

**WOMEN AND POLITICS IN NEPAL:
SMALL ACTORS, BIG ISSUE**

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Nepal was represented at Beijing's 1995 International Conference on Women by two delegations, the official/government one, and the NGOs (Non-Government Organisations). The conference involved an entire year of preparation, including the elaboration of several concurring reports on the status of women in Nepal¹, and harsh negotiations as to who (individuals and institutions) would take part in this prestigious event².

What happened in view of the Beijing Conference actually summarises the ambiguous position of women towards politics in Nepal. On one hand, women are political actors: they are voters, political activists, electoral candidates, even, ministers. On the other hand, women are a political issue; their status and rights are debated in the elected assemblies and in the media, and a whole range of various programmes, both national and international, are specifically aimed at them.

I shall first try to assess the presence of women in the main political institutions of the country: where are women on the Nepalese political scene? Who are they? Do they have specific functions?

The women Members of Parliament (MPs), insofar as they are supposed to be experts on women's issues, thus appear as privileged targets for the feminist lobby. They constitute the very nexus where women as political actors and women as a political theme overlap. How

¹ Among these reports, see the *Country Report*, HMG Planning Commission Secretariat, and the report prepared by the leftist NGO INHURED.

² See Gururaj Luintel, "Women's Issues", *The Independent*, January 25, 1995. Regarding the impact of the Beijing conference on the Nepalese delegations, see *Beyond the Conference*, a bulletin published by the Royal Danish Embassy, Kathmandu, January 1996.

women's issues are dealt with by the non-government sector will be the focus of the last part of this paper.

A first question to ask about the political participation of women in Nepal could be: where are the women in the Nepalese political arena? Some figures about the proportion of women in various political parties and elected bodies since the 1990 Jana Andolan will help define our object.

In the popular uprising of early 1990, which put an end to three decades of the Panchayat system and established a parliamentary monarchy instead, women's participation at various levels was visible. They took part in demonstrations and rallies along with men in many cities where the "Movement for the Restoration of Democracy" was active, and they organised their own demonstrations too, as did for instance students and teachers at the female college of Padma Kanya (Acharya, 1991: 8; Yami, 1990: 30-31).

Moreover, the leader of the United Left Front, a coalition of seven leftist parties (along with the Nepali Congress, the main protagonist of the movement) was a woman, Sahana Pradhan, a prominent Communist activist and the widow of a Communist leader.

The movement aimed essentially at establishing a multiparty democracy, as opposed to the former regime, which defined itself as a "partyless democracy". The political parties that had so far been underground could then come out in the open.

How important is the presence of women to the different parties? Since no party in 1994 could provide any reliable information concerning its members at the grass-roots level, I shall here focus exclusively on the highest level of the organisations' hierarchies. The percentage of women in the respective central committees of the five largest parties represented in Parliament in 1994 was 11% for the Nepali Congress, 8% for the Communist Party (United Marxist Leninist), 5% for the United People Front, 2% for the Goodwill Party and 7% for the National Democratic Party. No woman is a party leader in any of these organisations.

However, since the 1950s when the Nepali Congress and the Communist Party (later subdivided into numerous factions) were founded, a number of affiliated or "sister" organisations, were also created. Among them were women's organisations, meant to deal specifically with "women's issues". One could therefore consider taking into account these women's organisations in an attempt to assess the position of women in Nepalese political parties. But these organisations are obviously auxiliary to the party to which they are affiliated; their role is mainly a supportive one.

Student associations are another kind of sister-organisation, that structure political life on the campuses. Seven out of the eleven women present in Parliament in 1994 began their political careers as student activists within the student organisation of the party to which they now belong, and only two women did it within the framework of the women's organisation of their party. This suggests that among the parties' sister-organisations, student organisations are more able than women's in providing effective political training.

