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Women's Political Leadership in south asian nations: Challenges and Opportunities.

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I. Abstract:

There is no doubt that women have achieved high levels of political representation in South Asia. However, women face many challenges to sustain the progress made and their political skills. The main objective of this research paper is to examine the challenges and opportunities for women's political leadership in South Asian countries such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives through literature, case studies and reviews. This research examines the social, institutional, structural, political, cultural, religious and ethnic barriers that hinder women's political participation. This research study also plays a primary role in promoting women's leadership in politics, from grassroots mobilization to international institutional and constitutional support, opportunities and strategies. The findings of this study will help to provide a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding women's political leadership in South Asia, to identify women's political participation in the country's inclusive development, and to promote women's empowerment.

II. **Keywords:** women's political leadership, South Asia, challenges, opportunities, gender equality, Women's Empowerment, Breaking Barriers.

III. Introduction

"What we have asked for is social justice, economic justice and political justice, not reserved seats for quotas and separate electorates," - Ammu Swaminathan argues for equality and justice in the Constitution. This sentence is appropriate for today's society.

The political leadership of women in South Asian nations presents a landscape of both significant challenges and emerging opportunities, deeply influenced by historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts. Despite notable progress, women remain substantially underrepresented in leadership roles across the region. As of now, women occupy only about 21.2% of parliamentary seats in South Asia, a figure that reflects broader global trends where only 27

countries have female heads of state or government, indicating a protracted struggle for gender parity in political representation.

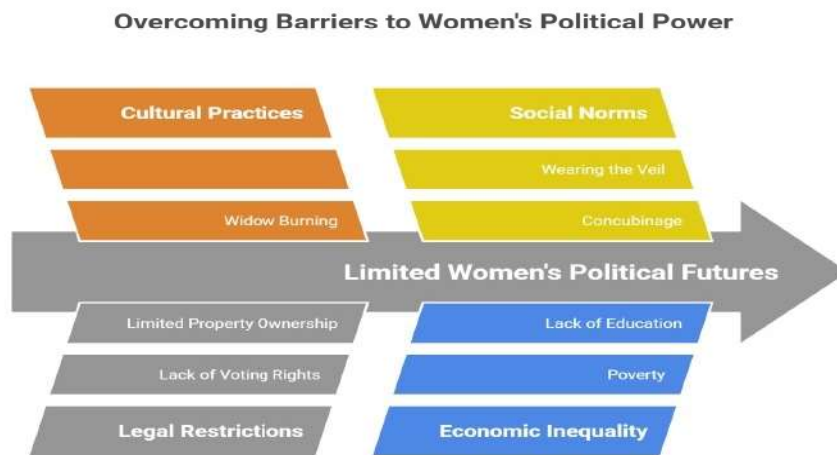
IV. Analysis

South Asian countries, with their diverse cultures, languages and histories, have seen significant progress in women's political leadership. Women have overcome many obstacles to assume leadership roles in government, from serving as heads of state and prime ministers, to serving as members of parliament and local government officials. However, women face many challenges in pursuing and sustaining political careers. Social norms, institutional barriers and structural obstacles hinder women's participation in politics, limiting their ability to influence policy decisions and shape the future of their countries.

The history of women's movements in Asia:

in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. According to Kumari Jayawardene, the instances where women fought for education, for the vote, for security, against poverty and inequality meant that women's political futures were still limited. However, the violent oppression of widow burning in India, widow burning in Egypt, Turkey, Korea, Vietnam, Iran and Indonesia, wearing the veil, having polygamy, making women concubines, and binding their feet in China are all sad things. It is difficult to overcome such obstacles and gain state power. However, if you think about it, nothing is impossible ! (Ref-1)

- We are in the picture below overcoming barriers to women's political power



There are many challenges that women face in political leadership. These include: cultural norms, social norms, gender discrimination, traditions, customs, beliefs, institutional and structural barriers within political parties.

