



# SOUTH ASIA PARTNERSHIP CANADA

## A Case For Affirmative Action

*A fact sheet on South Asian Women's Representation in Government*

### Introduction

Women form more than 50 per cent of the South Asian population and yet research suggests that women's participation in the decision-making process, especially in relation to representation at the different levels of governance is significantly lower in South Asian countries such as Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This implies that not only are women being denied their rightful place in a democratic polity, but also their voices remain unheard and their special needs overlooked for the most part within these societies.

A key aim of good governance is the promotion of people's participation in decision-making. This includes the participation of women in governance at all levels. Gender mainstreaming is necessary to create a governing body and state that is sensitive to pressing issues like gender injustice and inequality amongst other things. This is an integral part of developing a healthy society.

Following is an overview of the current situation and recommendations based on research and analysis conducted by the South Asia Partnership (SAP) International.

### Deterrents to women's participation in politics in South Asia

- Social and cultural norms – in most part these are male dominated societies where women have subordinate roles
- Inferior economic status - in most cases women depend on men on financial matters
- Election violence, assault on character/reputation (slander/rumours)
- Low literacy rates and educational levels, unequal access to education
- Low health indices, including high maternal and infant mortality
- Difficulty obtaining nomination – preference given by parties to nominate men
- Religious norms disabling women to break away from traditional roles
- Lack of encouragement from women already in politics

“It is a woman who can get close to a community. It is only to another woman that other women will come and talk of their problems. They will never talk so freely with a man nor expect solutions from a man. It is the woman who can enter another's kitchen. Women are generally more patient, empathetic, understanding and giving than men.” - Mrs. Jayothi A. L. D., an elected local women councilor from Sri Lanka.

### Reservations/quotas for women in local government and their impact

#### *Bangladesh*

- Provisions were made for reserved seats in national parliament but this provision ceased since April 1, 2001.

**Impact:** Women's representation dropped from 11.2 percent in 1996 to 2 percent in October 2001

#### *India*

- 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment passed in 1992 provided for 1/3 representation of women in the three tiers of local government and 1/3 of their chairpersons to be women.

**Impact:** A million women are members of these institutions in each of the two elections held since the early 1990s; an estimated 6 million women have been positively impacted by this legislation

### *Nepal*

- Local Government Act provides for one-woman representative in each of the nine ward committees of the Village Development Committee and one-woman representative in the District Development Committee.

**Impact:** Women are ensured at least a minimum level of representation; however, local government is nearly defunct as of now, partly as a result of the Maoist insurrection there.

### *Pakistan*

- Provision for reserved seats for women in the National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies (expired in 1988 and reintroduced in 2002).

**Impact:** Re-introduction showed marked increase in women's representation

### *Sri Lanka*

- Quotas/reserved seats for women do not operate in Sri Lanka at any level of governance.

### Some positive changes:

- Bangladesh has seen an enhancement of women's political credibility among voters.
- Participation in Indian local politics has enhanced the elected women's self respect and independent thinking.
- Nepal has witnessed a greater awareness of women's fundamental rights.
- Pakistan has a fairly active participation of women in political debates.

### Conclusion

- There still exists a low level of representation of women in South Asian governance at all levels.
- More affirmative actions are needed to enhance quality and quantum of women's participation.
- Reform is required within the larger societal context – gender bias and gender discrimination need to be eliminated from society, so women can take their rightful place in society as a whole, and consequently politics.

South Asian women in politics (or interested in politics) remain victims of inequality, suppression and exploitation, as is the case with many other countries in the world. Women's political participation is an essential element towards empowering women. Economic and social empowerment of women cannot be sustained unless women are active participants in the decision making process at all levels of the State. Women's participation in politics is essential to enable them to act upon their visions of a better society and to make meaningful contributions to national and societal development.

Despite various reformative measures adopted by some South Asian countries, there hasn't been a significant improvement in this situation over the years. Following are some recommendations in to improve women's participation in governance in the region.

She has organized training for women to take up income generating activities. The success of the savings group she initiated encouraged her to expand this work. She believes that saving, credit and income generation programs should be initiated for women. Self-reliance will help increase their confidence. (Excerpt from a case study of Dhan Maya Ojaha, an elected local women councilor from Nepal.)

## Recommendations:

### Short term

- Policy makers should be made aware about the lack of women representation in politics. Women's activist groups, NGOs and civil society groups should (through media and otherwise) persuade policy makers for implementing and increasing reserved seats/quotas.
- More cabinet portfolios need to be provided for women representatives who can influence policy decisions of the government. They should be made responsible for important ministries and issues like economic planning and social legislation.
- Awareness and training programs need to be implemented to create awareness regarding gender and human rights, electoral processes, violence against women and responsibilities of women legislators.
- Women's groups and organizations need to forge linkages to provide the necessary support systems for elected women and potential women leaders within these societies.
- Civil society groups need to put pressure on political parties to provide adequate party tickets to women.

### Long term

- An attitudinal change is needed to eliminate the acceptance of gender discrimination and low participation of women in important matters in South Asian societies and politics. Awareness of women's rights and contribution needs to be brought about by long-term educational processes in the forms of schools, workshops and seminars.
- Compulsory education needs to be implemented for girl children to end the unequal access to education. Special education programs need to be directed specifically towards women.
- Current discriminatory legislation against women need to be reviewed and abolished.
- Seats need to be reserved and quotas established not only at the local level, but at all levels of governance.
- Institutional arrangements such as Ministries for Women's Affairs, Women's Bureaus and National Committees/Councils for Women need to be established to provide the necessary support systems backed by the government.

*Compiled by Indrani Ray-Ghosal, based on "Reviving Democracy: The Emerging Role of Women in Decision Making, A Study of Women's Participation in Governance in South Asia," South Asia Partnership International.*