

# WOMEN AND FOREIGN POLICY

Edited by:  
Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey

CONSORTIUM OF SOUTH ASIAN THINK TANKS  
**COSATT**  
BRIDGING POLICY RESEARCH IN SOUTH ASIA

 **KONRAD  
ADENAUER  
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# Preface

Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks in cooperation with the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (KAS) organized a regional conference on 'Women and Foreign Policy' on Aug. 24-25, 2023 in Kathmandu. It is relatively a new topic for South Asian countries and encompasses how a feminist approach can be integrated into the overall conduct of diplomacy. All of us are aware that diplomacy consists of strategies and techniques for conducting relations among nation states and women with their inherent ability of peace-building can be natural promoters of peace and conflict resolution around the world.

Various speakers reiterated the importance of the discussions on women and foreign policy in South Asia during the conference and highlighted the need for sustained efforts to promote gender-inclusive foreign policies across the region. The region has had several women Presidents, Prime Ministers, Foreign and Defense Ministers therefore not oblivious to the important role that women can play in the domain of foreign affairs. Although some countries have less numbers, but the number of women parliamentarians and women officers in the foreign ministries of South Asia is also steadily rising. South Asia is also one of the largest contributors to UN peace-keeping. More and more South Asian women peace-keepers are serving in conflict zones at the moment. South Asian women serve the UN as part of the military, police and as civilians.

The conference was not only a platform for knowledge-sharing but also a catalyst for building networks and fostering collaborative efforts among participants. The conference brought in new ideas and some of it is preserved as write-ups in this publication. We sincerely hope that this conversation will continue among political leaders, policy makers, bureaucrats and researchers in South Asia and will help in promoting gender equality in all spheres of public life in the region.

**Dr. Nishchal N. Pandey**

Convener, COSATT,  
Kathmandu

**Andreas Klein**

Director  
Political Dialogue  
Asia Programme, KAS,  
Singapore

# Foreword

Congratulations to the Consortium of South Asian Think-Tanks (COSATT) and the Political Dialogue Asia Programme of the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for bringing us all together to discuss a topic of immense significance.

In our pursuit of global progress and regional stability, it is essential that we acknowledge and harness the power of women in shaping foreign policy. As we gather here in Kathmandu, a city that embodies Nepal's rich cultural heritage and its commitment to inclusivity, we must recognize the pivotal role that women play in diplomacy, security and development across South Asia.

History has shown us that societies flourish when the talents and perspectives of all their members are fully embraced. The same holds true for our nations and our region. South Asia boasts a reservoir of untapped potential residing within its women. From grass-roots activists to policymakers, from entrepreneurs to peace-makers, women have shown time and again that their contributions are vital for progress. Let us not forget the words of Mahatma Gandhi, who famously said, 'If you want to know the real character of a society, look at how it treats its women.' We must evaluate our societies and policies through this lens, ensuring that gender equality is not just a lofty ideal, but a tangible reality.

In the realm of foreign policy, the inclusion of women is not merely a matter of representation; it is a matter of effectiveness. Women bring unique insights to the table, shaped by their diverse experiences and perspectives. This diversity is not a challenge to overcome but an asset to be celebrated. By nurturing a diplomatic eco-system that values collaboration



and inclusivity, we can forge stronger bonds of understanding and trust among nations.

Moreover, women often bear the brunt of conflicts and instability. They are not just victims; they are agents of change. Women's participation in conflict prevention, resolution, and peace-building can lead to more durable and holistic solutions. When women's voices are heard in diplomatic discussions, the resulting agreements are more likely to address the root causes of conflicts and promote sustainable peace.

As we discuss women's roles in foreign policy, let us also address the challenges that hinder their full participation. Unequal access to education, limited economic opportunities, and persistent cultural biases continue to impede progress. It is our duty to dismantle these barriers and create an environment where women can excel and lead at every level of society.

In conclusion, I urge all to commit to the principles of gender equality and inclusivity. Let us work together to create South Asia where women's voices are amplified, their rights safeguarded, and their potential realized to the fullest. The decisions we make today will shape the trajectory of our region for generations to come.

Thank You once again to COSATT and KAS for hosting this conference on the theme of Women and Foreign policy in Nepal. Let us leave this gathering with renewed determination, knowing that a more prosperous and peaceful South Asia is within our grasp.

Dhanyabad! And let us embark on this journey together.

**Sujata Koirala**

Former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Foreign Affairs,  
Kathmandu.

# Keynote Address

Amb. Gaitri Issar Kumar

India's former Ambassador to UK and the EU

At the outset I would like to compliment COSATT and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung for convening this regional conference and I offer my best wishes for its success.

Dr. Nishchal Pandey and COSATT, I thank you for your invitation and hospitality in this wonderful city that I happily called home from 1993-1997.

Friends, this is indeed an opportune moment to be discussing women in foreign policy in South Asia. Of course, there are many dimensions to the theme – the considerable history, institutions and networks, gender balance, budgeting, notable contributions and successes, and I am confident that we will learn about these from the experts in the sessions that follow.

I think we all agree and there is a worldwide realisation that the urgent global issues must be addressed in a more effective way, a different way. There needs to be a rebooting and resetting. At a time when human security - in the comprehensive meaning of the term, should have been the number one priority, we have witnessed a carnival of major disruptive events around the globe mostly man made that have brought unprecedented human suffering and severely stressed the interdependent global economy.

Global leadership – and that includes many like us – stands accused of having failed to pre-empt and prevent these crises, failed to adequately preserve and conserve nature, failed to efficiently resolve conflicts and failed to see that this is a moment when a comprehensive, inclusive approach is the only way to save humankind from man-made catastrophes that are irreversible.

History will look at this era and wonder why we did not do more. Ironically, the worst affected is the Global South. And within this part of the humanity, the worst sufferers are women. Witness the indignities suffered by women displaced by violent ethnic conflict in our region, by devastation of land and infrastructure in climate events and by COVID lockdowns. Witness the plight of women in Afghanistan, and the impact of Ukraine on food and fuel supplies eventually impacting women.

All these remind us that we in South Asia, along with the rest of humanity are literally walking, eyes closed, into far worse disasters waiting to happen. Unless we do something about it now.

And here it is relevant to mention the growing realisation, in the western world that what they call a “feminist” approach in internal as well as external policy could possibly hold the most definitive and durable solutions. Sweden was the first to adopt this ‘feminist’ foreign policy, embracing the 4 ‘R’s i.e., equitable Rights, Representation and Resources based on Reality. We see that many western Governments are looking at its merits and others have already followed suit, with variations, of course, corresponding to their particular circumstances.

As we know, Feminist foreign policy has a different set of priorities - peace, gender equality, environmental integrity and human rights and more focus on marginalised individuals, humanitarianism, updating of traditional power structures and addressing the root causes of conflicts—using pacific methods rather than war and violence.

Most interestingly, pretty much all of this is predated by decades in the world view of Mahatma Gandhi.

While a nationalist in leading India's freedom movement, he was an internationalist in visualising a world at peace - where no nation exploits another, and the international community co-operates for mutual benefit and the good of the world, disarmament and human development are highest on the agenda.

For conflict resolution the only way, according to him, was dialogue to develop understanding and creative solutions - where both sides win.

These are the very principles espoused by the architects of India's foreign policy more than 70 years ago. That is why, perhaps, as a woman in the Foreign Ministry of my Government, and as a diplomat representing my Government, I have never had any reservation in pursuing these principles.

India and her South Asian neighbours have been engaging on these core priorities for decades - bilaterally and then since 1985, under the auspices of SAARC.

The first Summit declaration itself called for increased participation of women in activities at the regional level "within the framework of SAARC and that Programmes and Projects should be devised to ensure their active participation" ("01-Dhaka -1st Summit 1985-SAARC") in the development process.

And there is a full Article on promoting the status of women in the 2004 SOCIAL CHARTER of SAARC.

In all SAARC initiatives, including the first Ministerial Conference on women, a conscious effort has been made to include the aspirations of women – from the stage of conceptualisation and planning to active decision making and execution - and also bring women into the centre of conflict resolution processes – not least because women are the worst sufferers in a conflict situation – but also because they are increasingly found to be highly motivated participants in fighting, and in post conflict peacekeeping as well as peace building.

While working together for gender-sensitive policies, South Asian leaders have been engaging bilaterally, through regional and sub regional initiatives and at the global level on this more inclusive and gender sensitive agenda.

Due to the complex challenges in our neighbourhood, there had, for a long time, been a tendency to reserve high policy and strategic security issues for the men to deal with and give the so called 'softer' agenda to women officers. Of late, this has been changing - slowly but significantly.

I read in a recent report by UN Women, that wide gaps persist in women's participation in disarmament forums and women remain very much under-represented in weapons-related fields, including technical arms control – only 12 per cent of Ministers of Defence globally are women.

The same study finds that there is less defence spending 'in countries where there are more women in legislative and executive branches of government.' ("Women in Diplomacy | United Nations")

I often recall a moment at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva, when the Japanese Ambassador to the CD, one of the few lady Ambassadors in the CD, took the floor and expressing the acute disappointment of her Government with the lack of progress in the CD said that had been more women in the room a lot more would have been achieved in the Conference on Disarmament.

On a personal note, I wonder if the atom bombs would actually have been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki if there had been a woman in the decision-making process. Perhaps women would have voted for the demonstration bomb option close enough to Japanese territory to be convincing.

Also very telling is that Nagasaki was dropped a full three days after Hiroshima.

It is usually the case that the best solutions come from an intellectual response to an issue, understanding it in its entirety, with empathy and compassion.

While there are notable examples of outstanding women leaders all over our South Asian region, due to the time constraints, I would recall three instances :

- (i) when Former Prime Minister of India, Indira Gandhi led India through war in 1971 to a historic peace accord, she took care to inform world leaders, creating an understanding among them, of the issues and the situation in Bangladesh *before* entering into military operations alongside the Mukti Bahini for the liberation of Bangladesh.
- (ii) PM Sheikh Hasina has spearheaded international 'green partnerships' for her Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan for a green future for Bangladesh. She has continuously promoted women in peace and security, and the Bangladeshi women corps in peacekeeping have been particularly popular and successful.
- (iii) Courageous Afghani women are fearlessly lobbying in international fora to bring due attention to the plight of their sisters in Afghanistan.

And there are many more notable examples of the successful foreign policy and diplomatic efforts of women leaders and officials in our region.

At the present time, there is, indeed, a strong case for inducting more South Asian women into diplomacy. In the past decade, women entrants into India's diplomatic service increased from 25 per cent per batch of 25-20 officers to about 40 per cent.

In fact, greater representation of South Asian women in international organizations including the United Nations

would give voice to South Asia's legitimate human security priorities while influencing a more enlightened global governance grounded in the realities of the world today.

I am reminded of my recent posting as envoy of my Government in London, where I worked very closely with my counterpart women envoys – particularly from Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka. We found it fruitful to consult closely and work on many themes of common interest together.

External Affairs Minister of India, Dr S. Jaishankar, has stated that he agrees with bringing in feminist perspective to foreign policy everywhere and has emphasised that such a framework must evolve organically to succeed.

So, given that we in South Asia have already been doing for women and by women what advanced societies consider to be a better way, why do we still see, every day, that we still have a long way to go? What are the efficiencies that we need to build in? Are we in South Asia taking up regular reviews of the outcome of our collective and bilateral efforts?

Have we tried to work together as South Asian women for climate change, women for energy and food security, women for preventing the next global health crisis, women for women refugees, women for the women of Afghanistan and women for disarmament, etc.

