

**Invisible Faces of Violence on Women in Politics:  
Breaking the Silence**  
*South Asian Regional Conference on Violence Against Women In Politics*  
**September 18-20, 2007**  
**Kathmandu, Nepal**

**Women's Political Participation and Violence Against Women in South Asia**

Women's political participation refers to their ability to participate equally with men in all aspects of public and political life. Although many South Asian countries have adopted a quota system or reservation for women's political participation, the level of participation of women from the grassroots and the lower social strata is still negligible<sup>1</sup>. Women's average representation in parliaments of South Asian nations was 11.7% as of February 2006 which is still far below the world average of 17%.<sup>2</sup> Violence has been identified as one of the root causes of lower participation of women in political governance<sup>3</sup>. Insensitive political culture of the region itself has raised an alarming need for the issue of violence against women in politics to be undertaken at regional level and addressed effectively.

Violence against women in politics is a major problem in South Asia, yet it still remains a relatively new and unreported issue. "Violence Against Women In Politics" connotes any act of violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women politician, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life; within family, inter or intra-political party level, at societal and at state level during their political career. It also includes any act of violence against any family member of woman politician, which can affect her mental well-being deterring her political participation.

Politics and decision making have been closely guarded as men's privileged area, with the male dominated party structure and their insensitivity towards importance of women's involvement in political process. The gender insensitive masculine political culture of the region has made it difficult for women politicians to firmly establish themselves in decision making positions. Violence against women politicians has been stanching women's political growth and discouraging women to enter in political discourses. Studies on women and politics have suggested a variety of possible explanations for the paucity of women leaders and the marginalization of women in politics, including electoral systems, party systems, gender-role socialization, women's movement and political culture of violence. The status of violence against South Asian women politicians remains a scantily explored area, and available literature on the subject mostly consists of bits of isolated studies touching only some aspect of the issue.

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<sup>1</sup> The women politicians' average representation in parliaments of South Asia was 11.7% as of February 2006, which is far below the world average of 17%. Source://<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Source://<http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Reviving Democracy: The Emerging Role of Women in Decision Making, South Asia Partnership International, 2003

The intensely competitive world of men dominated politics, their patriarchal mindset and masculine model of political system, is in itself a major obstacle to women's political participation. In South Asia, politics ensures status and is a lucrative source of income and power over which men desire to control. The reluctance of political parties to nominate women candidates is a crucial factor, denying women's participation in governance. Character assassination has been used intentionally and unintentionally by men, women and society as a tool to violate women politicians, forcing many women politicians to quit their political career. Moreover, media as well as civil society are yet to acknowledge the credibility of women politicians.

The prevalence of a "Culture of Silence" among women is primarily responsible for unreported cases of violence. Many women politicians silently suffer violence accepting it as a part of the unchangeable South Asian culture. The deep-rooted cultural barrier and the inability to break this silence has for a long time hampered women's political participation. Until this silence is broken, women's effective participation at all levels of politics in South Asia will continue to be a dream.

### **Idea of Regional Conference**

Violence against women in politics is an issue of major concern today, but it still remains unaccounted for. Breaking the culture of silence against violence on women politicians has surfaced as a major challenge today. It is thus of utmost importance that a platform be provided for voicing issues of violence particularly against women in politics to prepare a collective agenda for addressing this non-raised issue. People should be encouraged to overcome their fear of sharing grievances that may have arisen from various levels of society.

The conference intends to bring together eminent women leaders of South Asia to share their experiences of dealing with the issues of violence in politics. It is anticipated that their sharing will pave the path for breaking the culture of silence and lay down the foundation for future generation of young women leaders. The conference expects to bring together the experiences of civil society organizations and media to overcome the challenge of violence against women in politics.

The conference will address both quantitative and qualitative aspects of women's political participation vis-à-vis violence. The qualitative aspect in the conference will address issues concerning gender and power relations in politics which leads to discrimination and gendered violence against women politicians. Gendered violence like intimidation, threat of violence in hostile environment has been counterproductive and has chilled many women from entering politics. The conference will discuss the vicious nature of violence against women politicians, which in itself is both the cause and the consequence, belittling women's political participation. This conference is specifically significant in South Asian context where despite most South Asian countries being led by women political leaders have not been able to overcome issues of violence, challenges of increasing women's participation in politics and reducing masculine culture of politics.

This initiative could be an appropriate starting point for assessing various factors and actors that have impacted on women politicians in South Asian countries.

### **What we want to achieve?**

- **Envisioning the Future of Women in Politics:** By providing a regional forum to women politicians of South Asia for consolidating their voices at regional level to outline future course of actions.
- **Strategic Alliance with Fourth State:** By recognizing contribution of media for addressing issues of violence against women to promote safe and secure participation of women in politics.
- **Synergizing the Actions:** By bringing together media, international and regional organizations, academicians, researchers, activists and decision makers along with women politicians to develop a regional agenda for undertaking corrective measures collectively.

### **Why Participate?**

- To share and learn the experiences of women politicians, civil society and media on the issues and mitigation strategies of VAWIP
- To network with the stakeholders (individuals, organizations and networks) working on the issues of VAWIP
- To build a regional perspective on the issues and agenda of VAWIP

### **What will be Program Methodology?**

- Experience sharing by eminent women political leaders, representatives of regional institutions, the media and civil society organizations.
- Interactive platforms for knowledge sharing amongst participants by using innovative techniques.
- Knowledge fair for sharing publications and documentations of participating institutions and individuals as well as publishing houses.
- Crafting future directions for promoting the participation of women in political governance

### **Who Can Participate in This Conference?**

- Women politicians
- Political leaders and representatives
- Civil society organizations including international and regional institutions
- Academicians, researchers , gender experts, legal professionals and activists
- Media
- Activists
- Government representatives

## **About Organizers**

This three-day South Asian Regional Conference which is being organized by South Asia Partnership International (SAP I) in collaboration with International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and South Asia Coordination Committee on Political Empowerment of Women (SACPEW).

South Asia Partnership International a member based regional network organization, ([www.sapint.org](http://www.sapint.org)) working for the last 25 years with SAP Nationals in Bangladesh, Canada, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka and regional organizations on the issues of Democracy & Governance and Peace & Human Security, with gender equality, human rights, and environment as the cross cutting issues. SAP International and its member SAP Nationals have been promoting regional platforms to raise collective voices of civil society for sustainable development.

International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an organization that supports sustainable democracy worldwide. Its objective is to strengthen democratic institutions and process and acts as a catalyst for democracy building by providing knowledge resources, expertise and platform for debate on democracy issues.

South Asia Coordination Committee on Political Empowerment of Women (SACPEW) is the sub-regional focal point of CAPWIP which is actively involved in women's political empowerment.

**Venue: Hotel Soaltee Crown Plaza, Kathmandu, Nepal**

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