Minority within a Majority: Women's Political Struggles and Policy Influence in South Asia

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Abstract

Women are half of the total population in South Asia; despite this, their representation in political institutions remains limited, their status is weak, and sometimes they play only a symbolic role. The paradox of being a "minority within a majority" indicates the social and institutional barriers that restrict women from accessing leadership positions and exercising influence in public life. Despite constitutional guarantees, a gender quota system, and reservation of seats at the legislative and local levels, women's numeric representation remains unchanged and does not translate into real influence on policy decisions. Deep-rooted patriarchal structure, intersecting caste, economic status, and influence of regional inequalities and continual custom of proxy leadership, where elected women representatives frequently act as stand-ins for male relatives, all influence their political efforts. This study investigates the kinds of women's political representation in South Asia and analyzes how their presence influences the making and execution of public policies. Through the comparative data of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, this research presents women's political participation in the contextual debate related to democracy, inclusive governance, and minority rights. This paper also examines how women leaders balance the institutional constraints, social recognition, and policy preferences, highlighting the inconsistency between true empowerment and numerical inclusion. Analysis of the study argues that women should not be limited to reservation reforms, but they should go beyond these provisions to address common barriers through gender-sensitive policymaking, political training, and enhancing accountability mechanisms. Finally, political empowerment of women as a minority within the majority is not only a question of equality in South Asia but a major condition of balanced and

sustainable development.

Keywords: Women's empowerment, gender quota, public policy, inclusive governance, women's representation, South Asia.

1. Introduction

Women are half of the total population in South Asia, but their presence and influence in political institutions are very disappointing (United Nations Population Fund, 2023). This paradox is that being a majority in population, they remain a minority in politics. It reveals the fact that the gender power structure is still influencing the democratic process of the region. Despite the several reforms, women's political participation is limited to their presence in political institutions and does not translate into real policy outcomes.

In many countries of South Asia, women's numerical strength has increased through the gender quotas system and other constitutional provisions, but this increase has not turned into real power of decision-making (Pitkin, 1967; Jalalzai & Krook, 2018). Lack of political resources, patriarchal mindset, male-dominated political parties, and socio-cultural constraints limit the political autonomy of women (Rai, 2018). Women are often limited to education and welfare sectors for these reasons, while men dominate in the important strategic sectors (Goetz & Hassim, 2003).

1.1. Research Objective

This research focuses on the specific and limited central question of whether the growing number of women in South Asia truly increases the policy influence of women. By using the feminist institutional approach, this research analyses how formal rules (reservations and quotas) and informal political practices combine to shape the true political empowerment of women. This analysis particularly focuses on women's agency in political institutions and their influence on decision-making, rather than on gender inequality.

The argument of the research is that unless there is a transformation in the institutional accountability, political culture, and the process of decision-making, numerical representation will remain only symbolic. For true empowerment, only seats are not enough; for these rights, resources, and the power of policy making are essential. In this context, women should be understood as "minority within the majority," which provides an essential

perspective to understand the democratic development of the region and the challenges to the true political influence of women.

2. Conceptual Framework

"Minority within a Majority": Theorizing Women's Political Position in South Asia

This section presents an analytical base to understand why women in South Asia politics are in a minority despite having a majority in the population. In this section, various concepts such as representation, intersectionality, patriarchy, and institutional barriers are not only explained theoretically, rather they are also directly connected with the main argument that women's real and effective political power is still limited. The concept of "minority within majority" reveals the important paradox in the gender politics of South Asia that women are half of the total population, but still their representation is very low in positions of public authority and decision-making in politics. This paradox shows how this demographic strength translates into political restrictions through deeply entrenched institutional, ideological, and social boundaries. It also explains that mere numerical presence does not mean qualitative control or influence. This concept serves as an important tool to understand the gap between representation and influence in the context of South Asia, where caste, religion, patriarchy, and democracy interrelate in a composite way.

2.1. Foundational Concepts

In political philosophy, the minority term is usually used for the groups that are disadvantaged as structure and numerically within democracy. Feminist theorists like Anne Phillips (1995) and Iris Marion Young (1990) included the concept of gender in it by extending this. They argue that women remain in a minority position in prestige, participation, and power despite being equal and more than equal. This minority position is not because of demography rather created by the social structure of gender hierarchy (Young, 1990).

In South Asia, authority is often linked with masculinity in patriarchal society, and political institution often functions as a 'men's club' (Connell, 2005). The result in when women enter these institutions then they work in a structure that marginalizes "feminine" standards like cooperation, care, and teamwork and elevates male guidance norms like Competition, dominance, and rationality (Swers, 2013). Even occupying the formal position, institutional bias turns women into a political minority. It limits women's

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authority and self-sufficiency in policymaking. Despite comprising half of the population, their presence is still invisible and very limited in politics, regional data (Consultative Group to Assist the Poor, 2025). It shows that even after decades of reservation, women occupy less representation in parliament and leadership roles. This gap indicates that, basically, having a larger population is not sufficient to reduce the gender bias.

To link this section with the argument of "minority within majority," the reader clearly understands why the next section on reservation, intersectionality, and proxy politics is important. Also, it explains how they contribute to the debate of true political empowerment of women. These fundamental ideas explain why, despite their large population, women remain a minority in South Asia's (majority) political structures.

2.2. Descriptive vs. Substantive Representation

Hanna Pitkin (1967) presents a critical view to understand this challenge and establish the relationship between substantive representation and descriptive representation. Substantive representation states that women's interests are articulated and increased through the process of policymaking. In descriptive representation mere presence of women is enough. In South Asia, women's descriptive representation increased because of the quota system and reserve seats, but their influence in political decision-making is still limited because of patriarchal norms (Krook & Norris, 2014). This gap is very important in the context of South Asia, where numerical inclusion created by the quota system failed to translate into gender sensitive decision-making. According to empirical studies from Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, women are visible in legislative bodies. However, they are often excluded from important policy committees, budgetary processes, and the leadership structures of political parties (Rai & Spary, 2019). Data from May 2022, according to the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), shows that the share of women in national parliaments in many South Asian countries is quite low. For example, women's representation in the lower house of one major country is "just under 15%" (Observer Research Foundation, 2023). This means that while women are visible in parliaments, they still constitute a minority-reinforcing the "minority within a majority" argument.

Women may be numerically present, but their limited access to decision-making processes keeps them a political minority within a democratic majority (Sadat, 2025; Jabeen & Sher Muhammad, 2021). Therefore, mere symbolic participation does not confer real power upon women.

