

Promoting Gender Equality in Local Government (Asia)

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Abstract

Through centuries of economic development, social and political awareness of gender roles and disparities has grown, as have efforts to end them. This has fueled the drive for gender equality. The governments and policymakers in various nations have been significantly shaped by international trends. An previous strategy that prioritised the welfare of women was superseded by the women in development (WID) approach. South Asia's economic liberalisation and globalisation have sparked winds of change in the social and political realms, paving the way for more chances for women to participate in local governance.

The South Asian nations of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Malaysia have a lot in common in terms of their social ideals, history, and culture. Although it is home to nearly 25% of the world's population, 43% of its citizens live in poverty. Over the past 10 years, the region has shown general improvement in all the key development indices; nonetheless, hierarchical and patriarchal power structures have persisted in impeding growth and wield significant influence inside the governmental apparatuses. The governments of the area have made some proactive, if occasionally cautious, moves during the past ten years to revive local self-government institutions on the basis of contemporary democratic values. Due to pressure from international organisations and initiatives like the UN International Women's Conferences and the Millennium Development Goals, all nations have at least formally accepted the necessity to provide women with representation in elected local governments.

Before South Asia achieves full equality, there is still a long way to go. To get there, a plan of action that is created by and for the local governments in South Asia and is continuously evaluated is required. The most crucial task at hand entails gender budgeting and its monitoring, capacity building along with the creation of a resource database, international networking among women in local governments and other associated networks, and gender sensitization of governance. Only then will the campaign to advance women's equality in South Asia be genuinely successful.

Introduction:

Women still lack the fundamental rights to property, education, and consequently the freedom to make decisions in many nations due to gender disparities in decision-making, access to resources, rights, and entitlements, either by law or tradition. Women are underrepresented in decision-making at all levels, from the household to public life, notwithstanding economic improvement in many nations. The objective of gender equality can be formally established by addressing these disparities through legislation and public policy. The majority of nations have now made legal measures to promote gender equality, but they are never enough to bring about long-lasting change without careful monitoring. It frequently takes extensive, coordinated advocacy efforts as well as partnership and coalition building at the local, national, and international levels to close the gaps between international statements, what the law mandates, and what actually occurs.

Global efforts to advance gender equality:

The path to women's empowerment has evolved over many years as society has come to terms with the necessity of gender equality and the need for international efforts to ensure this. In the modern context, these efforts have been crucial in profoundly influencing South Asian governments and policy-makers.

The former strategy was supplanted in the early 1970s by the women in development (WID) method. By bringing women's issues to the forefront of international discussion, the 1975 conference in Mexico City helped to legitimise the global women's movement. The United Nations General Assembly declared 1976 to 1985 to be the decade for women, equality, development, and peace after adopting the global plan of action put forward by the worldwide women's year world conference.

The UN reiterated its commitment to putting an end to discrimination against women during the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985. The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), which was formerly known as the decade of women, was established in 1984 and placed under the administrative control of the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

Gender mainstreaming is the process of evaluating the effects on women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies, or programmes, in any domains and at all levels, according to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO), which gave this definition in 1997.

The Declaration of Beijing and its Follow-Up:

Ten years after the decade on women came to an end, in 1995, "Action for Equality, Development, and Peace" was the main theme of the Beijing conference. At the summit, 189 states pledged to take action to strengthen women's ability for decision-making and leadership as well as to secure women's equal access to and full involvement in power structures and decision-making.

Millennium Development Objectives

The worldwide community created the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in response to the major development concerns facing the world, particularly those related to poverty alleviation and unequal development. The millennium statement was ratified by UN members in September 2000. Its eight objectives cover everything from alleviating extreme poverty to battling diseases like HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other ones. Gender equality has been mainstreamed into international goal setting, as seen by the MDGs and the Millennium Declaration. The benefits of gender equality are numerous and excellent. Higher marriage age, smaller families, better child care, and protection from disease-prone behaviour and issues resulting from ignorance are all benefits of female education.

The 2006 Global Gender Gap Report:

The World Economic Forum (WEF) began its first study in May 2005 with the goal of estimating the size of the gender gap in 58 nations based on economic, educational, health, and political factors. The score demonstrates that no nation in the world has yet achieved gender equality in crucial categories including political empowerment, economic involvement, education, and health.