When King Birendra announced in April 1990 that all Panchayat system institutions had been dissolved, an interim government was immediately formed under Prime Minister Krishna Prasad Bhattarai. In it Sahana Pradhan became the Minister of Commerce and Industry. It was the first time in Nepal that a woman minister was given a portfolio other than Education and/or Social Welfare. The tendency to confine women to these fields, implying that their political roles should be extensions of their traditional, social roles is not, however, specific to Nepal.

In May 1991, the first democratic elections in thirty years took place to elect members of the Lower House of Parliament, and in 1992 local elections were organised at the level of Village Development Committees (VDCs) and the level of District Development Committees (DDCs).

How did women fare in this new democratic exercise? Studies on Nepalese voters so far are extremely scarce. It is thus quite difficult to say anything about women voters³. My personal observations on a

³ See *Nepalese Voters, "Nepal National Election Survey, 1991", A Survey Report*, Political Science Association of Nepal (POLSAN), Kathmandu, 1991.

voting day⁴ in a remote village of Kathmandu Constituency Number One, however, indicate that voting is a prestigious and entertaining activity. Women and men were willing to walk several hours for that purpose, and women also wore their best clothes for the occasion.

As far as elections to Parliament are concerned, the 1990 constitution, drafted by a male-only constitutional committee, makes it compulsory for political parties to field at least 5% women among their candidates to the Lower House in order to be registered by the Election Commission. The constitution also rules that at least three women should be appointed to the Upper House of Parliament.

Do the figures on the participation of women in elections, small as they are, indicate that democracy has meant a fairer redistribution of power for women as well? Available data suggest that women have gained nothing with the new democracy in terms of access to political decision-making. In 1991 and 1994, the proportion of women among candidates was between 5% and 6%, and women parliamentarians accounted for barely 4% of members of the Lower House⁵. The number of women members in the Upper House of Parliament has never exceeded three. The constitutional provisions presented as measures intended to increase the political participation of women appear to define maximum rather than minimum figures. Moreover, women benefiting from these measures are not considered as genuine, valuable politicians. Parties are reluctant to field women candidates, as they are assumed to be weaker in political rivalries; they are usually sent to the most hostile constituencies⁶ where their chances of winning are very small. A view commonly expressed is that well-known political activists, like Sahana Pradhan of the Communist Party (UML) or Shailaja Acharya of the Nepali Congress, should not be counted among the 5% of women candidates. "They try to keep even the capable women within the 5%," the Nepali Congress MP Mina Pandey revealed to me.

⁴ Following the death of the former representative of the constituency, Madan Bhandari (CPN-UML), a by-election took place on February 7, 1994. The main opponents were the widow of Vidhya Bhandari and Krishna Prasad Bhattarai (NC). For further details, see Stéphanie Tawa-Lama (1995) "Political Participation of Women in Nepal", in Dhruba Kumar (Ed.), *State, Politics and Leadership in Nepal*, Kathmandu, CNAS, Tribhuvan University : 176-177.

⁵ Source : Election Commission.

⁶ Gita Wagley (Nepali Congress activist), personal communication, August 1994.

As we have seen, the interim government included one woman minister, as did the government formed after the Nepali Congress' victory in 1991. Shailaja Acharya, the niece of Prime Minister Girija Prasad Koirala, was then given the portfolio of Forest and Soil Conservation. Since she resigned in 1992 the Nepalese governments have been composed exclusively of men⁷.

How can the poor presence of women in the main Nepalese political institutions be explained? Anthropological studies of Nepalese society have shown that, as far as the status of women is concerned, most groups can be characterised as "dichotomic", i.e., with a clear distinction between the public and the private spheres (Acharya & Bennett, 1982). Women in this pattern belong to the private sphere and are largely excluded from the public sphere to which politics belong.

The majority of Nepalese women are largely deprived, due to their status⁸, of the primary political resources: money, physical mobility, contacts, information, education and time. "Going into the field is difficult," said one woman candidate of the Communist Party-United. "Women fear the violence, and above all, women involved in politics are poorly thought of"⁹. Their reputations are at stake: "character assassination is the main thing," said Durga Ghimire, explaining why she had given up politics. The Nepali Congress MP Chet Kumari Dahal was accused of neglecting her home and family because of political ambitions, a characteristic regarded as unsuitable for women.

