional representatives. In some cases, representatives elected on reserved seats had to obtain permission from those elected on general seats before implementing development plans or policies [5].

## 2. Political Status Of Women In Nepal

Traditionally, Nepali women had limited role in political leadership. However, time and again they became active and have significantly contributed in bringing political changes in Nepal.

In the first Parliamentary elections of 1959, the entire 6 women candidate lost the election. As a result of the compulsory provision of the 1990 Constitution that requires at least five percent women's candidature in the election for House of Representatives, the numbers of women candidates in the last three parliamentary elections held in 1991, 1994 and 1999 were gradually increased with a number of 81 (party candidate 73 and 8 independent), 86 (party candidate 74 and 12 independent) and 143 (party candidate 117 and 26 independent) respectively. But out of

the total 205 seats only 6 (2.9 %), 7 (3.4%), and 12 (5.8%) women were elected (only the party candidates) respectively in 1991, 1994 and 1999[6].

The report 'Women's Political Participation, Empowerment and Inclusions in Nepal' details women's participation in party politics in Nepal. The report recommends that the political parties should work towards a target of 33 per cent women in each party unit. Men and women alike single out discriminatory social and family factors as the main reason for the poor representation of women in political parties. Respondents propose measures to increase empowerment (35 per cent of respondents), training (19 per cent) as well as policy changes as the main ways forward to enhance women's political participation. The report recommends conducting massive awareness programmes for women to overcome the traditional notions of women's role in politics [7].

The basic building blocks of Nepal's sub-national structure for direct representation through elections are

- (i) Wards
- (ii) Village/municipal councils
- (iii) District councils

There are around 40,000 wards, 3915 village councils, 58 municipalities and 75 district development councils in Nepal. According to the Local Self Governance Act of 1999 (LSGA), 20 per cent women should be elected from each ward, however, elections have not been held to local bodies since the LSGA was adopted in 1999. In 1997, 7.7 per cent women were elected, up from 0.58 per cent in 1992 following a provision made in 1997 that each ward should elect one woman to the Village Development Committee (VDC) [8]. The reinstated parliament on May 2006 declared to end all forms of discrimination and ensure the inclusive democracy in future. A peace agreement was signed on November 21, 2006 between the government and the Maoist which further led the foundation for inclusive democracy and increased participation of women in National Politics. Following to this, a twelve-point agreement between the 7 political parties' alliance and the Maoists on November 22, 2005 is also considered as the beginning of political and social transformation in Nepal. And now Nepal has the highest women representative in parliament in south Asian countries. According to Inter Parliamentary Unit (IPU) in 2014, Nepal has 172 women member out of 575 (29.9%) in the house of parliament [9].

### 3. Political Status Of Women In Bhutan

Bhutan, which has traditionally been governed by a monarchy, transformed in 1999 into a constitutional monarchy. Although the King continues to occupy the position of Head of State, the Council of Ministers/Cabinet headed by the Prime Minister, who is the head of the government, exercises executive power. The legislature is bicameral, consisting of an Upper House/National Council and a Lower House/National Assembly. Women in the north of Bhutan enjoy a strong position in family life and society due to the matrilineal form of family in the northern part of the country. In general, it has been found that even though women across the country enjoy considerable economic and decision-making power within the family, they are still grossly under-represented in public life, especially in elected bodies of governance [10].

Between 2008 and 2011, recruitment and retention of Tshogpas, or local government council members, remained a serious issue. Obstacles range from lack of interest and lack of economic incentives to difficulty in compliance and obtaining accreditation under existing election laws. The functional literacy and skills test alone left many constituencies without the minimum of two candidates, leading to lengthy delay of the local government elections of 2011, originally slated for 2008. The first round of the functional literacy and skills test left many Gewogs with no representatives, though second round results showed a pass rate over 90%. Although women elected to office remained relatively few (14%) before local elections according to the UNHCR, more than half of voters in initial local government elections were women. In initial local-level voting in 2011, voter turnout was about 50%. This has raised the question of whether women would benefit from quotas in public service, highlighting the need to encourage further female electoral and political participation [11]

In 2011, six of the 25 members, that is, 24 per cent of the National Council are women, and four of the 47 members, that is, 8.5 per cent of the National Assembly are women. In 2014 Bhutan has 13.9 per cent of women member in the house of parliament.

