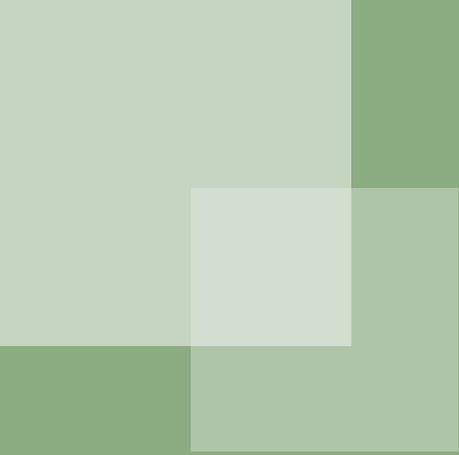


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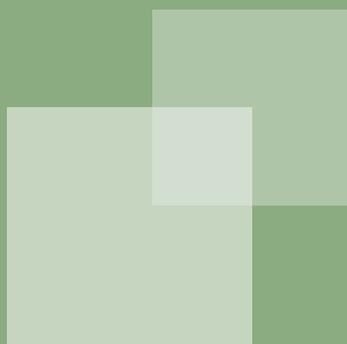
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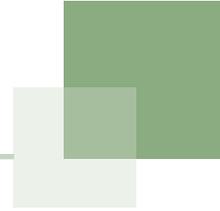
Chapter 4

SAARC: A Step Forward, Women's Inclusive Political Participation



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Indu Tuladhar



SAARC: A Step Forward, Women's Inclusive Political Participation

Introduction

This chapter analyses the initiatives on women's empowerment introduced by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the SAARC agenda on women's issues, and progress and challenges related to advancing the gender agenda and promoting women's empowerment at the regional level. It also sets out the need for a stronger regional mechanism for institutionalizing the achievements of SAARC on gender and women's empowerment in order to promote women's participation and representation in politics. On the basis of current commitments by SAARC leaders at the national and regional levels, the recommendations are based around a people-centric framework in which the citizens of SAARC member states and their governments can form a partnership to advance the issues. It concludes with a key recommendation on the appointment of a Gender Accountability Commission as a regional mechanism to ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality in the SAARC region.

Background

SAARC was founded in December 1985 to advance peace, development and stability in South Asia. The SAARC Charter makes a commitment to regional cooperation and was signed by the heads of state of Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri-Lanka, and later Afghanistan. The member states have agreed to take decisions on the basis of unanimity. Bilateral and contentious issues are excluded from the deliberations of SAARC and regional cooperation is seen as complementary to bilateral cooperation (art. IV, SAARC Charter).

SAARC broadly recognizes the role of women in the development agenda. From the early stages of its evolution, it formed a Technical Committee on Women and Development, which is responsible for the implementation, coordination and monitoring of programmes, ministerial-level meetings, engagement at the policy level and SAARC Summit Declarations. (The SAARC Summit is the highest authority, the heads of state or government meet once a year or when considered necessary by member states) (art. 3, SAARC Charter).

SAARC Summit on women's issues

The importance of gender equality was only recognized at the sixth SAARC Summit in 1991. Ever since, SAARC has given priority to women and development. The Sixth SAARC Summit also proclaimed the 'Decade of the Girl Child, 1991–2000' and formulated a National Plan of Action, a major intervention by SAARC to address the needs of girls in the region.

The Eighth SAARC Summit (1995) recognized the increased political and social consciousness in the region, and realized the need to eliminate gender disparities and promote women's empowerment in order to promote socio-economic development. This was followed by the adoption of resolutions such as the Kathmandu Resolution on Women and Family Health. The Ninth Summit (1997) re-emphasized the need for enhanced cooperation to bring women into the mainstream of socio-economic development in the region. The Tenth Summit (1998) continued to express concerns about gender issues, realizing the need for 'affirmative action and legislative measures' to address the existing range of structural discrimination, violence against women, and other such challenges. The summit also raised concerns about the impact of conflict on women and girls. The heads of state and government also recalled the dire need for regional cooperation and collaboration to address the issue of the trafficking of women and children in the region. The Eleventh Summit (2002) adopted a Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, which entered into force in 2005 (SAARC, 2008).

In addition, SAARC has made advances on social issues through its development of a Social Charter, which was signed during the Twelfth Summit in January 2004 and was marked as a historic development in the region. The concept was initiated during the review of progress in the social sectors at the Tenth Summit. The Charter highlights a broad range of issues to promote social development, such as poverty eradication, youth mobilization



and the protection of children, and emphasizes the empowerment of women as one of the key areas in advancing social issues in the region.