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2.3. Political Marginality and Intersectionality

Class, caste, race, and religion are all factors that overlap with the marginalization of women in South Asia, making it impossible to examine it only from a gender perspective. For example, Nepal has always been ruled primarily by hill-dwelling monarchs, despite being a cosmopolitan nation. In Nepal, women and certain communities have historically been excluded from politics, leading to unequal access to state power. Indigenous groups have long held administrative and political positions, while those of Madhesi origin face structural barriers such as caste-based discrimination and disputed citizenship status (Shah, 2006). According to Naila Kabeer, women face varying degrees of disadvantage in participating in politics depending on caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. Marginalized women, such as Dalits, Adivasis, and Madhesis, face even greater barriers, making it more difficult for them to participate in politics, while upper-caste or influential women face fewer difficulties. Additionally, legislative frameworks, national and local policies, budgets, and other government plans do not adequately address these issues. They are denied equal rights, opportunities, resources, and services due to a variety of oppressive practices, discrimination, gender-based stereotypes, and patterns of deprivation. Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) introduced the idea of inter-sectionality, which explains how overlapping identities exacerbate disadvantage and turn gender inequity into a more intricate web of interconnected oppressions.

In South Asia, where political mobility is determined by social structures like caste and biradari (clan networks), this theory is especially helpful. Because of this, upper-caste, metropolitan, and elite women are frequently over-represented in women's political spheres, while marginalized women continue to be on the edge. As a result, there are domestic hierarchies within the gendered mainstream due to the stratification of the group "woman." These multiple layers of inequalities exacerbate the “minority within the majority” status of women from marginalized caste, class, or ethnic groups. This demonstrates that mere presence in politics (descriptive presence) does not guarantee real influence or power. It is clear by connecting the argument of minority within majority to intersectionality that structural inequality creates stratification within the groups of women. It also determines who truly takes part in policymaking and in the process of governance.

2.4. The Politics of Substitution and Proxy Politics

Proxy representation means the situation where male relatives influence and control the functions of women, especially when they are elected through reservation. This trend is visible in politics across South Asia (Jayal, 2006;

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Buch, 2019). In India, the concept of Sarpanch Pati in Panchayati Raj institutions reveals the fact that only being elected to the post (Sarpanch) is not enough and does not empower them to take independent decisions. In the same way, in Pakistan and Bangladesh, women representatives often depend on the male-dominated political network to perform their official duties.

This tendency shows such a kind of inclusion that continues the dominance of men despite strengthening the representation of women as intended by the constitution. For example, in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), a province of Pakistan, a study on women's representation in local self-government suggested that although reservations increased the numerical strength of women at the local level but their genuine participation is limited due to structural, socio-cultural, and institutional constraints. In these constraints, patriarchy, symbolic representation, and limited decision-making power in rural or conservative areas are included (Sadat, 2025).

Likewise, research in Pakistan's national assembly on the effectiveness of gender quota shows that the quota system increased the seats of women but had no significant impact on consistent legislation or effective policymaking on gender issues (Jabeen & Sher Muhammad, 2021). It indicates that only descriptive representation can hide the real political influence of men. Proxy politics strengthen this situation more because only numerical representation does not provide independent political power to women. These examples show the "minority within the majority" situation in South Asia. Where women are in positions but remain politically marginalized, their autonomy and decision-making capacity are restricted by this. To connect proxy politics with this argument, it is clear that structural patriarchy and symbolic representation restrict women from transforming official positions into real political influence.

2.5. Liberal Democracy: A Feminist Perspective

Feminist political theorists criticized liberal democracy for a long time for its gender-blind approach to equality and citizenship. The patriarchal structure inherent in liberal democracies determines what is considered "political," and this structure cannot be dismantled merely through the official participation of women via quotas. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser (2009) and Carol Pateman (1988) argued that liberal democracy sustains the public place of male dominance, where women's related issues are systematically excluded from mainstream political deliberations, such as unpaid care, domestic violence, and reproductive rights.

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This criticism is relevant particularly in the context of South Asia, where women's political participation is often defended as an independent right to power rather than promoted on a developmental or symbolic basis. Consequently, women leaders are often presented as symbols of empowerment, but they get fewer opportunities in real decision-making. Women's presence validates the democratic institutions, but cannot transform their inherently gendered nature. It can be described as per formative inclusion rather than substantive empowerment. Despite the reservation system in Pakistan, male-dominated party structures and institutional resistance limit the actual participation of women (Rahim, Mehmood, & Khan, 2025), which further strengthens the majority-minority arrangement. Therefore, South Asian democracies often continue the minority status of women. From a feminist perspective, gender-blind institutions replicate the structural inequalities, and despite the numerical presence, women remain marginalized.

2.6. From Visibility to Influence: Redefining Empowerment

Many scholars support the redefining of political empowerment, where autonomy, accountability, and active participation are preferred rather than mere presence and visibility, to go beyond tokenism. Cornwall & Edwards (2015) argued that although the quota system increased the presence of women but this visibility often fails to transform into real decision-making in power. For true empowerment, it is better to move from symbolic inclusion towards substantive influence. Women should not only hold public offices but also use their rights and shape the policy agenda. For this, it is mandatory to break the patriarchal norms that limit the agency of women. For this, the concept of leadership should be redefined beyond formal participation. That's why the evaluation of empowerment should not be done only on the basis of how many women are present, but it should be done on the basis of how effectively they are utilizing the distribution of resources and impacting the governance and community development.

Beyond this, gender sensitive governance is vital for substantive empowerment. Women's aim and perspective should be included in policymaking. It should also include leadership development and gender budgeting (UN Women, 2022). In the absence of these mechanisms, the quota system will increase the risk of increasing women's dependence on male political guardians rather than promoting true independence.

Data from Pakistan's national assembly (2002–2018) shows that women contribute to legislative initiatives, but structural barriers limit their influence.

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To hold the offices is not merely sufficient for political empowerment. Institutional reforms are mandatory to provide genuine rights and power to women in decision-making. This situation clarifies the concept of "minority within majority", despite numerical presence, structural constraints restrict women from generating real influence. It put them in a marginalized condition in politics. From visibility to influence is the core meaning of this concept, where women should not only be visible, but they play an active role in decision-making.

2.7. Conceptual Summary

The argument "minority within majority" is based on the five chief premises-

- Proxy politics that restrict women's autonomy
- Systematic exclusion due to patriarchal institutions
- Gap between real political power and false representation
- Intersectional inequalities based on ethnicity, caste, and class
- Gender blind structures of democracy

These bases together provide a clear and rational perspective to understand the gap that exists in the political power of women in South Asia.