Periods of crisis provide an exception in this regard. Many studies on the political participation of women world-wide have shown that women do participate in great numbers in critical political events, such as movements for independence or democracy, as was the case in Nepal in 1990. On these exceptional occasions, according to Pearson, women's participation makes the movement a universal one, because women symbolically bring the private sphere into the public one when they join

⁷ Mrs Lila Koirala, however, was appointed Minister of Women and Social Welfare in December 1995.

⁸ For insight into the lives of Nepalese women, see *The Status of Women in Nepal* (1979-1981), Kathmandu, CEDA, Tribhuvan University. For a more theoretical approach of the status of women in Hinduism, see Michael Allen, & S.N. Mukherjee (1990) *Women in India and Nepal*, New Delhi, Sterling Publishers.

⁹ Nina Kiran Sunwar, personal communication, November 1994.

the demonstrations, showing in this way that the entire society is concerned with the crisis (Pearson, 1981:175).

As soon as the crisis is defused, however, women usually go back to their former, distant position vis-à-vis politics. This was very conspicuous in Nepal, where no woman was appointed to the committee in charge of drafting the new constitution.

Who then are the few women able to resist this general trend? A closer look at the eleven women MPs interviewed in 1994 will help distinguish some favourable factors that suggest affinities with a South Asian pattern of women's access to political posts, as described by Richter. Three main characteristics may "explain why these women were able to transcend their gender" (Richter, 1990-1991: 530).

First, out of eleven MPs, eight were older than 40, an age when most Nepalese women are mothers-in-law and acquire with this status more power in the household, more freedom of expression and of action.

Secondly, as far as education is concerned, ten out of eleven women MPs had reached at least the level of the Intermediate of Arts degree, in comparison to 1.4% of Nepalese women at this level.

Lastly, only five of these women were presently married; two were single, and four were widows - among them, three of prominent political leaders. The status of widows is generally low in Nepalese society, but the political world provides an exception in this regard. Being the widow of a renowned politician is a most valuable asset in following a political career for several reasons. First, one of the main hindrances to female political activism is female seclusion. Women whose families have a tradition of political activism are more likely than others to be able to commit themselves politically, because they will then be in contact with people already known to the family circle. More importantly, in the case of widows, "women are perceived as behaving appropriately in politics when they are perceived as filling a political void created by the death [...] of a male family member" (Richter, 1990-1991: 526).

Does this small minority of women politicians have a special role to play in Nepalese politics? Are there political tasks allotted to women only?

Many of the women interviewed regretted the tokenism prevalent in the decision to include a woman in such or such a body. A basic function of women in Nepalese political life could actually be "decorative"¹⁰.

But some sexual division of political work emerges in the electoral campaigns. Women, whether members of the party or of its women's organisation, are in charge of most of the door-to-door campaigning. This could add fuel to the idea that women add a private dimension to politics, thus "universalising" the event. Going from one house to another in order to bring political propaganda into the very heart of the domestic world does indeed rupture the clear distinction between the private and public spheres.

At another level, women Members of Parliament are allowed one speciality, if any, women's issues. Being female, they are supposed to be experts and major advocates of this cause¹¹, which, by the way, further diminishes the prestige attached to the issue. Here, women Members of Parliament have to deal with the non-governmental sector. As women politicians they are indeed privileged targets for the feminist lobby, primarily composed of "women for women" NGOs (WNGOs).

Moreover, some of these women MPs are themselves members of the Women Security Pressure Group (WSPG) created in June 1992 to deal with increasing occurrences of sexual violence against female children. The WSPG is basically an association of associations, and the women's organisations affiliated with the main political parties, as well as most WNGOs, are its members. It actually seems that besides the political bodies, WNGOs compete as possible sites for representation, mobilisation and the collective action of women.

