



POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN AND PATHWAYS TOWARDS WOMEN-LED DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH ASIA

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

Despite the constitution's guarantee of equal rights, women, who constitute about half of the population, do not participate significantly in political institutions and decision-making process. Women's empowerment resulted in greater family prosperity than men. In addition to being essential for equitable governance, women's political engagement offers the possibility of better and more responsive policymaking. Women in local government positions in rural areas more firmly reflect their families, castes, and classes than they do represent the gender. Legislative representation is crucial to political empowerment as it enables participation in the legislative process in addressing issues of gender equality and inclusive development. The representation of women in the national parliament is a crucial indicator of the level of gender equality in legislative politics. As of May 2022, the global average for the proportion of women in national parliaments was 26.2 percent. In all nine South Asian countries, women make up only 15 percent of national parliaments and 7 percent of ministerial positions on an average. Just 7 percent of women in South Asia belong to a political party. Against this backdrop, present paper aims at examining how women's political participation might enhance women's empowerment. It is based mainly on secondary data while a comprehensive review of relevant literature serves the foundation for this paper. The paper suggests that South Asian countries must take a multifaceted approach in order to bring about revolutionary change, bolstering quota systems with accountability measures, establishing safer political spaces free from violence and harassment, putting leadership development programs into place, and encouraging cultural changes through media and education.

Keywords: *Women's political participation, Women leadership in decision making bodies, Pathways towards empowering women.*

Introduction

It is commonly acknowledged that women's political participation is essential to inclusive government and the strengthening of democracy. Although women make up about half of the population in South Asia, which includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka, they are disproportionately under-represented in political institutions, decision-making forums, and governance processes. Women still encounter institutional, sociocultural, and structural impediments that limit their ability to effectively participate in public life, despite significant advancements over the past three decades (Nazneen & Mahmud, 2012). South Asia is a crucial region for analysing the characteristics of women's political participation because of the dichotomy of democratic expansion and enduring gender inequity. The political participation of women in South Asia is characterised by both ground-breaking successes and ingrained limitations. India and Sri Lanka were among the first emerging countries to elect women to senior political positions, including Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Indira Gandhi. There have also been female heads of state in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Nepal, suggesting symbolic advancements in leadership (Jalal, 1995). However, at the grassroots level, where patriarchal norms, limited mobility, and limited access to resources and education continue to impede women's meaningful involvement in politics, symbolic representation has not always translated into substantive representation (Kabeer, 2016). Women in South Asia are notably under-represented in national parliaments and ministerial roles, despite notable exceptions, such as female presidents of state, who often hail from political dynasties. Deeply rooted cultural beliefs about women's responsibilities, male-dominated political parties, and disdain for women's interests and concerns are some of the causes contributing to limited female political engagement. However, local governments have improved in a number of countries, and ongoing campaigns and lobbying efforts are being carried out to increase the representation of women and establish more inclusive governance. Women's involvement in decision-making helps

to improve laws, policies, institutions, services, and social norms, among other facets of society. Improving women's quality of life at all societal levels requires ensuring that their opinions are heard on choices that impact their lives, the lives of their families, and the community as a whole. Therefore, it is the duty of society to guarantee that institutions represent a diverse range of individuals from all backgrounds and that women have equal access to decision-making at all levels. The proportion of women engaging in political activities, including as attending election rallies, door-to-door campaigning, distributing election pamphlets, and raising funds for elections, has increased during the last few decades. Given that women make up roughly half of the population, the political system needs to give them the consideration and opportunity to participate in government and the political system. Since it fortifies the democratic fabric and gives the system legitimacy, citizens' active engagement in political events is essential and required in democracies. Political activists have worked to mainstream gender concerns in political institutions, which has increased women's political engagement.

Enhancing descriptive representation has been made possible by recent changes, such as gender quotas and reserved seats in local governments, which are especially notable in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, and Nepal (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). The number of women in local councils and parliaments has grown dramatically as a result of these institutional reforms, which have also created chances for political socialisation, capacity building, and leadership development. However, issues with tokenism, elite capture, gendered political violence, women's autonomy in decision-making, and the unequal application of gender-sensitive policies still exist (Bari, 2010). Furthermore, in the varied sociopolitical terrain of South Asia, women's experiences are shaped differently by intersectional elements like caste, class, ethnicity, religion, and rural-urban differences. For example, various levels of marginalisation further limit the political agency of minority women in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, Madhesi women in Nepal, and Dalit women in India (Krook & Restrepo Sanín, 2016). A detailed, multi-scale examination of the ways in which gender interacts with other identity markers to influence political opportunities and limitations is necessary to comprehend these intricacies.

