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# Politics of Empowerment of Women in South Asia

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## ABSTRACT

In the 1970s most Latin American countries were ruled by military dictatorships. All forms of civil disobedience were met with arrests, torture, or even death. The bodies of the victims often simply disappeared. The vanished body, deprived of identity, of physical and spiritual space, of social as well as historical memory, brings to mind the nearly universal condition of women pushed to the margins of official and recorded history, uneducated, illiterate, and powerless. The story of the disappeared represents a startling parallel to the worldwide struggle by women for visibility and for human rights and justice. So the women's rights, must also be defined as being seen and treated as equal in the political and ideological as well as domestic and private arenas. The participation of women in the political and the social realm allows for delegitimizing discrimination against women- and achieving genuine equality – not only under the law. It also affects individual cultures that previously denied women the possibility of an education and confined them to a world of silence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created in 1948 as an international body of laws, was meant to protect the integrity and dignity of human beings. Those laws, together with the 1979 Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, have been pivotal in the affirmation and implementation of women's rights. At the same time, these instruments have been used to prove the continued existence of violations of rights in both public and private spheres.

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# Politics of Empowerment of Women in South Asia

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## ABSTRACT

*In the 1970s most Latin American countries were ruled by military dictatorships. All forms of civil disobedience were met with arrests, torture, or even death. The bodies of the victims often simply disappeared. The vanished body, deprived of identity, of physical and spiritual space, of social as well as historical memory, brings to mind the nearly universal condition of women pushed to the margins of official and recorded history, uneducated, illiterate, and powerless. The story of the disappeared represents a startling parallel to the worldwide struggle by women for visibility and for human rights and justice. So the women's rights, must also be defined as being seen and treated as equal in the political and ideological as well as domestic and private arenas. The participation of women in the political and the social realm allows for delegitimizing discrimination against women- and achieving genuine equality – not only under the law. It also affects individual cultures that previously denied women the possibility of an education and confined them to a world of silence. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, created in 1948 as an international body of laws, was meant to protect the integrity and dignity of human beings. Those laws, together with the 1979 Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, have been pivotal in the affirmation and implementation of women's rights. At the same time, these instruments have been used to prove the continued existence of violations of rights in both public and private spheres.*

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## I. INTRODUCTION

One of the most hotly debated issues at national and international platforms, by academicians, politicians, policy makers and various government and non-government organizations, especially during the last three or four decades had been the women issue. The declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year and the subsequent decade as the United Nations Decade for Women was the first official international recognition of women's issues in a global context. This global concern about the women's issues is evident from the four international conferences convened under the aegis of the United Nations. (Mexico Conference 1975, the Copenhagen Conference 1980, Nairobi Conference 1985 and the latest being the Beijing Conference 1995, which was also, Nairobi Conference 1985 and the latest being the Beijing Conference 1995, which was also the largest attended by as many as 35000 women from all over the world.)

These conferences may not have achieved much by way of creating equality or ending discrimination against women, as the plight of majority of women, especially the rural and tribal in the developing countries continues to be pathetic. The documents and final agenda, declarations and commitments that come out of the conferences are hardly ever used or implemented seriously. But the real utility of

these conference lies in the diffusion of knowledge about the women's issues. The women's organizations – the NGO's looked upon by many as "elite bodies" founded many times by vested interests, ignorant of the real problems of the women, especially the rural, may not have been successful in ameliorating the miseries of the ordinary women but still they should be credited with having acted as a lobby to pressurize the policy-makers to take some women-friendly decisions.

If one scans through the documents concerning women at national and international levels, one is bound to see a shift in the paradigm which may be termed as from "welfare to empowerment." The most important new recognition at Beijing, both by NGO's and officially, was that "women need to be where economic decision-making and financial allocations take place. For too long women have been takers, not makers, of economic policies and national politics. The challenge now is to change this.<sup>1</sup> Thus the emphasis has come to ensure women's "full and equal participation in power structures and decision-making," and the term which has come to be widely used is "empowerment of women" – political and economic. The purpose of writing this paper is to raise a few issues in the light of this development. What has been the impact of this trend especially in South Asia in general and India in particular? What are the myths and realities linked with this? How far the constitutional and statutory provisions have been made in order to fulfill the said object? Is it all rhetoric or is there an element of genuine concern for the women? What are the so-called women-friendly policies and how far in the new liberalized market economy on the one hand and the atmosphere of political corruption, violence and armed conflicts and the rising fundamentalism on the other, political and economic empowerment can create gender equality and gender justice?