We could, in these sessions, evaluate achievements and identify areas for greater collective thrust for better results.

Thank You!





# **Women, Foreign Policy and South Asia: Perspective from Nepal**

Prof. Meena Vaidya Malla<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Global scenario has been changing with regards to changing roles and responsibilities of women in domestic and international arena. However, such changes are not the dramatic results but outcomes of the continued struggle and feminist movements spanning decades. Women fought against social, institutional, and entrenched masculinity for voting rights, justice and equality in national politics. It is with their endeavour that they are now promoting capable leadership beyond the national level.

Despite such a promising trend and potentiality, women especially in South Asia are still subjugated with low participation in international relations and foreign policy making. In Asia, the proportion of women as ambassadors and permanent representatives in United Nations (UN) organisations is just 12%, far less than the global average of 20.54%. (*2022 Global Gender Gap Report*).

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**1 Author is well known academic and former Head, Central Department of Political Science, Tribhuvan University, Nepal.**

Whereas, South Asia is the region where the symbol of mother occupies a central position in the construction of nationhood (Mohsin, 2005, 136). Poets and scholars from the region have eulogised the motherland in South Asia. The region also holds a commendable history in terms of women in positions of power with Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, electing female leaders as head of the government and state. Despite improvement in terms of the political representation of women in South Asian countries, problems remain which need to be addressed to ensure that feminist outlooks are taken into serious consideration in making international decisions. In many Asian countries, the feminist movement has already created space to push gender-equitable engagements. But their entry into foreign policy and diplomacy is seen as mere tokenism, rather than participation in their own right. Women diplomats who entered through the same exam as their male counterparts have had to struggle against personal, social, institutional, and state patriarchy (Chenoy, 2023, 25).

Now discourses have been beginning on the need to include more women in positions of power in the area of foreign policy and diplomacy in South Asia. So an increasing number of countries have been developing gender equality notion as a guiding principle of foreign policy, often understood as feminist foreign policy (FFP). Now the scholars from the region have already appreciated the development of FFP as a momentous departure from the conventional; towards a more pragmatic foreign policy based on universal values of equality, social justice, human rights and right to self-determination.

This makes foreign policy inclusive, more representative, gender balanced based on people's sentiment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Questions may arise why feminist foreign policy is needed? How can we inform policy discourses from a gender lens? How can women make a difference in foreign policy making and implementing especially in South Asia? The paper is an attempt to answer the above questions with special reference to Nepal.

### **Integrating Gender Perspective in Foreign Policy**

The feminist analysis of foreign policy is relatively a new development. While literature on feminism and international relations grows, critical gaps still exist. So women, their rational concerns and perception always remain at the margins of academic discussions, policy deliberations and decision making. Studies and research have shown that inclusive and meaningful foreign policies demand the involvement of women, who occupy half of national and global population. It is logical and fair that women must have a say in international policies that affect them in their lives and destiny.

So time is ripe for Asian women, academics, and leaders to begin discussions on gendered foreign policy. An increasing number of scholars have gradually recognized that gender is fundamental to international politics and, therefore, it is inseparable from, conflict, political participation and decision making (Porter, 2007). Gender is proved to be a major component of military, economic and diplomatic relations between and among the community of nations. How a gender-conscious approach supports defence, democracy, and diplomacy makes the regional

environment more resilient. Women's peace and security issues are central to peace processes and negotiations. Governments and multilateral agencies are more concerned on that and seek to articulate that perspective in different spheres of foreign policy. It includes areas like aid/ development assistance, trade policies, bilateral or multilateral collaborations on healthcare, clean energy and climate goals and also issues with long-term effects on social stability and economic growth.

2001 onwards, UN Women began pushing for the passing of the Security Council Resolution 1325 that emphasized on women's participation and leadership in international security and peace bodies. Feminist foreign policy approach demands for gender-balanced foreign policy and emphasizes diplomatic relations between nations to explicitly practice gender mainstreaming as a policy approach at all levels of foreign policy making. This ensures that development assistance targets gender inequality and transforms gender relations to focus on women's security, development and rights. This also ensures to introduce institutional and legislative mechanisms to promote women's leadership within the foreign policy portfolio.

We need to acknowledge the fact that current world order is witnessing shifts in power dynamics. Profound changes in global alliances are seen. Research shows that women's inherent qualities of skill, management, culture of commitment, compromise and mutual understanding for shared benefit make the environment peaceful. Elstain questions the equation of peace-feminine-war. (Elstain, 1995, p.357). It is said that war begins in the

minds of men, peace is restored in the minds of women. The logic behind is women cannot possibly favour violence since they are mothers and nurturers. So the inclusion of women in this area would have an influence on making nations, regions and the globe resilient.

### **Feminist Foreign Policy: Possibilities and Challenges**

Foreign policy and diplomacy are gender-neutral terms which do not differentiate between male and female. However, quantitative studies show the inadequate female representation in important positions in the international arena in South Asia. This is evidenced by the fact that diplomatic corps of South Asian countries tend to have very few women in positions of power. Men as chief agents of a sovereign state drive the sector of national interests, security and power without caring much about ethical values of gender justice and equality. Ultimately, issues of security, terrorism, and international relations are seen in male dominated foreign policy landscape. It is also perceived that what happens to men is political, but what happens to women is cultural. This idea of considering man as a political animal and woman as a cultural being explains the absence of women from foreign policy affairs. Nepal is no exception to this phenomenon. This is largely due to false yet persistent gendered beliefs determined by the norms and values laid out in the society.

The feminist approaches toward foreign policy have introduced gender as a key variable in analysing international behaviour of states. It is guided by the

conviction that their representation in external relations and interactions will ensure women's access to positions of power, diplomacy and governance on the agenda of state's foreign policy. An outlook that women rely on emotions and focus on soft-issues is still prevalent in many countries. Whereas hard and soft diplomatic dichotomy is there, defence, military and security are reserved as male domains and diplomatic decision-making surrounding topics of international trafficking, migration and women empowerment are labelled as soft-domains. The observable fact is that diplomatic and foreign policy structure and decision making being monopolised by men does not allow space for feminist voices.

In that context, feminist foreign policy (FFP) agenda can act as a new perspective and opportunity to view war and peace from a different lens. It allows countries to develop a holistic outlook towards decision-making in the international security arena by incorporating the voices of women. Hearing the voices of people from traditionally underrepresented groups in society will shed light upon the intersectional impact of any decision-making process through a feminist lens. Adopting a feminist foreign policy in such a situation will allow countries in South Asia to assert their commitment to gender equality by addressing intersectional issues in both internal and international arena. Gender based foreign policy agenda thus aspires to engage with the realist world of international politics.

Therefore, an increasing number of states have already adopted feminist foreign policy to address structural gender inequality through women's qualitative and

quantitative representation in foreign policy. Sweden adopted FFP in 2014. Germany presented the guidelines for a feminist foreign policy at the Federal Foreign Office in March 2023. France, Luxemburg, Spain, Mexico and Libya also adopted FFP in July 2021. Many states including Norway, Finland, the Netherlands, the USA, Australia and South Africa, who upheld a commitment to gender equality as a major principle of their foreign policy have begun the journey towards it. Other nations have also followed including Ireland, Mexico, the UK, and the first in Asia, Japan. Asian nations may not have national action plans but they have adopted policies, domestic and foreign, that signals a change both in domestic and international arena.

Studies show that the empowerment of women leads to better governance, economic growth, better human development indicators, and overall peace and stability in the nation. In many South Asian families, women are usually considered peacemakers, continually building alliances and mending relationships inside the family structure, which are all skills originating in the home that are integral to dealing with national and international actors.

### **Nepal's Quest for FFP**

Foreign policy is a state's outlook toward international engagement. Engaging with other states, the multilateral organizations, and foreign groups, diplomatic representatives define development assistance, transfer of knowledge and skill, innovation, trade and development cooperation agendas. So allowing more



women representation not just in domestic but also international politics will open up new avenues for countries to make way for a more prosperous society.

Nepal envisions promotion of gender equality at the international level. The fundamental objective of Nepal's foreign policy is to enhance the dignity of the nation by safeguarding sovereignty, territorial integrity, independence and promoting economic wellbeing and prosperity of Nepal. (Foreign Policy of Nepal, 2023).

There is hope for progress, as governments have invested in opening opportunities that were traditionally perceived to be male dominated. Nepal has more women peacekeepers deployed in UN Peace keeping missions who have proved themselves to be capable, reliable and trust worthy. In 2011 in response to the UN Resolution 1235, Nepal had approved a national action plan for women, peace and security. For Nepal to translate its national and international commitments to actions, she needs to pursue a feminist foreign policy agenda which will have a direct impact on the present foreign policy outlook. It will add new dimension to the existing foreign relations framework to gain more support and cooperation from more countries in the field of peace building and crisis resolution. If Nepal pursues a feminist foreign policy and actively takes steps to ensure that the increased representation also translates into concrete action, merit and quality of women officers at senior level positions; it can project a new image that will have a significant impact on its global standing.

## **Policy Recommendations**

South Asia and specially Nepal can have a foreign policy by having large role for women in foreign policy making and implementation. The following recommendations should be taken into consideration if they are to hold their rightful place in the nation and region.

### **Strategic Objective**

Women are capable negotiators and mediators. Giving equal space to women at the highest level of national policy and diplomatic representation will enhance Nepal's reputation in South Asia and at the global stage. Institutionalizing a feminist foreign policy needs to be a strategic objective of Nepal's foreign policy. Such a foreign policy would enhance Nepal's credentials when she would speak for the rights of women living under poverty, deeply impacted by the climate crisis, ongoing conflicts and insecurity in international forums.

### **Make Women's Issue Central to Foreign Policy**

Women's issues are not just supplementary or in any way less important than other issues. So quotas and token opportunities are not enough. It is crucial to raise awareness about the issue, promote open discussion as a priority concern on rights based approach. Only then can those who dedicate themselves to international relations create an ecosystem of enhanced cooperation among all.

## **Practicing Gender Mainstreaming as Policy Approach**

For realizing FFP, all national decision makers and stake holders including Prime Minister's Office, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Parliament and Judiciary need to work on enhancing representation of women at levels providing adequate resources and opportunities to women in the area. So it is clear that legislation and regulations have to be formulated with productive outcomes.

## **Attitudinal Change**

Although Nepal never had institutional barriers for women in foreign services, family-the micro agent and society, political parties, civil society-the macro agents of political socialization have not been encouraging the women.

## **Educational curriculum**

Feminist foreign policy literature and scholarship in international relations are still developing. The academic field of international relation is also dominated by men. Women's perspectives and concerns remain at the margins of discussions, policy debates and decision making. Awareness must be created about the rights of women through educational institutions. For that school text books and the media must be gender-proactive and portray women without a gender bias. University curriculum should have an adequate space emphasizing the significant role of women in international relations and foreign policy.

## Way ahead/commitment

There is nothing inherently gendered about the study of international relations. So the South Asian nations and particularly Nepal must unlock the masculine construction of foreign policy, patriarchal mind-set and gender biases in foreign policy and diplomacy. There is hope for progress. Focusing on women's spaces at all levels of foreign policy making is the need of the hour.

