

# Women's Political Participation in South Asia



## 1. Why Women's Political Participation and Representation Matters

Women's equal participation and representation in political life is fundamental to inclusive democracy, responsive governance, and sustainable development. Despite global commitments and some progress, women across South Asia remain significantly underrepresented in decision-making roles particularly in legislative leadership, executive office, and youth political spaces.

At the current pace, **gender parity in national legislatures will not be achieved before 2063**, and parity among Heads of Government may take until **2150**.<sup>1</sup>



## 2. Key Facts & Regional Snapshot

### Global & South Asia Overview

- **Women in national parliaments (global):** 27.2%
- **South Asia average:**
  - Lower/Unicameral Houses: 14.7%
  - Upper Houses: 19.9%
- **South Asian countries with women in top government leadership:** India, Sri Lanka

### Women in National Parliaments

Country	Women in Parliament
Nepal	<b>33.5% (Lower), 37.3% (Upper)</b>
Pakistan	17% (Lower), 19% (Upper)
India	14% (Lower), 17% (Upper)
Bhutan	18% (Lower), 8% (Upper)
Sri Lanka	10% (Lower)
Bangladesh	No functioning parliament

<sup>1</sup> UN Commission on the Status of Women 65th Session on *Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls: agreed conclusions* E/CN.6/2021/3

**Insight:** Nepal leads the region, reflecting the positive role of electoral system design and gender quotas.



### 3. Electoral Systems, Quotas & Participation

- Most South Asian countries use **First Past the Post (FPTP)** systems.
- **Nepal's parallel electoral system** stands out and correlates with higher women's representation.
- Legislative gender quotas exist in most countries, **except Bhutan**.
- Voter turnout is relatively high, yet **gender gaps persist**.

**Example:** In Pakistan's 2024 elections, women's turnout was **42.6%**, compared to **47% overall**.

**Key Message:** Quotas and voter participation do not automatically translate into women's political leadership.



### 4. Women in Political Leadership

Women's representation drops sharply at the executive level including in government cabinets and high level political appointments.

Country	Women in Cabinet
Bangladesh	<b>18.2%</b>
Bhutan	11.1%
Nepal	9.5%
Sri Lanka	9.1%
India	5.6%
Pakistan	<b>0%</b>

**Insight:** Political power remains concentrated among men, even where women are elected to parliament.



### 5. Youth, Gender & Political Power

South Asia has one of the world's largest youth populations: - **Pakistan:** 67% under 30 - **India:** 65% under 35 - **Nepal:** 56% under 30

Yet young women are largely excluded from political leadership.

Country	Women MPs Under 30
India	5
Pakistan	2
Sri Lanka	2
Bhutan	0

**Insight:** The gap between demographic reality and political representation is especially stark for young women.



## 6. Social Norms & Gender Bias

Deeply entrenched gender norms continue to restrict women's political participation:

- **49%** of people globally believe men make better political leaders than women.
- Share of population biased against women political leaders:
  - Bangladesh: 68.8%
  - India: 68.9%
  - Pakistan: **85.7%**

Women from marginalized groups including young women, women with disabilities, indigenous women, and religious minorities face compounded barriers.



## 7. Violence Against Women in Politics

Violence remains a critical deterrent to women's political engagement:

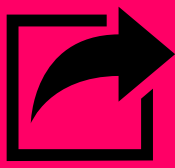
- **81.8%** of women parliamentarians report psychological violence.
- **44.4%** have received threats of death, rape, or abduction.

### Digital & AI-Facilitated Violence

#### Case: Pakistan (2024)

A sexually explicit deepfake targeting Punjab Information Minister **Azma Bokhari** illustrates

how digital tools are weaponized to discredit women leaders and push them out of public life.<sup>2</sup>



## 8. Moving Forward: Transforming Gender Norms

The **Women and Youth Democratic Engagement (WYDE) – Women’s Leadership Initiative**, aligned with the EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, focuses on:

- Transforming harmful gender social norms
- Strengthening women’s leadership pathways
- Building alliances among women’s movements, media, policymakers, and international actors

**International IDEA priorities include:** - Promoting women’s political leadership - Supporting youth and women’s participation and representation - Creating enabling and safe political environments

### Key Takeaway

Advancing women’s political participation and representation in South Asia requires **more than quotas**. Sustainable change depends on transforming social norms that fundamentally define the role of women in the politics. Only through transformative gender social norms can we address critical issues like violence against women in politics, and create an inclusive political space for all, contributing to a strong democratic system.

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<sup>2</sup> Deepfakes weaponized to target Pakistan’s women leaders, <https://www.dawn.com/news/1876469>