

Paper Presented on Panelist on Asia Pacific Regional Lawyers
Conference on “Ensuring Equality in Political Participation and
Decision making in Asia Pacific Region”

***Higher the participation of women in politics, greater their stand in ensuring
pro-people and women friendly policies***

Background:

Political and economic transformation notwithstanding, women's presence in politics in the Asia Pacific region has remained abysmally low and drifting mostly downward. As gender discrimination has a strong cultural bearing in the region, positioning of women's political equality has not yet been central to these transitions. The socio-political structural complexities have contributed to the shrinking of political space for women. Despite advocacy by international organizations, women's representation in politics in the region has not witnessed the desired result and progress. At the same time, the international human rights instruments and bodies are increasingly promoting women's rightful share in the political space including in local governments believing that this can have a significant impact on deepening of democracy, inclusive development and lasting peace. For democratic progress, women's participation in the political system needs to be enhanced. The factors that hamper women's participation in politics are unique to Asia Pacific and vary with the level of socio-economic development, culture and political system. We find that political, socioeconomic, and cultural factors are each important. Specifically, electoral system structure, the timing of women's suffrage, the share of women in professional occupations, and cultural attitudes toward the role of women in politics each play a role in accounting for variations in the degree of gender inequality in political representation around the world.

Politics always relates with power, however the various factors governing the sphere of women's lives are contributing to make them powerless in society, specifically, the ever-pervasive patriarchal norms and values, neo-liberal frame of the development, fundamentalism, consumerism and the transitional effect of the current globalization.

Challenges

Some common challenges for efficient participation of women in politics in the Region

- Patriarchal structures and gender biased societal attitudes that permeate political life;
- male dominated institutional frame
- Lack of party support;
- Limited social and financial support for women candidates;
- Limited access to political networks;
- Lack of minimum and less access and control over resources;
- Lack of contact and cooperation with other public organizations such as business groups, civil society organizations, women's organizations and parliamentarians; the nature of the electoral system which may not be favorable to women candidates.

Socio-Economic Factors

Political inequality will be affected via nation's level of economic development. The wealthier the country the less politics may be dominated by concern of economic growth and well-being, and the more willing parties and voters may be to allow other considerations, including gender equality to play a role in selecting political representatives.

Women's political opportunities are also likely to depend in part upon their labor force activity. Women who work outside the home tend to participate more actively in politics. A work career may result in enhanced confidence and independence, and therefore in a greater sense of political efficacy. Jobs can provide funds to help launch political campaigns; they can yield political contacts; and they may offer an organizational basis for political activity through business groups and unions. Higher rate of female labor force participation may lead a larger number of motivated and well-connected female candidates willing to stand for office and to hire rates of female voting.

However, it is not women's work activity in general that is most likely to improve their opportunities in the political sphere, but rather their movement into certain types of occupations. Professionals are more likely to be well-educated, practiced in public speaking, and familiar with the political system and the law. Researches have shown that lawyers, educators, journalists, and

business professionals tend to be heavily overrepresented in parliaments compared with their numbers in the general population. Thus, the greater of women in professional occupations therefore, the larger we should expect women's share to be among those elected to parliament.

Though, women's political participation does not necessarily increase at the same pace as economic development. But women's economic participation is a necessary (it brings resources, access to public networks and know-how) albeit not sufficient precondition for increasing women's political participation

Cultural Factors

Social and Cultural Prejudice Leadership is still predominantly considered a male attribute. In Asia Pacific, because of gender discrimination, women have lesser access to education, health care, wealth, mobility and other forms of social capital. Traditionally the concept of family headship is male and women are subordinate. This influences their community and public roles and position as well. Women's position at home and in society is the main hurdle to their political participation. Cultural, customary and religious discourses are frequently used to moralize that the 'rightful' place of women is NOT in politics. In all sub-regions there is strong resistance to women's participation in public life evidenced in the formal statements of leaders and politicians and in the mentalities of the broader societies.

