

Proceedings of the Roundtable on Gendered Observation of South Asian Elections



Centre for Gender And Politics (CGAP)

About CGAP Roundtables

CGAP is committed to establishing a regional platform for researchers and academics focused on gender and politics in South Asia, and roundtables are an integral part of this effort. Since 2020, we have organised over 15 panel discussions, roundtables, online dialogues and events to promote gender inclusion in South Asian politics. Our previous roundtable delved into the research gap, challenges, and opportunities in gender and politics research in South Asia.

Our roundtables, discussions, and dialogues provide early-career researchers and tenured researchers with opportunities to collaborate across South Asia. We also connect global researchers with South Asian researchers and share valuable insights on gender and politics in the region.

This roundtable was particularly focused on gender observations to inform the work of elections observers and other stakeholders in electoral politics ahead of several important national elections across the South Asian region. The roundtable also informs our work at CGAP in developing a resource guide on Gender Observation of Elections. We brought together experts from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Pakistan, India, and Sri Lanka, affiliated with IDS, Yale University, Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, University of Essex, and CGAP. The insightful dialogue explored gendered nuances in elections, shaping gender equal representation and participation in South Asian elections.

About the Participants

Chulani Kodikara

Visiting Lecturer, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka

Dr Chulani brings with her over two decades of experience in researching political participation and representation of women in Sri Lankan politics, including in local governance, authoring reports for international and multilateral organisations, and publishing articles and book chapters on the topic. She has also written about reparations, sexual violence and South Asian realities vs global discourses.

Sarah Khan

Assistant Professor, Yale University

At Yale, Sarah is affiliated with the South Asian Studies Council (SASC), the Inclusion Economics Initiative, and the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) Program. Her research interests lie at the intersection of gender and comparative politics, with a regional specialisation in South Asia. She designs research projects in collaboration with civil society organisations and government institutions. She has been published in the American Political Science Review, Journal of Experimental Political Science and PS: Political Science and Politics.

Sohela Nazneen

Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies

Sohela Nazneen has 17 years of experience working on gender and development issues. Her research focuses on gender and politics, feminist movements, women's empowerment and violence against women in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. She has published in World Development, Contemporary South Asia, Development Policy Review, Women's Studies International Forum, and Studies in Family Planning, among others.

Yangchen C Rinzin

Research fellow, Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies

Yangchen C. Rinzin is currently a research fellow with the Centre for Bhutan and Gross National Happiness Studies (CBS). She has been a professional journalist with the country's only daily newspaper, 'Kuensel,' for the last twelve years. She is a two-time winner of the Annual Journalism Award in Bhutan.

About the Moderator

Devanik Saha is a member of the Technical Advisory Unit at Centre for Gender and Politics. He is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the School of Health and Social Care, University of Essex. He has a PhD from the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. His doctoral thesis explores men's involvement in antenatal care in an informal settlement in Delhi. He is also a recipient of the Global Talent Visa by the UK government, wherein he has been endorsed as an exceptional talent in Global Health and Development.

Discussion and Insights

Opening Remarks: Where to start in Gender Observations of Elections?

Sarah, an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Yale University, shed light on the very recent opportunity that Pakistan has gotten with its three consecutive democratic elections in 2008, 2013, and 2020, to observe sustained democratic campaigning due to historical shifts between authoritarianism, military regimes, and democratic regimes.

Talking about the gender gap, Sarah pointed out a substantial gender gap in voter turnout in Pakistan, particularly in large metropolitan cities, which was surprising because urbanisation is often associated with improvements in women's empowerment, such as education and autonomy. She pinpointed the contrast in campaign approaches between urban and rural areas as one contributing factor. In urban areas, campaigns primarily rely on party workers, who are men, conducting door-to-door outreach, resulting in fewer interactions and mobilisation of women voters.

Sarah and her team's survey results reveal that female voters express the view that the involvement of women candidates and party workers could possibly boost their enthusiasm for engaging in the electoral process. One participant went as far as suggesting that political figures' spouses reaching out could also ignite greater motivation among female voters. This exclusion from campaigns underscores political party priorities and underscores the obstacles women encounter at the party worker level. Addressing these barriers is crucial to enhance women's participation in the electoral process.

While sharing about Bangladesh's gendered issues in elections, **Sohela**, a Research Fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, underscored the gaps in the voter list. She highlighted that in the recent elections, there was an evident incongruity with the demographic profile with respect to gender, with number of female voters being less than male voters. While discussing the situation of minority women, Sohela explained the link between vulnerability to electoral violence and the absence of women voters from minority groups on election day. In rural areas of Bangladesh, she noted a relatively small gender gap in voting, with voting seen as a festive occasion and women actively encouraged to participate. This engagement is often facilitated by local representatives and their wives, with family preferences and patriarchal dynamics shaping women's political interests. Sohela also stressed the significance of political party workers and leaders in engaging women in politics, highlighting Bangladesh's unique position with a woman Prime Minister since 1991. However, she emphasised the ongoing lack of gender parity within political parties, especially at leadership levels, despite the presence of women's wings advocating for women's issues.