It is a known fact that there is still no society in the world in which women enjoy exactly the same opportunities and position as men. The gaps

between men and women are particularly wide in developing countries like that of South Asia. The social structure prevailing almost in all the South Asian countries is virtually the same, with some differences here and there, and is in a sense by-product of history of thousands of years in terms of mixing of different races, religions and communities. Discrimination against women and their subordinate position in society in general and in family in particular, and this in spite of several reform movements launched at different stages of history and the present crusade launched by the various women's organizations, is common in all the South Asia countries. This probably is the outcome of the patriarchal system of society and the associated attitudinal values inculcated and transmitted through religious customs, traditions and social norms which have gone deep into the social psyche of the region according to which a woman is and supposed to be preserver of the institution of marriage and family. She will probably make all sorts of sacrifices and bear all victimization in the name of "adjustment." Very rarely she decides to desert her family and children, which is quite in contrast to the Western values.

The statistical data reveals a pathetic picture despite all the rhetoric. At the global level women today constitute 70 per cent of world's 1.3 billion poor, two-thirds of the illiterates and (with their children) 80 percent of 25 million refugees - mostly victims of armed conflict.<sup>2</sup> The whole world knows about the extraordinary and pernicious sex ratio in South Asia, the special aspects of domestic violence as expressed in dowry deaths the gross inequality in nutrition and literacy. To take a few indicators the sex ratio in India according to 1991 census is 927 females to 1000 males, a deficiency of females in the population that defeats biological superiority. This is all the more disturbing when we notice that it has decreased continuously. In the beginning of the century it was 972 per 1000 males, by 1941 the ratio had fallen to 945 females per 1000 males. It fell further to 933 females per 1000 males by 1981 and the 1991 census has the

record 927 – the lowest so far.<sup>3</sup> Life expectancy of the females is 57.7 years to 58.1 for males. (However, it may be noted here that highest life expectancy of females in South Asia is in Sri Lanka, it being 75.4 years).<sup>4</sup> Deaths of young girls exceed by that of boys by 1/3 of a million every year. One hundred and twenty thousand women die in child birth every year. While the official age of marriage is 18, only 19.5 per cent of women are married at or above this. India has the largest number of illiterate women i.e. 64.6 per cent of male literates compared to 39.29 per cent female literates. Again as a matter of comparison the female literacy rate in the neighboring state of Pakistan is even lower i.e. only 23 per cent which is 36 per cent in the case of males. Unemployment for women by current weekly is stated 44 per cent rural and 53 per cent urban. Sixty six per cent women as compared to 37 per cent men are not in conventional labour force but are concentrated in subsistence sectors. Within market workers women workers are casual workers. In Sri Lanka also the economically active group is male dominated. According to census of population in Sri Lanka in 1981 the proportion of economically active men was 74.5 per cent as compared to 25.5 per cent female labour force but this was of course, exclusive of women engaged in production estimated mainly during peak agricultural seasons.<sup>5</sup>

The 1995 annual report of the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan reveals a depressing report of the position of the women in Pakistan. The female literacy rate, as stated earlier, is 23 per cent at the national level, Baluchistan having the lowest percentage of 0.8. The family laws are heavily loaded in favour of the male. The divorce rate (woman divorced) remains high. In the absence of a written acceptance of the wife's right to dissolution of marriage (Khula) it is difficult for wives to obtain dissolution. This despite the fact that the superior courts have held that since both men and women are equal it is explicit right to a wife to claim 'Khula' if there is sufficient evidence that she and her husband cannot live together within the limits set by Allah and in that condition

there is no need for the husband's consent. The practice of forcing girls into celibacy by marrying them to the Quran is widespread (especially in the rural or even in certain areas of Sind – this is in fact, in order not to give the woman a share in the land holdings). The young girls are still auctioned, sexual abuses of minor girls have been frequent.

Another oppressive practice is that of "karokari" i.e. if a woman is suspected of having had illicit relations, her husband has the right to kill her – in fact to save his honour he has to kill her. These are in fact the unjust feudal customs. Even some laws are explicitly anti-women like the Hadood Ordinance, which was introduced during Zil-ul-Haq's regime and is still in operation. There is an Evidence Act too where two women would have to bear testimony in place of one man in a court of law. But in the Hodood Ordinance a woman cannot bear witness. However, the Family Laws Ordinance brought in during 1961 was certainly a reformative one.

