

An Empirical Study on Women Representation in Parliament of South Asian Nations

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Abstract

Women have been discriminated in every sphere of life. In South Asia, women constitute roughly half of the population, yet they are rarely seen in parliament or as ministers. It is true that in all sphere of political leadership women are severely underrepresented or in other words, men greatly outnumber women in every sphere of decision making even in parliament also. Women need the power to break up the trap of confinement that engage them busy in domestic work and put many restrictions on them in this patriarchal society. Lack of opportunity and low representation in the political sphere deprives women of being politically empowered. This paper is an attempt to examine the study the women representation in the lower house of parliament and as well as to compare this with the average data of women members in the lower house of Asia and World.

Keywords: Inter-Parliamentary Union, Leader, Parliament, Quota, South Asia, Women

Introduction

Discrimination against women has a long history. The term “democracy” came from the Greek word demos, “common people” and Kratos, “strength”, was first developed in Athens and since its beginning like slaves, women were excluded from political participation. Social contract theorists like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau were also antipathetic regarding women’s political participation. Later the patriarchal structure of the society and religious ideology jointly acted to confine the role of women for childbearing and domestic tasks by imposing restrictions on their movements. It means women have been blocked from access to power in any arena, domestic or public providing a status inferior to men (Ghosh, 1984).

Objective

There are many options that may work in favour of women to get back their freedom of choices and political empowerment of women could be considered as one of those options. If the women are politically empowered, then they would come forward and actively participate in politics that would increase their representation in the decision making bodies and could prove themselves in a better way. The objective of the study is:

- To examine the trend regarding the representation of women in the lower house of parliament.
- To compare the representation of women in parliament among South Asian nations and with that of the world average.

Literature Review

Discrimination and deprivation both of these words are both quite associated with women in India. Many a time, deprivation of women in various spheres of life has been highlighted in various pieces of literature. Verma (1976) highlighted the fact of receiving poor nutrition of young girls and lesser opportunities of medical treatment in comparison to their brother.

Male domination in sex ratio was quite common in the middle of 20th century. Although since 1990 male-female ratio in South Asia is almost same but intraregional variation is still seen in many countries in South Asia. The typical South Asian families are patriarchal and women in the region are generally treated as they are subject to perform the domestic roles of wife and mother and many a time, religious ideology imposes heavy emphasis on female inferiority (Naqvi, 1992). This male domination or patriarchal nature of South Asian families may be the reason for increasing the cases of violence against women and girls. Jennifer et al (2014) highlighted the fact about violence against women and girls in South Asia.

Physical differences of men, like they are heavier, taller and physically stronger than women, have been given more space for men to dominate over women. Further, women's vulnerability was reflected in bearing and nursing children. Once established, the subjection of women was further enforced by custom, tradition, practice and belief. (Dahl, 1995)

Sources of Data

The study is based on secondary data. The various sources of secondary data are articles, books, reports and various official websites of national and international level like word bank, united nations etc.

Women Empowerment

Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen mentioned in his book, "India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity", "Women's empowerment can positively influence the lives not only of women themselves but also of men, and of course, those of children". So, the concept of women empowerment is not new. Kabeer (2001) mentioned empowerment as "The expansion in people's ability

to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them". In other words, empowerment is the process by which the disempowered or powerless people are given enough opportunity so that they can change their circumstances in their favour and can get the freedom of doing things of their capacity and choices.

South Asia

South Asia or Southern Asia is the southern region of the Asian continent, which is a vast geographic region covering an area of 5.2 million square km (2.0 million sq. miles). Geographically it is almost 11.71% of the Asian Continent or around 3.5% of the world's land surface area. South Asia comprises the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, having a population of about 1.89 billion or 39.49% of Asia's population or one-fourth of the world's population and most densely populated geographical region in the world.

