

Women's Representation in Politics: An analysis of South Asian Countries

Tara Kumari Karki^{1,*}

Abstract

This study provides empirical data on women's involvement in politics in Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, India, and Nepal. Despite efforts to increase their political participation, women remain underrepresented in these countries' political systems. This study assesses the level of women's political representation in various countries by looking at data on the proportion of women in parliament, political parties, and elected offices. The study looks at factors that contribute to the underrepresentation of women in politics, such as societal and cultural norms, bias within political parties, and a lack of funding and support for female politicians. The report also covers efforts to increase women's political representation, such as the implementation of gender quotas and particular campaigns to encourage women's participation in politics. Overall, this study clarifies the challenges and opportunities that gender equality in South Asian politics faces.

Keyword: Gender equality, women in parliament, women in politics, women representation

INTRODUCTION

In several nations around the world, including Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, the involvement of women in politics has been a significant matter of discussion and debate [1]. Women have long been underrepresented in politics, despite the fact that they make up a sizeable fraction of the population in many nations. Yet, women's presence and influence in these countries' political arenas have gradually grown over time. Since the beginning of politics, women have had to deal with a variety of types of prejudice and restrictions that have lowered their political participation. Men's leadership roles are prioritized by cultural norms and traditions, women's political rights are legally restricted, and there is a lack of access to resources and knowledge. Notwithstanding these obstacles, women's organizations and activists have diligently campaigned to promote and protect their rights and advance the political emancipation of women.

There have been considerable advancements in these nations' political participation of women since then. For instance, although women's representation in the Indian parliament is still low, Indira Gandhi served as prime minister of that country from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 to 1984. In 2021, however, only 14% of the seats in the lower house were held by women. Benazir Bhutto, who

served as prime minister of Pakistan from 1988 to 1990 and again from 1993 to 1996, was also a woman. However, Pakistan's female participation in parliament is much lower than that of India, with only 10% of seats in the lower house held by women as of 2021. Bangladesh produced a few Sheikh Hasina, who has served as prime minister since January 2009, represents advancement for women in politics. Following this, the number of women in the Bangladeshi parliament marginally rose, with 20% of the lower houses' seats being held by women. Even though Sri Lanka's female

*Author for Correspondence

Tara Kumari Karki
E-mail: tara.karki@mswtu.edu.np

¹Research Scholar, Department of Social Work, Tribhuvan University, Kirtipur, Kathmandu, Nepal

Received Date: April 29, 2023

Accepted Date: June 09, 2023

Published Date: July 10, 2023

Citation: Tara Kumari Karki. Women's Representation in Politics: An analysis of South Asian Countries. Journal of Human Rights Law and Practice. 2023; 6(2): 1–8p.

representation in parliament is still low, with only 5% of seats in the lower house held by women, the country has made considerable political progress. Nepal has come a long way in terms of improving the participation of women in politics. Nepal has the highest female participation rate in South Asian countries, with 33 percent of seats reserved for women in the parliament by 2021 [2].

Women's representation in politics has gradually increased in these countries over the past few decades. However, despite progress, women are facing significant barriers, stereotypes, obstacles, and gender discrimination in society that hinder women's full and equal participation in decision-making processes. So, my paper aims to identify and explore these challenges while promoting greater equality and empowerment for women to better understand the ongoing issues facing women in these countries.

METHODOLOGY

The review will analyze data sources such as official statistics, surveys, and qualitative data, and evaluate research methods such as statistical analysis, content analysis, and ethnography. It will describe sampling strategies, data analysis methods, and ethical considerations related to research on women's representation in politics. The review will conclude by summarizing the main findings and discussing implications for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of researching women's political participation and representation is highlighted by True et al. (2012) [3], while Lovenduski and Norris (2005) [4] emphasize the obstacles and knowledge gaps that exist in the field, and Lan and Buss (2021) [5] draw attention to the lack of reliable data and the necessity for comparative analysis in understanding the relationship between women's political engagement and democratic resilience in different countries.

According to Krook (2021) [6], it is important to see women's political engagement as a component of a bigger fight for social justice and democratic rule of law. Asia has detrimental repercussions, as discussed by Guhathakurta (2010) [7] and Niaz (2003) [8], and more research is required to understand the challenges and the effects of boosting women's political representation. "Female political participation in South Asia," by Latif et al. (2020) [9], outlines the obstacles to women's political engagement as well as the possible advantages of improving it. It identifies areas for further research, such as the necessity for a thorough examination of society and cultural standards and the diverse impacts of racial, ethnic, and class differences.