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# South Asian Women's Leadership in Climate Diplomacy

Syeda Ailiya Naqvi<sup>1</sup>

## Significance of Women in Climate Action

Climate change is an existential threat to all of humanity, and effective action to combat it requires the entire global population. Women make up around 50 per cent of the world's population however their presence at international climate negotiations is around 30 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Even though the impact of climate change is indiscriminate, women are disproportionately affected because of their socioeconomic positions and social roles in society which makes them more vulnerable and puts an additional burden on them in post-disaster situations. This is reflected in the lack of access to resources, health services, education and limited role in decision-making processes for women. Therefore, their participation in decision-making for climate action is vital. More importantly, being primary caregivers, women play a key role as first responders to the needs of their families,

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1 **Author is Managing Editor and Co-Director at the Centre for Strategic and Contemporary Research, Islamabad.**

2 Halton, Mary. 2018. "Climate Change 'Impacts Women More than Men.'" *BBC News*, March 8, 2018. <https://www.bbc.com/news/science-environment-43294221>.

hence they are central to building resilient communities.<sup>3</sup> Their active role in the informal sector enables them to have a unique understanding of methods of adaptation and environmental sustainability.

Studies have shown a positive relationship between increased female representation and climate action. Research analysing 91 parliaments, concluded that greater female presence in leadership roles resulted in rigorous climate change policies.<sup>4</sup> Another study indicated that a one per cent increase in the percentage of the Women's Political Empowerment Index has resulted in an 11.51 per cent decrease in the country's emissions.<sup>5</sup> Positive links have also been found between women's leadership and adherence to environmental policies. Therefore, it has become increasingly important to make climate policymaking and climate negotiations gender-inclusive and gender-balanced.

### **UNFCCC Towards Gender-inclusive Policy Making**

The Conference of Parties (CoP) has been central to climate discourse. The scope of this paper limits itself to

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3 UN Women Watch. 2009. "Women, Gender Equality and Climate Change." [https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate\\_change/downloads/Women\\_and\\_Climate\\_Change\\_Factsheet.pdf](https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/climate_change/downloads/Women_and_Climate_Change_Factsheet.pdf).

4 Mavisakalyan, Astghik, and Yashar Tarverdi. 2019. "Gender and Climate Change: Do Female Parliamentarians Make Difference?" *European Journal of Political Economy* 56 (January): 151–64. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejpoleco.2018.08.001>.

5 Lv, Zhike, and Chao Deng. 2019. "Does Women's Political Empowerment Matter for Improving the Environment? A Heterogeneous Dynamic Panel Analysis." *Sustainable Development* 27 (4): 603–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/sd.1926>.

how the legislation under the United Nations Framework Convention for Climate Change (UNFCCC) encourages women's representation in climate negotiations. The image below shows the progression towards gender-inclusive policy-making on climate change over the years at the COPs, by noting some significant decisions made to strengthen women's leadership in climate change under the UNFCCC.

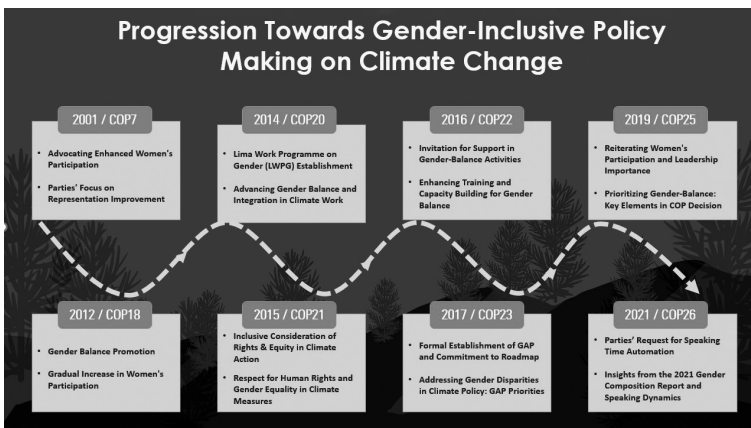


Image 1.0: Progression Towards Gender-Inclusive Policy Making on Climate Change.<sup>6</sup>

The UNFCCC and the Kyoto Protocol were the primary treaties on climate change in the 1990s, however none of the two mentioned gender. It was not until the COP held in Marrakesh in 2001 which concluded by calling

6 Gender Climate Tracker. 2016. "Women's Participation Statistics in Climate Diplomacy." Genderclimatetracker.org. September 19, 2016. <https://genderclimatetracker.org/participation-stats/introduction>.



for increased representation of women.<sup>7</sup> After this, it took another decade for any developments on giving importance to women and it was in 2012 that an increase in female participation and gender-balanced representation was advocated.

In 2014, the LIMA Work Program on Gender was established. This was noteworthy because it encouraged a “gender-responsive climate policy” by incorporating “gender considerations” in the work of the parties.<sup>8</sup> The Paris Agreement was ratified in 2015 and emphasized gender equality and women empowerment. At COP22, capacity building and training were added as dimensions of effective women empowerment.

Then the Gender Action Plan in 2017 was another key milestone. At COP25 the LIMA Work Program on Gender and the Gender Action Plan were enhanced for five years. The Gender Action Plan focused on five priority areas which aimed to mainstream gender, strengthen integration of a gendered perspective, make climate action gender responsive and monitor and coordinate

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7 Skutsch, Margaret M. 2002. “Protocols, Treaties, and Action: The ‘Climate Change Process’ Viewed through Gender Spectacles.” *Gender and Development* 10 (2): 30–39. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4030571>.

8 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. n.d. “Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG).” [www4.unfccc.int/sites/NWPStaging/Pages/Lima-Work-Programme-on-Gender.aspx#:~:text=The%20Lima%20Work%20Programme%20on%20Gender%20\(LWPG\)%20was%20established%20in.](https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NWPStaging/Pages/Lima-Work-Programme-on-Gender.aspx#:~:text=The%20Lima%20Work%20Programme%20on%20Gender%20(LWPG)%20was%20established%20in.)

with other bodies on gender.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the COP26 decision went on to address the technicalities of an increased speaking time of women at climate negotiations, as it was noticed that although women's representation was gradually increasing, males still took up the majority of the active participation space.

Overall, a gradual transformation has been noticed in climate diplomacy when it comes to the representation of women. To date, 120 UNFCCC decisions mention gender, out of which 51 specifically refer to gender balance in leadership and decision-making on climate change. The progress is slower than it should be considering the impact women can make, but it is happening and can be reflected in the increase in participation of women from 31 per cent at COP14 in 2008 to 35 per cent at COP27 in 2022.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, women still have a long way to go specifically for countries that have been severely impacted by climate change.

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9 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. n.d. "Lima Work Programme on Gender (LWPG)." [www4.unfccc.int](https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NWPStaging/Pages/Lima-Work-Programme-on-Gender.aspx#:~:text=The%20Lima%20Work%20Programme%20on%20Gender%20(LWPG)%20was%20established%20in.). [https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NWPStaging/Pages/Lima-Work-Programme-on-Gender.aspx#:~:text=The%20Lima%20Work%20Programme%20on%20Gender%20\(LWPG\)%20was%20established%20in.](https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/NWPStaging/Pages/Lima-Work-Programme-on-Gender.aspx#:~:text=The%20Lima%20Work%20Programme%20on%20Gender%20(LWPG)%20was%20established%20in.)

10 Women's Environment and Development Organization. 2023. "Who Decides: Women's Participation in the UN Climate Change Convention." WEDO. June 8, 2023. <https://wedo.org/who-decides-womens-participation-in-the-un-climate-change-convention/#:~:text=At%20a%20glance%3A.>

## **South Asia's Climate Profile**

Over the past two decades, the South Asian region has been declared the most vulnerable to extreme climate events. Floods, droughts, heatwaves and cyclones are the most common climate-induced disasters. Climate risk is exacerbated by other factors primarily the high population density of the region, high rates of poverty and geography. Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal are the three countries located in the region that are amongst the top ten countries in the world most vulnerable to climate change according to the Global Climate Risk Index.<sup>11</sup> It is noteworthy that these countries contribute less than one per cent to global greenhouse gas emissions.

Climate-induced disasters have impacted more than half of the South Asian region's population.<sup>12</sup> A climate disaster cannot be analysed in isolation; it acts as a threat multiplier, having a ripple effect by creating health and food insecurity, and economic and political instability. It also disproportionately impacts, women, children and marginalized communities, which can be noticed in the increased rates of gender-based violence for example. As a result, it directly challenges human security by putting an additional burden on countries' economies and social and political systems.

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11 Eckstein, David, Vera Kunzel, and Laura Schafer. 2021. "Global Climate Risk Index 2021 | Germanwatch E.V." German Watch. January 25, 2021. <https://www.germanwatch.org/en/19777>.

12 The World Bank. 2022. "OneSouthAsia, Climate Resilience, Disruptive Technologies, Innovation, Mitigation, Climate Change." World Bank. May 23, 2022. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/events/2022/05/15/innovate-and-mitigate-emerging-solutions-for-climate-resilience-in-south-asia>.

Losses as a result of climate change in South Asia are estimated to total US dollars 518 billion by 2050 and double by 2070.<sup>13</sup> According to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s report, weather forecasting for years to come also portrays a bleak picture for the region.<sup>14</sup> Addressing this is a pressing priority for the region and requires an all-hands-on-board approach, which most importantly must include women.

### Analysing South Asian Female Representation at COPs

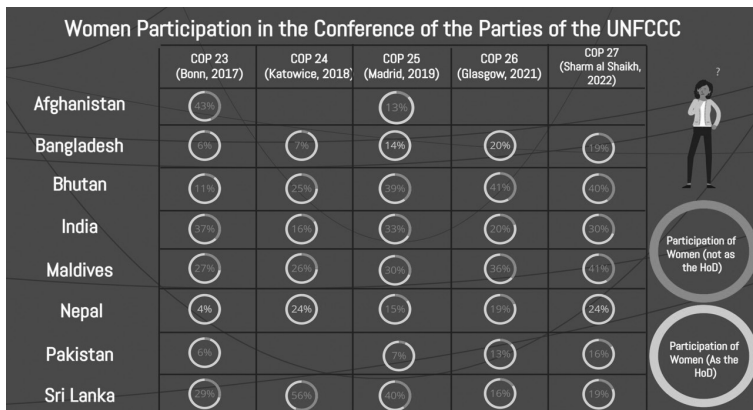


Image 2.0: South Asian Women’s Participation in the Past Five COPs<sup>15</sup>

13 Mechler, Reinhard and Surminski Swenja, eds. 2019. *Climate Risk Management, Policy and Governance*. Springer. Switzerland: Springer. <https://www.springer.com/series/15515>.

14 Pillai, Aditya, Mandakini Chnadra, and Sharon Mathew. 2022. “Examining the Climate Change Report by IPCC.” Centre for Policy Research. March 1, 2022. <https://environmentality.cprindia.org/blog/ipcc-report-on-climate-impacts-sounds-alarm-bells-for-india-south-asia>.

15 Gender Climate Tracker. 2016. “Women’s Participation Statistics in Climate Diplomacy.” Genderclimatetracker.org. September 19, 2016. <https://genderclimatetracker.org/participation-stats/introduction>.

The data in image 2.0 has been extracted from the Gender Climate Tracker and represents female participation from eight South Asian (Sri Lanka, Maldives, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan) countries at the past five COPs from 2017 to 2022 (No COP was held in the year 2020 because of COVID-19).

For each year, female representation at the COP is noted as a percentage of the total delegates from the country.