### 4. Political Status Of Women In Pakistan

The Constitution of Pakistan asserts the protection of women's rights under national legislation. While human rights concepts can be found from the preamble onwards. Article 25 under the



chapter of fundamental rights of citizens highlights the principles of women's equality in the Pakistani constitution. Article 25 clearly guarantees equality before the law and equal protection of the law stating that there shall be no discrimination on the basis of sex. Furthermore, The Chapter on Principles of Policy - Article 32 and 34 ensures full participation of women in all spheres of national life [12]

Women's representation in governance structures has been extremely low during the fifty- five years of Pakistan's history. In 1988, Benazir Bhutto (Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's daughter) became the first female Prime Minister of Pakistan, and the first woman elected to head a Muslim country. Pakistan acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) on 29 February 1996. The Ministry of Women Development (MWD) is the designated national focal machinery for its implementation.

The past regime of Parvez Musharaff took a landmark decision and ensured women's representation in political structures of the country through the reservation of 33% seats for them in all three tiers of local government and 17% in the national and provincial legislatures. Reserved seats for women are filled through direct election at the union council level and indirect election at the tehsil and district level. At the national and provincial level, proportional representation system has been adopted to fill the reserved seats for women. The reservation of seats for women brought more than 40,000 women to the local government institutions and 205 in the national and provincial assemblies and the Senate. The elections to the National Assembly were conducted in 2008, and women formed 22.2 per cent of the house, that is, 76 of the 342 members were women. Elections to the Senate were conducted in 2009 and resulted in the entry of 17 women into the 100-member house, that is, 17 per cent of the members of the Senate were women. The number of women in local governance by province is unavailable. At the national level, 60 out of 342 seats are reserved for women in the National Assembly, and 4 out of 100 seats are reserved for women in the Senate .However, in reality, women's political marginalization and other forms of gender discrimination continue to be the norm. Pakistan has experienced extensive violence within the political sphere against women and men alike. Cases of women who have suffered Political violence include the former Prime Minister Ms. Benazir Bhutto who was assassinated in 2007[13]. Another case of Women's rights activist and Punjab Minister for social welfare, Ms. Zille Huma Usman who was also assassinated in public view in

2007. There are several other cases of suppressing women's participation in politics such as barring women from voting or expressing threats especially in the province of Punjab and Khyber Pkhtawon (KP).

### **5 Political Status Of Women In Sri Lanka**

Until the late 1970's especially in conventional political terms, Sri Lanka had been viewed as a model of Third World Democracy and as a model of women's participation in Asian region. The credibility of the democratic model was characterized by the acceptance of legal and constitutional norms of a parliamentary democracy for a fairly long time. From a female perspective, aside from gaining universal franchise in 1931, Sri Lanka has had the proud record of providing the world's first prime minister-Srima Bandaranaika.

Women in Parliament, however small in numbers have held high positions in Parliament and the cabinet. Two Women have become Prime Minister and one has gone onto become the President of Sri Lanka. Sirimavo Bandaranaike became the world's first female head of government on 21 July 1960, holding the post for a non consecutive 17 years. In her final term succeeding her daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga, in 1994, who went on to become Sri Lanka's first modern female head of state and president [14]. This marked the first time that a female prime minister directly succeeded another female prime minister, and is also the first time that a nation possessed a female prime minister and a female president simultaneously. Women in politics in Sri Lanka however have stagnated as expectations are higher for their representation in Parliament. The paradox remain that Sri Lanka women have reached the highest political status in Asia while having one of the lowest level of representation in the national legislature and in local government institution in the region. Currently, 12 of the 225 members of Parliament are women; that is, women comprise 5.33 per cent of the total strength of the Sri Lankan Parliament [15]. The number of women in local governance is unavailable. Information regarding the nature of their participation in politics is unavailable.

### **Conclusion**



To conclude, we may say that manifestations of social and economic disparities related to gender inequality have affected the gender equilibrium of politics, leading to a deprived political agency, of particularly those women who are not connected to a political family. Women's participation in politics leads to more complete insights of the needs of the population, and injects healthy competition and quality in citizen political participation generally there is tremendous variation in women's legal rights across countries. A key point that emerges from this preliminary review of the status of participation of women in governance in the five countries in South Asia is that although affirmative action in democratic countries is more likely to secure the representation of marginalized groups, it is by no means an automatic guarantee of their effective participation. Although equality for men and women might be legally provided for, women are still subordinated to men in all spheres of life due to the fact that discrimination persists unabated within the family and other social institutions.

But the process of the participation of women in the political process in South Asia has just begun. It will take a while before women reach their full potential in active politics. This is recognized and accepted by the community at large. Positive discrimination, in the form of reservation for women, special courses that provide political skills to women politicians as well as women voters, the increasing number of women politicians as role models, are steps in the right direction.

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