Women, gender, and politics in Asia by Basu and Cooray, 2019 [10], makes the case for additional study on the nexus of gender, politics, and the experiences of oppressed people. They argue that additional comparative analysis is required to determine the variables influencing variation in women's political representation. "Comparative women's political leadership," by Franceschet (2019) [11] examines in a comparative context the elements that support or restrict women's political leadership and suggests that a more thorough investigation is required, one that takes marginalized women's experiences into account.

Manchanda (2008), in her book "Women, Democracy, and the State in Nepal: A Comparative Study of South Asia" examines how Nepali women have fared during the democratic transition and contrasts their experiences with those of women in other South Asian nations [12]. He focuses on the positive effects of women's political participation and the necessity of a multifaceted strategy to advance gender equality. Dahlerup's "Women, Quotas, and Politics" is from 2020 [13]. The writer argues that quotas have been a successful strategy in many nations for enhancing women's political representation and explores alternate methods for increasing women's political engagement as well as the effects of quotas on other excluded groups.

"Women and Politics in South Asia" by Ruparelia, 2008 [14], highlights the underrepresentation of women in politics in the area and points out obstacles such as cultural and societal norms, patriarchal

attitudes, and assaults on women. He emphasizes the necessity of expanding women's access to economic resources, the networks of civil society, and quota or reservation systems.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NEPAL

Despite the 1990s and 2000s being characterized by instability, gender-based violence, and discrimination, women still face significant challenges with representation and opportunities, and women's organizations continue to play a crucial role in addressing these issues. Although Nepal's Constitution includes provisions for gender equality, women still face significant challenges with representation and opportunities, and they continue to play a vital role in addressing these issues [15].

The advancement of women's political engagement in Nepal is discussed by Upreti and Ghale (2020) [16], who also acknowledge the remaining barriers. They call for greater research on the experiences of marginalized women and the elements that either encourage or discourage their participation. Sharma (2014) [17] offers a historical examination of women's involvement in Nepal and makes the case that much work has to be done before the nation can be considered gender equal.

A more intersectional analysis of women's experiences in politics and administration is required, as acknowledged in Acharya's 2017 [18] book "Nepal Himalaya: Women, Politics, and Administration," which emphasizes the importance of effective implementation of policies and programs that support women's representation. "Women's Participation in Nepal: Status and Challenges" by Thapa and Sijapati (2008) [19] emphasizes while acknowledging the major obstacles still present; it also highlights the advancements made in women's engagement in Nepali society and makes the case for comprehensive policy solutions and the primacy of women's empowerment in development initiatives.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN INDIA

Women's political participation in India has expanded since the country's independence in 1947, but they continue to confront considerable obstacles, such as gender-based violence, patriarchal views, and a lack of resources and opportunity. The Indian Constitution ensures that there will be no discrimination based on gender, and programs, like quotas for women in local government have encouraged participation at the grassroots level. However, due to resistance, the Women's Reservation Bill, which would have established quotas for women in the Parliament and state legislatures, has not yet been passed. Women have significantly impacted Indian politics and society despite obstacles.

Patel's 2020 Article [20], "Women and Electoral Politics in India"

A Search for Political Participation," acknowledges the growing involvement of women in politics in India but also recognizes obstacles, such as gender-based violence and discrimination. The book makes recommendations for actions, like raising the number of women in positions of power and tackling prejudice and violence against women. The article "Quiet Revolution: The Growth of Women in Electoral Politics in India" by Chandra (2014) [21] addresses the rise of women in Indian politics, but it also cites problems, such as gender-based violence and discrimination and underrepresentation in positions of decision-making. The book offers a multifaceted strategy to deal with these issues, including laws that support women's rights and empowerment.