3. Research Methodology

This study provides a qualitative comparative structure by using the data from the UN Women, World Bank, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), and national election commissions, and covers secondary data updated to 2024. This analysis is focused on five South Asian countries- Nepal, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. These are selected because of the accessibility of gender specific political data and their similar parliamentary structures. Also, they have reservation-based gender reforms in their countries. Besides this, consistent data is also available between 2020 and 2024, which makes the analysis of the study more reliable. By using a three-level coding rubric (high, medium, and low), policy autonomy was assessed, which includes portfolio-like electoral mandates, authority, confirmation of proxy influence, and role in budgetary decisions. To ensure transparency and replicability, a brief explanation of the rubric and its parameters is provided in Appendix B. To methodically analyze descriptive representation and substantive empowerment, four indicators are used: the percentage of seats held by women, the type of portfolio, the legislative initiatives made, and the level of policy autonomy. For ease of comparison, each country's analysis is based on these four indicators. Main research question answered by these indicators: To what level do women in South Asia exercise genuine political power, beyond numerical presence? For comparisons across different institutional

contexts, national-level ministers and members of parliament are included as the unit of analysis. To demonstrate processes such as proxy leadership and gatekeeping, Local-level examples from India and Nepal are used for supporting purposes only. To ensure coordination and validity between comparative countries, a cross-national triangulation approach is used.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Women's political representation trends in South Asia

For each country, we use four indicators-Percentage of seats (visible representation), Type of portfolio (hard or easy), Legal and policymaking related to women representatives, and Level of policy autonomy (assessed according to a clear rubric). Using the same indicators in each case provides depth to the analysis, facilitates comparison, and clarifies what each indicator reveals about actual political power. The detailed autonomy rubric used in coding for the high, medium–low categories is provided in Appendix B.

Patriarchal resistance, Social movements, and constitutional reforms have all played a complex role in the development of women's political representation in South Asia. From Sirimavo Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Indira Gandhi in India, to Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan and Sheikh Hasina in Bangladesh, South Asia has witnessed incomparable examples of women's leadership at the national level. However, since the mid-20th century, women have continued to face persistent under-representation in local and legislative governing systems. The structural background of women's political struggles in South Asia lies in this paradox. While a few women attain high-profile prominence, the majority continue to be politically marginalized (Jalalzai & Krook, 2018).

4.2. Historical Overview of Women’s Political Participation

The South Asian government inherited very patriarchal structures from colonial rule and traditions in the early post-independence period. However, women were mobilized by nationalist movements throughout the region, which led to the early articulation of women's rights in new democratic constitutions.

- India made women the same participants in elections by conceding them universal suffrage in its Constitution in 1950. Nevertheless, until the early 2000s, the proportion of women in the Lok Sabha stayed below 10%. Women's representation in the Lok Sabha has increased from 5% in the first Lok Sabha to 15% in the present Lok Sabha (PRS Legislative

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Research, 2023).

• In 1956, Pakistan first offered reserved seats for women; nevertheless, consistent advancements were halted by military control and shifting administrations (Muhammad, Rahim, & Hanif, 2019). Significant progress was seen in the 2000s, when gender quotas under the Power Devolution Plan and the political leadership of Benazir Bhutto strengthened women's presence in electoral institutions. By the 2018 elections, there were approximately 100 women in the National Assembly, of whom 8 were elected on general seats and 60 on reserved seats. Furthermore, the Elections Act 2017 mandated that parties nominate at least 5% women candidates (Allauddin & Rind, 2020). Despite these improvements, a large gap still exists between numerical representation and actual political influence (Zainab et al., 2025).

• Since gaining independence in 1971, Bangladesh has upheld a quota system that has seen the number of seats set aside for women in parliament increase from 15 to 50. (Parvin, 2016).

• Sri Lanka has continuously had one of the lowest percentages of women in parliament in the region, even after electing the first female prime minister in history (Sirimavo Bandaranaike) in 1960 (De Alwis, 2018).

• Nepal's political transition from monarchy to federal republic brought about one of the most gender-progressive constitutions in South Asia (2015), requiring one-third female representation in all political bodies (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2023).

These paths show that structural equality for women in general has not always followed historical symbolism, ‘women leaders as national symbols’.

4.3. A Comparative Overview of Legislative and Local Representation

In South Asia, women are significantly more represented at the local level than in national parliaments. Constitutional reservations have increased their visibility, but their actual power at the national level remains limited. Nepal and India have the best results, thanks to constitutional reservations and long-standing local reservations, while Sri Lanka, with 9.8% women in parliament. Bangladesh and Pakistan fall in the middle category, where reservations have increased visibility but limited electoral competition. Overall, the data show

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that reservations increase visible representation, but their impact is uneven across countries and is mostly limited to the local level, not reaching national politics. This comparison highlights the continuing gap between local participation and national power, which reinforces the "minority within the majority" situation. (A detailed table is available in Appendix A.)

4.4. India: Indicator-by-Indicator Analysis

Indicator 1 - Percentage of Seats (Descriptive Representation):

Till 2024, women account for approximately 13.6% of the Lok Sabha, while at the local level, the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments ensure 33-50% reservation for women in Panchayat and urban local bodies (The Gazette of India, 1993, p. 3). As a result, over 1.4 million women have been elected at the local level. At the national level gap between limited presence at the national level and strong or high presence at the local level reflects this gap of substantive and descriptive representation.

Indicator 2 - Type of Portfolios:

Most women in India are assigned “soft” portfolios such as health, women and child development, education, and social welfare. High-profile exceptions-such as Sushma Swaraj (Ministry of External Affairs) and Nirmala Sitharaman (Finance)-show the potential of women, but these are exceptions. Structural patterns still reflect gender-based portfolio distribution (Rai & Spary, 2019; UN Women, 2023).

Indicator 3 - Legislative Initiatives and Policy outputs:

Experience with Panchayats shows that women leaders prioritize water, sanitation, education, and welfare projects (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). At the national level, women MPs have contributed to the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act (2005), gender-based violence laws, and social security laws. However, sustained policy influence at higher levels requires cross-party coalitions, committee memberships, and access to institutional resources.

Indicator 4 - Level of Policy Autonomy (High/Medium/Low):

According to the autonomy rubric, women leaders in India have overall medium autonomy. Women elected from general seats and serving in high-

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powered ministries exhibit greater autonomy, but most representatives on reserved seats-especially at the local level-face limitations such as proxy representation (e.g., sarpanch husbands) and party gate-keeping (Jayal, 2006; Buch, 2019).

Brief Analysis:

India demonstrates that mere numerical gains (descriptive gains) cannot ensure substantive empowerment without autonomy, institutional access, and portfolio authority.