Yangchen, a research fellow at Centre for Bhutan & GNH Studies, shared that, historically, women were considered the head of the household, but they were restricted to the household activities. It was only after the transition to democracy that women began to participate in politics. However, Yangchen noted that despite political parties and the media endorsing women's participation, election results often contradict the rhetoric of women's empowerment, suggesting that women may not receive adequate support or may be perceived as lacking competency. Progress has been hindered by a lack of female role models and stereotypes of women. Yangchen highlighted resistance to proposals for a quota system, particularly amongst rural women who traditionally favour men as their leaders. She emphasised the need for critical discourse analysis and participatory action research to change perceptions and empower women in politics.

Gendered Factors Shaping Decisions about Electoral Candidates

Discussing the issue of sexism in elections, **Sohela** highlighted the importance of considering the nature of politics and voter priorities. Despite the existence of misogyny in politics and media discussions, it doesn't always significantly influence voter behaviour, as evidenced by cases like the election of Donald Trump. The political parties operating in Bangladesh and the broader South Asia region have a centralised informal structure, wherein candidate selection is primarily driven by central leaders with a focus on electoral strategies to win the elections. Misogyny may not always carry substantial costs electorally and may only become a prominent issue when it is politically advantageous to target a specific candidate based on such issues. Additionally, voters' choices are influenced by patriarchal clientelism, where the decision's whom to voter for depends on how this benefits to one's family or community plays a central role. In Bangladeshi politics, the focus often shifts from individual women voters expressing their preferences to household-level vote trading. It's crucial to take these factors into account when discussing the role of sexism in elections.

Sarah brought attention to the complex ways in which misogyny manifests in Pakistani politics, particularly in the realm of electoral competition. Misogyny is often used as a powerful tool to undermine women candidates and their supporters during political campaigns in Pakistan. In her analysis, Sarah highlighted instances of misogynistic rhetoric used by the PML-N party during the 2013 and 2018 elections to disparage women who participated in PTI rallies. These rallies, which were marked by a strong presence of women and cultural elements such as music and dance, were often targeted by political opponents with derogatory comments. However, the issue of misogyny in Pakistani politics goes beyond electioneering, with elected legislators in Parliament also known to use misogynistic language. Responses to such comments typically fall along partisan lines.

Sarah's analysis highlights how emphasising misogynistic comments from political rivals can be a strategic move to weaken adversaries. As political competition intensifies, instances of misogyny aimed at undermining competitors become more common. For example, Khan

pointed out how a political candidate publicly suggested that it was "haram" or against custom to vote for a woman candidate when challenged by a woman candidate in his constituency. These comments aren't just a reflection of cultural norms; they are a result of the specific partisan context. This underscores how electoral competition perpetuates misogyny in politics and may limit women's opportunities to advance to leadership roles in political settings.

Yangchen provided insights into the situation in Bhutan, focusing on women voters. She mentioned that there have been attempts to portray women candidates in a positive light as an electoral strategy. In more than half of our population, which resides in rural areas, there is a common belief that women should stay at home during elections to manage household tasks and agricultural work while men go out to vote. In the 2013 elections, a woman-led political party faced defeat. I remember speaking with people who admitted that they did not vote for the party because they believed a woman could not effectively lead the country. Interestingly, this same woman leader joined another party after the loss, and the party tactically utilised her skills, making her the first woman minister in Bhutan. Nevertheless, as Sohela pointed out, party decision-making processes still predominantly involve men. As we approach the upcoming election in November, it's worth noting that all five political party presidents are men. There's an ongoing fear that having a woman leader could lead to electoral losses. This illustrates a critical challenge related to sexism in our political landscape.

Frameworks and Methods in Gender Observation of Elections

While discussing the approaches to delve into the intricacies of analysing the gendered nature of election narratives and discourse, **Sohela** underlined that discourse is constructed, and it's vital to consider who is responsible for constructing it and where this construction takes place. In the context of electoral campaigns, understanding gendered political discourses entails exploring various sources, such as manifestos, speeches, and newspaper/media reporting. The choice of source and method of analysis is a political decision, with researchers needing to decide whether to conduct a thematic analysis or content analysis or opt for a more in-depth discourse analysis.