Women's political empowerment acts as a stimulant for political and social development, which speeds up social transformation and societal advancement. Stated differently, women's political empowerment is a weapon for women's political empowerment. In terms of legal standing, the constitutions of every nation affirm that everyone has the same fundamental rights and that discrimination on the basis of gender or religion is unacceptable. Nonetheless, prejudice is still practiced by those in charge of passing laws and regulations. It has been argued that minority groups and various social strata must have their own representatives in order to be adequately represented (Michael et al., 1994). Women are disproportionately under-represented in high-ranking jobs in South Asia, particularly in countries where gender participation in legislatures is not required. "The participation of members of society in the decision-making process of the system" is how Almond and Powell define "political participation" (Almond & Powell, 1975). "Political involvement" is defined by McClosky (Dowse, 1972). In their definition, Verba and Nie use the term "those private citizen activities that more or less explicitly aim at influencing the choice of governmental people and the acts they take" (Verba & Nie, 1972). The element of the people's will or intention is one of the most challenging problems to be solved in order to define political engagement. Ultimately, engaging in politics is taking action that involves attempting to alter the authoritative distribution of values in a community. Although the proportion of female candidates to male candidates in parliamentary elections has increased over time, it remains low.

Women's participation faces both obstacles and new opportunities in the current political environment, which is marked by growing populism, digital activism, shifting party structures, and more civil-society engagement. Social media has become a crucial instrument for advocacy, voice, and mobilisation, but it has also made people more vulnerable to gendered disinformation campaigns and online harassment (UN Women, 2020). In light of this, research on women's political engagement in South Asia is essential for evaluating the democratic health of the area as well as for developing gender-responsive policy frameworks that support sustainable development and inclusive governance. Therefore, by looking at historical contexts, institutional structures, socio-cultural norms, and emerging trends, this paper aims to analyse the patterns, determinants, and effects of women's political participation in South Asia. The report emphasises the need for revolutionary gender-sensitive political reforms that go beyond numerical representation to guarantee substantive empowerment, leadership, and voice for women throughout the area through a review of regional experiences, comparative insights, and theme analysis.

Political Empowerment of Women

The concept of women empowerment is new and multifaceted, and social scientists worldwide are always defining, redefining, characterising, and illustrating it. According to Malhotra, Schuler, and Boender (2002), the idea is generally associated with the principles of gender equality and non-discrimination in all spheres of life. It is commonly linked to the structural change of society through labour reforms, equitable access to resources, and the provision of economic, educational, and decision-making rights. Although women's empowerment has been overlooked for generations, it is now appropriately acknowledged as one of the most important policy objectives. It is essential for the advancement and socioeconomic development of the entire society, not only for the cause of women. When compared to the other eight South Asian nations (Pakistan, India, Afghanistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh), Bhutan, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka rank well in terms of socioeconomic development. According to statistics from the Human Development Index (HDI), women's empowerment was inadequate in Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan (Dutta, 2014). Empowering women results in dynamic shifts in the decision-making process, which directly and significantly affect the advancement of society (Steffen, 2014). Despite their recent increased activity, women are still under-represented in governmental power structures relative to their population ratio (Somani, 2012). Three dimensions—social, economic, and political—are most frequently examined to assess the degree of women's empowerment (Aregbesola, 20116;

Dutta, 2014; Wiklander, 2010). Even in western industrialised democracies, unequal women's political engagement persisted. Despite their assertions of gender equality, women only make up 24.0 percent of national legislature membership worldwide (IPU, 2018), despite making up 50.0 percent of the global population. The percentage of women who participate in politics is higher in some regions of the world than in others. Women have occupied the highest political positions of president and premier in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka on multiple occasions.

Participation of Women in Politics

Women's presence in national parliaments has significantly increased during the last 25 years worldwide. Women accounted for just 11.3 percent of parliamentary seats worldwide in 1995; by 2015, that number had nearly doubled to 22.1 percent, indicating a slow but significant change towards gender-inclusive government (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015). Additionally, there are now more female legislative presiding officers. According to recent data, women have steadily improved their access to high legislative leadership posts, holding 57 of the 278 presiding officer positions in 195 national parliaments or parliamentary chambers (IPU, 2023). The implementation of gender quotas has been a significant factor in this advancement. To encourage greater gender parity in political representation, 81 nations currently use legislative quotas of some kind, such as candidate quotas, reserved seats, or voluntary party quotas (Krook, 2009; IPU, 2023). Notwithstanding these developments, gender parity is still a long way off, and institutional injustices still prevent women from fully engaging in politics.