An analysis of the data reveals that only two countries, Bangladesh and Nepal have had women in leadership positions as delegation heads. Twice from Bangladesh and thrice from Nepal. No other country has had a woman as a head of delegation at the COPs in the past five years. Consistently low participation has been noticed from Pakistan, with no female representation at COP24. Moreover, in three out of the five COPs, Afghanistan has zero female participation. However, this does not mean there was sufficient male participation. At COP26 for example, there was no representation from Afghanistan, because the applications of a female and five male Afghans, residing outside of Afghanistan were rejected last minute.<sup>16</sup> At COP27, only a male Afghan activist was present to represent his country. It is important to note that Sri Lanka had the highest percentage of female representation at 56 per cent at the COP held in 2018.

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16 Taylor, Diane. 2021. "Afghans Have Cop26 Delegate Applications Rejected Days before Event." *The Guardian*, October 30, 2021, sec. Environment. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/oct/30/afghans-cop26-delegate-applications-rejected>.

Globally, female participation has been more from Latin America and Europe, averaging 45 per cent.<sup>17</sup> Although a gradual increase is noticed in female participation from South Asia, in the last five COP events it still averages only 25 per cent

### **Challenges to Increased Female Representation**

South Asian countries share some common social challenges that hinder women from taking up leadership roles. Certain socio-cultural roles associated with women make their responsibilities of household chores and the responsibility towards their family their priority. Most women do not wish to work full-time, while most engage in the informal sector.

Politics and hardcore leadership roles are associated with males, even though South Asia has seen some strong female leaders. Women often feel they are not taken seriously at top-level positions and go through extreme levels of discrimination. The environment is not conducive to encouraging women to take up important positions. In contrast, climate is also looked at as a "soft" subject. While this may be considered negative, this connotation gives more space to women in a male-dominated society.

The limited capacity building, education, training and awareness in climate and environmental management

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17 Bigda, Lindsay. 2022. "Women's Participation in the UNFCCC: 2022 Report." Women's Environment and Development Organization. June 9, 2022. <https://wedo.org/womens-participation-in-the-unfccc-2022-report/>.

also restricts women from taking up senior positions. Moreover, the Global Gender Gap Report 2023 published by the World Economic Forum, ranks countries based on education, health, economy and political empowerment. Majority of the South Asian countries are poorly ranked. The list assesses 146 countries, and all South Asian countries fall between 100 to 146, except Bangladesh, which has performed fairly well in all the previously mentioned variables.<sup>18</sup> These indicators also suggest the position of women in South Asia and the challenges they face.

### **Observations Moving Forward**

There is strong evidence that supports how women's leadership can have a positive and effective impact on climate action and how women are more supportive of environmental policies. This is linked to how climate change impacts women differently as compared to men. Considering the devastation caused by climate disasters in South Asia, it has become increasingly important to encourage women to take up active roles in leadership for climate action both at the national and international levels.

South Asian women are under-represented in global climate negotiations and although there is a gradual increase in representation, its effective participation is still questionable. At the national level, South Asian countries have climate policies and action plans

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18 World Economic Forum. 2023. "Global Gender Gap Report 2023." World Economic Forum. June 20, 2023. <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/in-full>.

that include gender however, there are still limited females that are in leadership roles and specific quotas need to be added in leadership positions to increase female participation. Gender equality also needs to be incorporated into climate finance to encourage women-led initiatives which can bring forward their unique approach to climate action. By empowering women, South Asian countries can generate a culture amongst its youth to bring forward girls in climate action. Regional projects must also encourage women's leadership and facilitate programs in climate for young women. This can also include scholarships for women to study climate change by regional and international organisations, which could act as a pathway to professional development in the field.

When discussing female representation in leadership roles, particularly concerning climate diplomacy, it is crucial to understand that although physical presence at international climate negotiations may be an important step in the right direction to make climate action more effective, however, it is necessary to make sure that participation for climate action is also meaningful. As discussed earlier, the decisions under UNFCCC have brought forward nuances such as speaking times of male versus female delegates to ensure gender-balanced participation. But, it is imperative that at a national level, countries ensure that female leadership representing the countries' climate issues is abreast with the on-ground realities. Often the political and policymaking elite, more so in the developing South are detached from the general masses. The disconnect with the grassroots disables meaningful participation which would bring about concrete actionable solutions. This is all the more



important because, in the event of a climate calamity, it is the people close to or part of the affected population who are the first responders for providing relief. A point to be noted is how the COPs have also evolved. In the beginning, COPs were limited to representation from only governments, however, participants have now diversified and include representations of climate activists, policymakers, and experts from many sectors.

It is therefore not only imperative to make sure women's representation in climate diplomacy is meaningful, but also that national, regional and international level decision-making mechanisms and platforms encourage and provide women that space which allows them to best represent their perspective, particularly of women from the global South.

# **Re-envisioning South Asia's Foreign Policy: An Analytical Study of Women's Role and Experiences**

Surya Prakash<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

Re-envisioning South Asia's foreign policy marks a pivotal and dynamic discourse that holds the potential to reshape regional dynamics and global interactions. South Asia has historically been a hotspot of complex relationships, historic rivalries, and intricate geopolitical dynamics. The role of women in South Asia's foreign policy has evolved over the years, albeit with significant challenges and limitations. Traditionally, foreign policy and diplomacy in the region have been male-dominated spheres, often reflecting deeply ingrained gender norms and inequalities. However, there has been a growing recognition of the need for a gendered perspective in foreign policy formulation and implementation. This recognition stems from the understanding that women's participation and perspectives are crucial for achieving more inclusive, comprehensive, and effective foreign policy outcomes.

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In the past, women's involvement in South Asia's foreign policy was often limited to symbolic or ceremonial roles, such as hosting international events or cultural exchanges. Their participation in decision-making processes, strategic negotiations, and high-level diplomacy was largely marginalized. Over time, increased awareness of gender equality and the efforts of women's rights advocates have led to some progress in breaking down these barriers. The role of women in South Asia's foreign policy is multifaceted as Women in Diplomacy and Decision-Making, Women in Conflict Resolution and Peace-building, Human Rights and Development, Cultural Diplomacy and Soft Power, etc. In recent years, several South Asian countries have appointed women to key diplomatic positions. For instance, in 2021, Bangladesh appointed Ambassador Rabab Fatima as the Permanent Representative to the United Nations. She focuses on human rights issues and disarmament treaties. Similarly, In August 2022, Ms. Ruchira Kamboj was appointed as India's Permanent Representative to the United Nations. Women diplomats from the region have played crucial roles in negotiations and peace processes. In Sri Lanka, the "Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)"<sup>2</sup> agenda gained prominence during the post-war period. Women-led organizations like the "Mothers of the Disappeared" or

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2 With the assistance of the Government of Japan and UN Women, Sri Lanka has adopted its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) for the years 2023 to 2027. According to the international obligations outlined in Resolution 1325 (2000) of the UN Security Council, the Plan strengthens the nation's legal and policy structures for the protection and emancipation of women. Additionally, it attempts to improve cooperation amongst those involved in Sri Lanka's women, peace, and security agenda, which is essential for long-term stability and progress.

“Association of War Affected Women” played significant roles in advocating for justice and reconciliation after the Civil War. In Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai's global advocacy for girls' education brought international attention to the challenges faced by girls in conflict-affected areas. Women artists, writers, and cultural figures have acted as cultural ambassadors, fostering understanding and dialogue between countries. These examples underscore the significance of a gendered perspective in foreign policy. Integrating women's voices and concerns into diplomatic efforts can lead to more comprehensive and sustainable outcomes.

### **Feminist Theory in International Relations**

Feminist theory in International Relations is a perspective that seeks to analyze and critique how gender and patriarchy intersect with global politics. Cynthia Enloe, J. Ann Tickner, Nira Yuval-Davis, etc. are just a few examples of the many scholars who have contributed to the development and advancement of feminist theory in international relations. Analyzing women's role and experiences in South Asia's foreign policy through a feminist perspective, which encompasses various theories and concepts that highlight the gendered dynamics of foreign policy and their impact on women's participation and experiences in South Asia's Foreign Policy. Some theoretical lenses in the context of South Asia's foreign policy are the Feminist International Relations Theory, Inter-sectionality and Marginalized Voices, Inclusivity, and Representation, Gendered Division of Labor, Diplomatic Representation and Symbolism, Gender Mainstreaming and Policy Impact, etc. Feminist International Relations

theory seeks to illuminate how gender norms and power dynamics shape international relations. It emphasizes the need to consider women's perspectives, experiences, and contributions to foreign policy. An example is the "Participation of Women in Afghanistan Peace Talks"<sup>3</sup>. In Afghanistan, women's inclusion in peace talks is crucial for ensuring a sustainable and gender-sensitive peace process. A feminist lens would analyze how Afghan women's voices have been historically marginalized and how their inclusion in peace negotiations could lead to more comprehensive and lasting agreements. It would highlight the importance of addressing gender-based violence, women's rights, and socio-economic empowerment as integral components of the peace agenda. Similarly, "Inter-sectionality" recognizes that individuals have multiple, intersecting identities that influence their experiences. An example is: 'Religious and Ethnic Minority Women' in India's Diplomacy. When examining India's foreign policy, it would consider how factors such as caste, religion, and ethnicity intersect with gender to impact their access to decision-making positions and influence their diplomatic interactions. This perspective could uncover the challenges these women face in navigating both gender and minority identities in a predominantly male and majority culture environment. Incorporating feminist theory into the study of South Asia's foreign policy deepens our understanding by revealing the hidden power dynamics, promoting more

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3 According to the report, women's involvement in peace initiatives is essential to maintaining peace in Afghanistan and calls on the government and the international community to take an active role in promoting women's access to leadership positions and meaningful engagement.

inclusive practices, and advocating for policy changes that reflect the experiences and needs of all individuals.

### **Women's Role in South Asia's Foreign Policy**

Women's participation in foreign policy decision-making and diplomatic roles in South Asian countries has evolved, reflecting changes in societal norms, political landscapes, and global trends. Challenges and disparities persist while progress is made. Some of the historical and contemporary examples from selected South Asian countries are-

**India:** In history, India's first female Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, played a pivotal role in shaping the country's foreign policy during her tenure. She was known for her assertive approach on the global stage, including during the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. Vijaya Laxmi Pandit was the first female ambassador who played a crucial role in India's foreign policy. In the contemporary period, Women like Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman held significant diplomatic and defense positions. Sushma Swaraj served as India's Minister of External Affairs and played a crucial role in foreign affairs.

**Pakistan:** In history, Benazir Bhutto, Pakistan's first female Prime Minister, made contributions to foreign policy discussions. Her role in regional diplomacy, such as during the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summits, showcased women's involvement. In the contemporary period, Hina Rabbani Khar, Pakistan's first female Foreign Minister, made

International headlines. Despite her prominent role, women's representation in Pakistan's foreign policy apparatus remains limited.

**Bangladesh:** In history, Bangladesh's founding leader, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, appointed women to key diplomatic posts, reflecting an early commitment to gender equality in foreign policy. In the contemporary period, Begum Khalida Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wazed have been prime ministers.

**Sri Lanka:** In history, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the world's first female Prime Minister, had an impact on Sri Lanka's foreign policy. She advocated for non-alignment and played a significant role in international forums like her daughter President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga.

**Nepal:** In history, the Nepali women deputy Prime Ministers Shailaja Acharya and Sujata Koirala paved the way for women in diplomacy. They emphasized women's empowerment and gender equality in foreign policy. In the contemporary period, Nepal has taken steps to increase women's participation in diplomatic roles, and women have held ambassadorial positions including now with the country's first female foreign secretary Sewa Lamsal.

Women's participation in foreign policy decision-making in South Asian countries has seen progress, albeit with ongoing challenges. Historical examples showcase pioneering women who paved the way, while contemporary efforts are being made to address gender disparities and promote inclusive foreign policy practices.