Over time, SAARC has steadily shifted its approach from 'women in development' to gender equality and women's empowerment. However, SAARC did not seem collectively to realize the importance of women's meaningful participation in decision making, particularly political participation, until its Fourteenth Summit in New Delhi in 2007. In the meantime, the thirteenth Summit (2005) endorsed the SAARC Development Goals (SDGs) (2007–2012) as recommended by Independent South Asian Commission on Poverty Alleviation. The eighth SDG is to ensure effective participation by the poor and women in the anti-poverty policies and programmes. The major indicators set for achieving this goal are the percentage of women in local government, parliament or the civil services and the implementation of gender budgeting—the amount of budget expenditure on women and the poor as a percentage of the total budget (ISACPA, 2007).

At the Fourteenth SAARC Summit (2007), the heads of state clearly accepted the need for women's full participation in all strata of society, including participation in decision-making processes in order to achieve equality and development. In addition, the SAARC leaders further emphasized women's empowerment and made it one of the major objectives of regional cooperation. The Fifteenth Summit, in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 2008, maintained regional cooperation on bringing women fully into the mainstream of development on the basis of gender equality. It called for women's economic empowerment and skills development, while addressing key health issues and violence against women. The leaders also gave directions for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and abuse against women and guaranteed the right of women to live in society in a dignified manner.

The Sixteenth SAARC Summit (2010) did not make any specific declaration on women, but expressed satisfaction about the ongoing initiatives to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through regional cooperation in the Summit Declaration. Moreover, in the Sixteenth SAARC Summit Declaration,¹ all the SAARC leaders welcomed the nomination by the Government of the Maldives of a woman as the tenth secretary general of SAARC. The need for collective efforts by parliamentarians in South Asia was discussed and recognized, and the convening of a 'Conclave of SAARC Parliamentarians' in line with the SAARC Charter was recommended. The SAARC Secretariat was directed to convene a Working Group, comprised of nominees from the member states, to work out the modalities for the establishment of such a conclave.

The Seventeenth SAARC Summit (2011) directed the convening of an Intergovernmental Expert Group Meeting to discuss the establishment of a regional mechanism to ensure the empowerment of women and gender equality in the region, with a focus on national legislation including timely realization of the Millennium Development Goals and the South Asian Development Goals. The meeting was set for October 2012. The expert group is an ad hoc mechanism that allows SAARC member states to send officials from the line ministries or independent experts on the relevant issues. Such meetings are generally facilitated by the SAARC Secretariat.

Ministerial-level decisions on women's issues

Since its establishment, there have only been four ministerial-level SAARC meetings on women's issues: in 1986, 1990, 1993 and 1995 (SAARC, 1990). The first SAARC Ministerial Meeting on Women in Development reviewed the overall situation of women in South Asian countries and identified the areas that require the greatest attention, such as the low level of literacy, poor enrolment in schools, high drop-out rates, the lack of vocational and technical training as well as marketing and credit facilities, and the low level of political participation and involvement in policy making and its implementation. The resulting initial Programme of Action focused on three areas: workshops (Women and the Law, Women and the Environment, Women and Social Forestry, Forestry); training (eg. Rural Management for Women, Public Cooperation for Women) and Exhibitions (handicraft and designs by women, exhibitions of work by women artists) (SAARC, 1990). The ministerial meeting agreed to examine and prepare specific programmes for implementation at the regional level. Some were integrated into a women's development programme, 'SAARC 2000: A Basic Needs Perspective', with an emphasis on Women in Development (SAARC, 1990). The Third Ministerial meeting focused on women and health. It adopted the Kathmandu Resolution on Women and Family Health in 1993. At the fourth meeting, ministers called for a reflection of the SAARC perspective on women to be taken to the Fourth World Conference on Women, which focused on the eradication of poverty, mainstreaming empowerment and decision making, a national machinery for women and girls, and violence against women and girls.