In 1985, the South Asian Association of Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was formed with a contagious bloc of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Later in the year 2007, Afghanistan entered as an eighth member. South Asia alone accounts for the world's largest majority of global Hindus, global Sikhs, and global Muslims. Apart from these, the regions have many distinctions in various issues like poverty, health condition, territorial disputes etc. The geographical compactness, common religious belief and languages made these countries indistinguishable but the sentiment of unity is rarely seen in that region. Because of variations in religion, British ruler used to play the religion card to lay the seeds of difference between South Asian nations. (Saha, 1996)

Sex Ratio

The sex ratio in South Asia is mainly masculine. The percentage of female in the total population of South Asia was around 48.19% in 1990 and it was almost the same up to the year 2005 (48.17%) and has increased to 48.36% of the total population in the year 2018. Since 1990, the trend of the average percentage of the female population in the world always remained above 49.5% and was become

49.58% in the year 2018. In the last 30 years, it is found that the female's percentage in the total population was always better than in South Asia. Among South Asian nations, Nepal had 50.3%

females in 1990, but it has increased by 4.2% and became 54.53% in 2018 which is the highest as an individual nation in South Asia. (Table-1)

Table 1: The Percentage Share of Females in Total Population

Countries	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2018
Afghanistan	48.88	48.13	48.55	48.39	48.82	48.6	48.63
Bangladesh	48.42	48.51	48.61	48.77	49.16	49.3	49.38
Bhutan	48.6	48.76	48.85	47.56	47.47	47.24	47
India	48.09	48.04	48	47.97	47.97	48	48.02
Maldives	48.73	49.38	49.41	47.76	45.67	40.34	37.26
Nepal	50.3	49.46	50.21	50.32	50.77	54.1	54.53
Pakistan	48.14	48.3	48.38	48.42	48.48	48.53	48.53
Sri Lanka	49.5	49.77	50.12	50.68	51.3	51.8	51.96
South Asia	48.19	48.16	48.17	48.17	48.23	48.33	48.36
World	49.68	49.65	49.61	49.58	49.58	49.58	49.58

Source: Data.worldbank.org (Authors calculation from World Bank data)

The data (5 Years Span) of the last 30 years reflects that the share of women in the total population has been increasing continuously in Sri Lanka and achieved the second position in South Asia in 2018. In the last 30 years, the percentage of the female population of Maldives has been decreasing continuously. The Maldives had 48.73% female in 1990 and has become 37.26% in 2018 which was the worst in South Asia. In the last 30 years, the share of the female population of India was between 47.9% to 48.09%. Among South Asian nations, Nepal and Sri Lanka are the only country, have a higher percentage share of females in the total population than the worlds average.

The Quota of Women in Lower/ Single House of Parliament of South Asian Countries

The first-ever world conference on women was held in Mexico in 1975. Then subsequent conferences held in Copenhagen, Nairobi and Beijing have contributed to the progression strengthening the legal, economic, social and political dimensions of the role of women (Fadia, 2014). Due to various international commitments made by countries (in Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1979, Beijing Platform for Action in 1995), women's participation in political, public and private spheres

of life have been opened up in South Asian nations.

In Bangladesh, a quota system was first introduced in 1972 with 15 reserved seats, subsequently enhanced to 30. In May 2004, the national parliament of Bangladesh passed the 14th constitutional amendment to reintroduce quotas for women. The number of seats in parliament is to be raised to 345, of which 45 (13 per cent) will be reserved for women. Parliament of Bangladesh is a unicameral legislature consisting of 350 members, of which 50 seats (14%) are reserved for women who are elected by the elected members following the law based on the procedure through a single transferable vote.

In Pakistan, President Musharraf presided over an act passed in 2002 which allocated 17 per cent seats in the national and provincial assemblies and the senate to women. The 60 (of 342) seats of the national assembly are three times more than the previous seats they held. However, the seats are allocated to the political parties in proportion to their electoral standing, and there is again a system of nomination: the names are picked from the top of a list of 60 women that each party presents to the electoral authorities before the election. (Omvedt, 2005). Till now, Pakistan has reserved 17% seats in parliament for women.

Since 1996 India has been considering adopting similar measures to ensure more representation of women in parliament. In India, though the women reservation bill was passed in the upper house of parliament in 2010 still pending in the lower house for an unknown reason in the male-dominated lower house. However, in 1993, 73rd and 74th constitutional amendment ensured the reservation of 33% seats for women in local bodies. And many a state increased the percentage of reservations from 33% to 50%. Afghanistan holds the second position in South Asia for adopting reservations of 27% for women in parliament. Nepal holds the first position in South Asia because of reserving 33% seats for women in Parliament. Maldives, Bhutan and Sri Lanka do not

have any quota system for women in parliament. These countries may believe that reservation for women in parliament will violate constitutional provisions of no gender discrimination.

