

Newsletter

June 1997



South Asian Coordinating Committee for Political Empowerment of Women

The South Asian Coordinating Committee for Political Empowerment of Women was formed at a Regional Workshop on South Asian Platform of Action held in Koilta Monikgang, Bangladesh in December 1994 by some concerned women. The Regional South Asian Platform has identified several areas for action such as Economic Empowerment, Political Empowerment, Violence Against Women, Trafficking in Women, Religious Fundamentalism and Ethnic Chauvinism. However, political empowerment of women was singled out by a few South Asian women as an area of action and they wanted to work towards the goal of increasing the political participation of women and to recognise women's role in politics and social movements.

The following areas were identified as needing significant transformation.

1. Women's unequal access to political power which is reflected in their social and economic positions.
2. Discrimination in employment, property rights, social rights, education, health and all level of decision making.
3. Fundamentalism, laws that victimize women, communal disharmony and the increasing role of black money that distorts the political agenda.

Among the strategies suggested to increase women's participation, the quota system was one. But not all women were in favour of the quota system because of its inbuilt inadequacy as far as the principles of equality and merit are concerned. However, the strengthening of lobbying with the political parties, bureaucracy, the UN, trade unions, NGOs, youth and other social groups to give equal representation to women was accepted as an interim strategy. In 1995 August, when the same women met at Fiji the idea of a S.A.C.P.E.W Newsletter was mooted. The responsibility of starting the process and bringing out the first issue fell on the Women's Education and Research Centre of Sri Lanka and here comes the first issue of the SACPEW Newsletter.

We take this opportunity to thank all the member countries who have sent us the Country Reports. There was a great deal of delay due to the distance, despite E Mail and Fax facilities some of us are still not connected to this new communication channel!

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The fundamental position that we take and emphasise as an imperative in our joint venture is the realisation that without political power, women in the margins and womens agenda will remain as an alternative to the mainstream. To mainstream gender and to become instrumental in effecting legal reforms, legal rights education, labour legislation and stop violence and harassment, women need to have political power in the decision making spheres. This is our common voice and our common vision.

Let me conclude emphasising what our vision is in terms of our goals as identified by the member countries.

The Overall Vision :

- a world with gender-sensitive laws, policies and programmes;
- a world of opportunity whereby resources are equitably shared by all;
- a world where women and men recognize and acknowledge each other's needs and responsibilities;
- a world with an environment which is free and fearless, and provides access to education, literacy and equal opportunity for all;
- a world of gender equality that provides equal representation for women, with the continuing support of just, gender-balanced socio-political order;
- a world of participatory democracy for all based on equitable distribution of resources;
- a world where political culture is based on economic independence and free choice.
- a world of transparency and accountability in the socio-economic and political system;
- a world of men and women motivated and committed to work for social transformation
- a world free from any kind of structural violence against women, such as physical and mental abuses, discrimination, conflict and poverty.

Political Status of Women in Bangladesh : Mirage or Reality?

*Professor Isbrat Shamim and Farah Kabir
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In the last quarter century, despite constitutional provisions, there have been no significant changes in the political status of women and their representation in Bangladesh. The country has experienced periods of democracy (1972-74), one party rule (1975), Martial Law (1975-77), return to democracy (1977-82), reintroduction of Martial Law and autocracy (1982-90) and restoration of democracy in 1990; but women have not fared any better, under one or the other system of government.

Since 1991, the head of the government and the leader of the opposition are both women, yet no significant changes in political status and participation of women have come forth. The constitution grants equal rights to all citizens in all spheres of life. However, it is not reflected in the representation of women in the electoral process. The patriarchal system restrains women from participating in politics and limits their access and contribution to the shaping of the present and future of society. Though women have marched forward in many spheres of life, they still lag behind men in planning and decision making. Discriminatory attitudes have led to marginalisation of women in political parties. Women's Wing in political parties are activated only to mobilise women's votes. However, they have faced challenges to have their own representatives, get attention to their issues and vote according to their choice.