## **Gendered Perspectives on Foreign Policy Issues**

Women's experiences and perspectives often differ from men's when addressing key foreign policy challenges in South Asia. These differences arise from a variety of factors, including societal roles, cultural norms, and personal experiences. Conflict Resolution and Peace-building, Economic Diplomacy, Regional Cooperation, Human Rights, and Gender Equality, etc. are some ways in which women's perspectives diverge from those of men in addressing foreign policy challenges:

**Conflict Resolution and Peace-building:** Women tend to prioritize community well-being and social cohesion. They may advocate for inclusive peace talks that involve diverse stakeholders, including women and marginalized groups. For instance, in Nepal, women's groups played a crucial role in peace negotiations following the civil conflict, emphasizing the need for justice and inclusion. Men may emphasize power dynamics and security concerns. Their focus might be on disarmament, military strategy, and negotiating with armed groups.

**Regional Cooperation:** Women frequently use cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections to foster regional understanding. They may prioritize collaborative efforts to address shared challenges. An example is the "Sadbhavana" initiative between India and Pakistan, where women from both countries came together to promote peace and mutual understanding. Men may emphasize traditional diplomatic channels and state-to-state negotiations in regional cooperation efforts.



Human Rights and Gender Equality: Women often highlight human rights and gender equality as integral to foreign policy. They may advocate for policies that address gender-based violence and discrimination.

### **Barriers and Enablers**

Women's active involvement in South Asia's foreign policy is influenced by a combination of barriers and enablers. These factors determine how much women can contribute to shaping and implementing a country's international relations strategies. Women's active involvement in foreign policy in South Asian countries is often hindered by a combination of structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. These barriers reflect deeply ingrained gender norms and unequal power dynamics that are-

#### **Barriers:**

Structural Barriers: Underrepresentation in Decision-Making Roles or Limited presence of women in high-level foreign policy positions and decision-making bodies. For example, at present, only 15.25 percent of parliamentarians are women in India, 20.86 percent in Bangladesh, 20.47 percent in Pakistan, 33.09 percent in Nepal, 17.39 percent in Bhutan, 5.33 percent in Sri Lanka, 4.60 percent in Maldives, (Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) report, 2023). Women remain underrepresented in ambassadorship positions across the world especially in South Asia. For example 16.9% in India and 13.3% in Bangladesh (Women in Diplomacy Index 2022). While these figures show an improvement from previous years,

they do not even come close to the number of women living in these countries.

**Cultural and Societal Norms:** Traditional Gender Roles or Deep-seated cultural norms often restrict women's engagement in diplomatic and international affairs. Family Expectations or Societal expectations regarding women's caregiving roles are another factor that hinders their pursuit of demanding diplomatic careers. The poor performance of South Asian Countries in the Global Gender Gap Index shows how cultural and societal norms impact gender parity in these countries.

**Institutional Barriers:** Institutional barriers play a significant role in hindering women's active involvement in South Asia's foreign policy. These barriers are rooted in the policies, practices, and norms within foreign affairs institutions that limit women's access to decision-making and leadership roles. For example, in every South Asian country, Women hold a small percentage of senior level positions in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and diplomatic missions, limiting their influence in foreign policy formulation. The lack of comprehensive policies addressing maternity leave, family support, and work-life balance also discourages women from pursuing or advancing in diplomatic careers.

**Enablers:**

Enablers in the representation of women in the foreign policy of South Asia are factors and initiatives that promote and support the active involvement of women in shaping a country's international relations. These

enablers help overcome barriers and create a more inclusive and equitable foreign policy landscape. Some progressive policies and enablers are implemented in different South Asian countries for the inclusion of women in the decision-making process.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Re-envisioning South Asia's foreign policy to be more gender-inclusive and responsive requires a comprehensive approach that addresses structural, cultural, and institutional barriers. We must fill the missing "gender" in foreign policy by adopting a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP)<sup>4</sup> approach that can dissolve the boundary between "hard" and "soft" issues and address issues and sectors from an equal and egalitarian position and inclusion. Applying a gender lens to perceived soft issues such as health, human rights, Gender Based Violence (GBV), and immigration versus perceived hard issues, ie. trade, security, and conflict, must be reassessed with the same balanced gender perspective. A "gendered foreign policy" approach takes gender into account in everything from increasing women's representation in foreign/diplomatic units to decisions on foreign aid, trade policy, bilateral water management, security, and peace.

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4 Feminist foreign policy (FFP), also known as feminist diplomacy, which refers to policies and practices that promote gender equality and improve women's access to resources and human rights and political participation.

## **Conclusion**

Gender-sensitive foreign policy can lead to more inclusive peace processes and conflict resolution. In countries like Afghanistan, efforts to include women's voices in peace negotiations have gained momentum. It can also address health and education challenges faced by women and girls. In countries like Nepal and India, targeted initiatives focusing on girls' education and women's healthcare can lead to improved health indicators and higher levels of education. Regional cooperation initiatives can strengthen partnerships.

Despite several Affirmative Actions for the upliftment of women still, representation of women in South Asian countries is limited so the need of the hour to Introduce Feminist Foreign Policy in South Asian countries. For now, Feminist Foreign Policy is confined to some Western Countries only. An Affirmative Action for the upliftment of women like India's Women's Reservation Bill [The Constitution (108th Amendment) Bill, 2008], which seeks to reserve one-third of all seats for women in the Lok Sabha and the State Legislative Assemblies, can be taken as a measure and this type of policy can be implemented in all South Asian Countries so that more representation of women in South Asia's Foreign Policies can be ensured.

Gender-sensitive Foreign Policy, Security and Counterterrorism Cooperation, Women's role in Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding, etc. are some other important areas for future research and exploration concerning women and foreign policy in South Asia that need to be explored.

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# Why should South Asia Engage on Feminist Foreign Policy?

Priyanka Bhide<sup>1</sup>

Words such as “Inclusive”, “Gender”, “Feminist” are increasingly used in the Foreign Policy outlook and strategies of countries, a large majority of which are situated in the western hemisphere. As the shaping of a country’s Foreign Policy is of consequence to all partner nations, this trend must be a matter of basic curiosity for all nations. In our work at Kubernein Initiative, we argue the need for countries, as well as civil society, to go beyond curiosity and engage with the conversation in a manner that provides a more diverse perspective for these evolving policies to consider. Such as, through creating greater awareness on what inclusion looks like in different contextual settings. Understanding the need to go beyond the binaries of gender and take a more intersectional approach. In India for example, defining inclusion would require consideration around how castes, community, economic class, geography etc. play a role in defining vulnerabilities.

The canvas for South Asia’s engagement is wide open, as there is no fixed definition, framework, or standard to such a foreign policy approach. Each country has taken its own path, suitable to its specific context and trajectory.

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Sweden, which was the first country to announce a Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014, has since disassociated from the word "Feminist". Yet, several of the systemic changes that were put in place towards ensuring greater rights, representation and resources towards gender parity within the foreign services, as well as policy mechanisms remain. Canada developed a Feminist International Assistance Policy through a consultative process which involved its civil society and citizens. Now, gender is a strong part of trade consideration, with gender chapters included in agreements. Germany did not use the term 'Feminist' to define its policy until last year, and instead began with Gender Mainstreaming within their Federal Foreign Office. France began with Feminist Diplomacy. Spain's introduction of its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) was led by its committed leadership. Mexico's approach is more aspirational, alongside widening the definition of inclusivity to include other genders as well. Today 12 countries have officially made Feminist Foreign Policy announcements. However, there exist several others that have elements of gender mainstreaming evident in their policy action. This is where South Asian countries can consider beginning their engagement, to feed into the evolving discourse.

A few lessons from existing FFP country experiences provide starting points for the discourse in South Asia. It is important to note that every country has had to deal with some form of internal pushback, which remains even as policies evolve. The very use of the term "Feminist" is often construed as negative, and "anti-male", with men and women reacting strongly. In the South Asian context this can be even more problematic as "feminist" can

have a binary connotation, is often seen as a “western” concept, and the word itself does not translate easily into all local languages. To counter pushback, it is important to keep language aside for the moment and focus on how the idea of FFP may take shape in a specific context. A good place to begin is where countries are already doing some form of gender mainstreaming/inclusive action and build on that engagement. In India for example there are instances of gender mainstreaming such as through development partnerships, multilateral engagements, and efforts through the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation programme of the Ministry of External Affairs. Similarly other South Asian countries must first place the conversation within their own domestic contexts.

As an evolving and uncharted policy territory, FFP countries are looking more creatively to shape what such a foreign policy will look like in action. South Asian countries can therefore contribute through greater engagement on the topic, and provide ideas and perspective, before the conversation advances any further. For example, the need to go beyond visual representation of gender, to understand the systemic issues that are often not given adequate attention. In India for example, the women’s reservation bill that was recently passed in the Indian Parliament is a good starting point for rooms where there are absolutely no women. However, there is a need to go beyond - to understand why the women are not there in the first place? This is an important question that plagues several South Asian nations - where often policies are in place to enable equal representation, but the struggle to translate on the ground remains.

When domestic realities are grim, it is often felt that mainstreaming gender in foreign policy is an unrealistic ask. This is not necessarily true. As we have seen with Mexico's example, it is possible for foreign policy efforts to exist alongside domestic policy initiatives. The two will have different markers and targets, as the fundamental objectives, design, and mechanisms of Foreign Policy and Domestic Policy differ. Hence, what inclusion looks like for each must be developed along parallel lines of thinking. The evolving Feminist Foreign Policy approach also serves a larger purpose, as it allows for the security conversation within Foreign Policy to expand from traditional hard security concerns, to include emerging areas of climate and human security. These are grave areas of concern for South Asian countries and another reason to push for greater engagement.

The COSATT conference in 2023 in Kathmandu that brought together academics from the neighborhood demonstrates the existence of the intellectual capacity to have such a conversation in South Asia. However, the fact remains that South Asian countries are diverse and disparate; each has its own perspective to offer. This perspective must be developed with a deep understanding of the core concept of FFP, and how it has evolved outside, to then consider potential for development within respective country contexts. Such a reflection will add greater substance to the evolving global conversation.

# **Dynamics of Contemporary Foreign Policy of Bangladesh: A Feminist Perspective**

Farjana Sharmin<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction:**

Bangladesh is at crossroads in navigating its foreign policy to address various contemporary global dynamics, especially affecting the South Asian region. With a focus on regional connectivity, gender empowerment, and emerging challenges, Bangladesh's foreign policy is undergoing notable changes. Bangladesh stands out most in terms of political empowerment for women, ranking seventh in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index.<sup>1</sup> Women in prime ministerial posts are not uncommon in Bangladesh, which may be the only country in the world where women have held the country's top office more frequently than men over the last fifty years. However, especially in the foreign policy machinery, this viewpoint is not reciprocated in the lower echelons of government or even at the ministerial or legislative levels. With the exception of the Prime Minister, there is just one female cabinet minister, and women held only 22 of the 300 contested seats in the 2018 elections. Nonetheless, there is still much work to be done and

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implementing a feminist foreign policy can play a critical role in mainstreaming women at all levels of government. Here, the study intends to analyse how Bangladesh's foreign and domestic practices are more masculine than feminine. In addition, the study explores how female leadership can be more effective in developing a women-centric foreign policy.