Sohela also urged researchers to consider intersectionality and not just gender but also other identity markers that marginalise women and non-binary individuals. She emphasised the significance of visual materials and social media in shaping election discourse, which requires different kinds of frameworks and software for analysis. Sohela's insights aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various considerations and methods for studying gender differences in election discourse, highlighting the need for a thoughtful and purpose-driven approach tailored to specific research goals and audiences.

Sarah and **Devanik** also touched upon the analysis of social media material and content creation to look at who is producing content for parties, and whose opinions and preferences are being taken into account in terms of creating party image and whether such data can be

accessed and analysed.

Yangchen highlighted the significant role media plays in influencing public perception of gender-related issues in politics and suggested that conducting gender analysis on media content with an intersectional lens could provide valuable insights.

She also proposed using a gender lens to inform the government programs and activities, particularly within the context of Bhutan's five-year plans. She highlighted the need to bridge the gap between government planning officers and women's agencies working towards gender empowerment, as awareness of gender-related issues is often lacking. Yangchen's suggestions aimed to ensure that gender considerations are integrated into the planning process to address gender gaps effectively.

Chulani shed light on the political landscape in Sri Lanka, highlighting the historical struggle of women to obtain the right to vote and their significant role in political parties, contributing to campaigns in various ways. Despite their active involvement, there remains a perception that women are not qualified for leadership positions. Chulani attributed this underrepresentation to various factors, such as Sri Lanka's shift to Proportional Representation voting system and intraparty competition.

She also highlighted benevolent sexism, where women are stereotyped as caretakers, contributing to their underrepresentation. Chulani emphasised the need for research to explore the inner workings of political parties and how women can challenge gendered power structures within them. She suggested long-term ethnographic studies and participant observations within political parties to bridge this research gap.

Examining Quotas, Representation, and Vote Bank

Yangchen provided insights into how political parties in Bhutan approach women as a crucial segment of the electorate. She highlighted that political parties often include specific provisions related to women in their manifestos, serving as promises to address various women-related issues if the party comes to power. For instance, one such promise was to provide six months of maternity leave to women in the public service and to offer breastfeeding allowances to incentivise women to have more children due to a declining fertility rate in Bhutan. However, sharing insights from her research, Yangchen noted that the reception of these promises varies between rural and urban women. While rural women tend to view these promises positively, urban women often perceive these promises as a mere electoral strategy used by political parties to secure votes rather than genuine efforts to empower women or address their needs.

Yangchen also touched on the ongoing conversation surrounding the potential implementation of a women's quota in Bhutan. Despite discussions for over a decade, there has been no agreement on implementing a quota system for women in politics. She suggested that instead of quotas, Bhutan should concentrate on raising awareness, sensitisation, and

advocacy for women's leadership, particularly in rural areas.

Sarah drew a comparative contrast with India, emphasising how political parties engage with women voters in these two countries. She highlighted that Pakistan's approach differs from India, where politicians often introduce schemes aimed directly at women voters, including distributing goods or offering clientelistic handouts tailored for them. In contrast, Pakistan doesn't seem to perceive the existence of a women's vote bank, and the outreach to women voters, even if superficial, is minimal.

Discussing this further, she stressed the significance of a country's political history and the nature of women's activism and movements in shaping political party strategies. In Pakistan, women's activism has mainly focused on legislative reforms and has targeted party legislators once in power. This approach is significantly influenced by international debates concerning gender equality and development. Furthermore, she pointed out that Pakistan's major welfare program, the Benazir Income Support Program, was designed based on international discussions regarding the structure of cash transfer programs, highlighting the impact of international aid organisations on Pakistan's policy decisions.

Echoing the insights shared by Sarah and Yangchen, **Sohela** explained the need to consider a country's historical context and the entitlements women hold as a social and political group based on their participation in past events, such as independence struggles, constitution-making processes, and transitions to democracy.

Sohela explained the case of Bangladesh, shedding light on significant events like the 1971 war, the 1974 famine, and the transition to democracy in 1991 that impacted women's position and patriarchal order and influenced how the state views women citizens. In her analysis, she stressed that the interaction between the political context and women's activism differs across South Asian countries, leading to varying priorities for women's movements. Sohela also stressed the importance of political parties including gender equality in their manifestos, noting that this imperative is driven by factors beyond just elections, such as international influences, historical development narratives, and performance legitimacy. She illustrated this with the 'development narrative' in Bangladesh, where political parties aim to showcase their achievements in social development indicators to gain legitimacy. Women are a key part of Bangladesh's social development story, which then is reflected in the election manifestoes. A critical factor to note while understanding elections, she emphasised, is the role of women's activism in civil society spaces, where feminist movements are often more active than within political parties and the state spaces. Bridging this gap is crucial for women to have effective voice in influencing public policy debates.

