
Political Empowerment of Women: A Comparative Study of South Asian Countries

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South Asia is a home of variety of cultures, languages and religions. Here we can find a number of variations in customs, value systems and ways of life. But one thing is common among all the cultures and regions of South Asia that is gender discrimination. Women traditionally are considered subordinated to the male and this remained a prominent feature both in the rural and the urban areas. In urban areas a little improvement is due to enhanced level of education and economic independence in women. There is very less distinction of educated and uneducated as that of religion in this regard.

The situation is improved with regard to political empowerment especially with the allocation of 33% seats in local government in South Asia but in most of the cases this change is not satisfactory. The real empowerment would be achieved only if it would be accompanied by the social and economic empowerment. For that purpose, society has to be changed at large. Such change cannot be materialized only through any coercive legislation or strong state action in the blink of an eye. But the fact remains there that in societies where all the changes start from top to bottom these measures along with a strong political will can stimulate a change to improve the situation gradually.

This paper discusses the measures taken by different governments in South Asia to achieve the goal of political empowerment and participation of womenfolk in the decision making process at all levels. By analyzing the implications and the practical aspects of these measures and the problems of women at domestic and societal level this paper also suggests the proposals to make the environment conducive for implementing

revolutionary steps by the government with the help of civil society and NGOs along with due cooperation of the masses.

Women's political empowerment is not a goal in itself but it is instrumental in stimulating the society for political and social empowerment which would further stimulate the overall development and refinement in the society. The presence and participation of women in decision making process would enable them to revise the gender discriminatory policies and laws on one hand and would support equality based new laws and policies on the other.

As far as the legal position is concerned, the constitutions of almost all the South Asian countries accept equal rights for all citizens and reject any discrimination on the basis of gender alone.¹ But still discrimination in law making and policy making is continued. It has been a complex debate in political science that no one represents the other except the interests. Different classes and the minorities should be represented through their own representatives.² So it is truly believed that only women can represent their interests and their presence is inevitable in decision making bodies.

In South Asia women are generally under represented in the high level power structure specially the countries which are not observing quotas in their parliaments for the representation of their women population. The table³ below shows the clear picture of women representation in the region:

| Country | Percentage |
|------------|------------|
| Bangladesh | 2% * |
| Bhutan | 2% |
| India | 8.8% |
| Nepal | 5.8% |
| Maldives | 6.3%** |
| Srilanka | 4.4%*** |
| Pakistan | 20%**** |

* there were only 6 women elected to the parliament of 300 in 2001 elections as compared to 30 women

in the previous parliament, after the expiry of women reserved seats.⁴

- ** Women are free to contest elections of the parliament but they cannot be elected as the president of Maldives⁵
- *** Less than 5% women were elected in the elections of parliament held in 2004.⁶
- *** Pakistan has reserved 17% seats for women in the Parliament since 2002.⁷

Affirmative Action

Dismal participation of the women in politics can be improved through affirmative action.⁸ All the South Asia countries are the signatories of international conventions on women rights and especially the Beijing Action Plan which strongly recommended the reservation of quotas to facilitate women to enter in mainstream of political process. Affirmative actions were used successfully in American society to reverse discrimination against Afro-Americans. Affirmative action may be described as:

Strong affirmative action involves more positive steps to eliminate past injustice such as reverse discrimination, hiring candidates on the basis of race and gender in order to reach equal or near equal results, proportionate or near equal results, proportionate representation in each area of society....⁹

Those who are against affirmative action argue that the presence of a critical mass of women politicians is not enough to empower them in the real sense. But various studies of local government system in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (where the quotas are implemented for women's political participation) reveal that quotas are helpful in making women politically interested and active which would lead to the real empowerment in the coming years.¹⁰

Another objection is that the efficiency level of elected representative institutions in South Asia is already dismal so the affirmative action may create a mass of women in decision making bodies but cannot serve the purpose of their presence i.e., active participation in policy making.¹¹ So there may be a need to reform quota and recruitment of women at the grass root level by the political parties. Their trainings and active involvement in party decision making process may create political consciousness on one side and the required experience on the other.