Thus it is a well recognized and established fact that there is much oppression and discrimination against women. The image of the women being just an object is the outcome of the feudal values prevalent in the society. According to one Pakistan delegate Khadija Gauhar, who is also a leading activist in the women's movement in Pakistan who attended the third convention of Pakistan – Indian Peoples' Forum for Peace and Democracy held at Calcutta (December 28-31, 1996) considered that the two basic factors which are responsible for women's oppression there are orthodoxy in Islam and their interpretation of sexist segregation which was there, particularly in certain classes, this having been reinforced by the feudal system.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the socio-economic field the women are marginalized in the political field too. Political activity is typically monopolized by men in most societies, despite the fact that some women do reach the top. The countries in South Asia can claim credit for giving the world its first woman President (Sirimavo Bhandaranayake) India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka have had the

women heads. Bangladesh is having women both as the Prime Minister and the leader of Opposition. In Sri Lanka, mother and daughter team are occupying the offices of President and Prime Minister. Not long ago Pakistan had a lady Prime Minister. India's Mrs. Gandhi, however, consistently denied that she was a feminist. She once told the reporters that she did not regard herself as a woman. She was a person with a job to do. It may be said that in spite of the occasional rise of a few women in politics, the participation of women in politics has not been very encouraging almost in all the countries of South Asia. Again making a review of the data regarding representation of women in Indian Parliament, especially the Lok Sabha, reveals that the percentage of women representatives never reached to a reasonable digits. It was just 2 percent in 1952, remained under six up to the eighties. It was highest in the eighth Lok Sabha when it was 8.1 percent. During the 10<sup>th</sup> Lok Sabha it was 7.1 percent.<sup>7</sup> After that Inter Parliamentary Union (I.P.U.) meet at New Delhi the statistics of women representatives in legislatures revealed a dismal picture not only for the developing countries but also for the developed countries except the Nordic countries where it ranges between 30 to 50 percent.

After having touched upon the status of women in the South Asia region, in general and in India in particular in social, economic and political fields, let us have a look at the various policy decisions taken at international and national levels.

The various policy documents issued at the International Women's Conferences have focused on various issues concerning women like violence against women, illiteracy, neglect of the girl child, participation of women in development and political empowerment of women.<sup>8</sup> Of these the last two issues i.e. participation of women in economic development and their political empowerment have come to be regarded as the solution to their agonies. As stated earlier in the paper a marked shift in paradigm can be seen in

the agenda of these conferences. The earlier conferences focused on making women the beneficiary of various welfare schemes of the states. The World Plan for Action adopted in Mexico City 1975 tried to formulate a worldwide consensus on women's issues and initiate a co-ordinated approach to them. An attempt was made to document the contribution of women's work to society by compiling gender – disaggregated statistics and to assess the needs and concerns of women all over the world.<sup>9</sup> It gave little priority to women's economic resources. Similarly the Forward Looking Strategies adopted at Nairobi 1985, though talked of better economic facilities for women but did not make any mention of gender equality in economic resources. However, the "Platform for Action" adopted at Beijing Conference identified 12 "critical areas of concern" or areas of particular urgency that stand out as priorities for action. These include issues of poverty, health, literacy and education, economic empowerment of women, participation of women in political process, violence against women, the effect of armed conflict on women and the portrayal of women, the effect of armed conflict on women and the portrayal of women in the media and focus on a girl child.<sup>10</sup> "Women's poverty is directly related to the absence of economic opportunities and autonomy, lack of access to economic resources, including credit, land ownership and inheritance, education and support services, and minimal participation in the decision making process." Hence one major area of concern in the "Plan for Action" was to develop gender-sensitive national and international policies, to provide poor women with economic opportunities and equal access to affordable housing, land, natural resources, credit and other services, to devise statistical means to recognize and make visible the work – including unpaid and domestic – of women and their contribution to national economics.<sup>11</sup>

The document stressed on elimination of wage inequality and occupational segregation and creation of flexible work environment. Nothing the inequality between men and women in

sharing political power and decision-making at all levels, the document urged governments, political parties, NGOs and international organizations to adopt the goal of giving equal representation to women at all levels of decision-making including the legislatures and integrate their concerns into public policies. The document stressed that equality in decision-making provides the leverage without which integration of the equality dimension in government policies is not feasible. (In India the subject of women's participation in development through the institutions of Panchayat has been debated for quite a long period.)