The Technical Committee on Women in Development

A regional consultation and collaboration on women's issues was initiated by the establishment of a Technical Committee on Women in Development under the SAARC Integrated Programme of Action in 1986. The first



meeting of the Technical Committee led to the finalization of a Regional Plan of Action on Women, based on the 'Joint Communiqué' of the First Ministerial Meeting on Women in Development, along with a calendar of activities for 1986–88. As is noted above, the calendar of activities focused on training, workshops and a handicraft exhibition (SAARC, 1990). The second to the fifth meetings reviewed and updated the ongoing calendar of activities and proposed some new ideas and activities for 1989–90. The Women in Development approach, which focuses attention on women in development projects, dates from the 1970s. This approach does not focus on gender relations based on social processes and reproductive roles. Nor does it address the root causes of gender inequality. The approach provided some guidance to SAARC's development plan to bring women into the development framework, but global experience shows it failed to achieve gender equality or influence national policies. Women-focused programmes criticize the marginalization of women and how the Women in Development approach excluded women from mainstream development work (ADB, 2003).

The Technical Committee meetings focused on pertinent issues and called for collaboration on legislation on women's property rights, a scientific assessment of women's contribution to the economy, with gender-disaggregated data, and recognized the need for a Women's Group in the SAARC Secretariat. The Committee was merged into the Technical Committee on Social Development in 2000. The Committee on Women in Development had held 13 meetings. Over the period, SAARC made some progress on developing a policy framework and implementing some activities, such as the publication of a SAARC Women's Journal, a Guidebook for Women in Development, a Calendar of Activities for 1989–90, proclamation of the Decade of the Girl Child and Adolescent Girl, and conducting various workshops and meetings to promote the role of women in development (SAARC, 1990).

The Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children

The Technical Committee on Social Development was dissolved in 2002 after only one meeting. The meeting focused on children's issues and reviewed progress on SAARC Autonomous Women's Advocacy. In 2004, a new Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children was created under the Regional Integrated Program of Action. The new technical committee was to manage a range of regional cooperation on issues related to women, youth and children in the region, in general. There have been five meetings of the committee, the most recent in July 2011.

The first meeting, in Dhaka, Bangladesh in November 2005, recommended ensuring the effective implementation of its mandate with reference to article VI of the SAARC Charter, which includes ensuring effective participation in activities by the member states, and coordination at the national level of effective implementation of decisions taken in the areas of women, youth and children by: holding regular meetings of the Sectoral Focal Points; promoting regional cooperation on improving legal, judicial and regulatory mechanisms in member states in respect of the provisions stipulated in the conventions under its purview; formulating and implementing programmes and efforts to harmonize policies and practices; and adopting regional goals and strategies in national development programmes.

Subsequent meetings mainly focused on reviewing progress with the preparation of the SAARC Gender Database and its implementation, reviewing the Decade of the Girl Child in SAARC, developing and endorsing a Standard Operating Procedure for implementing various provisions of the SAARC Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution and planned a workshop on various issues related to women. The Committee is also responsible for youth and children's issues, therefore committee meetings did not focus exclusively on women.

Progress and challenges

SAARC has made significant progress in realizing the dire need for regional cooperation on empowering women, including women's participation at all levels of decision-making bodies in the region, in order to achieve its goals. SAARC has even progressed its understanding of how to deal with women's issues in the region, which initially took a Women in Development approach but slowly shifted to gender equality and women's empowerment. This has given ample opportunity for SAARC to address women's issues in a positive way through training, information and participation in decision making and advocacy.

Since adopting the Regional Convention on Combating the Crime of Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution in January 2002, SAARC has developed a Standard Operating Procedure, as well as a framework for a Plan of Action for the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child, 1991–2001, which sets out guiding principles, goals, priority concerns, a strategic direction and an action programme on resource mobilization. The SAARC Autonomous Women's Advocacy Group was formed to advocate mainstreaming gender and make recommendations on gender-related issues and programmes.



SAARC extended its collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme, signing a memorandum of understanding in 2001. As is noted above, the SAARC Secretariat has developed a SAARC Gender Database. It has also created the post of gender specialist to provide support to the director of social affairs in mainstreaming gender in SAARC's development goals; support the SAARC Secretariat to develop operational guidelines, directives and manuals for mainstreaming gender and inclusion; analyse the gender situation, identify gender issues and concerns, and recommend ways to address these; formulate projects for the SAARC Gender Equality and Empowerment programme; and draft or review SAARC programmes and policy documents to ensure that gender is mainstreamed. However, SAARC has yet to appoint anyone to this post.