4.5. Bangladesh: Indicator-by-indicator

Indicator 1 - Percentage of Seats:

Bangladesh's National Parliament (Jatiya Sangsad) has reserved seats for women (50 seats). However, according to Democracy Watch (2024), women won only 8% of general seats through direct election, indicating limited access to political power through open competition. The 2024 Election Working Group review also found that women represent less than 10% of the major political parties, including the ruling Awami League, the opposition BNP, and the Jatiya Party (Hossain, 2025, para. 4).

Indicator 2 - Type of Portfolios:

Most women in Bangladesh hold social portfolios such as education, women and child affairs, and health. Although the leadership profiles of Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia as prime ministers are exceptions. It does not reduce established patterns of gender-biased portfolio in distribution.

Indicator 3 - Legislative Initiatives/Policy output:

In issues such as social security, maternal health, and labor regulations, women legislators are active, especially after the Rana Plaza reforms. However, many (Minister of Parliament) MPs elected on reserved seats are reliant on party leadership. They don’t have independent constituencies, which minimizes their efficacy in initiating and executing the macroeconomic policies (Kabeer et al., 2021).

Indicator 4 - Level of Policy Autonomy:

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Low to medium. Directly elected local women demonstrate greater autonomy at the local level, while women with reserved parliamentary seats are often party-dependent and have limited control over resources.

Brief Analysis:

Bangladesh demonstrates that having powerful female executive officials does not necessarily increase substantive political influence for a broader group of women.

4.6. Nepal: Indicator-by-indicator

Indicator 1 - Percentage of Seats:

Nepal has had a 33% gender quota for women since the 2008 Constituent Assembly, but a "glass ceiling" still exists in political advancement. The promulgation of the 2015 Constitution, changes to the federal system, and inclusionary arrangements have taken some steps to improve women's electoral representation and increase gender equality. Women have gained significant rights through the quota system, but access to leadership levels remains difficult (Prasaina & Dhakal, 2024, p. 42).

Indicator 2 - Type of Portfolios:

Women are visible in social ministries (education, health, women, and children) and are now also occupying leadership positions in parliamentary committees. Hard portfolios are less common, although the constitutional framework allows for broad inclusion.

Indicator 3 - Legislative Initiatives/Policy outputs:

Nepal has promoted gender-sensitive budgeting, strengthened GBV (gender-based violence) protection, and social protection measures changes are linked to an active women's caucus and civil society participation in constitution-making (Pandey, 2019; Upreti et al., 2018).

Indicator 4 - Level of Policy Autonomy:

Medium to High. Constitutional quotas, active caucuses, and civil society participation have given many women representatives greater autonomy; yet, ethnic and social class-based differences among women remain.

Brief Analysis (Nepal):

Institutional design and citizen participation in Nepal have produced more substantive policy impact than quota laws alone, although internal hierarchies among women remain a barrier.

4.7. Pakistan: Indicator-by-indicator

Indicator 1 Percentage of Seats:

Women constitute 20% of the total Parliament in Pakistan. Of these, only 3% came from general elections, and 17% were elected through reserved seats (Awan, 2016). The 2017 Elections Act was implemented to increase women's political participation. It prohibited women from voting or contesting elections, required poorer areas to nominate at least 5% female candidates in general seats, and allowed voting to be cancelled where female turnout was very low. Women-only polling stations were created and female staff deployed to increase turnout in conservative areas (Khan, 2024). The presence of women is increasing as Provincial Ministers is an important development. These appointments reflect expanding opportunities for women in political leadership, but they are often shaped by factors such as party gatekeeping, dynastic influence, and the allocation of "soft" portfolios.

Indicator 2 Type of Portfolios:

Women generally hold social and rights-oriented ministries (human rights, women's development). While there are some exceptions, such as Hina Rabbani Khar, who held foreign affairs or executive positions, the demanding economic and security ministries remain male-dominated. Now, a large number of women councillors were elected, and most of the eminent women in today's National and provincial assemblies emerged from that group. Some of them have become Ministers.

Indicator 3 Legislative Initiatives/Policy outputs:

Women legislators support laws such as the Protection against Harassment at Workplace Act (2010), measures related to domestic violence, and improvements in child rights. However, significant challenges remain in their implementation and adherence.

Indicator 4: Level of Policy Autonomy:

Low to medium. Many women in reserved seats are party nominees and lack the legitimacy of independent constituencies. Party gatekeeping, conservative social norms, and security concerns reduce women's effective autonomy.

Brief Analysis (Pakistan):

Reservations have increased the number of women in Pakistan, but their actual autonomy remains limited. While legal reforms are in place, their implementation and actual control over budgets remain limited.

4.8. Sri Lanka: Indicator-by-indicator

Indicator 1 - Percentage of Seats:

Women's representation in Parliament in Sri Lanka remains very low, despite historically having iconic female leaders (such as Sirimavo Bandaranaike). Female participation remains low, but the 2024 elections marked a historic milestone when 21 women were elected, the highest in Sri Lankan history (Asian Network for Free Elections, 2024, p. 16). In Parliament total of 22 women, including 1 nominated member, represent 9.8% of the total 225 members (data.ipu.org), which signifies that their representation remains low despite symbolic achievements.

Indicator 2 - Portfolio Type:

Women are primarily in "soft" ministries such as education, health, women and child development, and social services are primarily held by women. Finance, defense, foreign affairs, and key economic ministries are considered high-powered ministries that remain male-dominated. In the 2024 cabinet, Harini Amarasuriya became Prime Minister and holds the education portfolio, which is an important symbolic exception, but despite this tendency of gender based structural gatekeeping still exists.

Indicator 3 - Legislative Initiatives/Policy outputs:

A few important reforms were implemented in Sri Lanka to empower women, such as the Women's Empowerment Policy, the Women's Empowerment Act 2024, and the National Gender Equality policy. However, the influence of women MPs is restricted to foreign affairs, macroeconomics, and strategic legislation. Most of the Policy outcomes are largely symbolic and limited to social welfare, which reflects the low representation of women in Parliament.

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Indicator 4 -Level of Policy Autonomy:

Policy autonomy of women is low, and their representation in Parliament is less than 10% and their numbers are limited in high-powered ministries. Their independent decision-making is restricted by party structures and other systemic barriers. In 2024, the appointments of the Prime Minister and Minister of Women and Child Development are emblematically significant they do not reflect women's broad political power or capacity to decide agendas.

Brief Analysis (Sri Lanka):

Experience of Sri Lanka demonstrates that initial symbolic achievements have not transformed into continuous political representation of women, despite the election of the world's first female Prime Minister, Sirimavo Bandaranaike. In 2024, a record number of women were elected, which is a positive step in the direction of women empowerment but women share in ministries still shows the gap between exceptional leadership and structural empowerment.

4.9. Regional Patterns and Emerging Trends:

Three extensive regional trends emerge across South Asia related to the political participation of women.