The extent of these differences is demonstrated by international evaluations of women's empowerment. According to the Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) 2023, systemic hurdles ingrained in social, economic, and political institutions prevent women globally from reaching only 60 percent of their full potential (UNDP & UN Women, 2023). Less than 1 percent of women and girls reside in nations that satisfy high standards for gender parity and empowerment, and none of the 114 countries evaluated achieved full empowerment for women. These results highlight the necessity for governments to enact laws guaranteeing fair access to resources like social protection, healthcare, education, property rights, inheritance, and financial services (Agarwal, 1994; Narayan, 2021).

Women's political participation and better developmental results are strongly correlated, according to empirical data. Research indicates that greater representation of women in political institutions results in increased access to public goods like roads, drinking water, sanitation, and healthcare, as well as increased female labour force participation and employment opportunities in the public sector (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004; Beaman et al., 2009). This data supports the more general claim that more inclusive and socially responsive government results from women in political leadership roles. Women's involvement in governance in rural India involves complex intersections of caste, class, kinship, and communal standards in addition to gender identity. Women's roles are still shaped by patriarchal norms, which frequently restrict their independence and ability to make decisions in the home and in politics (Kandiyoti, 1988; Jeffrey & Jeffrey, 1995). Furthermore, research indicates that states with higher female voter turnout also typically have stronger women's empowerment indicators, indicating that political participation could be a means of bringing about more significant social change (Bhandari, 2020). The concept of "proxy women" lawmakers, in which elected women function under the influence or direction of male relatives, is a recurring problem in India. This inhibits women's meaningful participation in political decision-making and undercuts the intended goals of local government reforms (Rai, 2011). These limitations emphasise how crucial it is to advance women's access to political networks, leadership development, economic independence, and education in order to encourage real engagement as opposed to merely symbolic representation. According to Bhowmick (2023), encouraging meaningful and independent political participation requires empowering women via equitable opportunity, high-quality education, and economic independence. Encouraging women to fully participate in electoral processes and decision-making institutions is essential if they are to act as autonomous political agents rather than merely symbolic or proxy figures. Governments, civil society, and political institutions must remain committed to ensuring gender-equitable governance and tearing down patriarchal norms in order to accomplish.

Participation of Women in Parliament

One of the most important aspects of political empowerment is legislative representation, which permits involvement in the legislative process, executive oversight, and discussion of matters pertaining to national policy. Parliaments are places where gender equality in politics becomes apparent and quantifiable, in addition to being institutions of accountability. Consequently, a well-recognised measure of gender equality and democratic inclusivity is the percentage of women in national parliaments (Nelson & Chowdhury, 1994; Thomas & Wilcox, 2005). According to data from the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), the average percentage of women in national parliaments worldwide as of May 2022 was 26.2 percent. In terms of women's legislative presence, the Americas, Europe, and Sub-Saharan Africa outperform the global average, whereas Asia, the Pacific, and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) continue to have under-represented numbers of women (IPU, 2022). This suggests that despite more general developments worldwide, structural, cultural, and institutional hurdles to women's parliamentary involvement in Asia—including South Asia—remain in place. The picture of women's parliamentary involvement in South Asia is not entirely clear. High-profile female political leaders from the area include Indira Gandhi, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia, Benazir Bhutto, and Chandrika Kumaratunga, but their presence does not always indicate greater gender parity in legislatures (Jalal, 1995; Paxton & Hughes, 2014). India is one of the world's largest democracies, with 662.9 million female residents, but women are still disproportionately under-represented in its parliamentary institutions. Although it has grown over time, the number of women in the Lok Sabha is still insufficient. In 1952, just 22 women (5 percent) were elected to the first Lok Sabha. The 18th Lok Sabha (2024) saw 74 women (13.6 percent) in this group. Even

while this is a positive step, the number is still far from gender-balanced representation and below the global standard (Kishwar, 1996; IPU, 2023).

