



WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS IN INDIA AND ITS NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES: A COMPARATIVE CONTEMPORARY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

Women's political participation is a crucial indicator of democratic development and inclusive governance. Despite constituting nearly half of the population in most countries, women remain underrepresented in legislative institutions across the world. South Asia presents an interesting case where constitutional commitments to equality coexist with significant gender disparities in political representation. This study examines women's participation in the parliamentary processes of India and its neighbouring countries, namely Bangladesh, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, and the Maldives. The paper analyzes contemporary trends,



constitutional provisions, reservation mechanisms, electoral systems, and socio-political challenges affecting women's representation. The study finds that countries adopting quota systems and affirmative action policies have generally achieved higher levels of women's parliamentary representation. However, substantive participation remains constrained by patriarchal social structures, political party practices, and economic barriers. The research concludes that legal reforms, political commitment, and social transformation are essential for strengthening women's role in parliamentary democracy.

KEYWORDS: *Women, Parliament, Political Participation, Gender Equality, South Asia, Representation, Democracy.*

INTRODUCTION:

Women's participation in political decision-making is a fundamental requirement for democratic governance. The inclusion of women in legislative institutions ensures diverse perspectives, promotes social justice, and contributes to balanced policymaking. The United Nations and various international organizations have consistently emphasized the importance of women's representation in political institutions as part of sustainable development and gender equality.

South Asia has witnessed significant changes in women's political participation over the past few decades. Several countries in the region have produced female heads of government and state, yet parliamentary representation remains uneven. India, the world's largest democracy, has made progress in increasing women's representation, but the proportion of women in Parliament remains lower than desired. Similar patterns can be observed in neighbouring countries, where constitutional guarantees coexist with persistent structural barriers.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of women's participation in parliamentary processes in India and neighbouring South Asian countries, examining both achievements and continuing challenges.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine the status of women's participation in parliamentary institutions in India and neighbouring countries.
2. To compare constitutional and legal provisions promoting women's representation.
3. To analyse factors affecting women's participation in parliamentary politics.
4. To identify best practices and policy recommendations for enhancing gender-inclusive governance.

METHODOLOGY:

The study is based on secondary sources, including parliamentary reports, government publications, election commission data, academic journals, reports of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and United Nations documents. A comparative analytical approach has been adopted to evaluate women's parliamentary participation across selected South Asian countries.

Conceptual Framework: Women's Political Participation

Political participation refers to the involvement of citizens in activities related to governance and decision-making. Women's political participation encompasses voting, contesting elections, membership in political parties, legislative representation, and leadership in public institutions. Scholars argue that descriptive representation (numerical presence of women) and substantive representation (ability to influence policy outcomes) are both essential for genuine gender equality. Increased representation of women in legislatures has been associated with greater attention to issues such as education, health, social welfare, and gender justice.

Women's Participation in India's Parliamentary Process

India granted universal adult franchise immediately after independence, ensuring equal voting rights for women and men. Despite this progressive beginning, women's representation in Parliament has remained relatively low. Women currently constitute a modest share of members in both houses of Parliament. Although there have been gradual improvement over successive elections, the proportion remains significantly below parity. Studies indicate that women represent only a small percentage of legislators across Parliament and state assemblies. A significant development occurred with the passage of the **Nari Shakti Vandan Adhi Niyam (Women's Reservation Act), 2023**, which seeks to reserve one-third of seats in the Lok Sabha and State Legislative Assemblies for women. The legislation represents a major milestone in India's democratic evolution and is expected to substantially improve women's political representation once fully implemented. (The Times of India)

Key Challenges in India

1. Patriarchal social attitudes.
2. Limited access to financial resources.
3. Political party reluctance to nominate female candidates.
4. Electoral violence and intimidation.
5. Balancing domestic and political responsibilities.

Despite these barriers, women leaders have increasingly contributed to parliamentary debates, committee work, policymaking, and governance reforms.

WOMEN'S PARLIAMENTARY PARTICIPATION IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES

Bangladesh: Bangladesh has demonstrated notable progress in women's political representation. The Constitution provides reserved seats for women in Parliament, in addition to opportunities for direct election. The country has also witnessed female leadership at the highest political level for extended periods. The reserved-seat mechanism has helped increase numerical representation, although concerns remain regarding the extent of independent political influence exercised by women elected through quotas.