The capacity building of women to deal with the issues and challenges in position of power should be the next step after reservation of quotas in public institutions. Only then we would be able to witness a positive impact of women's increased participations in the decision making process at local and national levels.

Hurdles in Political Empowerment of Women

The environment in South Asia is not conducive for active political participation by the women. There are a number of hurdles basically at two levels.

1. Domestic
2. Societal

At first level the weak position of women at home even to make their personal decisions is one of the major reasons while economic dependence, responsibilities of the children or household are the others. At second level the threat of violence against the women, corruption, manipulation, gender discrimination and a mind set that women are inferior to men discourage a women and her family to let her participate in active politics. Politics is considered to be a dirty game, a forbidden fruit or a web of malpractices in South Asia. The women with distinguished leadership qualities are seen to be unwilling to participate in politics so as some educated talented men do. There is a need to make politics a fair game open for all. It is only possible with meaningful and value education at

primary and secondary level as the first priority. The meaningful education can extract the negative social values from the very fabric of society and enlighten the minds of men folk. The introduction of value added economic activities in rural and urban areas to engage both men and women to create balance in the society would be the next step. The economic activities on one side facilitate women empowerment in household and family affairs and give men a positive dimension in life which broaden their minds to accept an empowered women at home on the other. It also minimizes if not removes the imaginary sense of suspicion about the equality of women.

Women Struggle in Developed Countries:

Apparently it is assumed that the women in the western societies are fully empowered and they have no problem but this is not a true picture. Human beings can never be satisfied with their existing conditions. Moreover the life is also not stagnant that all issues may be resolved once for all. Struggle for rights is a continuous process and it continues in new dimensions with the advancement of civilization. Western women are still struggling for more rights as the western men are doing for their own. But it is also a fact that what they have right now is much better as compared to that of the women in South Asia have in terms of gender equality and empowerment. Still there are discriminations but what they have achieved is the outcome of a consistent struggle for their rights since nineteenth century. Before that women were confined to household only. Their role drastically changed as the American society became more industrialized. Women availed the opportunities and acquired knowledge of politics. Change in women sphere from household to working women in factories, offices, hospitals and educational institutions gave them confidence to form suffrage groups to gain their right to vote. It also changed the husband wife relations over the domestic and financial issues. With the economic independence the role of women changed in society.¹²

Women rights movement started in USA from 1848 and still it is continued. A few daring women believed that the women were being treated unfairly and took the stand to fight against the discrimination. Some of the prominent leaders were Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and Lucretia Coffin. Their

strong motivation to take all measures to give women equal rights they were entitled as American citizens inspired hundred of others to follow.¹³ Despite this dedicated struggle the right to vote could not be extended to the women before the dawn of twentieth century.¹⁴ The new laws empowered women with civil and political rights equal to men but still they exercise less political power as compared to men and as compared to their ratio in population. They are under represented in the principal law making institutions comprising about 10% of the world's parliamentarians and less than 4 % of the world cabinets.¹⁵ Even in the United States of America, the greatest torch bearer of human rights and democracy, no women could be elected as a president or vice president thus far. Women are still under represented in the institutions of political leadership. International organization of national parliaments, the inter-parliamentary union (IPU) compile the world average of women representation i.e., 15-16 % of legislative seats. It varies in different regions. It is 40 % in Nordic countries, 8 % in Arab states and in Europe and America it is around the world average. There have been only 42 prime ministers and 27 elected women presidents since 1945. Most of them belong to developing countries. The world's largest representation of women in parliament is in Rwanda where they hold 48% membership in the parliament.¹⁶

South Asian women are not weak. They have strong determination, ability and devotion. What they need is the awareness and guidance.

Proposals to Make Environment Conducive for Change:

- One of the most important prerequisites to bring awareness in the South Asian society is education. Advanced education facilities and high level of literacy lead to the creation of middle class, which always help in promoting moderation and democracy. It will also enlighten the society as a whole. The colonial rule provided women of lower and middle classes an opportunity to get education which was a privilege of elite women previously.¹⁷ Consequently

the women got encouragement and played significant role in the struggle for independence.