The Philippines stands out because it is the only Asian nation to be ranked among the top ten. The Philippines holds a high place in the rankings because to strong performances in all four categories. Sri Lanka, the next-highest ranked nation in the area, is doing well because it has achieved health parity and ranks highly in terms of political empowerment. And lastly, the Asian rankings place some of the biggest, most populous countries at the bottom. Their rankings show significant gender differences in all four areas of the index, despite the fact that they all perform well in terms of political empowerment, with Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan outperforming even the United States and Japan on this metric.

Gender, empowerment, and government:

As a result of a pattern change from an earlier, more exclusive focus on government to a focus on governance, the term "governance" has recently taken on a more significant role in development discourses.

The position of women in municipal governance, in particular, calls for empowerment methods. Women experience issues with health, education, housing, and basic amenities that are distinct from men's issues in many countries, though to varying degrees. Women frequently find themselves in a predicament where they must keep their domestic responsibilities while also working for financial reasons. They may be more susceptible to economic shocks inside a nation as a result, and it's possible that young females may be required to work rather than attend school. Women are underrepresented in national parliaments in the majority of nations, and this is also true of state-level governing bodies. In this situation, there is a major imbalance where women are not sufficiently represented in overall decision-making processes on local government concerns, such as budget preparation for gender-specific issues or participation on. The absence of essential services like shelter, water, public health care, sanitation, garbage collection, education, child care facilities, credit help, etc., which can become even more crucial when women have children, can also cause problems for women.

Perspective from South Asia on women in local government:

In the political landscape of the nations in the South Asian region, the role of women in local governance has grown in importance. It has also been crucial in the region's growing and strengthening democracy, where politics has hitherto been seen as a masculine realm. The question of local government is not only a desirable ideal but also a political necessity if they

are to be accommodated in a democratic framework where the human rights of individuals' communities can be upheld due to the cultural and ethnic diversity that most of the countries in the region encompass. Although South Asian nations are still largely rural, hierarchical and patriarchal traditional power structures continue to have a significant impact on the government and state apparatuses. Over the past ten years, governments in the area have made some thoughtful moves to revitalise local government institutions in their individual nations on the basis of contemporary, democratic values. Despite some major victories, efforts to decentralise politics and implement various forms of affirmative action to eradicate gender-based exclusions have made only little headway.

Local Governance Structures with Women:

According to CLGF, the number of women serving as local councillors is as follows: 23% in the USA, 20% in Europe, 20% in Canada, fewer than 5% in Africa, and 3.8% in Latin America. There are often quota systems in existence in South Asia that mandate 30% representation of women in municipal administration, for example. Pakistan and India. Women make up about 8% of the councillors in Mauritius and 2% in Sri Lanka. However, there is evidence of low retention rates and significant turnover among women in local government, as a result of the challenges women face in juggling their political commitments with their obligations at home and at work.

The bottom-up exercise in gender balance and female inclusion in politics is thus a crucial first step towards achieving full gender balance at a national level, as this will, along with other factors, feed into the larger political discourse and influence future measures to ensure representative gender balance on the national levels.

Participatory urban policy supports the activities of urban women:

Urban women's livelihood activities contribute to the social and economic health of their communities, although they are frequently underappreciated or unsupported. The lack of amenities in impromptu and unplanned communities severely restricts women's ability to perform their customary tasks of providing water, fuel, food, and other commodities for family consumption. According to reports, concerns involving the provision of essential services and the livelihoods of underprivileged women receive higher support from female elected officials; therefore, these issues should be prioritised in local governance decision-making processes. A shift in municipal administration towards building proactive ways to

achieving equality and independence is implied by widespread efforts to alleviate poverty and other activities to boost micro-enterprises.

