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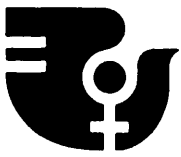
Status of Women in Asia and the Pacific Region

Series 4

PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN POLITICS

1986





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PREFACE

Five papers on issues concerning women's status in Asia and the Pacific were commissioned for the Regional Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting for the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace which was held on 26-30 March 1984 in Tokyo. The meeting was organized by ESCAP in co-operation with the United Nations Center for Social Development and Humanitarian Affairs and hosted by the Government of Japan. These papers, which documented regional issues emerging from accumulated evidence during the United Nations Decade for Women, were subsequently expanded into more detailed studies which could be of value for governments and concerned agencies as a basis for planning and implementing programmes to advance the status of women and their full integration in the Asian and Pacific region.

The five studies on specific issues concerning women in development are now being published by ESCAP as the Status of Women in Asia and the Pacific Region *series which include the following publications:*

1. *"Women in the economy: employment", by Linda Y.C. Lim*
2. *"Socio-cultural and attitudinal factors affecting the status of women in South Asia", by T. Scarlett Epstein*
3. *"Impact of science and technology on women", by Malee Suwana-adth and the ESCAP secretariat*
4. *"Participation of women in politics", by Rounaq Jahan*
5. *"Role of the women's movement and non-governmental organizations in enhancing the status of women", by the ESCAP secretariat*

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INTRODUCTION

Political participation is a key issue for women because it is an indicator of their status as well as a tool to improve their condition in society. Their insignificant presence in the various formal political and decision-making structures is a reflection of women's marginalization; it also explains why, even though they constitute half of the population, women have not yet succeeded in getting equal benefits from development. As a conference booklet of the 1980 World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace aptly points out, "women's participation in politics is essential to their advancement: without their voice being heard at the decision-making level, how will women get the changes they need in employment, health, education and access to supportive institutions and services? On the other hand, without such changes, without equal access and opportunity, how are women going to get into power?[1] Thus women are caught in a vicious circle: their limited resources in terms of education, employment, wealth and property, limit their access to public decision-making bodies which, in turn, adversely affect their access to resources. Mobilizing women as a political force to demand their due share of resources and to increase their participation in decision-making structures is one way to break out of the vicious circle.

Recognizing the crucial role of political participation in advancing women's status, the World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year, adopted in Mexico in 1975, recommended a number of general as well as specific measures to increase women's participation in politics. For example, the World Plan of Action called upon the governments to establish "goals, strategies and time-tables for increasing within the decade 1976-1985 the number of women in elective and appointive public offices and public functions at all levels."[2]

The 1980 mid-Decade World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women reaffirmed the objectives and strategies set forth in the World Plan of Action. The Conference again urged governments and political parties to "establish goals, strategies and time-tables" and "undertake special activities for increasing by certain percentages the number of women in elective and appointive public offices.[3] It called upon governments to issue special instructions to achieve "equitable representation of women at all levels, and in different

[1] United Nations Department of Public Information, *Women 1980: World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, 14-30 July 1980. "Bella Center", Copenhagen, Denmark, Conference Booklet*, p. 12.

[2] United Nations, *World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year*, p. 15.

[3] United Nations, *Report of the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, Copenhagen, 14-30 July 1980*, A/Conf. 94/35, p. 21.

branches of government and in departments at the national, state and local levels.[4] The Conference further recommended that "special attention should be given to ensure that "formal or informal practices which result in *de facto* discrimination against women in the selection of candidates for political office or in their exclusion from formal decision-making"[5] are eliminated.

The objectives and strategies laid down in the World Plan of Action were endorsed by most governments of the countries of the Asian and Pacific region; yet what has been the extent of implementation of these objectives and strategies during 1975-1985? How many governments and political parties of the region have set specific time-tables and undertaken measures to increase women's participation in elective and appointive offices? How many governments have issued special instructions to achieve equitable representation of women in government? Can the countries of the Asian and Pacific region claim a marked improvement in women's participation in political and decision-making bodies during the last decade? Available data on women's political participation is scanty, but in the next section an attempt has been made to measure women's participation both in political structures and in the processes. While women's participation in formal structures and decision-making bodies has not registered a marked improvement, there are encouraging signs of increased participation in movements both at the elite and grass-roots level during the Decade.

A. PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

1. Participation as voters

Women vote at a slightly lower rate than men; but in countries of the region which have held regular elections i.e., India, the difference between male and female rate of voting has steadily declined over the years. However, the mere act of voting can not be regarded as a measure of political consciousness or participation. In many instances, poor rural and urban women are mobilized by political parties to vote. In such situations women vote in high numbers but they do not participate in any other political activity. On the other hand, there are situations, i.e., Himalayan region of India, where women have been actively involved in peoples' movement demanding changes in forest policy and the restoration of womens' traditional access to minor forest produce, yet their electoral participation have been declining. Though voting can be used as an indicator of participation only in the few countries that hold regular elections, there are indications that in the countries which did hold elections during the decade there was a greater awareness of women as a political constituency; many candidates and political parties adopted pro-women stances and appealed especially for the women's votes. The trend is more noticable in the South Asian countries (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) and Japan where there is evidence of an active movement for women's rights.

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[4] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

2. Participation in parliament

Available data suggests that women's participation in legislatures at the national level did not register a significant increase during the Decade. In some countries (India, Indonesia, Sri Lanka) there was marginal increase but in others (China, Democratic Kampuchea, Mongolia, Republic of Korea and Viet Nam) women constituted 20 per cent or more of legislators. The Republic of Korea has the highest percentage at 33.[6] A few countries (Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan) reserve a quota for women in the legislature.

3. Participation in high public offices

The enormous disparity between men and women in appointment to high public offices has continued during the Decade. The two women heads of government (Indira Gandhi and Sirimavo Bandarnaike) came to power before and departed during the Decade. Though many countries appointed women as ministers (Australia, Bangladesh, China, Democratic Kampuchea, India, Japan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Thailand, Viet Nam), the majority were assigned to social services sectors, i.e., health, education, culture, social welfare, women and youth affairs.

Few women were appointed in the judiciary, except in China which has 10,000. The majority of women are at the lower levels of the judiciary. Even in China there is only one woman in the supreme court; Philippines has two and Indonesia one.[7]

4. Participation in political organizations

Little information is available on women's participation in political organizations – in political parties, trade unions or other mass organizations.[8] There is a general belief that women participate more in local government and more as ordinary members than at the centre of power and at top decision-making levels.

In many countries of the region, political parties were formed to spearhead popular mobilization against colonial rule or against particular regimes. In such situations mobilization of women was an integral and necessary strategy and women's wings of political parties were formed to mobilize women. However, once such parties came to governmental power, women's mass fronts were often alloted only non-political functions or supportive roles. Very few women achieved leadership positions in the overall party or trade union structures. The few who did achieve such status often came from established political families and rarely did these women publicly advocate women's issues.

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[6] Data about women's participation in parliament is taken from "Women's Participation in Politics", Center for Women's Development Studies, New Delhi, mimeo, 1985.

[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*

The Women's Decade saw the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in many countries of the region. At the same time an active women's movement has emerged in the region. In the Decade remarkably active women's movements developed in South Asia and political parties had to take note of that. In India there has been a marked increase in the number of women at decision-making bodies of political parties and more attention is being paid to women's problems in election manifestos. Women's organizations affiliated to political parties have become more involved with other women's groups in discussion on women's problems. There have been joint fronts of women's organizations (both political and non-political) in demanding more effective government action in the suppression of crimes against women and in promoting employment and educational opportunities for women. Recognizing women as a potential source of political support, many political parties and leaders are now ready to adopt pro-women stands in public statements. The growing movement also had its impact on legislation and on sections of the judiciary. Some legislative reforms have taken place in family laws, labour laws and in criminal laws for the protection of women. At the local level, however, there is often resistance. Laws to ensure the participation of women in village councils have remained ineffective in many areas.

In Sri Lanka, women constitute 20 to 30 per cent of members in various political parties, but are marginal in decision-making bodies. There is, however, a beginning of an active women's movement; the women's sections of the political parties have supported struggles by women workers to improve their condition, and participated in popular demands to declare the Indian Ocean a nuclear-free zone. The Government's decision to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs just before the referendum in 1982 indicates a recognition of the strength of women as a political constituency.

In some countries, women are members and even leaders of various political parties; political parties even have women's wings; and some seats in parliament and local government are reserved for women. Though the quota system ensures women's possible participation, other factors limit it.

In Malaysia, women are active in political parties: they constitute nearly 50 per cent of membership. However, their participation in leadership positions is low. The women's wings in the parties are more involved with social and welfare issues. In Indonesia, too, political parties have women's wings and few women attain party leadership positions. Women are generally active in women's organizations.

