

MONEY, MUSCLE AND MISOGYNY

A Comparative Study on Women's Political Representation in South Asia

“For me, a better democracy is a democracy where women do not only have the right to vote and to elect but to be elected.” - Michele Bachelet

The world [“cannot afford” such few women in power](#), says the data presented in the 2020 edition of the IPU-UN Women map of Women in Politics. This report by NETRI Foundation is an attempt to blare the horns and highlight some important lessons for the South Asian countries in terms of women's representation in politics. Through this endeavor, we have created an overview of women in politics as well as women in ministerial positions across the eight South Asian countries. The report will detail the barriers they face and the respective laws and policies in place to address gender-gaps in politics. A detailed analysis of the efficacy of these laws/frameworks/policies which have worked and what still remains unreformed will be further covered. Most importantly, the objective of the report is to build a repository of knowledge which can be shared across borders, identify areas of immediate attention and intervention and to propose practicable initiatives to improve the same.

OVERVIEW OF THE REPORT

In this journey of understanding the various dynamics of women in politics in South Asia, we found three major common barriers that make their political participation and representation very challenging.

These barriers are:

- ❖ Manifestation of violence in different forms including harassment, intimidation, physical harm or coercion, threats, and financial pressures. These may be committed in the home or other private spaces, or in public spaces. These acts may be directed at women in any of their roles as electoral stakeholders (e.g. voters, media, political actors, state actors, community leaders, or electoral officials)¹. It is relevant to note that although men in politics also face violence, the motives and the impact of violence against women in politics are different because apart from being an apparent device of inequality, it is used to maintain the subordinate position of women in society and shun them away from public decision making spaces.
- ❖ Patriarchal mindset, gender stereotyping and different forms of cultural barriers affect representation of women in politics. Women's status in electoral politics and governance is far below the desired representative levels, as it is viewed as the

¹ IFES. “VAWIE: A Framework for Assessment, Monitoring, and Response” 2017

playground of men, with not only few women struggling to enter Parliament. Under the canopy of patriarchy, women face a myriad of problems including but not limited to backlash from family members, political parties ostracizing women candidates, character assault, harassing women on the basis of their clothing choices, etc.

- ❖ Elections across South Asia are increasingly expensive and fiercely competitive. It not only impacts effective candidature but also implies that the ability to raise/spend extraneously high amounts of funds becomes the main criteria of success. The current climate of flawed electoral campaign mechanisms affects women in politics disproportionately because it plays heavily on the existing socio-economic divide, creating insurmountable financial barriers. Access to campaign finance for women is difficult for women for multiple reasons. The first is that political parties are more reluctant to support female candidates than male candidates, as the latter have a better chance of being elected in a patriarchal society. Secondly, female candidates who run as independents have to fund their own campaigns. If the woman is from an affluent political family which actively supports her candidature, it is easier but unfortunately that isn't the case most of the time. Third, inheritance of property and associated rights are unfavorable towards women. In turn, women are unable to accumulate or spend money as per their choice. The gatekeepers of politics in the end become political parties² not only because they can distribute campaign funds, but because they control the nomination process.

NETRI Foundation's report has addressed these barriers in a much more nuanced manner by discussing existing legislations/ enabling mechanisms in place, throwing light on the gaps and concluding by giving unique recommendations for all the eight South Asian Countries as well as for South Asia as a whole.

In our pursuit to make this research more insightful and comprehensive, we have decided to bring in voices from across the nations that constitute South Asia- leaders, scholars and practitioners working at the intersection of gender and politics.

The South Asia Dialogue is one such initiative towards making this a more holistic and collaborative effort.

² Gender and Politics: The State of the Discipline edited by Jane H. Bayes