Despite the progresses outlined above, women's participation in parliament in South Asia is the lowest of all the regions. On average, women hold only 7 per cent of ministerial positions and 15 per cent of seats in national parliaments (Afghanistan: 28 per cent in 2011; Bangladesh: 18.5 per cent in 2008; Bhutan: 8.5 per cent in the National Assembly; India: 10.7 per cent in the 15th Lok Sabha; the Maldives: 7 per cent in 2011 down from 12 per cent in 2007; Nepal: 33 per cent in June 2012, but Constituent Assembly now being dissolved; Pakistan: 22 per cent in 2011; and Sri Lanka: 6 per cent in 2011) (World Bank, n.d.). Some South Asian countries, such as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan, have adopted a quota system. In India, a Women's Reservation Bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha in March 2010 but the issue is still pending in the Lok Sabha.² In South Asia, only 7 per cent of women are members of a political party (UN Women, 2012).

There are numerous challenges to overcome in order to advance inclusive political participation and representation of women at the decision-making levels within the respective SAARC member states and at the regional level. These challenges require a holistic approach to the structure of SAARC and its relationships among the member states; the limitations on implementing and monitoring its declarations; and the socio-economic, cultural and political contexts in the region.

There are still huge questions left regarding the implementation of the policy framework in order to transform policies into the reality of people's lives in the region. Even the Fourteenth SAARC Summit reflected that it had become just a declaratory body, emphasizing the urgent need to move SAARC from a declaratory to an implementation body. Despite being critical about its own effectiveness, however, SAARC has not taken a solid move forward to improve women's lives and promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

During the 27 years of SAARC's existence, it was supposed to hold a Summit each year, but there have been only 17. In most of the cases this was due to political problems in the respective member states. Only four ministerial-level meetings discussed women. The SAARC Autonomous Advocacy Group of Prominent Women Personalities met in 2004 to discuss its terms of reference and related matters, but there have been no further meetings. SAARC forms more and more technical committees, but they do not function. The SAARC structure is ineffective at addressing women's issues in the region. It shows a lack of political will on women's issues. This is one of the foremost challenges to the participation of women at decision-making levels in SAARC. SAARC has made efforts to pursue a Regional Plan of Action. SAARC leaders have recognized the importance of gender equality and empowerment through regional cooperation. However, implementation of these plans has been limited.

SAARC was founded on the principles of sovereign equality, territorial integrity, political independence, non-use of force and non-interference in internal affairs (art. II, SAARC Charter), but relationships among the member states are asymmetric in terms of size, resources, military and economic capacity.

The deputy director of the SAARC Human Resources Development Centre, Kabir M. Jahangir, has emphasized the need for results-oriented intervention for the benefit of the millions in the region. He has advocated quick and tangible moves towards the implementation of all the SAARC Action Plans, strengthening the SAARC Secretariat, SAARC Bodies and SAARC Regional Centres, and expediting their operations along with expanding the SAARC budget through increased contributions by each member state.

The challenge for SAARC is 'structural reinforcement'—it does not have coherent modalities and effective mechanisms for follow-up and implementation. Shamashad Ahmad has expressed the need for a conceptual reorientation of the founding principles of SAARC—a 'serious review of the Charter on the basis of experiences of the past 27 years to overcome the shortcomings and outdated elements, especially the provisions on the "principle of cooperation, Inter-governmental structure, financial arrangements and general provisions concerning decision-making"'. He also recommends developing cooperation strategies based on the political will of the member states (Ahmad, 2012).

The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan is a comparatively new member of SAARC. It joined in 2007, signing the Joint Declaration of the 14th SAARC



Summit. It is not secure and it is politically unstable, which may hinder the strengthening of regional cooperation. Saleem Ahmed, the current SAARC secretary general, sees the main reason for the ineffectiveness of SAARC as its lack of political commitment and its failures to evolve a positive identity and image for the regional grouping or to proactively and productively build itself.

SAARC has not been able to invest its resources and time in a balanced manner to achieve its set objectives. Cooperation on women's issues do not receive priority at the implementation level. It will remain a challenge to get national attention and reprioritize investment towards women's participation within SAARC.

Decision making in SAARC is on the basis of unanimity, which is another challenge of its structure because it excludes bilateral and contentious issues from its deliberations. Particularly on women's issues, this causes great difficulties because not all the SAARC member states are on the same page in terms of understanding and perceiving women's rights in a national or regional context. Pakistan and Bangladesh, for example, have ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with a reservation.