In Viet Nam, women's representation is high in lower and middle levels. Women's issues are brought to the notice of the party and the government through the women's union, and during the Decade the union used its influence to obtain some pro-women reforms.

In China, women constitute 13.4 per cent of the membership of the Communist Party. Over the past years, more and more women have assumed

leading positions in political bodies both at the central and local levels. Women comprised 21 per cent of all deputies at the Sixth National People's Congress, the highest organ of state power, in 1983. The state council, the country's highest executive body currently includes one state councilor, three ministers and eleven vice-ministers who are women. At the local levels, there are 20 women vice-chairpersons of standing committees of people's congresses, one governor and six vice-governors and vice-mayors.

Women's participation in trade unions (especially at leadership level) remained low; but the Decade witnessed in some countries of the region, increasing militancy by women workers (e.g., Philippines and Republic of Korea). The condition of women workers in the free trade zones attracted substantial sympathy including that of women's organizations.

The Decade also witnessed another remarkable trend: attempts in various countries (Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka) to organize women workers in the informal sector both in urban and rural areas. The emergence of grass-roots organizations of poor women is one of the positive developments of the Decade.

5. Participation in women's organizations

Women's organizations still remain the major arena of women's political participation. All the countries of the region have women's organizations that have existed for decades. Generally, urban middle class women dominated these organizations and generally, these organizations advocated welfare and civil rights issues.

During the decade many of the old women's organizations have undergone a reorientation, and many new organizations have emerged which are very different from the traditional women's organizations. A visible trend has been increased emphasis on human rights of women by women's organizations. In Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, women's organizations have agitated against physical violence (rape, assault, bride burning), cultural violence (sex tours, traffic in women massage parlours, obscene publications), and economic exploitation (discriminatory wages, ban on unionization in the free trade zones, retrenchment, lay-offs, etc.). Female infanticide (China) and foeticide through amniocentesis (India) have also raised protests from women's organizations. While issues differ from country to country the threat to the security of life, liberty and dignity of women has emerged as a distinct issue that has politicised womens' groups in all countries of the region.

Some urban women's groups have taken up issues such as negative images of women in the media and the educational curricula (India, Japan, Malaysia, Republic of Korea). Some have protested against adverse impact on women's rights as a result of religious revivalism (Pakistan). Some have taken up wider political issues (Pakistan, Philippines), and the movement to ban nuclear tests (Sri Lanka, Pacific islands).

During the Decade there has been a marked growth of self-help action groups at the grass-roots level for economic advancement in both rural and urban areas (Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Philippines, Republic of Korea).[9] Though income generation has been the major focus, conscientization and collective action have also been emphasized to protect women's rights in the family and the community. A few of these organizations (such as SEWA, India) have organized self-employed poor women and have challenged the adequacy of established trade unions and international labour movement to protect and promote the rights of the women workers, the majority of whom in the developing countries work in the informal sector. More and more the new women's organizations (and some of the earlier women's organization) have taken up developmental issues and have attempted to organize rural poor women. Though the record of the national machineries (i.e., women's ministries, bureaus and national women's organizations) in mobilizing and politicizing poor women has been less than satisfactory, the new initiatives by non-governmental organizations have achieved some degree of success.

Why has prolonged mobilization of women proven to be so difficult? And why is it that even when women are mobilized and may participate in political movements and organization in large numbers, the decision-making levels remain largely male-dominated? What are the obstacles that limit women's greater involvement in politics? What are the factors that stand in the way of their reaching top decision-making levels? We must look carefully at the causes that affect and limit women's participation before recommending strategies and policies to increase their numbers in the corridors of power.

B. FACTORS AFFECTING WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

To participate and more importantly succeed in politics one needs resources, time, skill, experience, patronage contacts and information. Politics (particularly electoral policies) is expensive. It involves investment of time – time with organization and constituency. It requires skills, experiences and exposure to a wide network of information. The patronage of senior leaders is often crucial in pushing young aspirants to leadership roles.

Women are at a disadvantage with regard to all the above mentioned factors that promote success in politics.

Women generally do not have enough money to run for public offices. It is true that many women (like men) belong to wealthy families, but the wealth is usually family and not individual wealth. Few women have control over family wealth, and few are permitted to use family wealth for political purposes.