Women in the National Parliament of South Asia

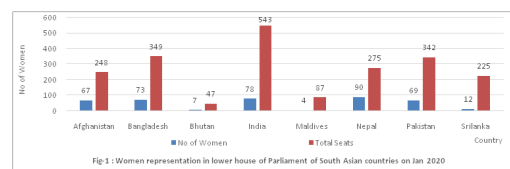
On 1st Jan 2020, Afghanistan has 67 women representative out of 248 total seats in parliament, whereas other countries like Nepal has 90 women representative out of 275 seats in the lower house of parliament. The Maldives has the lowest share of women representation in parliament among South Asian nations i.e. only 4 women parliamentarians out of 87 seats. (Table-2)

Table 2: Share of Women in National Parliament of South Asia (On 1st Jan'2020)

Country	Lower or Single house			Upper house or Senate			Rank
	No of Women	Total Seats	% of women	No of Women	Total Seats	% of women	
Afghanistan	67	248	27	19	68	27.9	67
Bangladesh	73	349	20.9	--	--	--	98
Bhutan	7	47	14.9	4	25	16	138
India	78	543	14.4	25	240	10.4	142
Maldives	4	87	4.6	--	--	--	184
Nepal	90	275	32.7	22	59	37.3	43
Pakistan	69	342	20.2	20	104	19.2	106
Sri Lanka	12	225	5.3	--	--	--	182

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data for single and lower houses

India has the highest number of seats i.e. 543 in the lower house of parliament among South Asian nations, whereas Pakistan and Bangladesh have the almost same number of seats i.e. 342 and 349 respectively. India ranks 6th position among South Asian nations for women representation in the lower house of parliament in the year 2020, falling behind Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan and Nepal.(Fig-1)



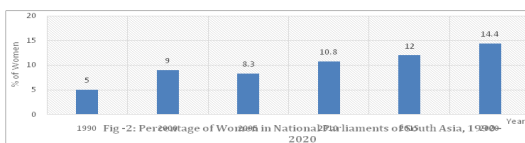
In 1990, the highest percentage of female representation in a parliament among South Asian countries was of Bangladesh (10.3%). In Pakistan, it was 10.1%, whereas in India, it had 5% women representative in the lower house of parliament. Bhutan had the lowest percentage of female representation i.e. 2% in parliament, among SAARC nations in 1990. (Table -3)

Table 3: Percentage of Women in the National Parliament in South Asia, 1990-2020

Country	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020
Afghanistan	3.7			27.3	27.7	27.7	27
Bangladesh	10.3	10.3	9.1	14.8	18.6	20	20.9
Bhutan	2	0	9.3	9.3	8.5	8.5	14.9
India	5	7.2	9	8.3	10.8	12	14.4
Maldives	6.3	6.3	6	12	6.5	5.9	4.6
Nepal	6.1		5.9	5.9	33.2	29.5	32.7
Pakistan	10.1	1.8		21.3	22.2	20.6	20.2
Sri Lanka	4.9	5.3		4.9	5.3	4.9	5.3
South Asia	6.3		8.4	13.2	20.1	19.3	19
Asia		13.2	14.6	15	18.5	18.5	20
World	12.7	11.3	13.1	15.7	18.8	22.1	24.9

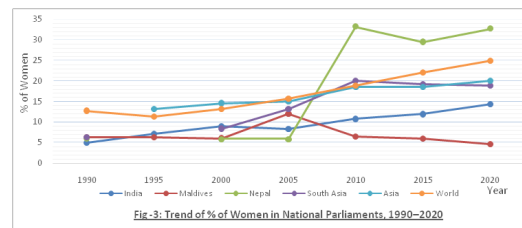
Source: Data.worldbank.org (Authors calculation from World Bank data)

Since 2015, the trend of female representatives out of total seats in the lower house of parliament in South Asian countries has been decreasing. In the year 1990, the average percentage of women members in South Asia was 6.3% and within 10 years it reached 8.4% (in 2000). Since then the average percentage of women representation in the lower house of parliament increased continuously and reached two-digit in percentage term in 2005 i.e. 13.2% and then became 20.1% in 2010. Since then, the average percentage of women representation in the lower house of parliament has been maintained 19%. Since 1990 the average percentage of women representation in parliament of South Asian nations has been increased by around 3 times now. (Fig -2)