In her 2011 book, Deshpande addresses the underrepresentation of women in Indian politics as well as the cultural, social, and religious standards that act as impediments [22]. The book recommends affirmative action policies, like quotas while also drawing attention to gaps in the research, like the scant coverage of the experiences of women from particular religious and caste groups. The 2017 study "Women's Involvement in Electoral Politics in India: Quiet Feminization" by Rai, investigates women's involvement in politics in India and highlights patriarchal attitudes and cultural norms as obstacles [23]. The book explores how electoral quotas affect women and women's networks, but it also has certain drawbacks, including a lack of analysis of intersectionality and policy consequences.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN SRI LANKA

In Sri Lanka, women have not had many opportunities to participate in politics because of traditional beliefs that men should be in charge. Even though Sri Lanka gave women the right to vote in 1931, it took 16 more years for a woman to be elected to the Parliament [24]. The first female prime minister of Sri Lanka was Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1960, and she was the world's first female head of government. However, women are still not well represented in politics, making up less than 6% of parliamentarians.

Political Participation of Women in Local Governance

According to "A Case Study of Selected Local Government Bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka" by Rameez (2018) [25], women face cultural and societal norms, discrimination, and gender-based violence that hinder their political participation. Quotas have increased engagement, but more needs to be done through training, mentoring, and support programs. "Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka" by De Alwis (2007) [26] emphasizes that structural and cultural obstacles must be overcome for gender equality in politics, and civil society and government have a role to play. However, the book lacks discussion of other excluded communities. "Women and Politics in the Third World" by Afshar and Eade (2013) [27] says gender-based violence, structural inequality, and patriarchal beliefs hamper women's political engagement. Governments, civil society organizations, and international actors must provide training, mentorship, and support for representation in politics. Inclusivity and a safe climate for women's political participation are also important. According to "Women and Political Power: Europe since 1945" by Marn (2021) [28], despite advancements, enduring disparities in political power between men and women exist. Gender quotas are necessary, and structural obstacles to women's political involvement and representation must be addressed by governments, civil society organizations, and international players.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN BANGLADESH

The slow process of women becoming politically active in Bangladesh has been characterized by constitutional protections for their equal rights and campaigning on the part of women's rights organizations. Yet there continue to be major obstacles, like patriarchal views, cultural norms, violence against women, and a lack of support for female candidates. Women's Parliamentary Caucus formation and gender-sensitive training programs are two initiatives to address these issues. Achieving gender equality and enabling women to actively participate in determining Bangladesh's future are both made possible by the approximately 21% of seats in Parliament that are currently held by women.

Khan and Ara's article from 2006 discusses the challenges faced by women in local government decision-making in Bangladesh and the need for more gender-sensitive training programs [29]. Kantha's 2007 book "Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh" examines the root causes of gender inequality and the importance of women's political engagement for social justice and economic development [30]. Huq's 2016 article emphasizes the significance of women's involvement in local administration for sustainable development and calls for institutional and policy improvements, as well as capacity-building initiatives [31].

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IN PAKISTAN

Pakistani women's political participation has experienced both advancements and disappointments. Women were given the ability to vote and to run for office in the nation's first Constitution, but patriarchal attitudes and discriminatory legislation still prevented them from actively participating in politics. However, a new local government system that was implemented in 2002 allotted 33% of seats to women, which significantly increased women's political participation, especially in rural areas. Despite these advancements, harassment, abuse, and a lack of resources and support remain obstacles for Pakistani women's full participation and representation. Although there have been some major successes recently, feminist organizations and women's rights activists continue to push for increased political engagement and representation.

The challenges women face in Pakistani politics are discussed in “Gender mainstreaming in politics: Perspective of female politicians from Pakistan” by Zakar and Hamid (2018) [32]. These challenges include cultural and patriarchal barriers, a lack of resources and support, and harassment and violence based on gender and to advance gender equality and women’s rights for democracy, social justice, and human rights. “Women and politics in Pakistan” by Shaheed et al. (2013) [33] emphasizes the need to change laws and institutions, educate the public, and support women’s leadership. Both works emphasize the significance of institutional and policy changes to promote women in Pakistani politics, but their applicability to other countries may be constrained.

SIMILARITIES, GAPS, AND SUGGESTION FROM THE LITERATURES

A recurring theme in the literature on women’s political representation and involvement is the low level of participation among women, as well as the importance of advancing gender equality and women’s rights. There is agreement that these impediments must be removed by institutional and legislative reforms, as well as through training, mentoring, and support systems. The literature also highlights the significance of comprehending the intersectionality of prejudice and disadvantage experienced by women from marginalized communities as well as the necessity for additional study to comprehend the intricate processes at work. However, there are gaps in the literature, such as a lack of a thorough examination of the difficulties and experiences of women from marginalized areas, the efficacy of various tactics, variations in the geographic focus, and a lack of inclusion and policies that reflect men’s viewpoints or those of other identities.