Crucially, women were less represented in the general elections of 2024 than they were in 2019. Just 799 (9.5 percent) of the 8,360 candidates were female, and only 74 of them were elected, compared to 78 (14.7 percent) in 2019. This implies that women's election participation and winnability have stagnated, if not regressed. The proportion of women in the 1952 Rajya Sabha was 6.9 percent (15 members). Women's representation rose to almost 13 percent by 2024, showing gradual but consistent improvement. These figures, however, are still insufficient to reach the critical mass, which is usually 30–33 percent, required to significantly affect policy results (Muni, 1979; Dahlerup, 2006). In terms of women's parliamentary representation, India is currently ranked 141st out of 193 nations (IPU, 2023). Women in India still experience ingrained discrimination, societal constraints, and political exclusion in spite of decades of democratic practice and constitutional assurances of equality (Akerkar, 1995). The representation of women in parliament varies greatly throughout South Asia. Due to strict constitutional gender quotas, Nepal stands apart with more than 33 percent of women serving in both chambers of parliament. With 50 seats set aside for women, Bangladesh continues to have 20–22 percent female MPs. Pakistan uses reserved seats to keep its representation at about 20 percent. Despite elected the first female prime minister in history in 1960, Sri Lanka's average is still low at 5–6 percent. Bhutan is represented to a considerable extent (15 percent). Maldives has varied between 4 to 6 percent. As a result, India performs worse than a number of its smaller neighbours despite its size and length of democracy.

India's parliamentary representation does not match the country's gender demographics. Party nominations, women's political agency, and public perceptions of female leadership are all still influenced by historical sexism (Kandiyoti, 1988). Another sign of a widespread pattern of gender exclusion in India is the continued under-representation of women in state legislatures. Researchers point out that women frequently find it difficult to reach the "critical mass" required to advance gender-responsive legislation or have a significant impact on parliamentary discussions (Dahlerup, 2006). As a result, gender issues continue to be on the periphery of political agendas. Actual implementation is anticipated to take several years, even though the Women's Reservation Bill (2023) was adopted and offers 33 percent reservation in the Lok Sabha and state assemblies (pending delimitation). Women's representation in parliament will remain below average for the world until then. Legal changes are necessary to empower women politically, but so are more general social obstacles that keep women from running for office on an equal basis with men, such as patriarchal party structures, gender bias, limited mobility, and a lack of funding.

The representation of women in South Asia is incredibly unequal at the subnational level. While some nations (like Bangladesh and Sri Lanka) mostly rely on local-level quotas to increase participation, others (like Pakistan, Nepal, and India) combine direct elections with reserved or quota seats. In comparison to their demographic share, women are still under-represented in state and provincial legislatures overall; social norms, party practices, and electoral systems all influence the slow progress that has been made. Each of India's 28 states and 8 union territories has its own legislature, known as the Vidhan Sabha. Historically, only a tiny number of MLAs are women (about 10–15 percent nationally; state percentages vary greatly). According to Pakistan's constitution, women are granted reserved seats in both the National Assembly and each Provincial Assembly. Parties are given these seats based on their proportional participation in party lists. This ensures that there are a minimum number of women in provincial legislatures (the number is set by the constitution). Nepal adopted a mixed electoral system with clear gender provisions following the 2015 Constitution; party lists are utilised to meet quotas, and the constitution guarantees at least 33 percent of women's representation in elected bodies. When it comes to women's inclusion by design (quota and proportionate lists), Nepal is among the top performers in South Asia.

Transforming descriptive representation into decision-making authority (committee leadership, ministries) and larger socioeconomic hurdles at the local level are challenges. Recent academic research examines how the mixed system boosted the representation of women while pointing out the disparities that still exist in leadership roles. Sri Lanka has local government organisations and intermediate-tier provincial councils. Historically low female representation in parliament and provincial councils; reforms in the 2010s brought quotas to local government (e.g., mixed electoral systems implemented for local bodies and a 25 percent quota in local councils). In contrast to the quota expectations, provincial seats continue to exhibit low female percentages. Effective decision-making roles for women at the province level are still restricted by patriarchal party structures, candidate selection, and resource limitations, despite legal amendments that boosted representation at the local level (first implemented in 2018 local elections), according to UN Women's assessments. Bangladesh employs local government levels (union parishads, upazila parishads, and city corporations) instead of state legislatures. At the local level, Bangladesh has quotas and reserved seats (e.g., a percentage of seats in union and municipal councils are reserved for women, historically 25 percent at several levels). Many women are now involved in local decision-making, particularly at the union and municipal levels, thanks to these quotas.