In Fig- 3 a trend is being shown taking the countries having the highest and lowest share of representation in parliament among South Asia and India. But since 1990 the average percentage of women representation in parliament of South Asia increased continuously but always remained less than the average of Asia and the world till 2005. In 1990, women parliamentarians in South Asia was 6.3% which was almost half of the world's average (12.7%) of female representation in parliament. In 2010 South Asia's average percentage of women representation in parliament was 20.1% which was

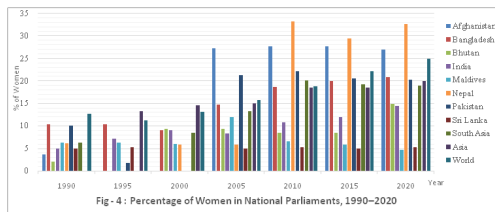
higher than the percentage of women representative of Asia and the world by 1.6% and 1.3%, respectively. But from 2015 onwards, the average percentage of South Asia's women representation in parliament declined and reached 19% on 1st Jan 2020. Whereas since 1990, an increasing trend of the average percentage of female representation in parliament of Asia and the world have been noticed and reached 20% and 24.9% respectively in 2020.(Fig -3)



Since 1990 among South Asian countries, the percentage of women representation in parliament of Afghanistan has increased by 8 times and become around 27.3% in 2005. The same trend has been continued till now because of adopting 27% reservation for women in Parliament. Since 1990, the percentage of women representation in parliament of Sri Lanka has always been in single-digit till 2020. In 2005 the Maldives had 12% women representation in the lower house of parliament. It has been maintained an average of 5% to 6% women representation in the lower house of parliament from 1990 to 2020. On 1st Jan 2020, Sri Lanka and the Maldives have less than 10% of women representation of total seats in parliament whereas Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan have more women represented in

parliament (in %) than South Asia or Asia’s average. Nepal has almost 1/3rd representation of women in parliament in the last 10 years. Article 84(8) of Nepal ensures 33% reservation of parliamentary seats for women. (Fig-3)

From 1990 to now, the highest increase in women representation in parliament was noticed in Afghanistan. But in 2020, the percentage of women representation in the lower house of parliament in South Asia is less than Asia and the world average. But in 2010 the percentage of female representation in South Asia was higher than that of Asia and the world average. Since 1990 in India, the percentage of women representation in parliament has increased by around 3 times.



Among South Asian nations, Nepal is the only country where the women population has always been around equal or more than 50% of the total population in the last 30 years. In fact, in 2018 Nepal had 1197 female per 1000 male. Since 2010 the percentage of women representation in the national

parliament of Nepal has been much higher than the average of South Asia, Asia and the world (Fig-4).

Women in Ministerial Positions in South Asia, 2020

It is true that in all spheres of political leadership, women are severely underrepresented or in other words, it can be said that men are greatly trying to outnumber women in every sphere. Between 1972-75 there were 13 women ministers in the Union Govt. of India, of whom one became Prime Minister and one attained cabinet rank (Katzenstein, 1981).

The Maldives has 7 women minister out of total minister of 27 which is around 25.9% and has the highest percentage of women ministers among South Asian countries on 1st January 2020. At the same time, Sri Lanka has the lowest percentage of female minister in parliament that is around 6.3 percent. India has 3 women minister out of 24 ministers as of Jan 2020 i.e. around 12.5 % of women minister brought India into the second position among South Asian nations. However, Nepal has consistently one-third representation of women in parliament and has a ratio of more than 50% of females in total population but having only 10.5% women minister who is far below the Maldives.

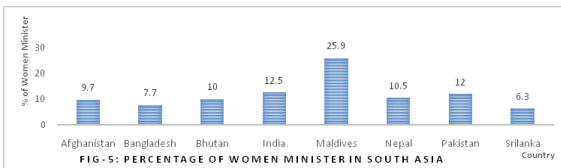
Table 4 Women in Ministerial Position in South Asian Countries

Country	Women Minister	Total Minister	% of women Minister	Rank in South Asia	Rank in World
Afghanistan	3	31	9.7	6	151
Bangladesh	2	26	7.7	7	159
Bhutan	1	10	10	5	148
India	3	24	12.5	2	134
Maldives	7	27	25.9	1	62
Nepal	2	19	10.5	4	146
Pakistan	3	25	12	3	136
Sri Lanka	1	16	6.3	8	170

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) data for single and lower houses (as of 1st Jan’2020)

It reflects although the quota system has increased the representation of women in the parliament of Nepal, women are being deprived of getting the opportunity to become a minister in Nepal. The percentage of women minister in Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh are 12.5%, 9.75% and

7%, respectively. For the percentage of women in a ministerial position, the Rank of Maldives and India are 62 and 134 respectively in the world, whereas Sri Lanka holds 170 ranks in the world in terms of percentage of women minister.