The popularity of NGOs after 1990 was one of the most dramatic consequences of the liberalisation of the regime. Nepalese NGOs are

¹⁰ *The Status of Women in Nepal (1979-1980)*, Kathmandu, CEDA, Tribhuvan University.

¹¹ "Women who already hold political positions need empowerment in order to effectively bring women's issues to the forefront and to facilitate the desired changes" (HMG, 1994: 41).

usually supported by foreign agencies, whether governmental or private. Nepal has been heavily dependent on foreign aid since the overthrow of the Rana rule and today this is very much apparent in the women's development sector.

Women were conceptualised from the 1970s on as an important resource of development worldwide, and development rhetoric has evolved from the "integration of women in development" theory to the present "gender and development" stand.

The impact of the Women's Decade (1976-1985) heralded by the United Nations was very conspicuous in Nepal. In 1975, International Women's Year, the Sixth Amendment to the Civil Code, improving women's rights in the fields of property and family law, was adopted. The Women's Decade also resulted in the publication of the most extensive research work on women in various communities of Nepal¹².

From then on, women's issues were dealt with at the governmental level. "In tune with the World Plan of Action adopted at Mexico World Conference in 1975, a Plan of Action for Women in Development in Nepal was compiled and edited by the then Women Services Co-ordination Committee under the Social Services National Co-ordination Council (headed by the Queen) and was significant for being the first comprehensive action plan of its kind in Nepal for women" (HMG, 1994: 3). Women's cells were also created in various ministries¹³.

As far as the non-governmental sector is concerned, among some 2000 NGOs registered today with the central Welfare and Social Council, numerous organisations devote themselves specifically to

¹² *The Status of Women in Nepal* (1979-1980), Kathmandu CEDA, Tribhuvan University.
¹³ "The Ministry of Panchayat and Local Development (now the Ministry of Local Development) established Women's Training Centres and a Women Development Division which is responsible for implementing the Production Credit for Rural Women (PCRW) and a number of other community development programmes for women. In 1987, a Women's Development Division was created in the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare, as a focal point for SAARC-related women's activities in Nepal. In 1988 it was upgraded to a Women's Development Division *per se*. In 1992, a Women Farmers' Development Division was established in the Ministry of Agriculture. The Ministry of Education, Culture and Social Welfare and the Ministry of Water Resources both have women's cells. In 1993, the National Planning Commission created a national focal point called the Children and Women's Development Section under the Population Division. It will also function as a secretariat for the recently established National Council for Children and Women's Development" (HMG, 1994: 41-42).

women's issues, or, more commonly, "women's development". The many reports elaborated in view of the Beijing Conference show that women's issues revolve around five main themes: the economic role of women, their access to education, health, legal status, political status and their role in government administration.

The WNGOs are highly visible. Most of them are Kathmandu-based, their leaders are highly educated, English-speaking, articulate people, used to dealing with the foreign donor agencies that provide them with funds, expertise and support. The most prominent of these WNGOs belong to international networks and benefit from the support of international feminism, whether through the networks of the largest international organisations, such as the World Bank, or from smaller national organisations. This great visibility of the Kathmandu-based, foreign-funded WNGOs is most conspicuous in the numerous papers they publish in the press, relating to women's issues such as inheritance rights, citizenship rights or sexual violence.

The most common criticism directed against these NGOs is that they devote more time to organising "national seminars" in luxury hotels than working in the remote, poorer areas of the country where their action is most needed. This symposia activity, however, might not prove that futile, since the very "national dimension" claimed by these meetings attracts the attention of the media who then discuss women's issues. In this way, WNGOs actually fulfil a function of identification and expression of the problems (Fatzenstein). Furthermore, they compete with women MPs as representatives of women and as experts on women's issues.