The traditional concept of foreign policy is definitely men centric and masculinity prevails till now in regional and global geopolitics and order. And till today, most of the state system, and foreign policy practice are following the conventional path. Feminism first raised the question against the male-centric, masculine state structure. So, feminist foreign policy is comparatively new phenomena, while there is no universal definition regarding the structure of feminist foreign policy. Liberal democracies are more likely to adopt feminist foreign policy. Though the number of feminist governments or feminist foreign policy supportive countries are still very few. However, the FFP concept is getting popularity in the West but in the case of South Asia or the global south, adopting feminist centric foreign policy in state affairs is relatively challenging. Because any country's foreign policy depends on various internal and external factors; geographical location, geopolitical importance, political stability, economic position and socio-cultural practices that are critical drivers of state's foreign policy and external affairs. In the context of Bangladesh, since its independence the country follows "Non Alignment" and peaceful co-existence approach in maintaining external relations. The country's foreign policy motto is "Friendship to all, and Malice towards none". According

to PM Sheikh Hasina, "What's the problem with it (maintaining friendly ties with both China and India)? We have ties with all our neighbours. Bangladesh has no animosity with anyone because we are following the lesson taught by the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman". Bangladesh's closest neighbour is India, due to geographical proximity, historical and cultural linkage, the country's foreign policy gives priority to India-Bangladesh relations. At the same, we can see that due to its religious affiliations, the country maintains good relations with Organization of Islamic Countries (OIC) countries.

But Bangladesh's foreign policy has considerably changed in the last few years because of country's increasing geopolitical importance and economic development. Once it was called a 'basket case' but is nowadays an emerging power and the fastest growing economy of the region.<sup>2</sup> With the economic advancement, the country has improved its Human Development Indicators. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina during the G20 New Delhi Summit spoke on several key areas, and stated that women, half of the global population, should get equal attention, for building peaceful, just, and inclusive societies. So, the country is prioritizing women welfare and equality in the multi-lateral forums, which is big sign that the country is going through transition before adopting a feminist foreign policy.<sup>3</sup>

### **Constitutional Right Vs. Reality:**

Any country's internal political ecosystem and status of women representation in state's structure are major

factors in shaping foreign policy. No doubt, 30 years of female leadership at the central level has proven women participation in politics. But this representation does not co-relate at the ground level and remains tokenism.

The history of Bangladesh liberation war and linguistic movement was significantly dominated by women sacrifice and contribution. Women were first to protest during the 1952 linguistic movement against West-Pakistan government.<sup>4</sup> But in post-independence era, Bangladesh went through political turmoil and also the socio-political culture changed drastically. Therefore different regimes shaped the political culture and practice with party preference. After the 1990s, country entered into a democratic system and the participation of women at central and local levels increased gradually.

Now the question is, while the country has been mostly ruled by female Prime Ministers, why the percentage of women ministers is still less in the cabinet? During Sheikh Hasina's regime, the country for the first time received a female home minister, foreign minister and parliament speaker. Other than these, in various sectors, women representation is considerably poor. For instance, comparing with the number male diplomats, female are far less and under-represented. Bangladesh has 50-60 female diplomats out of 300 diplomats and as per Women in Diplomacy Index 2022, 8 women ambassadors in a total of 60 missions worldwide.<sup>5</sup> There were 5 women ambassadors in 2017, the number increased in 2018 with 7 ambassadors and currently it's 8.<sup>6</sup> This number itself shows insufficient participation of women in diplomacy.

Stefan Liller in his recent article talks about how despite having a good position in gender equality, discrimination towards women still persists in Bangladesh.<sup>7</sup>

### **Political Empowerment:**

Though Bangladesh has ranked highest in gender parity index in South Asia, women participation at central and local politics is subsequently less. "Under the Local Government Act, 1997 three seats have been reserved for direct election of women. Although they can contest for general seats, most of the women candidates choose the easy path of opting for reserved seats. As the participation of women in central and local politics was not increasing, the government amended the Article 65(3) of Bangladesh Constitution in 2011, which ensures quota for women in local government bodies. During the 2008 election, Awami League announced that the number of reserved seats for women in the parliament will be increased 33%.<sup>8</sup> In the last elections, 22 women were elected through direct voting while 50 women got their seats from reservation system.

### **Bangladesh Foreign policy: Feminist Angle**

Since independence, the country had emphasised gender equality in national and foreign policy affairs. The country has initiated the gender development policy like National Action Plans on Women, adopting Sustainable Development Goals and the Beijing Principles on Women. Yet these initiatives alone do not prove as adopting a 'feminist foreign policy.'



## **History of Bangladesh Liberation war and WPS agenda**

During the nine-month Liberation War, about 3 million valuable lives were lost and more than 2 lakh women experienced sexual violence. So, history of Bangladesh liberation war has shaped country's internal and external policy. Just after independence the country enacted the International Crimes (Tribunals) Act 1973 to prosecute and punish the persons responsible for committing genocide and crimes against humanity during the Liberation War.<sup>9</sup> The trauma of liberation war led Bangladesh to play a significant role in adopting the UNSCR resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security agenda.<sup>10</sup> Government is committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. It is a signatory of the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). Government of Bangladesh also initiated National Women Action policy in 2011 and its 22 targets.

### **Bangladeshi Female Peace-Keepers:**

Bangladesh is leading by example and has pledged to increase female troops in UN Peace Keeping missions. It started contributing in peace keeping missions since 1988. The first contingent of women peace-keepers were sent to East Timor in 2000.<sup>11</sup> So far, total of 962 female peace-keepers from Bangladesh Armed Forces have participated in UN peace keeping operations. Currently 415 female members from Bangladesh Armed Forces are deployed in different peacekeeping missions.<sup>12</sup> Till 2020,

28% of police and 2% of military peace-keepers were women.

### **Woman leadership in Climate action:**

Bangladesh is suffering hugely from climate change. According to the Global Climate Risk Index (CRI) 2021, Bangladesh ranks 7th in terms of the most climate vulnerable states as it was affected by 185 climate change induced disasters that hampered the country's economy with losses worth 3.72 billion dollars from 2000 to 2019. Present government is determined to reduce the carbon emission by 21.8% till 2030. Female leadership in Bangladesh has brought significant achievements in terms of climate action. Various climate friendly policies like National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan (MSPP) have been adopted. As women are at the forefront at times of natural disasters, the government has raised the climate concern at various multi-lateral platforms.

### **Conclusion:**

Last fifty years, Bangladesh has gone through major socio-economic and political transformation. The most positive part of this transformation is political consciousness and economic participation of women in the country. However, a female head of the government surrounded by male cabinet colleagues, somehow exhibit the political culture of patriarchy. The representation of women in local and central politics is not sufficient, and in terms of political empowerment, Bangladesh is still behind. The policy of reservation is not going to

help, if the masculinity prevails in political practice. No doubt, the government has taken various initiatives to establish gender equality in every sector. But, the major challenge before the government would be to assure equal representation of women in parliament. In the context of adopting FFP, it can be said that the country is in a transition. The analysis of Bangladesh foreign policy structure in last 50 years shows that female leadership is not a guarantor of political empowerment of women. So, focus should be on equal participation of women in every sector to fulfil the nation's dream of becoming a middle income country by 2041.

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# **Assessing the Roles and Rights of Women in the Changing Political Landscape of Afghanistan**

Akanksha Meena<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

The women's movement has witnessed various phases throughout the political and cultural history of Afghanistan. While several regimes in Afghanistan recognized and improved the status of women in society by enacting various social reforms, other governments oppressed them by undoing the reforms. During King Abdur Rahman Khan's (1880–1901) rule, significant advancements for women's rights were made, including modifying or repealing various laws that discriminated against them. He raised the age of marriage of women to 16 and granted women the right to inherit from their father and spouse and the right to file for divorce under certain conditions. (Gosh, 2003). Other notable achievements for women's rights during the rule of period King Amanullāh Khan were the voting rights for Afghan women in 1919, opening of the first girls' school in 1921

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and numerous decrees pertaining to administrative, economic, and social changes to advance women's rights. He established new schools for all genders, outlawed forced marriage, fought against polygamy, and instituted strict clothing codes (Levi 2009). His spouse, Queen Soraya, fought for gender equality by removing her veil and started publishing *Ershad-I-Niswan*, or "Guidance for Women," in 1927, advocating for gender equality (Gornall, Salahuddin 2020).

King Zahir Shah, the liberal-minded son of King Nadir Shah, who ruled the country from 1933 until 1973, successfully implemented many of King Amanullah Khan's policies by reopening of girls' schools and the establishment of a new university in 1946 in Kabul. Women attended universities and participated in political and economic activities in urban areas. The new Constitution of 1964 restored women's voting rights and allowed them to run for office. While rural and less affluent groups continued to live by customary law and traditional values, these reforms faced resistance from the local leaders and primarily benefited elite and middle-class women (Allen and Brown, 2000).

In 1973, Mohammad Daud Khan, the country's first president, deposed Shah and ended the monarchy thereby initiating political instability in the country. As president of the country from 1973 to 1978, Khan took a cautious stance on women's rights. Women were elected to the Parliament under his government and Kubra Noorzai, Afghanistan's first female minister, held the minister of public health position. The Communist regime enacted several social reforms with the support

from the Soviet Union, such as making girls' education mandatory and setting a minimum marriage age of 16 for females. (Saba and Suleria 2017).

The Government of Afghanistan (GoA) signed the Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) on August 14, 1980; however, the conflicts in the country did not allow for the ratification of the Convention until 2003. GoA ratified CEDAW on March 5, 2003, without any reservations Considering the violations of women's human rights during the years of war (United Nations 2011). CEDAW is an international agreement with legal force that mandates state parties to end discrimination against their female citizens and advance the equal rights of women and girls. According to the estimates of the U.S. Dept. of State, by the early 1990s, women made up about 40% of doctors, 50% of government employees and college students, and 70% of schoolteachers in Kabul (U.S. Dept. of States 2001).

Post-Soviet Union withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan witnessed a civil conflict between the *mujahideen* and tribal groups, who systematically attacked Afghan women. During the civil conflict in 1995, the Taliban emerged as a new force, primarily composed of Pashtun students from eastern and southern Afghanistan who had attended rigorous traditional Islamic institutions (madari). After the Taliban ousted the last of the mujahideen in 1996 and seized control of a significant portion of the country, women's rights had been abolished in almost every aspect of life (Maizland, 2023).



## **Women's rights during the first Taliban rule of 1996 – 2001**

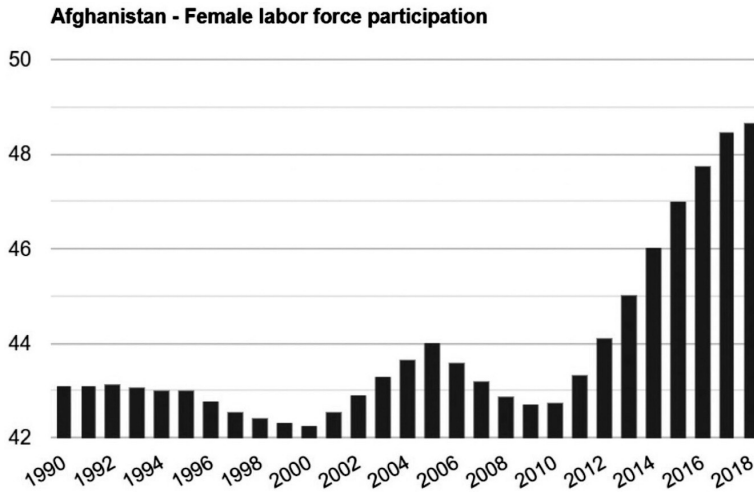
The Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996 after 20 years of political turmoil and civil war. At first, Afghans, especially those from the more conservative and religious areas, welcomed the Taliban as good Muslims who would bring back law and order to the country. However, the Taliban quickly outlawed traditional customs, ushering in a dark period for women's rights. From the outset, the Taliban forbade women from leaving their homes unless accompanied by a male member of the family. For instance, after the Taliban captured Kabul in November 1996, a directive from the religious police stated, "Women, you should not step outside your residence" and were allowed to appear in public if they are escorted by a close male family, such as a brother, father, or spouse, who is a legally recognised escort (mahram) (Noreen 1999).