- After independence, the women started struggling for their inherent rights in urban areas but remained confined to specific domains. To extend their struggle to remote areas of the country what require is that the women must be equipped with the advance education. The education will provide women more economic opportunities, awareness and participation in decision making at home and later in the society.¹⁸
- Economic empowerment is a source of social and political empowerment. As women are dependent on male members of their families economically in South Asian societies so they cannot cast their vote independently. In Bhutan the right to vote to a family is the example that vote will be cast with the will of male only. In urban areas where women are economically independent, they can participate in decision making in household and cast their vote relatively with more freedom. But where they are economically dependent (mostly in rural areas where literacy rate is comparatively low) they have to follow the pattern of their family affiliation in politics.
- Politics is an expensive hobby especially the electoral politics. As women are comparatively poorer in South Asian societies so they cannot run for the elections without the support of their family or political parties.¹⁹
- Economic empowerment is not an easy job. Women in South Asia are generally poor and rate of literacy among the women folk is relatively low as compare to men. Therefore the only mode of access to financial resources in most of the cases is the inheritance from family. The state laws in all the South Asian countries support the women in this regard. The only exception is Nepal where women do not inherit the property of their family.²⁰

- But the social structure is fabricated in on male child's dominance and only those women are supported and appreciated by the family who surrender their property rights in favour of their male relatives. In rural culture, some of the feudal families practice marriages within the family just to save their landholdings. If they do not have any match within the family, women are confined in homes without marriages. In some Muslim feudal families of Pakistan they have the tradition to marry with Qur'an. We need more gender sensitive laws to end discrimination but what is required immediately, is the effective implementation of existing laws e.g. law of inheritance etc. if it is ensured that no women can surrender her share of property in favour of their males, then within one generation society will accept it as a rule and women, even illiterate and poor will have the access to economic resources. Only then they would be able to take personal decisions.
- Women lack the institutional support also. Not only the government organizations like bureaucracy and other departments are least sensitive towards women rights ²¹ but the non-governmental institutions like political parties also have the same thinking. Despite the fact that South Asia had the honour of the world's first lady prime minister and India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have been ruled by women prime ministers, the recruitment of women by the political parties at the grass root level is not noteworthy. It's a great hurdle in the women's leadership development at the provincial and national level. In the absence of support from political parties only those women can be elevated to high offices who act as a proxy to their male family members i.e., husband or father.²² The other major consequence to this pattern is the absence of women issues in the manifesto of the political parties. In South Asia political parties use women vote to win political positions but do not extend financial and political

support to those who want to join politics.²³ The situation may vary from one party to another but generally political parties need winning candidates, so they prefer men for electioneering. The introduction of reserved seats for women is instrumental in inducing political parties to recruit women at the local level but there is a need to institutionalize this process for better results.

- Government actions are appreciated but they can be fruitful only if they will continue with a strong political will. Laws already exist but there is a need to institutionalize the gender equality as a culture at governmental and social level. All the constitutions of South Asia prohibit any discrimination on the basis of gender alone.²⁴ The main hurdle in women participation in politics is the customary structure of the society where women are considered to be subordinated to men. Media campaign along with high literacy level supported by a strong women sensitive legal system can change the culture gradually.
- Women are commonly exploited in the name of religion. Religion has a deep impact on human life but in South Asia the place of women is basically determined by local cultures and the value system. The evidence is that the women in some areas of India observe purda regardless of their religion. A study on women empowerment in South Asia reveals that “women autonomy in terms of decision making, mobility, freedom from threatening relations with husband, and access to and control over economic resources..., women in Tamil Nadu fair considerably better than other women, irrespective of religion.” This study also rejects the claim that women in India exercise more autonomy over their lives than do the Pakistani women or the Muslim women have less autonomy than the Hindu women.²⁵ As the political systems in the South Asia is the legacy of the colonial rule- representing western civic values and liberties. The pattern set by the same system should be followed

for the women rights as well i.e., “equality and social justice in accordance with internationally accepted standards.”²⁶ Women equality can be promoted with the help of civil society and NGOs. For that purpose democracy is the only system which can be responsive to eliminate gender discrimination and bring women empowerment.