Women Representation in Local Governments

The local government is frequently the most accessible platform for women to enter politics as it puts politics closer to everyday life and offers chances for leadership, service delivery supervision, and political socialisation. Legislative quotas and reservations for women at the municipal level have been the main policy tool used to increase numbers throughout South Asia. Due to social norms, elite capture, a lack of capacity building, and the persistence of "proxy" relationships, these legal tools have significantly increased descriptive representation (the number of women elected) but have had mixed results in terms of substantive representation (women influencing policy and decisions). Check out the UN Women review for summaries of quota design and

global/local comparisons. At least one-third (33 percent) of seats and chairperson positions in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban local governments were reserved for women by the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments (1992); at different points in time, several states have raised this to 50 percent. Millions of women were elected to represent their villages as a result of the reservation, and numerous studies show that areas with female leaders had better access to public goods like water, roads, and sanitation, as well as some increases in women's networks, mobility, and local political activity. However, empirical research also reveals limitations in decision-making autonomy, the necessity of capacity training, and frequent proxy representation (male relatives guiding female office-holders). Current policy discussions, such as the national Women's Reservation Act (2023) for Parliament, demonstrate a persistent emphasis on women's political inclusion, but they also draw attention to implementation shortcomings.

At the union/municipal level, Bangladesh has long utilised reserved seats for women (usually one woman every three general seats, or about 25 percent); these seats have been elected indirectly or via rotation at various points in time, however the specific procedures have evolved throughout time. Women's numerical presence was increased by reserved seats, but many of them occupy reservation seats rather than general seats, and research reveals limitations that are comparable to those in other nations: scarce resources, sizable constituencies, socially imposed limitations, and concerns about substantive influence. When and how quotas result in meaningful representation is the subject of recent qualitative research. With the implementation of quotas for local elections and Nepal's post-2015 constitutional and legislative framework, women's representation at the local level was extremely high (about one-third and frequently over forty percent of local offices following the 2017 local elections). More inclusive candidate lists were obtained with the aid of feminist mobilisation and party regulations. However, elite limitations and intersectional hurdles (caste, ethnicity, and rural poverty) still exist. The successes and continued difficulties for meaningful leadership are documented by UN Women and nation studies. Women now have reserved seats in many local types of council thanks to Pakistan's 2001 devolution and local government reforms; the scope and longevity of these policies vary by province and over time. Although the number of reserved seats has grown, women's autonomous political voice is nevertheless constrained by nomination procedures, political party leadership, and enduring sexism. According to recent studies, women's substantive power is shaped by party incentives and local government structure. Through electoral reform and revisions, Sri Lanka established a 25 percent quota for women at the local government level, which was put into effect in the most recent local elections. Although this increased the proportion of female council members, sociocultural limitations and gendered party procedures prevent the full substantive impact. Journal studies and country reviews examine the effects of the mixed electoral system and quota design on results. Since 2021, women's involvement in Afghanistan's formal institutions has been significantly affected. Women's public political responsibilities have been drastically diminished by the security and rights environment.

Women Led Development

The term "women-led development" describes development processes in which women (individually or collectively) steer economic, social, or political change. Examples of such roles include those of entrepreneurs, heads of cooperatives and self-help groups (SHGs), heads of community development initiatives, or heads of non-governmental organisations and service delivery organisations. It encompasses initiatives that explicitly centre women as key agents of change as well as those that are created, managed, or predominantly led by women. Microfinance/SHGs, women's cooperatives, women entrepreneurs, women-centred NGOs, and women's political leadership are some of the pathways that have improved development results, according to evidence from South Asia. Though causal economic gains can vary by program design, evaluations show positive effects on financial inclusion and some measures of women's empowerment. In India, large-scale Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and women's collectives offer savings, credit, training, and collective bargaining power. The Grameen Bank model, which focusses on microfinance and women borrowers in Bangladesh, aims to improve women's wages, labour force participation, and societal impacts. A prime example of a women-based community network that connects microcredit, enterprise, social mobilisation, and poverty reduction is Kerala's *Kudumbashree* model. Several studies show significant increases in participants' agency, enterprise creation, and communal action. The significance of customised financing, market access, and capacity building for women-owned/led micro, small, and medium-sized businesses (MSMEs) is emphasised by UN Women and regional diagnostics. Access to cash, registration fees, market networks, and caregiving obligations are some of the obstacles. Even while women's education in South Asia has improved, there are still large gaps, with female literacy rates falling short of those of men. In contrast to the high rate of female dropouts in postsecondary education, there has been a noticeable rise in female enrolment in basic and lower secondary education throughout South Asia. Girls who fall behind in obtaining or finishing formal education are therefore frequently unable to fulfil the digital skills required by employers in the twenty-first century. According to the UNICEF Report, around 90% of professions globally involve digital components, and in poor nations, the gender gap in internet access remains at roughly 33 percent. Furthermore, the female labour force participation rate is the lowest in the world in several of the region's countries. Women's entrepreneurship has played a significant role in the creation of jobs and economic progress over the years. For women entrepreneurs in the area, however, issues including discriminatory gender social norms, a lack of sufficient economic possibilities, restricted market access, a lack of training and skills, and a lack of knowledge about rules and regulations continue to be major concerns. Their active involvement in commercial operations has been further hindered by their lack of access to a business network, ongoing unpaid domestic care job, and household duties. The psychological, social, and economic effects of women's non-participation in economic activities have also been attributed to gender inequity and gender-based violence. The percentage of women who own businesses is the lowest in South Asia, at just 18 percent compared to the global average of 34 percent in 2021 (World Bank, 2021). In this regard, the world has become more aware of the importance of women-led