Taliban decrees also limited women's employment opportunities. The Taliban shut down girls' schools as their first act of immediately implementing the strictest interpretation of Shariah law ever seen in the Muslim world. A 1997 Taliban decree restricted women's employment in the medical industry, mainly as "female health workers." Later, women were permitted to work in different roles for international relief organizations, like the World Food Program's women-only bakeries, which temporarily closed in August 2000. A 1996 decree forbade women from exposing themselves by donning "tight, attractive, fashionable, and charming clothes, [lest they] be cursed by the Islamic Shariah and should

never expect to go to heaven.” In July 1997, the Taliban tightened its restrictions on women’s clothing. These included prohibiting wearing makeup, high-heeled shoes, white socks or shoes, ankle jewellery, and anything that made noise as women walked—women shouldn’t be heard or seen! (Fieldman 2001).

### **Shifts in Afghan women’s rights after 9/11**

The state-building initiative in Afghanistan, led by the United States, implemented several constructive programs between 2001 and 2021. Afghanistan ratified a new constitution in 2004 and reserved 25% of seats for women in provincial councils and legislatures and 30% of civil service positions. (Nehan 2022). Afghanistan was also compelled to uphold and implement provisions related to women rights under the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and UNSCR 1325. The coalition’s efforts also led to establishing its first National Action Plan for Women, Peace, and Security in 2015. The plan’s main focal points are the participation, protection, preventive, alleviation, and recovery pillars. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Directorate of Human Rights and Women’s International Affairs 2015).



Source : UN Women 2019

Afghan women proactively expressed their desire to enlist in the Afghan National Police and Army. The first class of 37 female cadets from the Female Officer Cadet School started in May 2010. On September 23, 2010, 29 cadets graduated despite a comparatively high dropout rate. A batch of 29 Afghan female Second Lieutenants, guided by U.S. troops, finished a 20-week officer-cadet program at the Kabul Military Training Centre in September 2010 (U.S. Department of Defence 2010). According to Shukriya Hikmat, head of women's sports at the National Olympic Committee of Afghanistan, "About 3,000 Afghan women participated in leagues for 22 organised sports across the country (Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan in London 2016). Apart from Ms. Kohistani's Olympic participation, Afghan sportswomen have succeeded in boxing, taekwondo, football, cricket, and powerlifting. At the South Asian Football Championship

in 2010, the women's football team defeated Pakistan 4-0. At the Pan-Asian Games in Kazakhstan in 2011, Afghan female power-lifters took home three gold and two bronze medals (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2014).

During the tenure of National Unity Government led by Ashraf Ghani in 2014, his spouse Rulaghani publicly reiterated the commitment to women and children in Afghanistan. The number of female HPC members increased due to Ghani appointing some strong and vocal champions for women's rights (Nijat 2014). He promoted women to cabinet positions in fields where men dominated, like mining and communications, and required every Ministry to include at least one female deputy minister. He backed the founding of the Afghan Women's Chamber of Commerce and Industries and granted a 5% advantage to Afghan women-owned companies bidding for public contracts. He also nominated a woman as a member of the High Council of the Supreme Court, which conservative groups in Parliament furiously rejected (Mohib 2016).

### **Implications of Taliban takeover in 2021 on Women in Afghanistan**

The withdrawal of the United States from Afghanistan and the subsequent takeover by the Taliban in August 2021 significantly impacted all facets of lives of Afghani people particularly for women. The group swiftly repealed all of the nation's passed legislations, including the Afghan Constitution, which, in certain ways, guaranteed female equality. According to World Bank data, women comprised

over 21% of Afghanistan's labour force as of mid-August 2021. However, after the Taliban took power, women's involvement in public life drastically decreased. Despite women being allowed to work in the national and local governments under the 2004 Constitution, most female employees have lost their jobs since August 15, 2021, due to stringent limitations. The report from the International Labour Organization (ILO) in January found that Afghan women's employment levels fell by an estimated 16% in the third quarter of 2021, compared with 6% for men. According to ILO, "Women's employment was expected to be 21% lower than before the Taliban takeover by mid-2022 if current conditions continued" (International Labour Organization 2022).

Although the international community has pressured the Taliban to allow women to work, the new hardline Islamists have said women would labor under the confines of Sharia law. Still, they haven't said what that means. Zabihullah Mujahid stated that women would struggle shoulder to shoulder with men. On the other hand, he warned women not to work due to security concerns brought on by Taliban fighters' bad attitude (Astor, Hassan, and Onishi 2021). Despite their initial pledges to establish an inclusive government promoting women's political participation, the Taliban took over Afghanistan and established an all-male government. The Taliban called a sizable assembly of over 3,000 tribal elders, known as the Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly), on July 30, 2022 to discuss the nation's precarious political situation, however, this time, there were no women present (Rubin 2022).

According to Taliban Deputy Prime Minister Abdul Salam Hanafi, "When their sons are in this gathering, it means they are also involved, in a way, in the gathering" (Reuters 2022). The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA), founded in 2001 under the Bonn Agreement, has been dismantled by the Taliban as part of the nation's organisational structure for gender equality. The Taliban have instead established the Ministry for the Propagation of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice to carry out the regime's self-declared Islamic laws. The recently imposed government banned Women and girls from attending colleges and institutions (Congressional Research Service 2021).

In mid-September 2021, the Taliban ordered male students return to school but not female students, claiming that the group wanted to establish a "secure transportation system" before allowing female students back into classrooms (Lawrencia 2022). It is unclear, nevertheless, exactly what the "secure transport system" for females denotes. Young women attempting to enrol in college face challenges. Following the Taliban takeover, there was an instant spike in female unemployment to above 80%, which particularly affected economic sectors. The prohibition on women working has a severe and detrimental impact on Afghanistan's health and education systems in addition to harming women and particularly female-headed families (United Nations Human Rights 2023).

The Taliban banned women from travelling more than 45 miles (72 km) alone without a close male guardian on September 27, 2021. Additionally, the regulation instructs taxi drivers and public transit providers to

refuse trips to women who do not wear Islamic head coverings or attire. Women and girls are effectively shut out of opportunities due to the new restriction because they cannot travel freely. Women who visit health centers are also prohibited from receiving treatment unless accompanied by a close male guardian. Meanwhile, families are limiting women's and girls' movements as a protective measure. This will have immediate and long-term effects on women, negatively affecting their mental health, subjecting them to increased domestic violence, making them dependent on their jobs, and denying them access to the outdoors (United Nations Human Rights 2022).

Most women and girls in Afghanistan are victims of violence against women and girls (VAWG), which has been generally recognized as a severe problem with terrible long-term effects on families, communities, women, and society. To guarantee women's access to justice, the former Afghan government created the nation's first-ever National Action Plan on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in 2016 (U.N. Women 2016 ). In the 2004 Constitution, gender equality was also guaranteed. For instance, Article 22 restates the prohibition against "any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan." (The Constitution of Afghanistan 2004). All Afghan citizens, regardless of gender, have equal legal rights and obligations. On paper, these legal measures gave women the safety to flee abuse and pursue justice. But since the Taliban took power, laws have been repealed, access to court has been restricted, and the need for services and justice has increased.

## **Conclusion**

The volatile politics of Afghanistan is inextricably linked to the country's women's movement. The role of the international community, particularly the U.N., is crucial to put more pressure on the Taliban to abide by international human rights legislations and put an immediate stop to any violations and abuses of human rights. A robust system of supervision of international humanitarian assistance by donor communities is necessary to ensure that help reaches the most vulnerable population, including women and minorities. Access to accurate, comprehensive information regarding women's rights in Afghanistan is a big obstacle for the international community. Donors must demand and oversee comprehensive pledges from the Taliban about the prevention of forced and child marriage and guarantee support and legal recourse for women and girls who are the victims of domestic violence. Donors should encourage the Taliban to uphold the right of women to work in any occupation in line with Afghanistan's international human rights commitments. Donors should monitor women's legislative and practical constraints if the Taliban do not acknowledge their complete freedom to work.

The UNAMA mission, established by the Security Council in 2002 plays a vital role in this direction and already has a comprehensive mandate to monitor human rights, support the rule of law, defend women's rights, and promote national reconciliation. Monitoring women's and girls' rights should be a key component of UNAMA's future work, and donors should ensure that any concessions the Taliban seeks from the international



community are based, at the very least, in part, on U.N. reports on their treatment of women. The achievement of peace and conflict settlement in Afghanistan will be contingent upon Afghan women being granted a voice in the formulation of policies. Norway made a significant stride in this direction in 2021 by bringing Afghan women to the Oslo talks. There is an urgent need to ensure that women activists are safeguarded and that those who have already been arrested are released immediately. A meaningful participation from all citizens in national and local governance, irrespective of their gender or ethnic background will not only ensure freedom to all but is also a key to conflict resolution in the country.

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# **Women and Foreign Policy in South Asia: Analysing the need for a Feminist Foreign Policy in Sri Lanka**

Shavini De Silva<sup>1</sup>

The goal of Sri Lanka's foreign policy is to maintain strong, independent, powerful and unitary Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan foreign policy establishment gives highest priority to this goal. Sri Lanka's foreign policy has been founded by national interests. In a period of rapid and continuing change, foreign policy formulation and implementation needs to be capable of responsibly catering to new challenges and opportunities. It has to be an integral part of the larger effort of building the nation's capabilities through economic development, strengthening social fabric and well-being of the people and protecting the sovereignty and territorial integrity.

Sri Lanka recognizes the inherent right to gender equality and women's empowerment and places equality between women, men, girls, boys and gender minorities as a key aspect of development. Women comprise 51% of the population of Sri Lanka. There is no national level data available on gender minorities. Sri Lanka commits to the empowerment of women and girls recognizing

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inherent inequalities, marginalization and discrimination faced by women and girls in all spheres of life. Women's status in Sri Lanka is complex, displaying positive achievements and negative situations. As a result, Sri Lanka is being placed 75th among 132 countries in the World Gender Inequality Index which measures gender disparity in countries. Article 12(2) of the Constitution of Sri Lanka promulgated in 1978 sets out the principle of non-discrimination on the ground of sex. Article 12 of the Constitution guarantees the right to equality before the law and equal protection of the law for all persons and commits itself that no citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds. The Constitution further provides for affirmative action committing those Constitutional provisions on equality shall not prevent special provision being made, by law, subordinate legislation or executive action, for the advancement of women, children or persons with disabilities [Article 12(4)]. Sri Lanka is signatory to key United Nations (UN) Conventions and International Human Rights Treaties which have committed to gender equality and women's empowerment. In 1981, it also ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Sri Lanka is also signatory to several other international Conventions including the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which clearly distinguishes discrimination on the grounds of sex as a violation of human rights. In 1993, Sri Lanka signed the Vienna Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women setting out the country's focused commitment to

combat gender-based violence. Sri Lanka's commitments to the United Nations UN Security Council Resolution 1325 and the Child Rights Convention has advanced the country's commitments to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. It also commits itself to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that by 2030 all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

The key policy document on women's empowerment in Sri Lanka is The Women's Charter formulated in 1993. The Sri Lanka Women's Charter was drafted and adopted by the State in March 1993 and is the main policy statement by the State regarding the rights of women, expressing the States' commitment to remove all forms of discrimination against women and address crucial areas relevant to women. Since 1978, Sri Lanka has ensured a ministerial portfolio committed to women's empowerment. The most significant introduction to State machinery to work towards the rights of women made by the Charter was the setting up of the National Committee on Women (NCW) as the monitoring arm of the Charter. The National Committee on Women, a Presidential Committee, is facilitated by the provisions of the Charter. The mandate of the NCW falls into three broad categories, to entertain, scrutinize, and act against, complaints of gender discrimination, to promote research into gender issues and to advise the Minister in charge of Women's Affairs when advice is sought or when the National Committee on Women considers it necessary. However, the lack of statutory recognition of the Women's Charter denies it the legal, administrative



and authoritative recognition and the rightful power to effect and monitor implementation.