According to the literature, achieving gender equality and women’s empowerment in politics requires a multifaceted strategy that involves institutional transformation, legal reform, and support for women’s leadership and involvement. To advance gender equality in politics, there is a requirement for more cooperation between the public and private sectors. An intersectional study of women’s experiences in politics and administration as well as effective implementation of laws and programs that support women’s representation, are essential. Further study is required to determine the precise hurdles that keep women out of politics as well as the effects of expanding women’s political representation on policy outcomes and women’s experiences in elected office.

DISCUSSION

- From 2.9% in 1990 to 33.2% in 2021, women’s political representation in Nepal has greatly increased. The advancement of women’s rights and empowerment in Nepal has been made possible thanks in large part to women’s movements.
- Although women make up over 51.7% of all registered voters, they have a low representation in parliament, holding only 14.4% of seats in the Lok Sabha and 11.5% in the Rajya Sabha. Proposals like the Women’s Reservation Bill, which aims to reserve 33% of seats in the Lok Sabha and state legislative assemblies for women, have been made to boost the number of women who participate in politics.
- Women occupy slightly fewer political offices in Bangladesh than the average for the world (25.5%), i.e., 21.3% of the national parliament’s seats. Women’s movements have been crucial in promoting women’s rights and political engagement in Bangladesh, helping to raise awareness, and encourage women to get involved in politics.
- Just 5.3% of the seats in the Sri Lankan parliament are occupied by women, which is a low level of female representation. Women’s movements and activism have a long history in Sri Lanka, with groups fighting for gender equality and women’s participation in politics and decision-making. Also, 20.6% of the seats in the national parliament are held by women, demonstrating the advancement of women’s political engagement in Pakistan. Women’s movements in Pakistan have aided in promoting policies and regulations that support women’s empowerment and gender equality, as well as raising public awareness of and education about women’s issues [34].

FINDINGS

Patriarchal Norms and Cultural Hurdles

These nations frequently place restrictions on women's participation in public life and politics due to patriarchal standards and cultural barriers. In addition, gender stereotypes and conventional views of women frequently deter them from pursuing leadership roles.

Inadequate Access to Education and Training

In many of these nations, women lack adequate access to both, which makes it challenging for them to acquire the information and skills they need.

Violence and Harassment

In these nations, women who work in politics frequently experience discrimination, assault, and harassment, including verbal and physical abuse, cyberbullying, and threats to their personal safety. This not only hinders their political participation but also deters other women from doing the same [35].

Political Parties and Voting Procedures

Political parties and other nations' electoral procedures frequently disadvantage women, making it challenging for them to win government. Because they are frequently underrepresented in political parties, women may not have enough opportunities to run for office under the current electoral system.

Economic Obstacles

Women in politics frequently encounter economic obstacles, such as a lack of funding for campaigns or performing their obligations as elected representatives. Their capacity to successfully engage in politics may be hampered as a result.

These challenges and barriers have a major impact on women's participation in politics among South Asian countries, and we recommend the need for further research and strong policies and laws to address these issues. By implementing these recommendations, these problems can be resolved in a timely manner.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Women's participation in politics in South Asian countries, including Nepal, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, has seen progress over the years. Nepal has made significant progress in increasing women's political representation, while India has made efforts through initiatives like the Women's Reservation Bill. Bangladesh has also seen progress through the advocacy efforts of women's movements. Sri Lanka and Pakistan have also made progress with women's movements contributing to increasing awareness and education around women's issues and advocating for policies and laws that support women's empowerment and gender equality.

Patriarchal standards, restricted educational opportunities, assault and harassment, a lack of support and mentorship, political party and election structures, and economic impediments are just a few of the difficulties faced by women in politics in South Asian nations. So, the recommendation and future areas are to increase the number of women in politics which has the potential to improve democracy, advance gender equality, and produce better policy outcomes, including and increasing their representation, putting gender-sensitive policies into place, encouraging legal institutional reforms, offering education and training, developing support systems, addressing societal and cultural barriers, acknowledging intersectionality, and engaging in advocacy and awareness-raising. Through putting these policies into practice, women's opinions can be heard and represented in decision-making, resulting in a society that is more inclusive and gender-equal.

REFERENCES

1. Abbas A, Muneer L. Women empowerment in South Asia: Role of women in the development of Pakistan. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*. 2019; 6(2): 42–49.