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[9] Some of these groups have been described in an ILO study: S. Muntemba, ed., *Rural Development and Women: Lessons from the Field* (Geneva, ILO, 1985), vols. 1 and 2.

Women also have little time. Their "double day", their productive and reproductive roles often leave women with little time for politics. Time budget studies around the world have shown that women work longer hours than men, leaving them with little time for leisure and pursuit of hobbies or interests (e.g., politics). Given demand of domestic chores and earning of income and given the cultural norm of segregation of sexes in many countries, women are generally isolated at home, cut off from networks of information. They lack confidence to seek elective or appointive positions. This results in their inexperience in holding political positions. Sexual segregation also makes it difficult for young women to be protégées of senior leaders most of whom happen to be men. While young men can easily enter into a protégé-patron relationship with a senior leader and be pushed up the organizational hierarchy, for a young woman the process is much more complicated. There are not that many senior women leaders who can be influential patrons; and entering into a patron-protégée relationship with a senior male leader can often be misconstrued as a sexual relationship which may hinder instead of promote her upward mobility and jeopardize her support with the constituency. No wonder, most of the noteworthy Asian women leaders got their entrée into politics through their family networks.

Though it is difficult for women to involve herself politically and more particularly to assume leadership roles, that does not mean that women do not participate in politics. Indeed, women do participate and in great numbers, but their pattern of participation is different from that of men. Women generally participate in what is known as supportive roles; they vote, they help in campaign and in mobilizing electoral (especially women's) support, but they rarely stand for election themselves. They are active in national liberation struggles, but more as nurses and couriers, than as armed combatants. They are active in peasant struggles and trade union movements, but more as unrecognized foot soldiers than as leaders.[10]

Women's participation in politics is generally intermittent. In some cases, they participate in great numbers and often assume leadership during crisis periods but the rate and level of their participation often falls during normal times. Women are visible and often in the front ranks when a political struggle is in the ideological phase but they become invisible when the struggle gets into the phase of "who gets what, when and how". In other cases, women are mobilized on an *ad hoc* basis to support specific causes and issues, but once the cause is achieved and the movement turns to a routine game of power, women tend to lose out – they are either pushed back by men to their "normal" duties at home, or they themselves lose interest in pure power struggles.

Women in politics champion issues that appear directly relevant to people's day to day needs, i.e., food, nutrition, ecology, health, family planning, education, prices, crimes, violence, etc. Women participate more in informal structures than in formal structures, more in voluntary civic association than in political

[10] *Ibid.*

organizations. Women do participate in politics, but their pattern of participation is often different from men's; the issues, the rules of the game they give priority to are also different from those of men. The sexual division of labour determines women's role not only in society and in economy, but also in politics. Women are involved in politics, they are used in politics, but generally they are socially recognized as performing only subordinate and supportive functions.[11] No matter how crucial women's votes and women's voluntary labour are in winning elections and in civic and political organizations, these are still perceived as subordinate roles, not worthy of getting women's recognition as equal partners in decision-making and leadership roles.

How can we change this misleading perception that women's work in the political arena is supportive and, hence, inferior? How can we (a) ensure that the crucial functions women perform in political movements and organizations are recognized and valued, and (b) promote women in leadership roles? What kinds of strategies can we recommend at the end of the United Nations Decade for Women, when a review and appraisal of women's participation in politics in the Asian and Pacific region indicates only marginal progress in the last ten years?

C. STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS

A number of strategies are called for to remove the obstacles women face in (a) getting due recognition for the functions they already perform, (b) moving towards leadership position, and (c) enhancing their scope and levels of participation.

The World Plan of Action, the 1980 mid-Decade Conference, and the 1985 Forward Looking Strategies have all identified a number of special efforts to promote women's participation in politics. For example, the 1975 World Plan of Action recommended four types of "Specific efforts":[12]

(a) Reaffirmation and publicity for the official policy concerning the equal political participation of women;

(b) The issuance of special governmental instructions for achieving an equitable representation of women in public office and the compilation of periodic reports on the number of women in the public service and levels of responsibility in the areas of their work;

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[11] Rounaq Jahan, "Purdah and participation: women in the politics of Bangladesh", in Minnault and H. Papanek, eds., *Separate Worlds*, Allahabad, India, Chayanaka Publishers, 1983.

[12] United Nations, *World Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Objectives of the International Women's Year*, p. 15.