Women in Parliamentary Elections

The Parliament consists of 300 seats filled by direct election from single member territorial constituencies and 30 seats are reserved for women.

1991 Women won 8	ie.	2.7% general seats
1988		1.3%
1986		1.7%

In 1991 the number of seats occupied by women was 4. Women in the legislature therefore accounted for 10.3% with the reserved seats, but without, it was 1.3%.

Women in the Seventh Parliament 1996

Voters in general and women in particular have become more aware of their voting rights so that participation of women was 80-85%. However, the major parties gave fewer women nomination than in 1991, nominations being 3 or 4 from each party. In their election manifestos Women's Development is one of the topics. The major parties have all mentioned, though not very specifically, that women's rights would be established.

Contesting Candidates in the Election June 1996

Total contested	: 2571
Female candidates	: 36
Won the Poll (Women)	: 5

The 5 women who won included the former Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition.

Gender equality or equity in the political arena in Bangladesh shows a huge gender gap.

Some of the obstacles to women's political participation

- * Lack of political awareness
- * Limited participation in political spheres
- * Economic dependency of women on male members
- * Lack of family and social support for participation in electoral politics
- * Influence of religion, rigidity of religious practices obstruct women's participation in politics
- * Absence of women in political hierarchy
- * Absence of women's issues in political agenda
- * Money, muscle and manipulation of politics and the election process discourage women from participating in mainstream politics.

Reserved seats for women in Parliament

There has been no contest for these reserved seats, because the electoral process favours the party obtaining the majority. These seats are usually filled by women as nominated candidates of the majority party.

Women in the Cabinet

1991 Khaleda Zia - Prime Minister
1996 Sheikh Hasina - Prime Minister
Only one other full woman minister today for 3 ministries

Women in the Local Government

At present there are 23 chair persons of Union Parishads out of a total of 4461 unions. No woman has yet been elected as chairperson of pourashva Parishad (Municipal)

Conclusion

Women are mobilised by political parties for winning elections not for bringing about social change and enhancing women's present political status. Women are not recognised as a political constituency and are deprived of their representation in politics and decision making bodies in Bangladesh.

The Path Towards Political Empowerment of Women

An Indian Perspective

Kamla Nath

Coordinator National Network for Women in Politics
Coordinator for South Asia coordination Committee on Political Empowerment

Women's political empowerment and equal participation in all decision making institutions are critical elements in women's struggle against their subordinate status in family and society.

Since 1970s government and non-government and international organisations have implemented plans for women's development through economic, social and legal intervention. However, women's conditions have not improved: brides are burnt, girl children suffocated to death, female foetus are thrown into dust bins. Discrimination against women is so extreme that a large majority of women are under the poverty line.

This is primarily because women are not in policy making positions. Due to the challenge taken up by the women's movement to change gender discrimination in the power structure, the 73rd and 74th amendments were passed.

Under the 73rd amendment 1/3 seats have been reserved for women at the Panchayat Raj Institutions which now have about 100,000 elected women, while 500,000 women participated in the elections. Awareness of women's rights had been created across the country.

The 74th amendment provided reservation of seats for women in urban local bodies. In the February '97 elections Delhi Municipal Corporation reserved 46 out of 134 wards for women which led to women's entry into local politics. Active lobbying for similar reservation in Parliament and State Assemblies is currently in progress. All national level political parties included this provision in their manifestos, subsequently.

The Bill for 81st amendment is expected to be introduced in the current session of Parliament. The National Commission for women has brought together NGOs, Parliamentarians, academicians to lobby for the Reservation Bill.

However, this is just a step towards gender equality, which is the ultimate goal of women's empowerment in India.

The Centre for Social Research (CSR), a NGO, has been lobbying for the reservation of seats for women from Panchayat to Parliament. It has also formed a National Network for Women in Politics in India.

