

Panel: South Asian Women Parliamentarians for the Rights of Women

Despite international declarations and ongoing commitments, women still enjoy less rights and opportunities as compared to men and are under-represented in the political sphere worldwide. In South Asian countries in particular, societies are dominated by patriarchal structures, hampering women's participation in political processes.

The inclusion of women in politics, not only brings hope for the protection of women rights and the introduction of gender-responsive and balanced policy-making, but is closely linked to questions pertaining the quality of democracy and its decision making process.

In some South Asian countries, gender quotas have been an accepted, employed tool for women's political mainstreaming, resulting in a considerable increase in the number of women representatives in parliaments across the region. However, quotas remain a contested issue due to their design and impacts. Although it is encouraging to see the relative increase of women parliamentarians, the numbers vary significantly from case to case among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member states, depending on the design and employment of quota provisions. Women in national parliaments in the SAARC region are as follows:

Table 1: Female Representation in SA Parliaments (Lower or single House)

Countries	Female Representation %
Afghanistan	27.7
Bangladesh	20.0
Bhutan	8.5
India	12.0
Maldives	5.9
Nepal	29.5
Pakistan	20.6
Sri Lanka	4.9

Source: IPU (2015).

However, this quantitative increase also does not spell out the quality of the representation in terms of whether they are able to contribute meaningfully, make their way to the first tiers, or whether their voice has been muted or styled by the political party narrative or if they are in the frontline of decision making. These concerns are not restricted to one country, but to the whole of South Asia and there are various lessons to be learnt from across the border. Some of the other questions that need to be raised are as follows:

- Does the quantitative increase in women's political participation lead to substantive political empowerment of women and reflection of women interests in policy making?
- Are electoral modalities and regulations, such as quota provisions an efficient tool to reach gender equality and improve the situation of women in South Asia?

- What are the possibilities and issues for women parliamentarians in the SAARC region to connect and collaborate across borders for common causes? The Panel:

While examining the challenges confronted by women in politics, SDPI initiated a Council for Women Parliamentarians (CWP). Through this forum, SDPI engages in regularly sharing research for supporting women parliamentarians in formulating informed policies and drafting and moving forward legislation/bills. This time SDPI would like to take this initiative to South Asia to consolidate the effort.

The panel invites members of the CWP and women parliamentarians from each country within South Asia to present and discuss the lacunas and challenges in addressing women's interests and present a roadmap for women's inclusion in the political processes.

References:

IPU 2015, 'Women in National Parliaments', Inter-Parliamentary Union, 1 September, <<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>>, accessed 21 October 2015.

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