

Proceedings of the Panel on Navigating and Challenging Gender Norms in Politics

Centre for Gender And Politics



About the Panel Discussion:

In the last three years, the team at Centre for Gender and Politics (CGAP) have worked with politicians, researchers in the field of gender, economics, politics and other related subjects and conducted surveys, in-depth interviews, and extensively reviewed existing research on the intersection of politics, gender and South Asia.

Through this roundtable, we aim to increase awareness on the subject and create an enabling platform for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to come together to promote a positive discourse on gender and politics in South Asia. In the last 3 years, 14 virtual and in-person panel discussions, dialogues, workshops and roundtables were hosted and broadcasted.

Research suggests that gender norms play a critical role in women's political journeys in South Asia. To discuss the role of gender norms and how women political leaders have been challenging and navigating them in South Asian politics, CGAP, in collaboration with [Women in Leadership Conclave](#), organised the panel discussion on 8th March 2023 with leaders in politics, nonprofits and research working in South Asia.

About the discussants:

Hon'ble Dil Maya Rai

Member of Parliament, National Assembly of Bhutan

Hon'ble Dil Maya Rai is a Member of Parliament in the National Assembly of Bhutan. She has chaired the Public Accounts Committee and served as a Deputy Chair and member of various other parliamentary committees. She has served as a Social Development Specialist with the Asian Development Bank and the UN Bhutan.

Ms Hima Bista,

Executive Director, Women Lead, Nepal

Hima Bista is the Executive Director of Women LEAD Nepal - an organisation empowering young Nepali women to become future leaders. With 22 years of experience in the development sector, including six years as Head of Human Resources

at DFID Nepal, Hima's passion and leadership have hugely contributed to moving towards an inclusive society.

Ms Jena Karim

Senior Democracy and Governance Advisor

Jena Karim is a Senior Democracy and Governance Advisor. She has been a civil society and democracy practitioner for 20 years, working on access to democratic processes, elections, and electoral reform in conflict and post-conflict states. Most recently, she worked on increasing access to justice for women and marginalised groups and civil society advocacy development in Afghanistan. In addition to Afghanistan, Jena has worked in and on Bangladesh, Pakistan, Myanmar, Sudan, Tajikistan, and other contexts in transition. Jena published a book on polarisation and political culture and has written and presented on civil society, access to justice, and political transition for academic and policy audiences.

Understanding how gender norms shaped the opportunities of getting into political leadership, of having access to political leadership

Dil Maya Rai shared her experience of running for the electoral office and subsequently working in the government. She reflected on how she didn't face gender biases while campaigning during elections but gradually encountered them amongst her male colleagues once in office. She attributed this dichotomy to the individual mindset of colleagues, where there is an attitude barrier to women working on the same platform as men.

Hima observed how the gender perceptions around what a woman or man should do and how they should behave is felt in every public space in our society, whether it is elections, public service or workplaces. She noted how nepotism and gender norms are interconnected, particularly in the context of Nepal elections, where the representation of women has been limited to token representation on the reservation. Hima's experience of working with young women in politics has also made it evident that unpacking the deeply entrenched and strong gender biases in our psyche is a very tiring and long process.

Bringing together experiences from across cultures and continents, **Jeena** talked about growing up in a patriarchal society, with set notions of masculinity and access to and participation in public spaces. She reflected on the strong societal notion of women

being interested only in gender-centric issues and being sidelined in spaces that are about other issues. **Jeena** also talked about different approaches by civil society from across varied contexts to challenge these norms: through building constituencies unexplored, focusing on non-gender impacts of issues, and by becoming sector experts.

Challenging gender norms in politics across different contexts

Dil Maya Rai highlighted the lack of representation of women in parliament as well as local offices. She stressed how representation is lower as we go higher up the ladder and even in merit-based offices, which indicates that norms dictating gender roles of men and women in our society do act as an obstacle for women participating in direct politics. She noted that despite being close to 50-50 in population, on average, women represent only 15-20 percent of positions in higher office. She talked about how expectations of a workplace were starkly different from her other colleagues owing to her exposure to international higher education and different cultures before entering politics. Her being open, friendly, or frank would be interpreted in a negative way by her colleagues. However, after four years, by being persistent, she has managed to change the way some of her male colleagues interact with their female counterparts and encouraged some of her female colleagues to be more free, and eventually move the needle forward towards a more open and accepting workplace.

Hima Bista drew on her experience of working with young women from different backgrounds aspiring to enter politics as part of the leadership fellowship she runs, and the strong focus on building advocacy among young women. She talks about the hesitancy among young women to speak up, protest, and raise their voices and how that's shaped by gender norms and the very real fear among women of the gender-biased backlash that they would face if they raised their voices in public. She drew on her own experience from a public speech she made as part of a public march in Nepal and where certain words were picked, and she faced continued trolling by the media. However, that has not stopped her from acting and encouraging other young women to act and rise up and break these ceilings and set do's and don'ts established in our society.

Role of Media in Shaping Gender Norms

Dil Maya Rai shared how the media and what is written on social media strongly influence how the general population views politicians without the need for fact-checking. She talked about her experience as a parliamentarian where the media misrepresents what is in the control of a legislator to the public and that these misrepresentations are extremely difficult to clear. Drawing on her experience, She also talked about the need for a new government to educate and orient this powerful

institution of media on the role of different arms of the government before rolling out activities.

Jeena also focused on the need to train media and educate them on the impact of their work, particularly the gendered impact of their outputs. In the heat of chasing stories and jobs, judgements can be clouded, and that can lead to unintentional harm. She also talked about how media engagement is a dance and the media and politicians are in a symbiotic relationship, and that it is very important in terms of framing narratives. On gender and media, Jeena talked about the need to have more women in media, in both urban and rural areas, to tackle the sensationalisation of words by women political leaders and so that the focus is drawn back on the substance of what is being said on a public platform.


The Future of reshaping gender norms

Hima Bista shared the changing scenes in Nepal, where more and more young women are entering politics, working in their own new ways and changing the field. She shared how choices of political role models among young women are also shifting slowly from global to local. Hima also stressed on the role of male allies and youth in politics and how their voices help in breaking gender biases towards women in politics. **Jeena** also stressed on the need to create and nurture community relationships and build allyship in reshaping gender norms and gave the example of Afghanistan, where allyship has been a critical issue. She also reinforced the need to change the perception of women working only on women's issues and breaking the "us versus them" narrative in politics. **Dil Maya Rai** highlighted the role of civil society in reshaping gender norms by encouraging women to enter politics. She also talked about the positive changes in the political space in Bhutan, with more women being active in the field at local elections as well as the executive level.

The session is moderated by **Sugandha Parmar**, Director, Centre for Gender And Politics.

The proceedings are drafted by **Hoyasala Devi K**, Chair - Women in Policy, Women in Leadership Conclave 23. Edited by **Sakshi Hallan**, Member, Technical Advisory Unit, Centre for Gender And Politics.

The full discussion can be watched at

 [Navigating and Challenging Gender Norms in South Asian Politics](#)

Check out more about our work: www.cgapsouthasia.org / www.womenforpolitics.com

Interested in collaborations to host roundtables? Email us at contact@cgapsouthasia.org