The legal system in Sri Lanka comprises a collection of codified and uncodified forms of law comprising a combination of Roman-Dutch law, English law, and personal laws (Kandyan law, Thesavalamai and Muslim law). The Penal Code recognizes several specific instances that strengthen the State's protection of the physical integrity of women and girl children. Laws governing labour and employment, laws governing marriage and family relations, laws on land and property are largely gender neutral with selected gender responsive positive provisions. However, despite affirmative constitutional guarantees of gender equality, the legal framework taking a predominantly gender-neutral approach, with a few proactive legislations that addresses issues of gender equality and women's empowerment, most laws contain no special measures to ensure gender equality and women's empowerment and have at times served to overtly discriminate against women and gender minorities.

Sri Lanka has had the world's first female head of the government Srimavo Bandaranaike. Her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga was also the President of Sri Lanka. Rosy Senanayake, a former beauty queen is the current Mayor of Colombo. Sri Lanka also has had the privilege of having three distinguished female foreign secretaries till date – Mrs. Kshenuka Senawiratne, Mrs. Chitranganee Wagiswara and the current Aruni Wijewardane.

But despite of these accomplished women leaders and officials, more women leaders are needed at the grass-roots and at the foreign policy implementation levels. "A Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) is a political framework centered around the wellbeing of marginalized people and invokes processes of self-reflection regarding foreign policy's hierarchical global systems." The approach provides an antidote to the current problematic practices of foreign policy and global aid, where decontextualized individually-centered actions are favored over implementing structural and hierarchical change.

Sri Lanka has grappled with a history of violence: the country experienced armed conflict with the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) from 1983 to 2009, and two youth-led insurrections in 1987 and 1991. From the increase in the number of female-headed households, increased vulnerability to sexual harassment and violence, psychological effects including depression and economic vulnerability, women continue to contend with the troubled post-war landscape and seemingly insurmountable challenges. Conventional peacebuilding approaches have struggled largely due to their failure to move beyond the inclusion of gender analysis as a "checkbox" activity within a neoliberal paradigm, such as the continued framing of women as "mothers", "wives", and "victims."

The question stands as to how can a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) can eliminate the marginalization for women in Sri Lanka. Research has proven that countries with more gender equality are less likely to experience civil war and it also encourages good governance.

The FFP provides an opportunity for Sri Lanka to craft a peacebuilding framework rooted that focuses on a more intersectional and gendered approach. Applying a gender focus to peacebuilding can still be limited to a patriarchal framework when it lacks intersectionality. After the end of the 30-year civil war, a feminist framing was starkly laid bare in the state's approach to the "rehabilitation" of ex-LTTE cadres. Interviews with female LTTE fighters found that they joined the movement to seek self-determination in a society that expected them to conform to rigid gender roles. Unfortunately, the state-led reconciliation processes ignored this aspect and resumed women to their traditional gender roles by enrolling them in courses on cosmetology, arranging marriages, and "family culture." The FFP can provide an understating on the gendered assumptions that drive the targeting of women for microfinance. For example, it can ensure that access to these loans is not conducted as a stand-alone activity but has efforts to challenge these gendered practices directly integrated into the process and execution.

Women continue to be marginalized and, in many cases and they are left out entirely on key "national" issues such as security, economic development, and trade, despite these being the most pressing issues on Sri Lanka's political agenda. In addition, while the political participation of women as a whole is low, women from minority groups face barriers than their Sinhalese counterparts. In the current National Parliament, no Tamil or Muslim woman currently holds a seat, a gap few have addressed. The FFP can help and provide women opportunities to participate from the grassroots level,

such as trade unions, labor collectives, etc., in formalized political settings, which the current narrow focus on simply filling a certain number of seats in parliament.

In the post- pandemic period, aid money has been significantly limited to supporting short-term projects of six months to a year, which particularly targets the well-being of women. Consequently, these projects treat women as a homogenous group without considering their generational, class, caste, race, and religious statuses that significantly impact the issues they grapple with and their experiences. FFP aids the move beyond the “project” cycle approach that most donors employ with blanket analyses of these issues and instead takes on a sorely needed targeted approach of the intersecting systems that facilitates patriarchal systems. For example, a significant issue overlooked by traditional peacebuilding processes is the movements led by the mothers of the disappeared – both from the North and East where the civil war took place and the South, which was the site of the JVP insurrections. To date, very few mainstream peacebuilding processes have been able to support these women, primarily because they are viewed as an “issue” to be solved rather than actors who need to be fully engaged in a long-term way, which is how an FFP approach would frame it.

In conclusion, the need of a FFP in Sri Lanka is urgent as it is necessary to transform the realities of the most vulnerable. The process and content in order to formulate Sri Lanka’s FFP should align according to the country’s past and current context.

# **Bhutan's Path to Women in Foreign Policy**

Karma Yangzom Dorji<sup>1</sup>

At the core of Bhutan's developmental journey lies the philosophy of Gross National Happiness, an integral element shaping its progress. This endeavors to establish an inclusive environment where each individual regardless of age or gender participates in and reaps the benefits of the nation's development and growth. The 2008 Constitution of the Kingdom of Bhutan also serves as a comprehensive foundation that firmly affirms gender equality principles. Within this constitutional framework, both men and women are endowed with fundamental rights, reflecting a commitment to women's empowerment. Bhutan has dedicated itself to advancing gender equality through the formulation of various frameworks, plans, and programs. Additionally, the establishment of robust protective and institutional mechanisms further underscores the nation's commitment to fostering gender equality. In a significant stride towards this goal, the year 2020 witnessed the development of the National Gender Equality Policy. This policy serves as a guiding directive, empowering the government to actively promote gender equality

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and integrate gender perspectives across legislations, policies, plans, and programs. The policy spans three key domains, (a) Gender Equality in the Political and Public Domain, (b) Gender Equality in the Social Domain, and (c) Gender Equality in the Economic Domain.

Bhutan has witnessed impressive achievements in terms of girls' participation rates, with girls making up 50.5% of the total enrolment in education. The survival rate for girls at the primary level stands at 95.3% exceeding that of boys at 86.5%. Similarly, there is an equal representation of girls at the secondary level, however the enrolment of girls at the tertiary level remains low (19.1% as compared to 23.7% of boys). The Bhutan Gender Policy Note 2013 indicated that factors such as poor academic performance due to household obligations and early pregnancy limit girls' access to tertiary education (NCWC, 2020). Women have much lower participation in regular paid employment, 24.9% only as compared to 42.0% for men (NSB, 2022). The Constitution provides every Bhutanese citizen the fundamental right to vote and to participate in any lawful profession. However, only 14.9% and 16% of woman candidates were elected in the National Assembly and the National Council respectively in 2018 elections. Women's contribution to unpaid household and care work was at least two times larger than that of men. While women's contribution as a share of GDP was 11 per cent, and men's contribution was around 5 percent (NCWC, 2019). Despite guarantees of formal equality, structural and cultural norms continue to pose barriers to the broader realization of gender equality.

Women make up to 47.7 percent of the population (NSB, 2023), but they have experienced disparities in access to education at the tertiary level, and employment since the country embarked on its journey of modern development in the 1960s. Consequently, the representation of women in decision-making positions in 2023 does not align with this demographic proportion. The women in leadership positions in the civil service shows 18% (after recent reforms and promotions), 3.4% as local leaders, and 15.3% in the Parliament (kuensel , 2023). Certainly, the concept of leadership is inherently associated with masculinity, resulting in an unquestionable dominance of men in this realm.

The first female ambassador of Bhutan is Kunzang Chhoden Namgyel and was appointed as the Ambassador/ Permanent Representative to the United Nations on January 3, 2014. The second appointment was of Pema Choden who was Ambassador to Bangladesh. On April 22, 2016, Bhutan signed the Paris Agreement in New York for climate change under Ambassador Kunzang C. Namgyel's tenure as the ambassador; she shared that Bhutan is vulnerable to the climatic changes and this agreement is a collective fight towards protecting the climate. The status of women in Bhutan's foreign policy reflects a slow move towards gender equality and social empowerment. Women's representation in this field remains constrained, but has expanded in recent years, underscoring the developing acknowledgment of the esteem of women's viewpoints in forming Bhutan's universal engagement. Women's authority in foreign

policy is picking up momentum, with a few women holding key parts as ministers and representatives in the world stage. In any case, their number is still less.

Bhutan's legal framework appears a positive state of mind towards women's participation and inclusion. The country's structure ensures gender equality and prohibits gender discrimination. Furthermore, Bhutan has ratified United Nation's treaties such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), reaffirming its commitment to women's rights and gender equality. Be that as it may, despite these legal provisions, gender contrasts still exist, particularly within the political field and decision-making bodies. Basic obstructions, cultural standards and societal desires proceed to prevent women's break even with participation in decision-making forms.

Addressing the gender disparities faced by women requires a comprehensive and strategic approach. Primarily, it is crucial to continue and expand efforts that have already demonstrated positive results. The National Gender Equality Policy, developed in 2020, serves as a vital tool in guiding the government's commitment to promoting gender equality. To strengthen its impact, continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms should be in place to ensure effective implementation across the three key domains – political and public, social, and economic.

Targeted interventions are necessary to address the low enrollment of girls at the tertiary level. Initiatives should include creating a supportive environment that addresses challenges such as household obligations



and early pregnancies, ensuring that girls have equal opportunities to pursue higher education. Moreover, raising awareness about the importance of education for girls and actively involving communities can contribute to a shift in societal attitudes.

In the political arena, affirmative measures can be explored to increase the representation of women in decision-making bodies. Quotas or targeted support for women candidates can help bridge the existing gap, ensuring that women are proportionally represented in the National Assembly and the National Council. Furthermore, fostering a culture of inclusivity within political parties and institutions is essential for sustaining long-term change.

Regarding women's role in foreign policy, Bhutan can actively encourage and support more women to pursue careers in diplomacy and international relations. Mentorship programs, networking opportunities, and targeted recruitment strategies can contribute to a more balanced representation of women in diplomatic roles. Recognizing and valuing women's perspectives in shaping Bhutan's global engagement is critical for fostering diversity and ensuring a comprehensive approach to foreign policy.

In the pursuit of gender equality, it is paramount to challenge and transform deep-seated cultural norms that perpetuate disparities. Educational campaigns and community engagement can play a vital role in shifting societal attitudes towards accepting women in leadership roles, both in decision-making bodies and foreign policy positions. By implementing these strategies collectively,

Bhutan can pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable society, where women actively contribute to and benefit from the nation's development and growth.

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