Women Representation in the Lower House of Parliament: The Indian Perspective

In South Asia, the representation of women in parliament is accorded a low status. There could be various reasons. In countries like India, a few are set up like Parliament, Constituent Assembly of each state and local bodies. Reservation of 1/3rd seats for women was introduced to local bodies by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional amendment in the year 1993 and since then few women do get involved in politics of grass root level. Still, without reservation in parliament, it becomes difficult to move up from regional politics to state or central politics.

Women generally participate in politics of grass root level along with performing all the domestic responsibilities. So these dual tasks hinder women from shining in politics. Gaining experience is necessary to remain in politics. In 2014, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development surveyed the developing and underdeveloped nations of South East Asia. Its report revealed that on average, a woman gives 5.51 hours to her family and husband, whereas in western countries, this average was 3.44 hours in France, 3.43 hours in Canada and 3.23 hours in Sweden. So the role of women in the private sphere hinders participation in the public sphere and gaining experience like men. Although women of the middle class or above middle class may have the greater opportunity because of their economic resources and employment, education, confidence than the poorer women who always remain busy in day to day activity.

Nowadays, in most developing countries for moving towards state or national politics, an ambitious young new entrant woman into politics needs a political leader as a patron. For a young women politician, a patron-client relationship with a male political leader might express that the relationship extends beyond politics to a sexual relationship. The only women who succeed in politics are connected to powerful politicians or have a huge willpower that helped them achieve their goals (Jahan, 1980).

Another reason that restricts women to represented in national parliament is the thought of our patriarchal society that treats women as subservient to men. Men never like to share the same stage and work with along women. So men dominated society never allows women to prove their ability because of their old thought.

Another reason is that the failure or lack of interest of political parties to sponsor women candidates. Nowadays, it is seen that in countries like India, most of the women representatives of parliament have a connection with any national political leader or from political family, or they are renowned personalities in any other field of activity. The problem with that these women members remain in parliament as symbolic and they get influenced by men dominated parliamentarian or party members. Most of the women parliamentarian is not very much concerned to do anything for the women fraternity of the nation.

Nowadays in most the political party has their women wing to influence the women voter of the country and political party make them act as per its need. Still, these women never get the honour they deserve. That is why the representation of women always remain close to their quota in parliament and women gets deprived of becoming a minister.

Conclusion

Among South Asian nation's one thing in common is the low representation of women in parliament in comparison to the world's average. However, the region has or had the highest concentration of female governmental heads and rare distinctions of having first woman Prime Minister of Muslim Countries.

Few countries of South Asia reserves the minimum quotas (direct or indirect) for women in parliament. However, still, the percentage share of women in parliament remains close to the minimum quotas. It implies that somehow the women parliamentarian failed to encourage other women so that they may politically be empowered and can reach parliament. This can be those symbolic parliamentarians who are famous for any other activity but political party projects them to win the election easily. Due to reservation policy, it is also true that now a day's few women reach parliament but many of them act as a mouthpiece of their male counterparts.

Data reveals that very few women parliamentarian gets an opportunity to become a Minister. It has been

seen that women are always being excluded from key ministries. A quota system for women in parliament may increase dynastic politics by providing more opportunities to the wife, daughter and close women relatives of the powerful male politician to enter into the parliament in the reserved seat for women. To increase women representation in parliament the following measures can be adopted: Initially to increase the participation of women in the lower house of parliament, more constitutional reservation is essential. All-round women empowerment i.e. educational, Economic, Social, psychological, is necessary. All-round empowerment of women will serve as a tool for their capacity building. Educational empowerment will give them access to material resources. It will not only improve their status materially but also bring about increased self-esteem and self-confidence. So education is the precondition of successful political empowerment of women. Thus empowered women can play a very important role with their full potential for developing their countries in national and international spheres.

Educated women have to be motivated by their family and society so that they get interested in politics. Political parties should take the necessary steps to bring educated women into politics because only educated women can understand the technicalities of work and can offer suitable suggestions/ decisions.

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