As for India, it was in 1974 that the National Committee on the Status of Women in India made the first assessment of the status of Indian women and focused on her as an individual with rights of her own. The Committee recommended the establishment of statutory women's Panchayats at the village level with autonomy and resources of their own for the management and administration of welfare and development programme for women and children as a transitional measure to break through the traditional attitudes. Although the recommendations had no statutory status but in some places, for example, in Andhra Pradesh such all women Panchayats were formed. But after 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> constitutional amendments all panchayat and local bodies are formed.

The policy of the government had been to associate women with the working of grass-root institutions so that the benefits of governments, welfare policies could reach to the women. But influenced by the shift at the international level in the policies regarding women, the Indian government also started talking of associating women in the development programmes. As a result, the Government of India prepared a policy document - the National Perspective Plan for Women 1988-2000 A.D. (The NPP) on the basis of which implementation strategies and precise measures to make the system more responsive to women's needs was to be conceptualized. The perspective was said to have been adopted to bring the economic development and also

integration of women into the mainstream of economy.

Two pertinent recommendations of NPP, to secure effective participation of women in the decision-making process at national, state and local level were, (i) reservation should be made of 30 percent seats at Panchayat to Zila Parishad levels and local municipal bodies for women (ii) 30 percent of executive heads of all bodies from village Panchayat to district level and a certain percentage of chief executives of Panchayat Raj bodies at lower, middle and higher levels must be reserved for women.<sup>12</sup>

First concrete measure to give constitutional sanction to these recommendations was taken up by Rajiv Gandhi's government by introducing the 64<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Bill on local government on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1989. The bill, however, got defeated in Rajya Sabha. It was in 1992 that the two Constitutional Amendments namely 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> were passed giving 33 percent reservation to women in rural and urban local bodies. The step has been hailed as path-breaking and revolutionary. And now the 81<sup>st</sup> Constitutional Amendment<sup>12</sup> Bill giving 33 percent reservation to women in the legislatures has generated a good deal of controversy and interest. Introduced enthusiastically by the Deve Gowda government, the bill was collectively supported by all the women parliamentarians cutting across party affiliations, but the initial enthusiasm subsided as there was a lot of dismay within political parties (including those pushing the bill) about the implications. The National Alliance of Women spear headed a campaign where women groups across the length and breadth of the country tried to put pressure on the different parties to support the bill. The OBC lobby reacted and asked for reservation for their section in the women quota. Every one is aware that the bill was referred to a select committee but was not taken up by the eleventh Lok Sabha. Even the Gujral government had also declared its commitment to pass the bill. However, the opposition by itself to the bill exposed the limitations and constraints of the

existing social and political system. The position of this concerned is the same till now.

Here my humble submission is that the various political parties and the vested interests are engaged in political rhetoric. This may be illustrated by the fact that if these so-called “sympathizers of the women’s cause” have had any genuine concern for the empowerment of women they should have first set their own house in order. Though the value of an amendment bill like 81<sup>st</sup>, should not be denied completely but just providing reservations in Legislatures or jobs, the women will not start having their say in decision-making. Already the experience of the women’s participation in the decentralized governance and development, of course, with a few exceptions, has been peripheral. At the time of elections, they are usually projected as someone’s mother, sister, wife or widow and not as people’s representatives. The ground reality is that women, especially rural, have been in the quagmire of illiteracy, poverty and ignorance. In a society which is divided, into castes and classes and is run according to the old feudal values, the subordination of women is bound to continue, irrespective of the fact that some women have been made to occupy positions of decision-making, at local, state and national levels.

Secondly, reservation as a policy does not appear to me a very positive indicator. A better alternative could be providing the opportunities and right type of education to inculcate the right type of values. By right type of values I mean the attitudinal values based on equality of human beings, irrespective of caste, colour, creed or sex. The policy of reservation, in the case of SCs, STs and now OBCs have shown that once they are started as a transitional step have the quality of becoming permanent and giving rise to the elite sections within its categories. I,m not an opponent of the policy of empowerment of women but what I want to emphasize is that the need is to strive for certain basic changes in the value system of our society. The exploitation of women is not only prevalent in rural, uneducated and ignorant

sectors but can be seen in educated, economically well-off urban sectors as well. There may be a difference of degree.

Further the various women’s organizations apart from looking into the hardships of the urban women should try to reach the poorest of the poor and make them aware. They must not take anti-men position. The concept of empowerment of women must not look like making women dominate their men counterparts. A harmonious relationship based on equality and understanding must be the aim.

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