‘But despite all the struggle and activism, the worldwide paucity of women in authoritative positions and decision-making bodies—as we enter the twenty-first century—is a disturbing reflection of how little power women still exercise in arenas where public policy is made and economic decisions are taken. This asymmetry led participants of the “Fourth World



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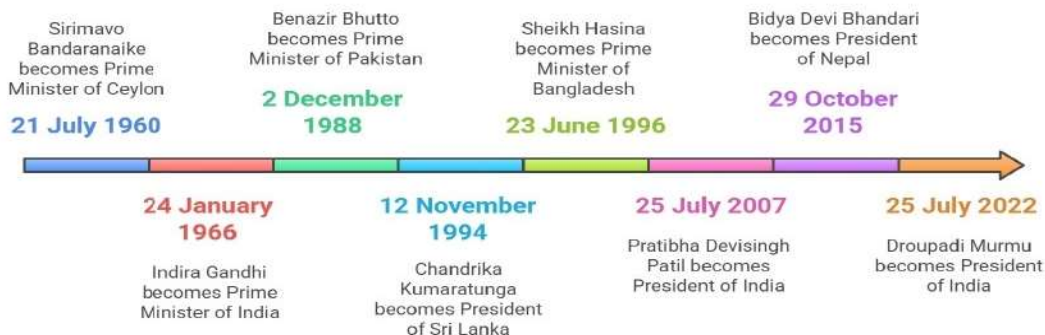


Conference on Women” to demand, through the “Beijing Platform for Action,” “measures to ensure women’s equal access to, and full participation in, power structures and decision-making.” Recognising that exceptional women who make it into the higher echelons of power have not broken the glass ceiling for women but rather have risen through the seams, a global consensus is emerging on the need for women to constitute at least one-third of decision-makers in all structures of power. It is hoped that once this critical mass of women decision-makers is in place, women would be in a better position to transform the body politic into a vehicle that is responsive to their needs and desires.” (Ref-2)

Women-Powered Governments Primarily in South Asia: Looking at countries with female heads of state or government, Bangladesh has had two female prime ministers, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina, who have been in power since 1991. Sheikh Hasina's leadership has advanced women's rights and education. India has had several female leaders, including Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and President Droupadi Murmu. Women play a significant role in Indian politics, with 33% reservation for women in local governments and a proposed Women's Reservation Bill. Sri Lanka was led by the world's first female prime minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who served three terms. The country has made progress in women's representation, with a 25% quota for women candidates in local elections.

We can see countries with prominent women leaders in politics. Pakistan, a Muslim majority country, has female leaders like Benazir Bhutto, the country's first female prime minister. Women like Fawzia Koofi have also played important roles in politics and peacebuilding. Nepal has made significant progress in women's representation. In addition, 33% of legislators are women. The country's constitution includes provisions for gender equality. Bhutan has implemented a quota system for women, resulting in a record number of women running in local elections. In Bhutan, the Network for Empowering Women (BNEW) supports women in politics. If we look at women's representation in parliaments: Nepal has 33% women legislators, India's Lok Sabha has 11% seats, and the Rajya Sabha has over 10.6%, Pakistan has 21% women in the lower house, and over 18% women in the upper house, and Afghanistan has 28% women in its parliament.