At regional level CSR and other NGOs formed the South Asian Coordination Committee for Political Empowerment of Women (SACPEW) with its Secretariat at CSR, Delhi.

At the Huairou Conference, the networks of all regions on women in politics, culminated in the launch of the Global Network for Women in Politics (CAPWIP) with its secretariat in Manila. The CAPWIP holds an annual conference of NGOs and women in politics. The conference addresses major issues related to empowerment particularly on women electorate, women political leaders, strategies for training them, and lobbying.

Violence against women is another major issue, a human rights issue. Discrimination against women is so extreme in India that in spite of strong pressure from feminist groups the government has no clear policy decision to eliminate violence. CSR provides counselling services to women in distress.

However, its efforts are geared towards changing the attitudes of society towards women, towards a violence free society, so that women can live in dignity. CSR has networked with other NGOs across the country and launched a National Network on violence against women and is bringing out a Violence Update containing articles and statistics on the subject.

Women Representation in Decision Making Process - Nepal

Durga Ghimire

Nepal is a small country where 90% of the population live in villages depending on traditional agricultural activities.

The 1991 census reveals that 50% of the population are women and the 1990 World Bank Report shows that 71% of the population live at the poverty line

The Literacy rate is 45% while women's literacy rate is 25%

Life expectancy of males is 55.3%, females 52.6% and the maternal mortality rate is very high

Political participation of women is very low and women in Nepal lag far behind men in economic, social and political position

Women's Political Participation

The political history of Nepal divides into

- (1) 1847 - 1951 rule by the feudal family of Ranas
- (2) 1950 - the autocratic rule of the Ranas was overthrown and democracy established. Women were in the forefront in the movement for restoration of democracy
- (3) Since then according to the new constitution (1990) women have the right to vote, to contest elections, to hold any political position by election or right to affiliate with political parties. It is also stipulated that each political party should have atleast 5% women candidates for the House of Representatives. However, women's participation in public life and in decision making position is very marginal.

After 1990, 7 women were elected to the House of Representatives and 3 women nominated for the National Council (Parliament's Upper House) at the general elections.

In the general election of 1991
Out of 1345 contestants 81 were women
Out of 205 candidates 7 women (3.4%) were victorious
In the election of 1986, 4.2% of the total number elected to the Rastriya Panchayat (Parliament) were women. Even in the mid term poll of 1993 the participation of women was below 4%.
This indicates a decreasing trend in women's political participation.
In the local elections too the trend is the same
In 1991 out of 2119 candidates for the District Development Committees only 7 (.33%) were women. In the village and town development committees participation was equally low.

At present the council of ministers is the largest with 48 ministers but there is only one woman minister.

It indicates that in the various levels of political and administrative structure, women's political participation is really negligible.

Women's Participation in Government Administration

Women's participation in government administration is also very low. In the public service and administrative management department it is nil. In the judiciary sector or in the Nepal Planning Commission women's participation again is very low.

There never has been a Supreme Court Judge, and even very few practising lawyers. Up to now no woman has been nominated to the National Planning Commission, and there are no women in the diplomatic service.

In 1983 the total number of women in the Civil Services was 4.2%. After 10 years, in 1992, the increase was only 1%. After the restoration of democracy a high level administrative reform commission was set up to advise the government pertaining to civil administration. The report however does not mention any means of promoting participation of women.

Main Constraints

The main reason for low political participation of women is the patriarchal structure of society and according to tradition and culture participation of women in politics and public life is against the accepted role of women. Being socially and economically controlled by men the fundamental requirement is economic empowerment of women.

The literacy rate of women is 25% while 75% are illiterate and unaware of their rights and constitutional provisions. Due to the high level of illiteracy it is difficult to motivate women for political participation.