development as a result of India's 2023 G20 Presidency. A world of equality, quality, and equity where every woman lives with dignity is likely to result from its emphasis on a number of factors, including inclusive access to work opportunities, involvement in leadership and decision-making roles, digital skills, financial literacy, and the care economy. India's perspective on gender equality has changed since the country's 2023 G20 leadership; it now emphasises a more dynamic model of women-led development rather than women's development. This research focusses on women's contributions to unpaid care work, informal employment, and corporate and grassroots leadership in order to comprehend the process of women-led development through women's employment and leadership. Drawing from the current frameworks in the literature, we offer a thorough framework on women-led development that places an emphasis on the development of entrepreneurship, leadership participation, and women's engagement and retention in the workforce. By changing the emphasis from "women's development" to "women-led development," propelled by the vigour and strength of Nari Shakti (women's power), India redefined the "gender-sensitive lens." The G20 Women-Led Development Agenda established the following goals: (i) education, which is a transformative route to women's empowerment; (ii) women's entrepreneurship, which benefits the economy and equity; (iii) forming a partnership to support women's leadership at all levels, including at the grassroots; and (iv) women and girls as agents of change in climate action, with digital skills supporting the aforementioned priorities (G20, 2023). A key component of India's "Viksit Bharat" by 2047 mission is the idea of women-led development. The comprehensive approach to development is highlighted by the four pillars of the Viksit Bharat mission: *Annadata* (Farmers), *Mahilayen* (Women), *Garib* (Poor), and *Yuva* (Youth). Instead of viewing women as passive recipients, it seeks to include them in economic progress. This strategy seeks to remove obstacles that prevent women from participating fully in a variety of economic sectors. Since women make up over half of the world's population, the women-led development model acknowledges this significance and concentrates on removing obstacles that prevent women from advancing (PIB, 2024). A crucial component of women-led development is leadership development. To guarantee that women can lead in the future, it is crucial to develop their leadership abilities at every stage of their lives. In order to develop abilities like critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, it is crucial to promote leadership qualities through education and mentorship programs. By providing young girls with opportunity to assume leadership roles in their schools and communities, leadership development should start in the classroom. The advancement of women is crucial to the country's progress and development, although structural obstacles such sociocultural barriers still exist.

Women have faced several social, cultural, and financial challenges throughout history. One in ten women, according to UN Women (2024), live in extreme poverty; if this trend continues, approximately 8 percent of women globally will still be living on \$2.15 per day. According to the ILO (2020–22), over 73.5 percent of women in waged work globally do not have access to social protection. According to data from the World Bank from 2021, 78 percent of men and 74 percent of women work for pay globally, and there is still a disparity between the sexes when it comes to financial services access. Furthermore, about the digital divide According to the ITU (2022), 37 percent of women globally do not use the internet, and 259 million fewer women than men have access to it. Women's engagement in all facets of development is hampered by these obstacles.