Here we can see executive political power in South Asia



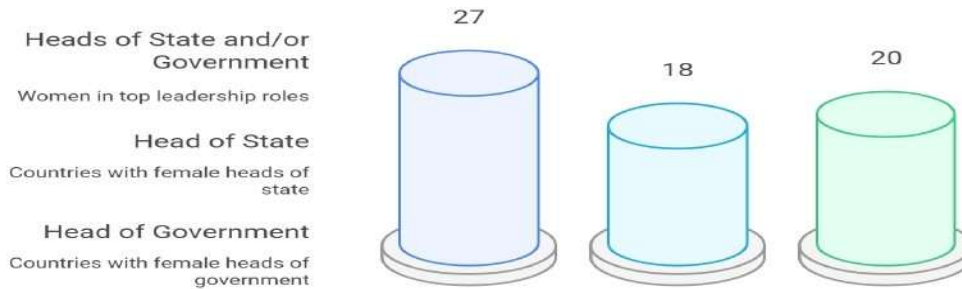


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According to Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation “Women demonstrate political leadership by working across party lines through parliamentary women’s caucuses—even in the most politically combative environments—and by championing issues of gender equality, such as the elimination of gender-based violence, parental leave and childcare, pensions, gender-equality laws, and electoral reform .Facts and figures Facts and figures: Women’s leadership and political participation Women’s equal participation and leadership in political and public life are essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. However, data show that women are underrepresented at all levels of decision-making worldwide and that achieving gender parity in political life is far off. Women in executive government positions - As of 1 June 2025, there are 27 countries where 31 women serve as Heads of State and/or Government . At the current rate, gender equality in the highest positions of power will not be reached for another 130 years . - Just 18 countries have a woman Head of State, and 20 countries have a woman Head of Government .Women demonstrate political leadership by working across party lines through parliamentary women's caucuses—even in the most politically” (Ref-3)

Women in Executive Government Positions



According to UN Women’s latest publication, Women Political Leaders 2025, women’s political leadership in executive positions is not just stagnant – it is in decline. Women’s representation in key ministerial positions, including as heads of state, heads of government and in key ministerial positions, is limited, faces increasing barriers and lacks gender equality in political leadership.

Today, only 27 countries are headed by a woman head of state or government. Five years ago, there were only 21 countries, but a staggering 103 countries have no women at the highest executive office. Even if they do exist, they are barely visible. This imbalance is also reflected in the representation of ministries. Women hold just 22.9 per cent of cabinet positions leading ministries worldwide – down from 23.3 per cent in 2024, marking the first recorded decline in the number of female cabinet ministers.(ref-4)