- **Party Gate Keeping:** Women's access to political authority is often controlled by political parties. To enter in politics most of the women depend on family dynasties. In numerous cases, male family members decide about the nominations and selections of candidate, which also restricts women's independent political identity (Jalalzai & Krook, 2018). Comparative evidence shows that in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh party leadership structures remain male dominated, while Nepal's proportional representation system has helped first-generation women leaders to enlarge their number. Entry into politics In Sri Lanka is mainly connected to family legacy.

- **Slow Progress in Formal Roles:** Women's development in gaining substantive roles is very slow despite gender quotas and constitutional provisions. In portfolios such as defence, finance, and trade, they are still underrepresented in decision-making which indicates that gender equality in politics remains mainly symbolic (Goetz & Hassim, 2003). It reveals by

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the comparisons across countries that in high-powered ministries women are rarely appointed in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh, although in Nepal where few women leadership in finance and security ministries are visible that presents partial exception.

- **Local vs. National Participation:** At the local level, women's representation in elected bodies is approximately 35.5% (UN Women, 2025). In contrast the global average stands at only 27% in the national parliamentary level (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2025). It reflects an important difference between national-level empowerment and grassroots inclusion. At the local level highest representation of women is visible in India and Nepal due to broad reservation systems. This progress is moderate in Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka still lags behind. At the national level, these countries lack similarity, which shows that at the local level achievement does not automatically transform into national empowerment. The comparative history of women's participation in South Asia reveals both progressive institutional innovations and constant patriarchal arbitration. By contrasting, how across various nations women's presence has or has not transformed into institutional alteration and policy influence. The next section delves deeper into this contradiction.

Although legislative reforms and quotas have increased descriptive participation of women but substantive change is still reliant on the extent of institutional accountability, internal party democracy, and women's access to high-power positions revealed by the comparison of these countries

4. Results and Findings: Comparative Synthesis: Indicators and Cross-country Patterns

Based on four indicators that are applied to five south Asian countries this part summarizes cross-national trends. The purpose of this is to comprehend existing differences, common patterns, and structural barriers in South Asia that influence real empowerment of women. Four key findings emerge in it:

- Descriptive representation has increased-especially at the local level-but this number often does not translate into national-level power or policymaking.

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- In all five countries, women are predominantly in "soft" ministries, while high-powered, budget-intensive ministries remain male-dominated.

- Women legislators bring about social sector reforms, but control over resources and bureaucratic delays limit implementation.

- Policy autonomy is the most uneven dimension: countries with strong institutional design and party inclusion (Nepal, India) exhibit greater autonomy, while those with only quota-based systems (Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka) have limited autonomy.

In order to bring real empowerment, institutional accountability, effective portfolio, and autonomy to take decisions are vital, not just increasing their number is enough for women.

4.1 Indicator 1- Descriptive Representation (Percentage of Seats)

Conceptual note: This measures the number (percentage) of women at the national and local levels. While essential, it does not ensure real impact without institutional power and autonomy.

Country overview:

- India: ~13–15% in the Lok Sabha (2024); 33–50% women representation in local PRIs.

- Nepal: ~33% in the federal; ~41% in local (constitutional quota + proportional representation).

- Bangladesh: ~20–21% in Parliament; numerical presence from reserved seats but limited electoral legitimacy.

- Pakistan: ~20% in the National Assembly (reserved seats + provincial quota); local patterns vary.

- Sri Lanka: ~9.8% in Parliament (2024); Local councils ~25% after recent quotas.

Brief analysis: Visible representation is highest in reserved seats, but without autonomy and portfolio distribution, this is insufficient.

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4.2 Indicator 2 -Policy Domains & Ministerial Portfolios

Conceptual note: Portfolio type is an indicator of political power. Ministries with large budgets, regulatory authority, and strategic policies (finance, defense, foreign affairs) have greater real policy influence than "soft" ministries.

Country overview:

- India: Women are predominantly in social policy ministries (education, health, women and child development, rural development). Exceptions: Indira Gandhi, Sushma Swaraj, Nirmala Sitharaman.

- Nepal: Women are predominantly in social welfare, health, and education ministries; fewer in finance, defense, and foreign ministries.

- Bangladesh: Generally, in social policy ministries, the Prime Minister is the exception.

- Pakistan: they are holding ministerial positions. Weak portfolios (women's development, human rights); reserved seats and party gatekeeping prevent independent access to strategic ministries, but despite this, their participation is increasing.

- Sri Lanka: Women in social welfare, education, and health; higher economic and security ministries are male-dominated.

Brief analysis: In all countries, women are primarily in soft ministries, limiting their influence on budgets and macro-policy.

4.3 Indicator 3 – Legislative Outputs and Policy Impact

Conceptual Note: Legislative work reflects whether women representatives can bring issues to the policy agenda, secure budgets, and implement policies. Therefore, the evaluation looks at two things: Which laws were enacted? And how were they implemented on the ground?

Country evidence (indicator-by-indicator, legislation & implementation):

- India: At the local level, studies show that women sarpanches prioritize

essential needs like water, toilets, and schools. Women have played an important role in making reforms like the Hindu Succession Act 2005. Various reforms have been made, but their implementation remains uneven. Proxy politics is the major challenge that creates obstacles in the way of women's empowerment.

- Nepal: Various constitutional provisions and, of course Quota system played a role in increasing the status of women. Women have pushed for gender-responsive budgeting and GBV laws. However, delays and low budgets remain major challenges.

- Bangladesh: Women leaders have pushed for maternal health policies and labor-safety reforms (especially after Rana Plaza). However, their dependence on party leadership limits their independent policy initiatives.

- Pakistan: Women have led initiatives on workplace harassment and domestic violence laws. However, enforcement and enforcement of these laws remains weak across provinces.

- Sri Lanka: Women promote policies such as gender action plans and gender focal points, but low representation and cultural barriers limit their impact.

Brief Analysis: Women in South Asia are capable of driving policy change-especially on social and gender issues. However, real impact is achieved only when they have control over budgets and hard-line ministries, often held by men.

4.4 Indicator 4 - Policy Autonomy (Substantive Decision-Making Power)

Conceptual Note: Policy autonomy refers to the degree to which women leaders can make decisions, control budgets, and resist political interference. It is measured on three levels-high, medium, and low-based on Electoral mandate, portfolio authority, Budget control, and Proxy influence or external interference. Simply increasing numbers or securing a ministry does not confer real power. Therefore, both formal authority (such as budgets, positions) and informal constraints (party control, patriarchy) are considered.