In addition to the institutional and relationship challenges among the member states, there are social, economic and cultural challenges that impede the empowerment and inclusion of women at the decision-making level in the SAARC region. Patriarchal societies and attitudes have not been challenged in SAARC, as in many countries in the world. Women face problems in moving ahead in politics because social attitudes to women in politics are negative. A study conducted in Nepal shows that patriarchal social thought 40 per cent and a traditional outlook 39 per cent are the major reasons for negative social attitudes towards women's political involvement. Other reasons include gender discrimination 14 per cent and the negative attitudes and behaviour of the current political leadership (mostly male) towards women in Nepal.³ These attitudes prevent women from entering politics or competing against male colleagues. Women become stuck in a role for many years.

The Second South Asian Regional Conference on Combating Violence against Women in Politics: Revisiting Policies, Politics and Participation, organized by South Asia Partnership International in Kathmandu in 2008, identified the regional challenges for women's participation in politics in South Asia. It listed eight major challenges, such as translating parties' exploitative tendencies into affirmative action, changing the social mindset and institutional barriers, the

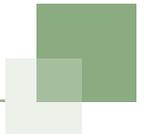
growing incidence of election violence in South Asia, gender-based violence against women in politics and the lack of a multi-stakeholder approach to tackling violence against women in politics. It also highlighted the limited priority given by UN agencies to violence against women in politics in South Asia. A final point was the lack of attention paid to gender-based violence in the SAARC Gender Database. The conference clearly stated that half-hearted reforms will not work and a more comprehensive approach is required (SAP International, 2009).

The SAARC member states have appointed more women leaders than many other regions in the world, including the first woman prime minister in 1960, but the SAARC countries are not free from prevailing social values and norms. Research has identified that traditional party leadership is one of the basic obstacles to women's participation—the biased attitude of the leadership, the attitude that senior positions are for life and a lack of trust are all part of the culture in internal party politics that hinders political access for women.

There are many issues that surround this, such as the culture, the lack of women's organized pressure to lead, lack of education, limited access to economic resources and limited mobility. In addition, none of the political parties acknowledge women's reproductive role as a social responsibility. Many women discontinue their active political participation when they have children.

In Nepal, for instance, despite a binding legal provision ensuring women's proportional representation in the party lists for election to the Constituent Assembly, no political party included more than 33 per cent women in their list of candidates. It was only after the Election Commission refused to register the parties that they eventually prepared a new list including 50 per cent women. This is evidence that voluntary commitments do not lead to full implementation—it required binding laws and strong oversight bodies to force parties to stick to the spirit of gender inclusion in Nepal's context as democratic political culture is yet not fully practised. On the other hand, many active women politicians have to sacrifice their political life after getting married. Even female politicians who are married to male politicians have to leave the stage while their husbands reach the top (International IDEA, 2005).

Despite what is written in the policy framework, the unwritten rules are stronger in nearly all the SAARC countries. The godfather culture still exists, and the policy and practice of nominations further reinforce and continue such practices.



Future perspectives and policy recommendations

The SAARC member states' growing commitment to institutionalizing multiparty democracy can be seen as a key opportunity for inclusive participation by women at all levels of decision making in its bodies and other political institutions. The most notable point is that many of the SAARC member states at the national level have been taking affirmative action to increase women's participation in local government and their national parliaments.

The recommendations made below focus on three major areas. First, political-level interventions mainly focused on changes in approach and mindset, as long-term strategies. Second, at the institutional level, the focus of attention is the creation of a 'SAARC Gender Accountability Commission', as a medium-term strategy. The third set of recommendations focuses on policy-level interventions that can be implemented using existing structures and mechanisms in a short- to medium-term strategy.

Political-level interventions

An Independent Technical Committee

For inclusive political participation by women, thoughtful and proactive action by member states and strong political will are paramount. They require time and commitment as well as the investment of resources in developing a policy framework, functional mechanisms and aggressive moves for the implementation of commitments. However, the current structure has neither binding force nor financial commitments, but is based on voluntary contributions by member states. A review of the SAARC Charter is needed based on nearly three decades of experience in order to enhance its structures, accountability mechanisms and financial commitments. The recommendation is therefore to form an independent Technical Committee prior to the 2014 SAARC Summit in order to review and evaluate the gaps in the existing structure of the SAARC framework, revisiting a Charter that was built on mistrust and fear among member states and providing clear guidelines for change to take to the Summit.