(c) Studies to establish the levels of economic, social and political competence of women compared to men for recruitment, nomination and promotion;

(d) Special activities for the recruitment, nomination and promotion of women especially to fill important positions until equitable representation is achieved.

Why have the many excellent recommendations of the World Plan of Action and the 1980 mid-Decade Conference largely remained unenforced? How can we prevent the Forward-looking Strategies from meeting the same fate?

Mobilizing women as a political force around women's issues is the only strategy that would guarantee their increased influence and power to hold governments and political organizations accountable to their needs. But what strategy should we adopt to mobilize women?

One obvious strategy would be not to down play the importance of women's so-called supportive role in politics. This would increase women's own self-esteem and self-confidence and remove the popular myth about the inactive female.

In the next decade, we must articulate and publicize the significance and inter-linkage of women's role in the total political process, formal and informal movement as well as government positions. In the next decade, we must encourage more studies of women's roles in politics and publicize women's contributions in national liberation movements, political struggles, peasant and trade union movements. In the last decade we emphasized women's role in economic development – employment, education and health were singled out as priority issues. In the next, we must give priority to women's role in politics and decision-making. We already have scattered information from various countries of the region on women politically mobilizing themselves to achieve land rights or fair working conditions. We need to publicize these emerging struggles and bury once and for all the myth of the economically inactive and politically passive female.

Countering the image of the politically inactive female is a useful strategy; but we still need strategies to promote women from the ranks of political workers to those of leaders. One strategy is affirmative action by political parties and governments, as suggested by the World Plan of Action,to put a progressively larger percentage of women in leadership positions. Politics is the most natural field to get on-the-job leadership training. Women's wings of political parties, trade unions and other oganizations must not remain satisfied with leadership positions in the women's units alone; in exchange for their supportive work they must bargain with central leadership for a certain percentage of leadership positions earmarked for women in central structures.

Women who are put in leadership positions as a result of affirmative action, need to maintain close contact with and promote grass-roots women's organizations. Once women leaders develop a solid women's constituency, they stand a better chance of not being co-opted by the male leadership.

Women's organizations are a training ground for women leaders. In many countries of the region, particularly in countries with a strong tradition of sex segregation, it is easier to mobilize women in women's units of political parties, trade unions and other associations than in integrated structures. During the Women's Decade, many countries of the region set up national women's organizations. But establishing separate organizations to promote greater participation has proved to be a controversial and debatable strategy. Some argue that women can develop self confidence and leadership potential quickly by first participating in separate women's units; others argue that women's units create a protected environment for women, and lead them into competing with other women, thus undermining women's group solidarity and preventing them from developing confidence to compete with men. The efficacy of women's organizations as a strategy to promote women in leadership positions needs to be further analysed and explored.

For the majority of women of the region, who are poor, rural, illiterate or half literate, engaged in a twelve to fourteen hour "double day", a greater participation in politics is possible only if they are convinced that such involvement has relevance for their day to day needs – that politics is responsive to their needs and aspirations, that it is not a game to realize somebody else's dreams and goals.

D. CONCLUSIONS

Why do we want to promote women's political participation? Is it a means or an end? As argued earlier, participation is a means for women to gain access to resources and power. It is also an end in itself. It is a basic human right. As citizens, women should in theory and in practice enjoy equal political rights and positions. Up to now women have lived in a world where their agenda and priorities have been set by others. Increased political participation would imply women having a voice in shaping their own as well as the society's future.

But how can we promote women's political participation? Are mere resolutions urging governments and political parties to take affirmative action enough? Or should women ask for specific women's quotas in the various political and decision-making bodies? Will quotas and special policies for women create women's "ghettos"? Or are they the only realistic strategies to protect women's presence in the short run? Should women only make demands? Or should they also think of imposing sanctions?

The socio-cultural norms prevailing in the Asian and Pacific region that assign women an inferior social, economic, and political position will remain

until and unless women of the region mobilize themselves and challenge these attitudes. Already there are signs that these attitudes are under attack and eroding. At the elite level we notice scattered movements in various countries of the region that challenge these attitudes. At the mass level women are not bothered about consciously challenging men's attitudes – mere survival needs force them to chart new courses that defy the established social norms.

In the last decade, many countries of the region have witnessed endogenous grass-roots women's movements. These need to be strengthened. Linkages amongst organizations should be established so that these movements can grow bigger and recruit wider support. Building on these grass-roots women's organizations appears to be the most effective strategy to promote women's political participation.

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