Country Evidence (Indicator 4 - Autonomy Assessment Across Cases)

- India: Directly elected women at the local level (such as sarpanches) operate with greater autonomy-they decide on spending on water, education, sanitation, etc. At the national level, some women ministers (such as Sushma Swaraj and Nirmala Sitharaman) demonstrate a high degree of autonomy. However, most women MPs are limited by party discipline, patriarchy, and proxy politics.

Rating: Medium (varies by electoral mandate and portfolio).

- Nepal: Women gain both formal authority and visibility due to quotas and a strong women's caucus. They advance gender-budgeting and GBV laws. However, bureaucracy and party control in larger ministries reduce their autonomy.

Rating: Medium to High (better structural support than regional peers).

- Bangladesh: women gain entry because of reservations, and because of this, they have less control over the budgetary process and electoral legitimacy. In Pakistan, women also have less control over the budgetary process; due to reserved seats, they have limited independence. Despite having spearheaded important legislation against harassment and domestic abuse, party gatekeeping, conservative social norms, and proxy politics, particularly at the local level, limit their ability to make independent decisions. Although quotas have increased the number of women serving in local and parliamentary bodies, party control, a lack of funding, and deeply ingrained patriarchy nevertheless restrict their actual power.

Rating: Low to Medium.

- Sri Lanka: With women holding low representation and mostly “soft” ministries, their policy autonomy is limited. Some exceptions exist, but even they do not hold power for long. But recent elections show the records and where women’s participation is increased but their share in ministerial positions is still low.

Rating: Low (slow progress)

4.5 Cross-Country Comparison of the Four Indicators Revised synthesis:

A comparison of the five countries shows that increasing women's representation (Indicator 1) does not automatically lead to real power or policy-making authority (Indicators 2–4).

- Nepal leads on all indicators because its constitution and civil society strongly support women.
- India has made significant progress at the local level, but women's influence remains limited at the national level.
- In Bangladesh and Pakistan, reserved seats make women more visible, but they have less real decision-making autonomy.
- Sri Lanka has the lowest female presence in national politics, despite a history of some iconic female leaders.

4.6 Regional Patterns and Theoretical Implications

4.6.1 Pattern 1 - Party Gatekeeping

Party institutions play a major role in mediating women's political access in all five nations. Independent political identification is restricted by male-dominated nomination committees in India and by dynastic recruitment in Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. More first-generation female legislators are made possible by Nepal's proportional representation mechanism, which makes it unique.

4.6.2 Pattern 2 - Slow Progress in High-Power Roles

Despite quotas and constitutional provisions, women are still underrepresented in important ministries. Males continue to dominate in South Asia in the fields of finance, defence, home affairs, and foreign affairs. Some progress has been made by Nepal in this direction, but structural constraints still exist.

4.6.3 Pattern 3 - Local vs National Divide

At the national level, representation of women is 5-25%, compared to local level representation, which is 30-40% and is significantly higher. This demonstrates that quotas increase exposure of women, but vertical mobility and reach to higher authority are not ensured. This shows that these local

achievements do not result in national empowerment.

4.7 Final Comparative Conclusion

In South Asia clear gap is visible between substantive empowerment and descriptive visibility. Although the quota system increased the numerical presence but still women's access to policy autonomy, hard portfolios, and legislative power is still limited. Nepal exhibits the best outcomes when civic engagement and constitutional design coincide. India exhibits significant grassroots participation but enduring limitations at higher levels. Sri Lanka continues to be the exception with persistently low representation, while Bangladesh and Pakistan serve as examples of quota-driven descriptiveness without autonomy. These trends show that in order to achieve structural change, party democracy, institutional accountability, and women's access to decision-making power must be strengthened in addition to quotas.

5. Discussion

5.1 Comparing Substantive and Symbolic Representation

In order to comprehend women's political conflicts, it is essential to distinguish between descriptive and substantive representation. Although quotas in Nepal and India have improved numerical presence, particularly at the local levels but the extent of policy is still constrained:

While major foreign affairs, economic, and Defence portfolios continue to be restricted by men, women frequently hold "soft" portfolio positions (social welfare, education, and health) (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). This pattern shows that women's formal authority often does not match their real policy influence.

This disparity is not a result of women's lack of political aspirations, but rather of systemic obstacles. Besides these, Problems related to the execution weaken the women-driven laws, by this clearer between real influence and formal authority.

5.2 Societal and Cultural Barriers

The political participation of women is influenced by the existing patriarchal

structure and social customs.

- In India and Pakistan, social norms frequently prevent women from speaking with male constituents or going to council meetings by themselves, which strengthens proxy leadership (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

- Despite having parliamentary seats, social factors in Bangladesh restrict women's participation in economic policymaking (United Nations Development Programme, 2023).

- Experience of Sri Lanka and Nepal demonstrates that only legislative structure is not sufficient in itself; caste dynamics, established customs, and local hierarchies restrict women's autonomy (UN Women, 2021; 2023).

Besides this, inter-sectionality worsens the issues; those women who come from poor sections, ethnic minorities, marginalized castes, face more exclusion. By this, their active participation and capacity to hold public offices are restricted.

5.3 Limitations of Institutions

- Often, institutional structures fail to efficiently affect transformation in policy through statistical representation. For example, Quota systems increase the number of women in parliament, although reserved seats may unintentionally fortify the dependence on party structures. It restricts their autonomy and the capability to make decisions.

- Because women are more likely to have "soft" portfolios, they have less access to budgets and policymaking power, which limits their ability to have an impact on foreign, security, or macroeconomic policy (UN Women, 2023).

- Even progressive regulations, like those pertaining to harassment in Pakistan and India or maternity health programs in Bangladesh and Nepal, frequently encounter underfunding and bureaucratic delay, which reduces the efficacy of policies led by women.

This illustrates that without methods to guarantee women leaders' accountability, autonomy, and control over their resources, institutional

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reforms by themselves are insufficient.

5.4. From Presence to Power: Pathways to Genuine Empowerment

Structural changes are needed in South Asia to convert women's representation into long-term decision-making power. The following institutional and policy adjustments are required:

- Instead of limiting gender audits, gender budgeting, and performance accountability to the social sectors, institutionalize gender-responsive governance by incorporating them into all ministries.

- Training and Capacity Building: Create ongoing leadership academies in local institutions and party structures to foster expertise in budgetary management, legislation, and negotiation.

- Establish Accountability against Proxy Politics: To guarantee elected women have realistic control over their positions, require attendance logs and signed meeting minutes. Also, make it compulsory to be present in the meeting for women representatives by making strict rules.

- Diversify Representation: Use mentorship programs and intersectional quotas to acknowledge and advance women from underrepresented castes, classes, and ethnic groups.