A review of local government bylaws from a gender perspective should be conducted in this situation, with participation from organisations and people from low-income and informal settlements. Additionally, women elected to office can create policy review forums in low-income urban settlements, ensuring that women's concerns are recognised and included in strategic plans that local authorities can implement in conjunction with communities. Strategically, this would entail supporting women who have been elected to office as well as promoting and assisting women, particularly young women, who are interested in running for government. In respect to, support structures can be identified:

- Assistance with family caregiving duties;
- Engaging in political party interaction;
- Communication with the media.
- Building elected members' capabilities

Representative local government, responsive local government, close administration to the people, subsidiary principles, financial autonomy, participatory planning, and other fundamentals of strong local governance are crucial. The expectations of residents of cities and villages have significantly increased, and better amenities and services are expected. In this situation, elected officials are crucial to civic governance. To become more receptive to needs on the ground, they must engage with citizens, facilitate basic services, increase civic money, and act as mediators and supporters of citizen initiatives.

A bottom-up process that incorporates the public and acknowledges community-based organisations, especially women's organisations, as legitimate stakeholders in urban governance is what local government policy has to be driven by. Community-based organisations (CBOs) are acknowledged by UN-Habitat as important collaborators in developing, putting into practise, and evaluating human settlements initiatives, particularly those pertaining to gender issues and women's empowerment. Unfortunately, the knowledge and suggestions of people in positions of authority, who may not be able to directly express the problems of the urban poor, in which women and women's organisations play an active

role, are frequently limited in policy-making decisions. This implies that women's issues largely go unheard and unaddressed. Additionally, there is a loss in the efficient use of public resources and a probable failure of policy as a result.

In order to increase the capability of women, UN-Habitat's women and Habitat programme and local leadership and management programme have created manuals and held training sessions. A gender and development capacity building programme was created by UNDP with the goal of giving governments the necessary tools for gender mainstreaming. Numerous national, regional, and international women's networks have started local civic education initiatives. The capacity building activities of women's and community-based organisations have also received funding from donor agencies and bilaterals. It will be beneficial to exchange knowledge and experience regarding ongoing initiatives aimed at enhancing the ability of women at the local level.

Budgeting by gender:

The budget is a crucial tool for affirmative action in order to enhance gender relations by closing the gender development gap. Economic disparities between men and women, as well as between the wealthy and the poor, may be lessened as a result. The gender dynamics at play in the economy and in civil society must be taken into account while developing budgetary strategies. It is important to emphasise pro-poor and pro-women participatory budgeting strategies, the local and global consequences of these strategies, alternative macroscenarios that result from alternative budgets, and the connections between these strategies and the empowerment of women.

Gender budgeting must be taken into account when planning urban policies and programmes at all levels. The implementation of social, political, and economic agendas and programmes depends critically on effective budgets. Policymakers must figure out how to redistribute funding to previously underserved regions and populations. In order to continuously target resources in a gender-conscious manner, local government authorities will benefit from the generation of a more complete set of gender statistics inside city jurisdictions. Building up the skills of local governments in urban governance will make it easier for them to make effective use of the gender data at their disposal.

Future Planning Roadmap:

Women's empowerment and participation in local governance through elected office, appointment to high-level posts in local government, and involvement in community associations influence how policies are decided and the results of those decisions. Decentralisation, and particularly democratic decentralisation, have become popular since the early 1990s. Innovative legislative methods have been used by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh to set quotas for the representation of women in municipal councils. This has had a noticeable but in some ways limited impact on policy. A aim of at least 30% women in all spheres of life, including elected local government and at all levels of staff and management, has been set by all Commonwealth governments.

India and Pakistan have both attained the required thirty percent through various methods that both make use of legislative authority. Sri Lanka falls far short, and Bangladesh is just adequate. In neither Malaysia nor the Maldives have elected officials been implemented at the local level. About how many women work in local government staff positions, little is known. Political parties might implement policies to promote and train women within their ranks as a starting point for creating initiatives. The local government can make sure that they have a programme for engaging young women in local governance and educating them. Gender concerns include a change in policy for the entire council, not just for women. All employees and elected officials in local government must get gender-sensitive training or education. This is especially true for senior decision-makers who are men who have been hired or elected. This will not only assist to shift attitudes but also give staff and council members the tools they need to carefully examine policy and make sure it has the desired gender impact.

Conclusion:

The result of these efforts is a local government climate that strives to be more gender aware and concerned with making sure that all people are treated fairly. All parties involved must create plans to promote women in local governance. It is crucial that local, state/provincial, and national stakeholders work together to establish these plans in order to make sure they are successful.

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