A partnership charter of non-reciprocal and reciprocal agreements among SAARC member states

In 2008, India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, took a key step in strengthening bilateral relationships with SAARC member states. India took non-reciprocal and unilateral action in key areas, such as reducing the list of sensitive items subject to trade tariffs from 480 items to 25. The non-reciprocal nature of India's actions found favour with other SAARC member states, which have begun to emulate them. The sustainability of this non-reciprocal relationship is open to question, but the immediate benefits outweigh the negatives.

SAARC has to remove fear and mistrust among its member states, creating a long-term partnership agenda that redefines its relationships and accountabilities. Thus, the formation of a partnership charter is recommended that includes both non-reciprocal and reciprocal agreements among the SAARC member states on trade, human rights, gender, education and health care, among other things. There should be clear sanctions for those that breach mutually agreed SAARC policies. This would not interfere with national sovereignty but enhance the mutual benefits and sustainability of SAARC. In relation to non-reciprocal benefits, member states need to use national resources to benefit the whole of the SAARC region, such as India's financial declaration on supporting humanitarian programmes across the region.

Establish a new SAARC body to address gender issues

A SAARC Gender Accountability Commission

In the long run, there is undoubtedly a need for a strong and independent central mechanism that will play a catalytic role in advancing the status of women in the region. Creating such a regional mechanism will ensure cross-national participation and accountability. This would increase women's effective participation in politics at decision-making levels. Against this background, the possible structure of a central mechanism, a SAARC Gender Accountability Commission, is outlined below, including its composition and jurisdiction and the need for accountability to member states (Figure 4.1).

The Commission would have a partnership focus in which governments and citizens can play a creative role in enhancing gender equality and gender mainstreaming. Effective national women's commissions would need to be accountable to their national parliament and to be adequately resourced.



The structure of the commission

The SAARC Gender Accountability Commission would be an independent commission with a nominated representative from each member state's National Women's Commission. If any member state does not have such a national mechanism, a representative from the Ministry of Women could be nominated.

There would also be an Independent Advisory Bureau from each country, appointed by the respective government in a free and open selection process. At the functional level, the Independent Advisory Bureau representatives and National Commission members would have equal status in the Regional Commission. Together, there would be 16 members of the National Commission who would serve for a maximum of four years.

Jurisdiction of the Commission

The Gender Accountability Commission would protect and promote equality and non-discrimination, women's human rights and oversee their effective implementation. In order to perform its duties, the Commission would review the existing laws and policies related to women's rights and gender equality, and their implementation, every three years, and make recommendations to the SAARC Summits. The SAARC Summits would make policy directives on the basis of such recommendations, which must be binding on the member states. For this purpose the Commission would work jointly and in partnership with civil society.

The Commission would take all necessary measures to strengthen the instruments of SAARC that are mandated to promote and protect women's human rights, and combat violence against women at all levels, based on the recommendations of the Commission.

The Commission would also receive reports from member states every three years to ensure that developments and challenges were being monitored and make recommendations. The SAARC secretary general would transmit these recommendations to SAARC Summits.

Through the representative of the National Women's Commission, with the support of an appointed member of the Independent Advisory Bureau (typically the member from that specific country), member states would undertake to implement programmes and carry out activities of civic

education with a special focus on the rights, responsibilities and entitlements of citizens and the promotion of women’s human rights.

Overall, the Commission would coordinate, harmonize and continue the programme undertaken on a short-term basis. The commissioners and the appointed representative member of the Independent Advisory Bureau would meet annually for not more than ten days to consider the reports submitted by each country. The meeting would be held in rotation in each member state.

Figure 4.1. SAARC Gender Accountability Commission



Policy level

Immediate appointment of gender focal person in SAARC secretariat

The Technical Committee for Women in Development identified the need to appoint a gender specialist in the SAARC Secretariat. It made moves to appoint the specialist and called for applications, but the process failed to identify anyone for the position. Consequently, there is no gender specialist in the SAARC Secretariat. The SAARC Secretariat must take immediate steps to appoint a gender specialist with terms of reference.

Regional-level investment on consciousness building

Bringing women into the political process is not only a goal, but also a key means of challenging structural violence and discrimination against women built on deep-rooted patriarchal values at the ideological and system levels. SAARC needs to be aware of and address legal, political, cultural and social

boundaries that may interfere with the political involvement of women, focusing on women's oppression in the patriarchal system, and expressions of male domination and control over all social and political institutions. Failure to address these issues will undervalue the role of women in politics, and patriarchal dominance will continue with little accommodation to women politicians at the sub-national levels. SAARC must invest in resources of a largely preventative nature, such as raising consciousness or eliminating discrimination, along with developing policy frameworks, mechanisms and other arrangements. This could include maintaining a database on women's status in general and policy analysis on the existing legal frameworks of SAARC member states on inclusive women's participation and other relevant legal measures.