Institutional Support

There is a lack of effective institutions for women's political empowerment. Some women's organisations are raising economic, social and political issues after the restoration of democracy, but they have not been able to pressurise political parties to increase women's participation. The women security pressure group consisting of about 90 women NGOs and organisations is advocating social, political and legal rights for women.

Wrong concept about politics

The general feeling of the majority of women and general public is that politics is a dirty game not meant for women - that politics is not free and fair, involves violence, character assassination and heavy expenditure.

The role of media can take a very important place in increasing and encouraging women's participation.

Recommendations

Nepal has ratified the UN convention on the elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women, but many discriminatory laws still remain. At present there is a vast gap between male and female at various levels of decision making. Hence there is a need to enhance atleast 10% minimum quota for women in the civil services and parity basis appointments in key positions such as in autonomous bodies. The present 5% women in all political party candidature for the House of Representatives should be increased.

Discrimination on basis of sex in the field of jobs should be eliminated.

Women network groups should work as pressure groups to increase women's participation.

There is a need to establish separate commissions on the status of women. Leadership training at all levels of power structure is necessary.

Economic empowerment of women and campaigns for women's literacy and against discriminatory social values and norms, are essential.

The process of women's participation in decision making is not easy because it is closely related to social, educational, cultural and economic, constraints.

Women In Pakistan : An Overview

From The National Report prepared for the 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing 1995, by the organisation of Women Parliamentarians from Muslim countries Secretariat, Islamabad.

Pakistani society has traditionally, held a conservative attitude towards women, resulting in a high rate of female illiteracy, lack of employment opportunities and non-elected governments' lack of commitment to the advancement of women, reinforcing their low status.

The last 13 years have seen a distinct change. The 6th, 7th and 8th Five year Plans have given increasingly greater priority to basic health and education for women and children in rural areas. The government's social action programme of 1992 has given an enormous boost to the enhancement of women's welfare, involving them in the design and execution of projects concerning all aspects of their lives.

Education and Training

The government is now committed to universal primary education for 5-9 year old children and compulsory attendance. Only women teachers are recruited for primary schools and special allowances paid to teachers in rural areas. NGOs supplement government efforts.

Women's Health Care and Reproductive Health

Special emphasis is laid on the provision of health and population planning facilities. A nation-wide infrastructure of basic health units and rural health centres is being developed along with family planning workers' programme for training women as National Health workers.

Women's Participation in Economic Structures and Policies

Women are an integral part of the economic process but remain unrepresented in economic decision making fora. The rural credit programmes for women, the first women's Bank (1989) staffed by women, and government's assurance of greater employment opportunities for women by allotting 5% quota for women in the public sector, are signs of progress.

Sharing of Power, Responsibilities and Decision Making

Throughout the '80s and '90s women became increasingly visible at decision making level. With a woman Prime Minister, six women have been elected to the National Assembly along with government's promises to restore reserved women's seats to the Assembly with 20 additional women to be nominated. At the local council level, 10% of seats are now reserved for women.

The civil service fills its 5% quota of jobs for women. Women judges sit in 3 out of the 4 high courts. More women have been appointed to the lower and family courts. An all-women police force has been set up throughout the country.

Women working in the print media especially has increased. A feminist press caters to the female intelligentsia while in street theatre and independent film production women play a prominent part.

Mechanisms To Promote The Advancement Of Women

In 1989 the Women's Division was upgraded to the Ministry of Women and Development, which now focuses on women's needs and rights at policy making and legislative levels. It has set up Women's Legal Rights and Women's Legal Aid Committees, an inquiry committee to review discriminatory legislation against women, and the National Consultative Committee on women which has initiated work on representation of women in Parliament and on violence against women.

In the '70s and '80s discrimination against women, hostile legislation and a negative climate of public opinion helped the women's movement in the form of a multitude of pressure groups to gather strength. This movement led to greater awareness among the general public of the importance of women's issues. Nationwide attention through the electronic media especially, was given to issues like violence against women and the rights of the girl child. Women lobbied to set up women's police stations, legal aid centres, a Human Rights Cell to help women victims of violence and human rights violations.