Gender empowerment has also been a top priority on the G-20 agenda since 2014. As is the case, women encounter greater obstacles than males in terms of access to good jobs and labour participation. With the exception of Argentina in 2018, there was no distinct Task Force on Women's Empowerment during the previous four G-20 Presidencies. The topic of women's empowerment was mentioned in passing by a number of task forces under various presidents that primarily addressed concerns of social cohesion, global governance, the future of welfare systems, etc. G20 nations made certain promises to address women's issues in later G-20 Declarations. However, two of the most important G-20 initiatives for advancing gender equality and entrepreneurship have been We-Fi (Women Entrepreneur Financing Initiative) and W-20 (Women 20), the engagement group of transnational networks of women's organisations, women entrepreneurs, and think-tanks. In September 2015, during a special session of the UN General Assembly, world leaders pledged their commitment to the 2030 Agenda, coinciding with the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the creation of W-20 under the Turkish Presidency. In actuality, SDG 5's gender equality is regarded as a cross-cutting issue that affects all 17 SDGs. Following each G20 Summit and Ministerial meeting, the separate nations made commitments to providing inclusive support for women's economic empowerment in a variety of communiqués and declarations. At the G20 summits, pledges to boost economies by enhancing collaboration for long-term gender equality are repeatedly reiterated.

Pathways to Women's Empowerment

Women's empowerment is a crucial tactic for achieving gender equality and fostering socioeconomic development. Additionally, there are two approaches to empower women. First, by giving women work chances; second, by promoting and assisting women's entrepreneurial endeavours. Both of these routes promote economic growth and grant women financial independence, autonomy, and decision-making authority. And having leadership skills is a common component that is necessary to succeed in various fields. A woman can develop leadership skills from an early age. Later in life, these skills can help women overcome social and institutional barriers and successfully navigate both the personal and professional spheres. Women-owned businesses boost the economy, create jobs, and encourage creativity. However, at many points in the development of entrepreneurship, women encounter a number of obstacles, including limited capital and limited access to networks. There is various gender-based differences in the fields of entrepreneurship in India. In terms of the number of female employees, the Indian service industry has a larger concentration of female entrepreneurs. Women own almost 40 percent of manufacturing companies in the unorganised sector. However, women only own 9 percent of service businesses (Shetty, 2018). Long-term empowerment requires encouraging women's entrepreneurship in addition to employment. In India, women-owned MSMEs make up 20.5 percent of all

registered MSMEs as of 2024, yet they only create 18.73% of jobs. One of the most important strategies for empowering women is employment and entrepreneurship. Opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship can foster financial independence, grant women the power to make decisions, provide social security, boost confidence, and foster personal growth. By increasing the economy's productivity, which leads to growth, women's economic engagement also fosters economic expansion. However, a number of social and economic barriers, including workplace discrimination, wage disparities, difficulty balancing work and personal obligations, limited access to professional networks and mentorship, lack of credit, etc., make it difficult for women to enter the workforce and launch their own businesses (Verick, 2014, Khan, 2022; Wadhwa and Retnakaran, 2020). Therefore, specific interventions that can help women advance in their careers and business, like mentorship programs and skill development initiatives, are required. In India, the majority of female entrepreneurs work in a few, typically less productive industry. Furthermore, women are more likely to work in the retail and service sectors; this could possibly be due to cultural norms that forbid women from entering certain professions. Therefore, focused support is essential to reducing the gender gap. Additionally, women must enhance their leadership skills in all spheres of life.

It is clear that, compared to men's participation during the same time period, the global situation regarding the employment rate of women in the services industry improved considerably in 2023. It also shows that, in practically every economy, the number of women working in the services industry has increased since 2000. In contrast to their male counterparts, women in South Asia are under-represented in the services sector. In the agricultural industry, however, women typically handle the more mundane tasks of planting and cultivating crops, while males handle the processing of the agricultural output. According to the World Bank, just 8% of Pakistani women own MSME, and 13 percent of them borrow money from formal and microfinance banks, while only 2 percent of business loans are given to SME owners (UN Women Pakistan, 2013). But without any kind of collateral, women in Bangladesh and Nepal also have difficulty getting bank loans. Digital literacy, cyber security literacy, online platform expertise, and digital financial literacy are some of the biggest obstacles that women in South Asia encounter and that hinder their ability to conduct online business successfully. Women were forced to struggle in the competitive world since they were unable to obtain traditional forms of collateral to banks, such as land ownership, owning a house or other fixed assets, and lacking family support. Obtaining bank loans to start or expand their businesses can be difficult for women due to a number of factors, including the need to submit an application and guarantor, a lot of paperwork, complex terminology, and strange bank operating hours.