- There is a need to transform the system of politics into a fair game, so that honest, decent, competent and educated people from middle class including women should come and join. If women would be protected in all spheres of public life, it would encourage other women to follow the path. The politics would be more refined, if more women join it. In the presence of women sitting in elected bodies male politicians would not be able to use street language. Secondly as the women are hard working and keen to learn, in their presence serious work would be done.
- It is generally pointed out that the allocation of quota in the parliaments of South Asia create a large mass of women in the public institutions but they not effective because they have no constituency. They cannot follow their own agenda because they are elected by the member parliaments of different political parties. These political parties do not have significant programmes for women in their manifestos. So the significance of these women parliamentarians is often debated. It is also argued that the women reserved seats in the absence of direct election system “would not enhance women’s leadership quality, efficacy in legislation, especially legislation dealing with women issues and their role as individual legislators.”²⁷ If these women will be elected directly by the people having their own constituency, they would prove to be more effective in law making and policy making process. Bangladesh is working on it. Such direct elections can be conducted like those of American Senate (two seats from a state elected on popular vote). It would be more challenging but for women to

contest election like this, but the real representation would lead to the real empowerment. It would also compel political parties to recruit women at the grass root level to produce women leaders of stature to compete for popular vote.

- All these measures may be effective in achieving the goal when there would be self motivation among them to empower themselves. Women in South Asia are not weak. They are brave and strong. They have sustained themselves in most depressing environment. Whatever they have now is the outcome of their own efforts not alms given by men. With the increasing commitment of men in life compelled them to delegate some duties to women, which women performed with dignity and perfection. It has inculcated a self confidence in them. But the real empowerment needs consistent struggle with high spirits. They can achieve their goals and avail all the facilities provided to them by the state laws only when they have self motivation to empower themselves in all spheres of life.

Conclusion

South Asia is one of the least developed region in terms of human development despite the fact that one fifth of humanity is residing here. Societies are still transitional, under developed and parochial. Discrimination on the basis of caste, creed and gender is fairly common here. Women in South Asia are no exception.

Allocation of reserved seats at all levels in decision making bodies by the government along with the efforts to empower women socially economically and politically are the measures being taken by the government under the pressure of women movements and the international conventions on women rights. Now the question of women empowerment has been transformed to that of overall development of the nation. It is on the basis of realization that how the sustainable development can be made with out participation of half of the population. The other simple argument is that 'give me the best mothers; I will give you the best nation.'²⁸ So a satisfied, prosperous and empowered woman would prove to be the best custodian of the new generation and

her mainstreaming in national life is equally important for the development of new generation.

Women issues can be rightly addressed with the considerable presence of women in the legislative and decision making institutions. Allocation of seats at the governmental level, recruitment at the political party level, support from media and civil society all are required and appreciated in this regard. But we would suggest that to produce sustainable results there is a need to work on society as a whole. Women are not living in isolation. They are part of society. They need support of their family, especially the males. So we have to work on society as a whole to change the mindset of the people to accept an empowered women, sister, and daughters. The high level of literacy, economic opportunity, and prosperity in the society and regular workings of the representative institutions will broaden the horizon of people and they will accept the mainstreaming of women as the part of progress and modernization.

Women are seen in stereotype role in the society but it is not only reserved for women. Men also have to face this dilemma which distracts the process of getting equality. There are social pressures on men also to demonstrate their masculinity, keeping control on their women, violence against them, not to let them go outside, not accept their dominance in household or in decision-making regarding children and family affairs etc. Mostly these pressures are from the senior women of the family. There is a need to change the behaviour of society as a whole. For that purpose civil society, media and government have to join hands to launch a coordinated struggle. The steps being taken by the government to bring political empowerment of women can be a good start but real empowerment cannot be achieved without working both on men's and women's economic and social elevation as a whole.

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