2. Dahlerup D. *Breaking male dominance in Democracies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2018.
3. True J, Niner S, Parashar S, George N. *Women's political participation in Asia and the Pacific*. SSRC: Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum; 2012.
4. Lovenduski J, Norris P. *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*. Routledge; 2005.
5. Lan A, Buss TF. Female political participation and democratic resilience: A global perspective. *Politics & Gender*. 2021; 17(1): 167–192.
6. Krook ML. *Women's political participation in the context of change: Agents of change*. Oxford University Press; 2021.
7. Meghna Guhathakurta. (2008). *Minorities, women and peace: A South Asian perspective*. Women in peace politics. Online Available from: https://www.academia.edu/76920915/Minorities_Women_and_Peace_a_South_Asian_Perspective.
8. Niaz Z. *Women's empowerment and reproductive choices: Case studies from Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Oxford University Press; 2003.
9. Latif Arfan, Usman Ahmed, Kataria Jafar, Abdullllah Muhammad. Female political participation in South Asia: A case study of Pakistan. *Journal of South Asian Studies*. 2015; 30: 201–213.
10. Basu AM, Cooray N. *Women, Gender and Politics in Asia*. Springer; 2019.
11. Franceschet S. *Comparative women's political leadership*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2019.
12. Manchanda R. *Women, War, and Peace in South Asia: Beyond Victimhood to Agency*. Sage Publications; 2008.
13. Dahlerup D. *Women, Quotas and Politics*. Polity Press; 2020.
14. Sukumar N. Sanjay Ruparelia, *Divided We Govern: Coalition Politics in Modern India* - N. Sukumar, 2017 [Internet]. *History and Sociology of South Asia*. 2017 [cited 2023 Sep 21]. Available from: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2230807516655416>
15. Kadoi N. *Women's political representation in the Middle East and North Africa: A comparative study*. Palgrave Macmillan; 2013.
16. Upreti BR, Upreti D, Ghale Y. Nepali women in politics: Success and challenges. *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 2020; 21(2): 76–93.
17. Sharma N. *Women's participation in Nepal: A historical perspective*. Kathmandu, Nepal: Himal Books; 2014.
18. Acharya T. Nepal Himalaya: Women, politics, and administration. *Journal of International Women's Studies*. 2017; 18(4): 197–208.
19. Thapa D, Sijapati B. *Women and politics in Nepal*. Mandala Book Point; 2008.
20. Patel T. *Women and Electoral Politics in India: A Quest for Political Participation*. Routledge; 2020.
21. Chandra K. *Silent revolution: The rise of women in electoral politics in India*. Princeton University Press; 2014.
22. Deshpande R. *Women's political participation and representation in India*. New Delhi: Sage Publications; 2011.
23. Rai P. Women's participation in electoral politics in India: Silent feminization. *South Asia Research*. 2017; 37(1): 58–77.
24. Supra 6n.
25. Rameez A. Political participation of women in local governance: A case study of selected local government bodies in Eastern Sri Lanka. *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. 2018; 53(7): 1043–1061.
26. De Alwis M. *Gender and Politics in Sri Lanka*. Routledge; 2007.
27. Afshar H, Eade D. *Women and Politics in the Third World*. Routledge; 2013.
28. Rubio-Marín, R. *Women and Political Power: Europe since 1945*. Cambridge University Press; 2021.
29. Khan MR, Ara F. Women, participation, and empowerment in local government: Bangladesh union Parishad perspective. *Asian Affairs*. 2006; 29(1): 73–92.
30. Kantha S. *Women's Political Participation in Bangladesh*. Routledge; 2007.

-
31. Huq SMS. Women's participation in local Government: A tool for sustainable development of Bangladesh. *European Journal of Business and Social Sciences*. 2016; 4(11): 169–183.
 32. Zakar R, Zakar MZ, Hamid N. Gender mainstreaming in politics: Perspective of female politicians from Pakistan. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*. 2018; 24(2): 224–245.
 33. Shaheed F, Khan A. *Gender and politics in Pakistan*. Oxford University Press; 2013.
 34. Shaheed F, Eisenstein Z. *Gender and Politics in Pakistan: From Domestic to Foreign Policy*. Routledge; 2010.
 35. Norris P. *Why Elections Fail*. Cambridge University Press; 2020.