- Promote Policy Connections with Civil Society: To track developments in gender-specific legislation and budget utilization, women's groups should work with NGOs and media coalitions.

By reorienting governance towards responsiveness, fairness, and democratic legitimacy, these reforms have the potential to move representation from symbolic inclusion to transformative power.

6. Conclusion

Across South Asia, comparative analysis of women’s political participation discloses a constant paradox mainly in terms of descriptive versus substantive representation. It shows that women are nearly half of the total population, but their political influence is still limited, or they are in the minority. Constitutional reforms, quotas, and reservation/affirmative action in India,

Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka have significantly increased women's numerical presence but have not translated into substantive empowerment. Highlighting the gap between access and actual decision-making power. Women continue to be determined in "soft" portfolios such as health, education, and social welfare, and across all five countries, decision-making in foreign affairs, finance, and defence remains dominated by men.

Despite these gains, although descriptive equality has been enhanced by quotas and affirmative action, real empowerment comes from policy control and autonomy. Legal measures that ensure access to financial resources and women's autonomous control of portfolios are essential to gradually destroy party hierarchy, patriarchal structure, and resource disparities. Open nomination procedures, Gender audits, and inclusive leadership pipelines are examples of institutional novelty that can change figurative engagement into genuine alteration. Democratic administration becomes more fair, responsible, and development-focused when women have decision-making authority, particularly in the South Asian context, where institutional and cultural barriers persist.

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Appendix A: Tables Supporting Comparative Analysis

Appendix Table A1. Representation of Women in National and Local Governments in South Asia

Table 1: *Representation of women in local government and national parliament in South Asia.*

Country	Women % in National Parliament (Lower House)	Women % in Local Government	Reservation/Quota Policy	Notable Constitutional or Policy Reforms
India	13.6% (Lok Sabha, 2024)	33–50% (Panchayati Raj & Urban Local Bodies)	33% seats reserved at local levels; 33% Bill for Parliament passed in 2023	73rd & 74th Amendments (1992); Women's Reservation Bill (2023)
Bangladesh	20.9% (Jatiya Sangsad, 2024)	~25% (Union Parishads & Upazila Parishads)	50 reserved parliamentary seats; direct elections for local women's seats	Constitution (15th Amendment, 2011); Local Government Act (2009)
Nepal	33.6% (Federal Parliament, 2024)	~41% (Municipal & Rural Councils)	One-third of women in all elected bodies	Constitution of Nepal (2015)
Pakistan	20.2% (National Assembly, 2024)	~33% (Local Governments, varying by province)	17% reserved in National Assembly; 33% local quota	Legal Framework Order (2002); Elections Act (2017)
Sri Lanka	9.8% (Parliament, 2024)	25% (Local Councils)	25% local quota introduced in 2017	Local Authorities Elections (Amendment) Act (2017)

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Note. Sources: Data compiled from IPU and UN Women databases, verified with respective national election commission reports (2023–2024).

Appendix Table A2. Ministerial Portfolios Held by Women in South Asia

Table 2: *Ministerial portfolios held by women*

Country	**Soft portfolios are commonly held by women**	**Notable women who held hard portfolios / high-power posts (Finance / Defence / Foreign / Head of Govt/State)**	**References**
India	Education, Health, Women & Child Developme nt, Social Justice, Rural Developme nt	**Indira Gandhi** - Prime Minister, **Sushma Swaraj** - External Affairs (2014–2019); **Nirmala Sitharaman** - Defence (2017–2019) and full-time **Finance Minister** (2019–);	(Prime Minister of India)Press Information Bureau (PIB) – Nirmala Sitharaman's appointment/take-charge releases. (PIB); MEA transcript: Sushma Swaraj. (MEA India).
Nepal	Education, Social Welfare, Women, Children & Senior Citizens; Health.	**Head-of-Government / Cabinet exceptions** are rare historically; women have rarely held Finance/Defence/Forei gn at the cabinet level. Recent high-profile exception: **Sushila Karki** sworn in as Nepal's first woman Prime Minister (Sept 2025 interim).	Office of the Prime Minister & Council of Ministers (Nepal) - Cabinet page. (opmcm.gov.np);(AP News).
Banglades h	Education, Women & Child Affairs,	**Prime Ministers** (Sheikh Hasina, Khaleda Zia) are major exceptions at the	Cabinet Division, Government of Bangladesh (official site).

	Health, Social Welfare,	executive level; **ministerial Finance/Defence/Foreign** posts have been held mostly by men.	(Cabinet Division)UN Women policy brief (parliament.gov.bd).
Pakistan	Social Welfare, Human Rights, Women's Development,	**Hina Rabbani Khar - Foreign Minister** (July 2011 – March 2013); **Benazir Bhutto** - Prime Minister. Top finance/Defence posts are typically held by men.	(National Assembly of Pakistan)(World Economic Forum).
Sri Lanka	Social Welfare, Women & Child Affairs, Health, Education	(Sirimavo Bandaranaike- PM; Chandrika Kumaratunga - President). Recent: **Harini Amarasuriya** - Prime Minister (Sept 2024)	Cabinet Office, Sri Lanka - official cabinet/minister pages & gazette info. (cabinetoffice.gov.lk); news coverage of Harini Amarasuriya's swearing-in (Indian Express / New Indian Express). (the Indian express)
Regional / cross-country facts	Outline: women inexplicably intense in "soft" portfolios	Global/regional information illustrates the drift	Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) / UN Women reports (Prime Minister of India).

Note. Sources: UN Women (2023, 2024); Government of India (2023); Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); Government of Nepal (2015); World Bank (2024); Government of Pakistan (2010); Government of Bangladesh (2009); Government of Sri Lanka (2017).

Appendix Table A3. Women-Driven Legislation and Policy Impact across South Asia

Table 3: *Women-driven policy & legislative impact*

Country	**Notable Legislation / Policy**	**Areas of Impact**	**Implementation Challenges**
India	Local Panchayat projects, Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005	Water, sanitation, and inheritance rights	Proxy politics, limited autonomy at local levels
Nepal	Gender-Responsive Budgeting, Gender Based Violence (GBV) policies	Maternal health, social welfare	Bureaucratic delays, underfunding
Bangladesh	National Strategy for Maternal Health, labor reforms	Maternal/child health, workplace safety	Party dependency, limited authority in economic policymaking
Pakistan	Protection Against Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2010	Workplace safety, human rights	Enforcement gaps, cultural resistance
Sri Lanka	National Action Plan for Advancement of Women	Gender-based violence, legal reform	Low parliamentary representation, cultural barriers

Note. Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); UN Women (2023, 2024); World Bank (2024); Government of India (2023); Government of Bangladesh (2009); Government of Pakistan (2010); Government of Nepal (2015); Government of Sri Lanka (2017).