At the community level, women NGOs focussed on women's awareness of their human and social rights as well as their special role in conservation of the environment. In taking charge of this urgent issue, women now play a major part.

Equal status for Pakistani women is still a long way off. However, the process of educating women as well as men in the importance of participating at every level of the country's development has only begun. But the commitment displayed in the last decade gives the government a good basis for maintaining the momentum of progress.

Women in the Sri Lankan Political Scene

C.K.Abayaratna

Sri Lankan history reveals that from the 6th century onwards even queens have ruled the country. In more recent times it was in 1931 that universal franchise was granted in Sri Lanka when the country was still under British rule. At this time educated Sri Lankans established the Ceylon National Congress agitating for greater participation in the government of the country. The women themselves formed the Women's Franchise Union and this was the first organised women's group to work for political rights. The women who formed this union were for the most part from aristocratic or high class families. The women then had the right to vote and to be elected to the National Legislature and to the Municipal Councils and Urban District Councils although till 1938 they were debarred from the Village Councils and Town Councils. Since then women and men enjoyed the same political rights, and the first woman to be elected to the State Council was in 1931.

In 1979 with the introduction of the new constitution the political system changed from the British model to an Executive Presidency with proportional representation in Parliament and the establishment of Pradeshiya Sabhas or Provincial Councils. Entry into any of these legislative bodies, National, Provincial or local was through a registered political party and the party system, much maligned today, came into being. Every political party had its Women's Wing but women were mostly counted on for voting strength, rallies and demonstrations where numbers were important. To seek nomination to any legislative body, however, women had to enter mainstream politics.

Over the years it has been clearly seen that women's participation in main stream politics has been very low and thus representation in legislative bodies hardly felt. Nevertheless, Sri Lanka prides itself in the fact that at the same time the World's first Prime Minister Ms. Sirimavo Bandaranaike was elected in 1965 with 58.9% of votes cast and her daughter the present Executive President Ms. Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaranatunga was elected in 1994 with 64.8% votes.

Candidates for Parliamentary Provincial and Local Authorities (Source : Department of Elections)

Legislature	year	Total No.	Females No.	%
Parliament	1970	410	14	3.4
	1977	730	14	1.9
	1989	1,396	29	2
	1994	1,410	55	3.9
Provincial Council	1989	1,327	38	2.8
	1993	2,351		
Local Authorities	1987	641	22	3.4
	1991	1,152	42	
Municipal Council				
Urban Councils	1987	984	31	3.1
	1991	1,453	40	2.7
Pradeshiya Sabha	1987	7,198	133	1.8
	1991	13,385	325	2.4

The proportion of women in the National Legislature has seen a very slow and unsteady rise from the 1st Parliament of 1947. In 1989 in the 9th Parliament the highest percentage of women MPs was 5.3% but in the 10th Parliament in 1994 it was 4.80. However, most of these women elected hailed from politically influential backgrounds. It is also true as in several Asian countries, that these women entered politics by way of filling vacancies created by the death or resignation of a close relative, a husband, brother or father. They have, nevertheless, held very senior positions in the cabinet with responsibility and filled Ministerial and Deputy Ministerial posts.

Women in Parliament 1947 - 1994 Members and Those Holding Office (Source : Department of Elections)

Parliament	Year	Total No M.Ps	Women	M.Ps	Women	Holding	Office	Leader of the Opposition
			No.	%	Prime Minis	Cabinet Mini.	Other Mini.	
5th Parli.	1960	151	3	1.9	1	-	-	-
6th	1965	151	6	3.8	-	-	-	1
7th	1970	151	6	3.8	1	1	1	-
8th	1977	168	5	2.9	-	1	3	-
9th	1989	225	12	5.3	-	1	5	1
10th	1994	225	12	4.8	1	2	3	-

With the introduction of free education in 1948 and the increasing participation of women in politics, candidates came not so much from the elitist background as it had been in the early years, but from the semi-urban and more rural backgrounds. They were not only increasingly politically conscious, but had a good educational background as well and were capable of contributing to the processes of governance of the country.