Women entrepreneurs make a substantial contribution to the Indian economy (Verma, 2015). Women own the vast majority of the over three million micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises. These women-owned enterprises employ about 8 million people and account for 3.09 percent of industrial production (Trivedi and Gaur, 2015). Three categories of female entrepreneurs exist (Singh and Singh, 2022). The first group of women entrepreneurs consists of people who have professional experience and academic credentials and who successfully own and operate their own businesses; the second group consists of women who have started businesses but lack formal education or management expertise; and the third group consists of people who are numerous, earn modest salaries, and have very little formal education or training. To support their business, they need help from both the public and private sectors.

This is a comparatively small portion of the 135 million female entrepreneurs who are thought to run their own companies globally. Notably, out of the 9 million female entrepreneurs, 4 million are employed in the agricultural sector, while the remaining 5 million are in non-agricultural fields. The International Monetary Fund estimates that by granting equal opportunities in all areas of growth, India's GDP may rise by more than 20 percent, or around \$780 billion by 2025. Currently, women make up about 19 percent of the country's GDP, which is less than the 45 percent global average. Notably, out of the 9 million female entrepreneurs, 4 million are employed in the agricultural sector, while the remaining 5 million are in non-agricultural fields. The International Monetary Fund estimates that by granting equal opportunities in all areas of growth, India's GDP may rise by more than 20 percent, or around \$780 billion, by 2025.

Conclusion

In addition to regional averages for women in national parliaments remaining low, South Asia lags behind the majority of other globe regions in terms of the proportion of women in national parliaments and top public leadership roles. Statutory reservations have made significant progress locally (particularly in India), but their substantive presence in executive cabinets, senior civil service positions, judiciaries, and corporate boards is significantly weaker in many other nations. India's reserved-seat policies provide randomised and natural-experiment evidence that when women lead village councils, they increase female participation in local meetings, create role-model effects for girls, and reallocate spending towards public goods that women prioritise (drinking water, sanitation, and health). One of the most obvious causal conclusions regarding the substantive performance of women in South Asia is this one. In South Asia, women continue to be under-represented in national parliaments; in the few instances when they do occupy top positions, such as the previous female prime ministers of Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan, this is frequently due to elite or dynasty politics rather than general gender parity in decision-making. Globally, parliamentary seats are growing slowly but steadily, according to IPU and UN Women data; nevertheless, South Asia's gains are more uneven and lower. Political parties act as gatekeepers; whether or not women are able to obtain winnable positions is greatly influenced by party policies, candidate selection procedures, and intra-party customs.

Women's chances increase when parties implement zip rules or enforce candidate quotas; yet, women frequently have less power when party lists without constituency ties are used to fill reserved seats. The region's under-representation of women in corporate

boards, top public service positions, and the higher courts restricts their ability to participate in institutional and technocratic decision-making. The World Economic Forum and regional development organisations highlight significant disparities in positions of leadership and economic decision-making. In the Asia-Pacific area, gender-based political violence, harassment, and physical and online abuse of female lawmakers and staff members compromises their retention and autonomy. Independent decision-making may be restricted if family members or party-loyal proxies occupy the reserved or high-visibility seats. The number of female candidates and their ability to influence policy if elected are both diminished by socioeconomic norms and restrictions such as reduced female labour force participation, limited mobility, and restricted access to financing and education in some areas of the region. These structural gaps are documented by regional World Bank/UN publications and global indices.

Despite a slow increase in women's political participation over the last three decades, South Asia still maintains some of the largest gender disparities in decision-making authority in the world. Although women's descriptive representation has greatly expanded due to constitutional quotas, reserved seats, and local-government reservations, especially in India and Nepal, substantive involvement is still unequal across nations and political levels. Research indicates that when women are given actual responsibility, they are more likely to prioritise public goods like social safety, water, sanitation, health care, and education, which directly contributes to inclusive development outcomes. However, women's capacity to exert autonomous leadership and influence policy agendas is nonetheless constrained by ingrained patriarchal norms, party gatekeeping, political violence, and restricted access to resources. Increasing the number and calibre of women leaders is essential to achieving women-led development. This entails implementing efficient quota plans with significant decision-making authority, creating secure and welcoming political environments, expanding women's access to financial and educational resources, and changing party systems to guarantee impartial candidate selection. While community-level empowerment and role-model effects might gradually change social norms, investments in skill development, digital inclusion, and gender-responsive governance can increase women's leadership potential. Ultimately, how well governments and societies convert women's political presence into transformative leadership—leadership that not only elevates women's voices but also promotes social justice, equitable growth, and sustainable development throughout the region—will determine South Asia's future course.

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