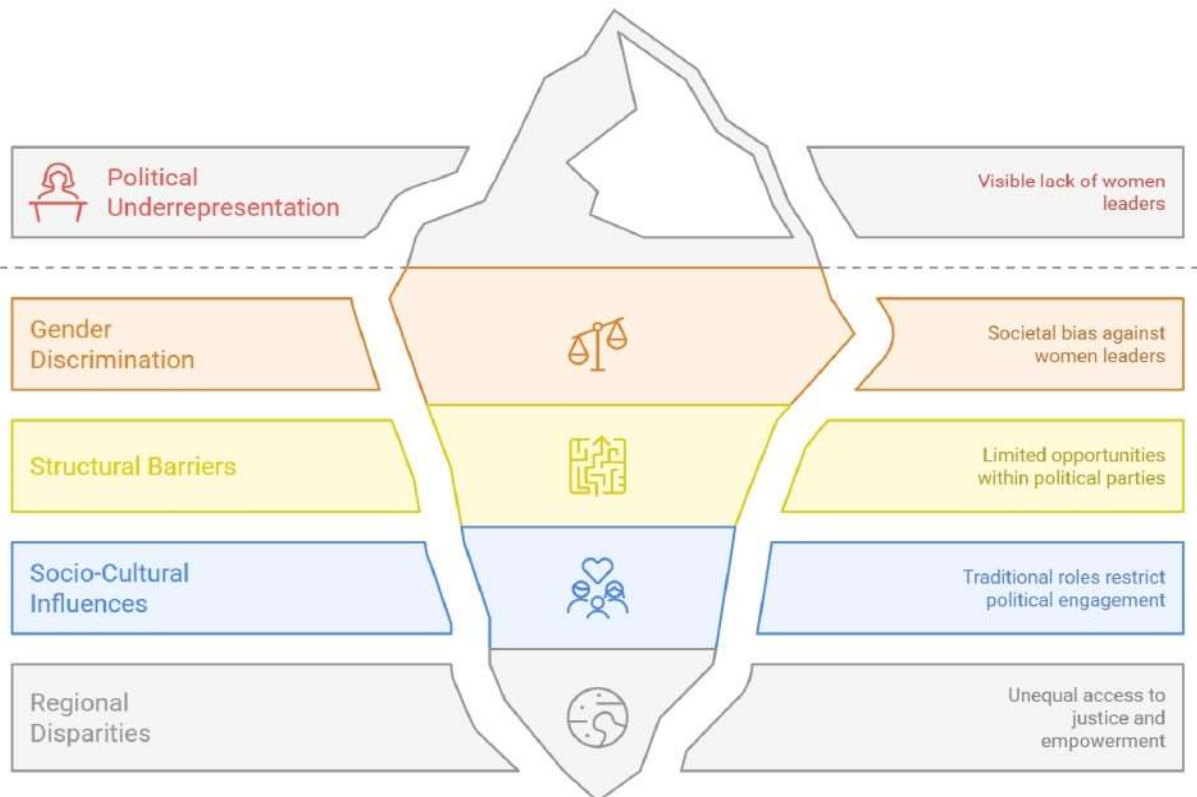
V. Challenges and Apportunities

There are many opportunities for women to become a political force, especially in South Asia, but there are also all sorts of obstacles.

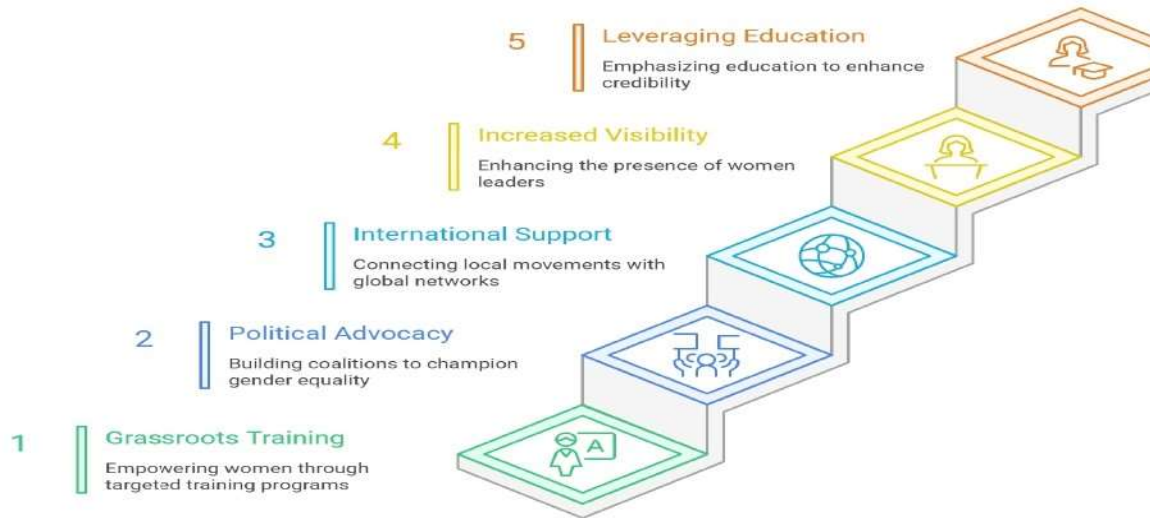
- Deep-rooted social norms

- patriarchal attitudes
 - Gender-based violence & harassment
 - Limited access to resources
 - Resistance from political parties
 - Disparities in education and literacy
- Opportunities:
- Increased representation through reservations
 - Growing awareness and advocacy
 - Positive impact of women in leadership
 - Potential for policy changes
 - Changing social norms
 - Growing emphasis on women-led development

- Here we can see graphs for challenges to understand easily.



- Here we can see paragraph Opportunities to understand easily



VI. Conclusion

There is a clear need to pursue ways to further improve women's representation in political leadership. There are. As seen in Nepal during the 2022 local elections, initiatives aimed at encouraging women to seek political office demonstrate the potential of institutional support to enhance women's candidacy.

Strengthening gender equality laws and ensuring their effective implementation are crucial to creating an enabling environment for women's political engagement.

A country's ability to emerge as a leader in politics is evidence of inclusive, diverse, and sustainable development.

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4. Women's political leadership declines, with fewer women in ...



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