WNGOs, like other NGOs, usually define themselves as non-political organisations. Yet some of their activities suggest that they might constitute alternative sites of the political mobilisation of women. Activities such as "consciousness raising", "women's leadership training" or "gender sensitisation", whereby NGOs set up meetings with a whole village to discuss the traditional sexual division of labour, do encourage women to mobilise collectively in order to bring about change.

Some NGOs also seek to organise women in a more explicitly political way. One such instance was provided with the "Women in

Politics Programme" organised by Didi Bahini and supported by the American Asia Foundation/Nepal. The programme, convened by the American "international feminist" Ms. Robin Morgan, brought together women from various political and professional backgrounds to discuss the main problems women face in Nepal. One of the goals of this "Coalition Building and Advocacy Workshop" (June 21-23, 1994) programme was to establish a "Women's United Front" in Nepal. Another objective was to form a "Dalit Feminist Organisation".

Other WNGOs are openly linked to the political arena, as is SCOPE (Society for Constitutional and Parliamentary Exercise), whose main objective is to "strengthen the democratic process in Nepal". SCOPE has a women's cell that aims, among other things, at supporting women MPs through training sessions and through the creation of a women's caucus based on the American example.

Through the multiform action of WNGOs, women's issues are, therefore, highlighted on the social as well as the political agenda. Following the "Coalition Strategy and Advocacy Building" workshop organised by Didi Bahini, several meetings of the same group focused on the need to increase reservations for women candidates to the Lower House of Parliament to 25%, and on the need to establish reservations at the local level¹⁴. The Nepali Congress then announced, through its young woman leader Shailaja Acharya, that it would field 20% of women candidates for the next elections. The mid-term polls organised shortly after this announcement, however, did not see this measure implemented.

WNGOs do not only provide alternative forms of representation and mobilisation of women. They themselves constitute places of alternative female activism, "alternative" insofar as they have a different status and use strategies that differ from those used by women's political organisations. The most important example of this is the WSPG's lobbying; women thus constitute a special interest group. Another example of WNGO activism is the crisis centres that have been created to shelter different categories of needy women - battered wives, prostitutes returning from Indian brothels, or women with AIDS.

¹⁴ Pratibha Subedi, personal communication, November 1994.

The position of women vis-à-vis politics in Nepal thus appears paradoxical. On the one hand, women seem to vanish progressively from the mainstream political scene. They are less and less numerous within political bodies and in the government. The last two governments, headed respectively by Man Mohan Adhikari and by Sher Bahadur Deuba, until recently did not include any women. On the other hand, women's issues, as a political theme, have gained more importance. On the Nepalese political scene, women disappear as individuals only to gain strength as an issue, as a theme to be dealt with by government¹⁵ and non-government agencies.¹⁶ There are close links between the two sectors - of institutional, ideological and personal¹⁷. NGOs are conceived as full partners in the implementation of the country's development policies, and the same individuals belong to both political organisations (political parties or their sister-organisations) and WNGOs.

WNGOs doubtless provide women with an alternative arena where they can establish a public career and fight for their cause in an environment less hostile to them than the political scene. One may wonder, however, if the WNGOs' highlighting of women's issues does not actually result in further marginalisation of individuals. By joining WNGOs to do social work, women reinforce the traditional division between private and public, social and political, women's field and men's work realm.

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¹⁵ It might be significant in this regard that a Ministry for Women and Social Welfare was recently created.

¹⁶ National and foreign NGOs, including user groups, committees and associations, are covered by the three local government acts passed in March 1995 as full actors in Nepal's local development, along with DDCs, municipalities and VDCs, government line agencies, foreign donor agencies, and private sector enterprises. For further details, see Martinussen, 1993.

¹⁷ Individuals shift from one sector to another in both directions. A famous instance is the case of Durga Ghimire, who as a Nepali Congress activist during the Panchayat era was jailed three times. She described this experience in a recent published book, was then nominated by Her Majesty as a member secretary for one of the committees of the SSNCC, and later was one of the founder members and is currently president of the NGO "ABC/Nepal" that focuses on the problem of the exploitation of women.

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