Note: This table presents the legislation provisions that influence women's substantive political empowerment, highlighting key landmark reforms that shape their autonomy, safety, rights, and ability to participate in public and political life. These examples are illustrative rather than comprehensive.

Appendix Table A4 Comparative Overview of Women's Political Representation, Policy Influence, and Institutional Autonomy in South Asia

Table 4: *Comparative overview of women's political representation, policy influence, and institutional autonomy in South Asia*

Country	Women % in Parliament / Local Govt.	Instances of High-Power Portfolios Held by Women	Notable Legislation / Policy Impact	Autonomy & Institutional Strength
India	~13.6% in the national Parliament; local govt. reservations up to 50% in some states, World Bank Data – Women in national parliaments (India)	Some women have held "senior" portfolios (foreign affairs, external, home, etc.), but rarely over long periods (PIB)	Local public goods shifted under women leaders, including inheritance law reform.	High legal institutional framework; strong civil society, but issues of patriarchal norms and proxy politics persist.
Nepal	~33% in federal; ~41% in local bodies (UN Women, 2024)	Women in important ministries (e.g., Women, some social sectors, Children & Senior Citizens); less so in Defence/finance (UN Women, 2024)	Gender budgeting: Strong constitutional guarantee, legal protections for Gender Based Violence. (UN Women, 2024)	Organizational support is moderately stronger; women's caucuses are powerful; still, marginalized groups within women, less

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				empowered.
Bangladesh	~20–21% in Parliament; local govt seats for women civilized but with dissimilarity (IPU Data Portal – Bangladesh)	Mostly social welfare, women/child affairs; rarely finance, Defence; some exceptions in ministries related to labor or export sectors in female-dominated industries (IPU Data portal-Bangladesh).	Policies for maternal health, garment-sector regulation, and social protection have female champions, but limited influence over broader economic policy	The reserved seat system reduces direct electoral mandate, dependence on party leadership for nominations, and limited resource control
Pakistan	~20% in the National Assembly; provincial/local quotas for women but with strong regional variation (IPU, 2024; UN Women, 2024).	Very few women in senior ministries; often assigned to less powerful ones. Legislation on harassment/domestic violence has been pushed by women, but they struggle for budget/control and oversight of policy implementation (IPU, 2024; UN Women, 2024).	Some legal reforms (harassment laws, domestic violence, child rights), but implementation is weak; women's voices in committees are sometimes symbolic	High barriers: party gatekeeping, patriarchal norms; limited autonomy and institutional backing; reserved seats sometimes seen as symbolic rather than fully empowered positions
Sri Lanka	9.8% in Parliament; local	Portfolios mostly in women/child	The Ministry of Women,	Representation is weak; cultural,

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	councils ~25% quota (recent) (IPU Parline – Sri Lanka)	affairs and social welfare; few in economic or security sectors; ministerial representation extremely low (IPU, 2024; UN Women, 2024).	Child Affairs & Social Empowerment has pushed policies, but has had minimal influence on macroeconomic and foreign policy domains.	media, and party culture constraints; institutional mechanisms for gender equality are less powerful or of lower priority.

Note. Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); UN Women (2023, 2024); World Bank (2024); Government of India (2023); Government of Bangladesh (2009); Government of Pakistan (2010); Government of Nepal (2015); Government of Sri Lanka (2017).

Appendix Table A5. Comparative Overview of Women's Representation in South Asia (2024)

Table 5- Comparative Overview of Women's Representation in South Asia, 2024.

Country	**Women % in National Parliament**	**Women % in Local Government/ Councils**	**Reservation / Quota Mechanism**	**Key Observations**
India	13.6%	Up to 50% (Panchayati Raj)	33–50% reserved in local bodies	High local-level representation, but symbolic presence in many cases

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Nepal	33% federal	41% local bodies	33% quotas in local and federal elections	Increased representation, gender-responsive budgeting implemented
Bangladesh	21%	Variable local quotas	Reserved seats in Parliament	Women influence social policies, limited economic portfolios
Pakistan	20%	Provincial/local quotas	Reserved seats in assemblies	Women largely in soft ministries, limited autonomy, symbolic roles
Sri Lanka	9.8%	25% local councils	Reserved seats in local councils	Low parliamentary representation; recent appointments to higher ministries show progress

Note. *Sources:* Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); UN Women (2023, 2024); World Bank (2024); Government of India (2023); Government of Bangladesh (2009); Government of Pakistan (2010); Government of Nepal (2015); Government of Sri Lanka (2017).

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Appendix Table A6. Comparative Assessment of Autonomy and Policy Influence

Table 6- Comparative assessment of Autonomy and Policy Influence.

Country	Autonomy of Women Representatives	Policy Influence	Societal Barriers	Intersectional Challenges	sources
India	Medium – legal frameworks are strong, but proxy politics persist	High at the local level, limited in national policies	Patriarchal norms, male-dominated parties	Lower caste & rural women are less empowered	UN Women India Report
Nepal	Medium to high – quotas & training programs improve influence	Significant in social & health policies	Cultural and hierarchical restrictions	Ethnic minorities face exclusion	UN Women Nepal Report
Bangladesh	Medium – reserved seats boost presence, but party dependency	Moderate impact on social policies	Societal norms limit economic policy participation	Rural & poor women are disadvantaged	UN Women Bangladesh Report
Pakistan	Low to medium – proxy politics are common	Limited legislative impact	Conservative norms restrict visibility	Minority women face multiple layers of exclusion	UN Women Pakistan Report
Sri Lanka	Low – recent progress in	Moderate in social policy	Gendered cultural norms	Rural women and minorities are	UN Women Sri

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	select ministries			underrepresented	Lanka Report

Note. *Sources:* Inter-Parliamentary Union (2024); UN Women (2023, 2024); World Bank (2024); Government of India (2023); Government of Bangladesh (2009); Government of Pakistan (2010); Government of Nepal (2015); Government of Sri Lanka (2017).

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Appendix B - Autonomy Rubric

Autonomy rubric: **Level**	**Description / Evidence**
High autonomy	directly elected to a general seat and in charge of a ministry or portfolio with substantial financial discretion or clearly independent decision-making (e.g., signed ministerial orders, autonomous authority over budget lines, sustained policy efforts without proxy influence).
Medium autonomy	Possesses committee leadership, caucus influence, or a ministry with moderate financial authority; is either directly elected or has held a reserved seat for a long time; there is some indication of autonomous efforts, but significant limitations still exist.
Low autonomy	A seat that has been nominated or reserved without a direct electoral mandate, persistent proof of proxy control, restricted financial authority, and few committee or leadership positions.

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