

Summary of talking points

Speaker: Bhojraj Pokharel

Marginalization and Exclusion of Women: Ensuring an Inclusive process: Addressing Women's Political and Electoral Participation

Marginalisation and exclusion of women has been a major global problem affecting legitimacy of democracy as well as election integrity. Their implications have been huge. In many countries around the world, women are subjected to various forms of injustice and inhuman conditions as their voices failed to be heard in the decision making circles. For example, in Nepal problems such as female foeticide and human trafficking is on the rise at an alarming rate.

Presently as of 1 September 2013, only 21.4 % (IPU) of women are represented worldwide in national parliament and only 38 (IPU) countries in the world have achieved the target of 30 % representation of women set by Beijing platform after nearly 18 years. Likewise, till today 38 countries have below 10% (IPU) representation of women and a few countries even at the zero level. Merely 8 women serve as head of state, 13 as head of the government and only 14% of women serve as a speaker in Parliaments. Similarly, only 11 % women occupy leadership position in political parties. (UN Women)

The case of Nepal and some general insights

In Nepal, both women and men were given equal suffrage rights since 1947. However, women representation in the parliament was very low or less than six percent till 2008. For the 2008 Constituent Assembly (CA) elections, Nepal adopted a mixed electoral system, which guaranteed minimum 33 percent women as candidate from both the races and ensured 50 percent representation of women from proportional side. This resulted in plus 33 percent women in the parliament. Based on the recent experience of Nepal and other parts of the world, following insights can be drawn:

- The Election System matters. The election system should conform to the country's international obligations and commitments as well as the country's context. The election system must be developed through inclusive, transparent, and participatory process. More importantly, election system should help create inclusive political processes and eliminate conflict drivers such as systemic discrimination against women or other excluded groups. Generally, data has shown that PR System is more women friendly.
- Temporary Special Measures (TSMs) could be one of the ways to increase women's electoral and political participation. They could be measures like introducing outreach and awareness raising programmes for attitudinal change or allocation of resources to support women's participation.

TSMs should be instituted only where the appropriate situation prevail and be limited to certain timeframe.

- Quotas can be one of the TSMs which could be supportive to increase women's participation in some contexts though not in all circumstances. Quotas have to be within the context of legal framework and electoral system of the country.

Quotas can be helpful where women do not have equal access to education, and health and do not have equal opportunities mostly on economic and political front. Equally important, there has to be political will to implement quotas. Globally about 115 countries have adopted legal or voluntary quotas for women representation at various levels.

- International Organisations like the UN's role can play a supportive role by recommending national authorities to increase women's electoral and political participation as well as by providing technical assistance or advice as necessary.

Similarly, UN involved elections have been better represented by women compared to other normal elections.

Global Challenges

Some of the challenges facing fair and effective representation of women globally are as follows:

- Social, institutional and attitudinal barriers for women to get into politics are one of the major reasons for marginalisation of women in political and election processes.

Some research has shown qualities required for leadership roles like ambition or confidence is admired in a man whereas not encouraged in a woman across all societies. This has deterred women from being involved in politics and hence their representation has remained low even in societies where they have nearly equal opportunities in education and economic front.

- Security, whether physical or psychological, is another equally important issue for women in majority of the countries in the world. Women cannot come out openly to be engaged in politics because of the sense of insecurity.
- Media, the way they have been portraying women, has yet to be more women friendly in most part of the world. Character assassination is limiting for women to enter the political front.
- Political and economic structures, election processes including the election system that most often do not take into account barriers for women have caused marginalisation and exclusion of women worldwide.

Way forward

- Firstly, it is highly important to increase participation of women in local elected bodies, grass-root political organs to create a wider base in politics.

It is equally important to increase participation of women in political parties at the grass-root level who will then go on to occupy important positions inside their political parties. This is important not only to increase representation of women but also to ensure that they could play an effective role.

To cite the case of Nepal, the role of women parliamentarians was questioned because they could not play an effective role. The reason why they could not play an effective role was because they did not occupy influential positions inside their party and hence had to obey what their leaders told them to do.

Also, rising from grass-roots give women confidence and competence necessary to play an effective role and reduce a sense of unfairness felt by men who hate to see their seat taken by a woman only based on their identity rather than their contribution in the life of the party. Hence global community has to prioritize its efforts towards this direction including in establishing a sound monitoring mechanism.

- Similarly, Temporary Short Measures (TSMs) suited to country's context could be adopted in situations where appropriate. Enforcement of such measures is also equally necessary. TSMs aimed at creating a conducive environment for women's participation could be of support in funding initiatives for women or ensuring extra security for women in addition to gender quotas.
- Priorities are needed to break various barriers, which limit women participation in politics and elections. Investment in capacity building of women and attitudinal change are equally important in ensuring effective participation of women. This is also important to sustain quick gains attained through TSMs such as gender quotas.
- It is equally important to develop more women friendly electoral system and processes to engage more women based on electoral cycle approach.
- It is urgent to address the various gender-disaggregated data, which will support in designing appropriate policies to address the issue of inclusion and participation.
- As mentioned earlier, international organisations like the UN can play an important role by advising national authorities to comply with international commitments or support countries that want to increase participation of women even though they are not signatory to any agreements.

Targeted and focused efforts are urgently needed to increase the representation of women in those societies where still it is below 10 percent at national elected bodies.

Finally, increase in the electoral and political participation of women is possible through a combination of policies and approaches. A strong will and determinations are the need of the time!