Political parties especially in unstable regimes across Asia-Pacific are often family-run political enterprises that enable elite women's participation but serve as major barriers to non-elite women's political participation.

Violence against 'political' women speaking up in public, defending human rights or seeking political office is very common, especially in conflict-affected countries/regions, across Asia and the Pacific and strongly dissuades women from participating in public life let alone seeking political office.

Political Factors

Quotas and Reservations: Gender quotas and reservations have significantly improved women's political representation at national and local levels. Results are notable in Mongolia, Nepal, Timor-Leste, Afghanistan, New Caledonia and the non-independent territories of French Polynesia. Political and post-conflict transitions provide special opportunities to institutionalize quotas. The parity principle avoids the use of quotas and reservations to limit women's representation rather than to achieve equal representation. High-level women and men may undermine gender quotas in political debates. For gender quotas to be successfully adopted, women's movements must be consolidated and supported to get behind them. A vivid reference can be taken from the recent experience of Nepal's achievement of constitutional guarantee of 33% reservation.

Electoral system: Electoral systems have considerable impact on the representation of women. For instance, globally women's political representation averages 22.6% in proportional electoral systems compared with 18.1% in plurality-majority systems (2012, SSRIC Conflict Prevention and Peace Forum). First, in proportional systems, parties are encouraged to nominate women on the basis that inclusive party lists will broaden and increase their electoral appeal. Thus, proportional systems allow for gender quotas for the number of women and men candidates on the party list. Second, in majority or 'plurality' electoral systems gender quotas can be achieved internally within parties as a certain percentage of the total number of candidates running for office. Third, any political/electoral system may designate reserved parliamentary seats for women or any other traditionally under-represented group that all parties can compete. Thus, women's mobilization about electoral systems and politics through political parties, civil society and other form of organizations should be focused on building alternative pathways for women's political representation.

Other political factors: There are unseen factors in power politics that play adverse role in undermining the position of women in politics. When power cash and stereotypes advertising determine the result of elections, the marginalized hardly get the chance to win elections. That's where democracy severely constrained by elite dominants where people's participation is not in center.

Way Forward

- Comparable and desegregated data must be collected and monitored in Women's Census of political participation at different levels (local/village, provincial/state, national) and in different jurisdictions — legislature, executive, judiciary, bureaucracy, and opinion-leading institutions such as universities and think-tanks.
- Gender quota lessons from transitional states should be leveraged in established political systems and affirmative actions should be supported across jurisdictions at local, national, and regional levels. Constitutional provisions that guarantee women's participation should be supported.
- Electoral mechanisms that are known to increase women's representation in Asia-Pacific should be supported, especially proportional representation systems with closed ("zippered") lists, which alternate the names of male and female candidates, should be advocated for at the regional level.
- Special program to enhance the capacity of the candidates who are brought from the quota system and reservations in order to ensure their qualitative participation in politics.
- Focus on capacitating Women to make these as their personal strategy in politics: 1) Making contact with people, 2) utilizing her knowledge and experiences, 3) Networking, 4) Utilizing opportunities, 5) Provide alternative plans and programs, 6) Women's caucus and 7) realization of person in politics.
- Active measures must be undertaken to change societal expectations of women and to assist non-elite women's pathways to political participation through political parties, trade unions, religious, media and civil society organizations.
- Political parties and civil society organizations need internal democratic reform to promote women's representation given women's lesser access than men to economic resources and to political networks.
- Women's civil society advocacy should be strongly supported by international actors to ensure that women's political participation is accepted and encouraged from the grassroots by ordinary women.
- Anti-women in politics discourses should be directly challenged and states held to account under international law and by peer states and civil society actors drawing on CEDAW and the UN Security Council Resolution 1325, which mandates women's participation in peace and political decision-making.

- States should engage in structural reform of the police/security sector and the judiciary to protect women's public access, security, and political participation, and to prevent violence directed against political women.

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