Re-energize the SAARC Autonomous Women's Advocacy Group

As is noted above, SAARC made progressive attempts to establish the SAARC Autonomous Women's Advocacy Group (SAWAG) in 2002. The group was comprised of national prominent personalities. The major objective of the group was to advocate mainstreaming gender and make recommendations on gender-related issues and programmes in the region. However, there was only one meeting and it has been inactive since 2004. There is a need to re-energize SAWAG with a new spirit so it can become a strong advocacy group in the region for increasing resources, strengthened institutional mechanisms, developing an appropriate policy framework and advancing the status of women.

Promote affirmative action in SAARC countries

In a liberal democracy there is a need to create a legal regime, the rule of law, by demanding and ensuring equal rights and self-determination for women within the framework of the legal system. SAARC should play a catalyst role in creating space for member states to have this public policy debate, in communication with the media and through education, in order to change habits based on a continuation of patriarchy, discrimination, prejudice and inequality. SAARC should seize the opportunity to create new norms, taking the law as the determining agent or means. SAARC must play a catalyst role through critical analysis of laws and ending discriminatory laws in favour of affirmative action to create substantial equality, along with special electoral mechanisms for promoting women's participation in decision making.

Engage with national political parties through a Conclave of SAARC Parliamentarians

SAARC has already discussed and recognized the need for collective efforts by the parliamentarians of South Asia. A Conclave of SAARC Parliamentarians was recommended in line with the SAARC Charter. The SAARC Secretariat was directed to convene a Working Group, comprised of nominees of the member states, to work out the modalities for establishing such a conclave. However, it is not yet in place. In this context, the recommendation is to form a Conclave of SAARC Parliamentarians with clear instructions on the meaningful participation of women parliamentarians.

Through the Conclave, SAARC should engage with national political parties in order to transform party statutes and culture. There is a need to continue to engage with political parties in a strategic manner with the support of women's wings of the respective political parties to strengthen interparty women's networks and women's groups in parliament.

Regional intervention on women's empowerment in politics

SAARC needs to introduce a Women's Empowerment Programme in the long term and as a short-term, time-bound programme for progressive investment in women's empowerment in order to promote women's access to leadership positions within party structures at the national level. While developing such a programme, multifaceted and multidimensional programme interventions will be required. To increase the effective bargaining and negotiation capacity of women leaders, as well as the capacity of women in political parties, capacity-building interventions will be required from the local to the national levels. SAARC could play a pertinent role in harmonizing legal frameworks.

Conclusions

In the 27-year history of SAARC, it has made steady progress in recognizing the importance of the agenda of women's empowerment, including women's participation in decision making. SAARC member states have made progress in developing affirmative policies on women's participation in politics at the national and local levels, which has inspired SAARC member states to develop regional policy on women's participation in decision making. Nonetheless, SAARC is weak on the implementation of its policies. SAARC has formed and reformed technical committees time and again, but these committees have failed to address women's agendas and turned SAARC into a declaratory body.

SAARC faces a number of challenges in the region in addressing not only women's agendas, but also economic, social, political and cultural issues. SAARC does not have strong political will to achieve its goals. Structural limitations, financial arrangements and its decision-making process all hinder progress and even effective functioning. In addition, SAARC must consider the geopolitical situation in the region and is not able to address the psychology of fear among member states that it is based on. The overarching social and cultural barriers are strong factors that prevent gender equality.

Given all these opportunities and challenges, SAARC must develop long-term and short-term plans based on its lessons learned from 27 years of experience. Creating a SAARC Gender Accountability Commission is one recommendation. Certainly, SAARC must revisit its current mechanisms in order to create a more effective and efficient structure.

Notes

- ¹ <<http://www.saarc-sec.org/userfiles/16thSummit-Declaration29April10.pdf>>.
- ² <<http://ibnlive.in.com/news/winter-session-upa-hopes-passage-of-womens-reservation-bill/437378-37-64.html>>.
- ³ <http://renaissance.org.np/images/downloads/1369762348womens_political_participation_survey_report.pdf>.