Descriptive and Substantive Representation for Gender Equality

Sarah explained that it is important to understand that the presence of women in legislative bodies does not guarantee the power to advocate for a specific agenda or enact particular policies on gender equality. Multiple constraints affect the influence that women wield in these spaces, including party loyalty and partisan considerations. A crucial initial question is whether there exists an incentive for women legislators to champion policies on gender equality. During this discussion, Sarah urged for a more nuanced exploration of how women's preferences and interests are formulated and a resultant assumption that women legislators inherently have such incentives or the willingness to promote these policies.

Sharing insights from Pakistan, she discussed a need to understand the design of specific reservations or quotas. She explained reservations for women in national and provincial legislatures pertain to reserved seats allocated post-election based on the party's overall performance. Given that these women are allocated seats by parties and not directly elected, their constituency is not women voters or voters at all. Their constituency essentially is the party leadership that has put them in those nominated positions. Pointing out the limited scope they have to advance an independent agenda due to dominant support for party leadership, Sarah explained that even if such women leaders have preferences to champion specific policies, their capacity is considerably restricted. Thus, the discussion circles back to the pivotal role of political parties and the need to comprehend the positioning of women within them. Understanding the dynamics of parties is essential for interpreting the behaviour of women legislators once they occupy these seats. Sarah encouraged a closer examination of women's roles within parties and party leadership to elucidate the lack of substantial support for this demand. She also shared that the demand for direct elections for women has been supported by feminist civil society groups in Pakistan, albeit within a constrained space that faces numerous challenges in expanding its influence. While this idea has been a topic of discussion, it has not evolved into a prominent political movement.

Yangchen highlighted the positive impact that both men and women parliamentarians in Bhutan have had on gender issues. For maternal and child welfare policies, the Health Minister, a woman, advocated for important initiatives like maternity and breastfeeding allowances, resulting in positive outcomes. On the other hand, in the context of LGBTQ rights, it was a man in the Parliament who actively pushed for decriminalisation, and the Health Minister supported the cause. This resulted in the decriminalisation of same-sex relationships in Bhutan. Sharing these examples, Yangchen emphasised the importance of acknowledging that the commitment to specific issues by Parliamentarians and leaders is sometimes irrespective of their gender. Additionally, she commented that better representation translates into increased attention and positive changes for women's issues, exemplifying this with policies advocated by women in the parliament in support of rape survivors.

Sohela highlighted the intricacies surrounding women's roles as political agents, considering the potential political costs they may face when advocating for gender equality and the influence of party lines on their decisions.

Sohela shared insights into the nuanced nature of gender-related agendas, explaining that not all gender equality issues are treated equally by women representatives. Collaboration across party lines is more common on topics such as violence against women and welfare, while other issues such as bodily autonomy or family law reform can be more sensitive.

Moreover, she pointed out that women parliamentarians, including those entering through quotas, who may not have historically advocated for gender equality, later engage in discussions on relevant issues, though the overall impact of quotas remains unclear. Lastly, she explained that it is crucial to consider the backgrounds and pathways of these women come into politics, as parliamentary success often hinges on networking and social/political capital. For instance, she explained, women leaders in Bangladesh who entered politics in the 1970s and 1980s through student and left-party worker politics possessed different forms of capital and legitimacy compared to those nominated by political parties. Explaining that such traditional spaces where there was a natural progression from student politics to national politics are diminishing, Sohela urges efforts to nurture alternative pathways for women in political spaces to develop political skills and networks.

Devanik highlighted the Indian context, in which men from scheduled caste and tribal communities have raised concerns about the advantage of upper-caste women over them while opposing a blanket quota for women in legislatures. He also shared that certain political parties have proposed sub-quotas within the larger reservation framework to guarantee fair representation for women from diverse caste backgrounds. This underscores the necessity of assessing women's representation through an intersectional lens.

Agreeing with other participants, **Chulani** stressed the significance of examining incentive structures, citing instances where international trade concessions, aid conditionalities, and the global women's rights regime influenced Sri Lanka's policies related to women. Notably, Chulani highlighted the instrumental role of the women's movement and their engagement with international platforms like CEDAW in advocating for women's concerns. This advocacy has led to significant domestic policy changes. Chulani also points out the challenges of addressing specific women's issues, such as Muslim personal law reform, within the complex dynamics of Sri Lanka's deeply divided society, where a nuanced approach is required to address the intersections of different identities.

Sohela and Devanik also highlighted the political strategies that come to play in countries with heterogeneous, intersecting and complex identities that also impact gender-equal representation in political candidacy.

Drafted & Edited by Sugandha Parmar, Director, Centre for Gender And Politics.

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