Pakistan: Pakistan has adopted a quota-based system that reserves seats for women in the National Assembly and provincial legislatures. These constitutional provisions have significantly improved women's parliamentary presence. Women parliamentarians in Pakistan have played important roles in advancing legislation concerning education, health, domestic violence, and gender rights. Nevertheless, cultural conservatism and party-controlled nomination processes continue to limit broader participation.

Nepal: Nepal is often cited as one of the most successful examples of gender-inclusive constitutional design in South Asia. Following democratic reforms and constitutional restructuring, provisions were introduced to ensure substantial representation of women in legislative institutions. As a result, Nepal has achieved one of the highest levels of women's parliamentary participation in the region. The proportional representation electoral system has further facilitated women's entry into politics.

Sri Lanka: Despite high literacy rates and social development indicators, Sri Lanka has historically exhibited low levels of female parliamentary representation. The absence of strong quota mechanisms at the national level has contributed to slow progress.

Although Sri Lanka produced the world's first female Prime Minister, women remain underrepresented in parliamentary institutions. Political parties continue to nominate relatively few female candidates.

Bhutan: Bhutan's democratic transition has created new opportunities for women's participation. However, female representation in Parliament remains comparatively limited. Social norms, educational disparities, and restricted political experience have affected women's electoral success. The government and civil society organizations have increasingly promoted leadership training and political awareness programs for women.

Maldives: The Maldives has made gradual progress in women's political participation. Electoral reforms and awareness campaigns have encouraged greater involvement of women in governance. Nevertheless, parliamentary representation remains relatively low due to socio-cultural and institutional barriers.

TABLE 1: COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Country	Major Mechanism for Women's Representation	Relative Performance
India	Constitutional reservation (2023 Act) and electoral participation	Moderate
Bangladesh	Reserved parliamentary seats	Moderate to High
Pakistan	Reserved seats and constitutional quotas	Moderate to High
Nepal	Constitutional guarantees and proportional representation	High
Sri Lanka	Limited quota provisions	Low
Bhutan	Emerging democratic participation	Moderate
Maldives	Electoral reforms and awareness measures	Moderate

The comparative analysis reveals that countries employing quota systems generally achieve higher levels of female representation than those relying solely on electoral competition. Nepal's constitutional framework and proportional representation model have produced particularly positive outcomes. India's recent reservation legislation has the potential to transform parliamentary representation significantly, provided its implementation is timely and effective.

Contemporary Challenges Affecting Women's Parliamentary Participation

1. Patriarchal Social Structures

Traditional gender norms continue to influence political participation throughout South Asia. Women often face resistance from families, communities, and political institutions.

2. Economic Constraints

Election campaigns require substantial financial resources. Women generally possess fewer economic resources and fundraising opportunities than male candidates.

3. Political Party Gatekeeping

Political parties function as primary gatekeepers to legislative office. Women frequently receive fewer nominations, especially in winnable constituencies.

4. Violence and Harassment

Gender-based political violence remains a major obstacle. International studies have documented widespread psychological harassment, intimidation, and discrimination against women in politics.

5. Limited Leadership Opportunities

Women often remain concentrated in lower organizational positions and face difficulties advancing to influential leadership roles within political parties.

Recent Trends and Future Prospects

Global data indicate that women's parliamentary representation continues to increase, although progress has slowed in recent years. Women held approximately 27 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide by 2025–26, demonstrating steady but gradual advancement. Several developments suggest a positive future for South Asia:

- Expansion of quota systems.
- Greater public awareness regarding gender equality.
- Increased educational attainment among women.
- Growth of women's political networks.
- Stronger international commitments to inclusive governance.

India's implementation of the Women's Reservation Act may significantly reshape parliamentary politics and serve as a model for other countries in the region.

CONCLUSION

Women's participation in parliamentary processes is essential for democratic legitimacy, social justice, and inclusive development. The comparative analysis of India and its neighbouring countries demonstrates that while significant progress has been made, substantial challenges remain. Nepal, Bangladesh, and Pakistan have benefited from affirmative-action mechanisms that enhanced women's representation. India has recently taken an important step through the Women's Reservation Act, which holds the potential to transform the country's political landscape. However, legal reforms alone cannot guarantee meaningful participation. Structural inequalities, social norms, financial barriers, and political discrimination must also be addressed. For South Asia to achieve genuine gender equality in governance, governments, political parties, civil society organizations, and citizens must work collectively to ensure that women not only enter Parliament but also actively influence policymaking and national development. The future of democratic governance in the region depends significantly on the extent to which women's voices are represented and heard in parliamentary institutions.

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