Provincial Councils were established in 1988 in the Provinces and administered by a Provincial Governor appointed by the President. No woman has been appointed to this post to date. At the 1988 elections out of 437 provincial councillors 12 were women - 2.9%. In 1993 out of 382, 12 were women - 3.4%.

The participation of women in local government has always been lower than in the National Councils. At village level the Gramodaya Manadala had statutory provision for women's representation but it was less than 1%.

In the most recent local government election held in March 1997 just 20 women were elected to 238 local bodies making a minute percentage.

It is as voters that women's participation in politics is felt, as a high proportion of women turn up at elections. The Muslim women in spite of their absence in public life, have shown a high participation in voting. However, political parties make hardly any mention of women's issues in their manifestos and even when they do, they seem to be of little consequence to the voting public or even the women. Nevertheless, every political party has its Women's Wing, but few women prepare themselves for political leadership and therefore do not come forward to seek nomination.

After the 1977 elections the new government established a Women's Bureau. UN policies and programmes relating to women had created an awareness of women's issues. Sri Lanka signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all kinds of Discrimination against Women. Subsequently a Ministry of Women's Affairs was established in 1983. The Women's Charter was drawn up by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and accepted by Parliament in 1993 as a policy statement, and the National Committee on women was established to implement the Charter. The Charter was a list of human rights and gender equality commitments accepted by the government as guidelines for legislation.

Women in decision making positions is very low, although the constitution safeguards women's right to employment without gender discrimination. Though very few in numbers some of the highest posts of responsibility in the public service are held by them.

It is evident therefore that Sri Lankan women in general avoid politics. Politics is looked upon as a dirty game, beset with violence and other implications which will devalue a woman's image in society. The patriarchal culture which is their background and calls for a woman's duties within the home and family prevents them from coming forward without the permission and support of the men in the family. Financial constraints no less hold them back. The net result therefore is a growing number of politically conscious and educated women voters who much as they wish to be represented and would take on the responsibility, yet in the existing circumstances will not actively get into mainstream politics.

Following the Indian example what Sri Lanka could do with is a quota representation of women in local council legislation. In the Delhi Municipal Corporation elections held a few months ago, a new law came into effect where 1/3 the number of seats were reserved for women. Such statutory provision would draw the Sri Lankan women to more active involvement in politics and the realisation of the importance of training in leadership roles for women while the men will necessarily have to support them.

Violence of Politics

SACPEW strongly condemns the Brutal murder of Leelawathy, a social and political activist at the grass root level in Tamil Nadu on the 23rd of April. She was hacked to death with scythes and knives by a gang of six, allegedly her political rivals.

While being a CPI(M) Councillor of the Madurai Corporation, Leelawathie was a workers' leader and was working hard to improve the living conditions of the poor in Madurai. We understand that the laying of pipelines in her constituency which enabled the people to get water has affected the business of water suppliers who were making huge profits from this venture. She had also led other successful campaigns against the sale of illicit liquor and fought against anti-social elements which have affected those who were perpetuating them for their own profits. Her social commitment and political activism towards social upliftment had enraged others.

We have been constantly pointing out that the brutality, violence and the savage intolerance of political opponents have made politics an anathema for women. Here is another incident where a woman politician is victimised.

We urge that the law takes its judicial course without political interference and the culprits are punished however powerful they are politically. We wait in anticipation

We women of SACPEW have now added reasons to enter politics in numbers so that politics can be cleansed.

Selvy Thiruchandran

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The Politics of Gender and Women's Agency in Post Colonial Sri Lanka

By Selvy Thiruchandran

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