

Proceedings of the Roundtable on Gender And Electoral Politics Research in South Asia



Centre for Gender And Politics

About the Roundtable

In the last two years, researchers 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. We created two recurring informative series on women's political leadership as a result of an extensive review of resources and literature on women in politics that reflected a gap in the literature on a *positive discourse* on gender diversity in politics.

With a goal to investigate further into the gap, we continued to explore the subject and launched another recurring series of in-depth interviews with politicians, conducted a survey on women voters and reviewed the legal and policy debates on gender and politics. While landscaping the subject through a review of literature and information available, we found a paucity of data in some fields, missing emphasis on South Asia in research on women's political leadership, social and cultural challenges in collecting primary data, generalised '*victimisation*' of women in politics and lack of intersectional analysis on caste, religion and other South Asian identities.

To discuss these challenges and deliberate on the scope of research on the subject in South Asia, CGAP organised the roundtable on 19th June 2022 with academics and researchers from different fields of study working towards gender and politics who brought in recent field experiences during the pandemic and also decades of research experience on the subject in South Asia. During this roundtable, we aimed to discuss challenges in researching across different approaches, navigating through these challenges and the future scope for researchers.

This roundtable is our first step towards creating a platform for early career researchers and tenured researchers to come together to work towards research on gender diversity, inclusion and the participation of all genders in politics in and across South Asia.

About the Discussants

Afiya Zia

Visiting Assistant Professor, Wesleyan University, USA

Dr Afiya has authored books, peer-reviewed articles and edited chapters on women's political movements and electoral agency in Pakistan, among her other works on women, religion and secularism. She is also an active member of Pakistan's women's and human rights movements.

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.

Irma Clots-Figueras

Professor of Economics, University of Kent, UK

Dr Irma's research interests include Development Economics, Labor Economics, Migration, Cultural Economics, and Political Economy. She has published several works on the causal effects of women's representation on policy-making and women's political agency in the context of India and states within India.

Poonam Kakoti Borah

Assistant Professor, Gauhati University, India & Sensitivity Reader at CGAP

Dr Poonam's research areas include Political Theory, Feminist Theory, Gender and Governance, Sexuality Studies and Queer Theory. She has published articles in journals and authored and edited books on the intersection of politics of sexual minorities, citizenship and the LGBTQIA+ movement in the Indian context.

Proma Ray Chaudhury

PhD, Dublin City University, Ireland

Dr Proma's work on political mobilisation, participation and representation of women with respect to political institutions has revealed the play of dominant gender norms in the institutional cultures of the political parties in Bengal. Her research interests involve gender, religion, right-wing politics, political mobilisation, political violence, and critical theory, among other things.

Shandana Khan Mohmand

Research Fellow, Institute of Development Studies (IDS), UK & Associate Fellow, Institute of Development and Economic Alternatives (IDEAS) Pakistan

Dr Shandana's research is focused on the relationship between political participation, inequality and accountability, especially in fragile and conflict-affected contexts. She has authored a book on marginalised voters and electoral politics and has authored several articles and book chapters on women's political participation in Pakistan.

Shraddha Chatterjee

PhD Candidate, Gender, Feminist & Women's Studies, York University, Canada

Shraddha's work on power dynamics and status has touched up several aspects of queer life in India, such as health, caste, violence and marginalisation. She authored *Queer Politics in India* in 2018, which focuses on queer politics in India through the lens of lesbian suicides. She is currently working on Hindu Nationalism and its intersection with queer.

Discussions and Reflections on motivations to enter the field of gender and politics in South Asia

Afiya shared her experience of growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s under military dictatorship and how the return of Benazir Bhutto became a symbol of inspiration for women's political leadership. The experience of violence and abuse of women in public places, including Benazir Bhutto's assassination but also trolling and violence against women in civil service, indicates how sexuality and gender are often used to discredit women and their capabilities. **Afiya** added that on the other side, gender quotas in Pakistan are the single factor that has pushed the country up the scale on gender empowerment rankings but apart from that, the rank might actually fall to the bottom. Women in public places continue to be highly vulnerable to violence and abuse and so the question of the

legitimacy of women in public places and politicisation of public spaces and its gendered nature became an area of interest for **Afiya**. Additionally, as a member of Free and Fair Elections (FAFEN) and earlier on the Trust for Democratic Education and Accountability (TDEA) board, she was introduced to a data-driven approach for measuring and understanding electoral trends. In the 2018 election, gender-segregated data had become more readily available, and **Afiya** through her analysis of the voter data revealed the shift in women voters' electoral agency.

Shandana discussed that studying women in politics is not separate from the mainstream study of politics, highlighting the ~50% population that is women, which should be the greatest motivation to study it. She also noted the motivation that this roundtable brings highlights absolutely foundational elements of studying politics in South Asia, that this topic is understudied and that there is not enough gender-disaggregated data. She added that she was interested in understanding how women's voting decisions are made and how political parties engage with this section of society.

For **Poonam**, it seemed to be a smooth transition from political science to the women's studies department when she moved from the capital, New Delhi, to Guwahati University in the northeast of India. She continued to teach papers on feminist theories, governance and political participation. But the question of her identity linked to the region and observations on the situation of women's leadership in Assam that did not seem very different from 1980s when women's political activism did not translate into leadership opportunities, drove her research interests in electoral politics and women. She noticed that while the consistent pattern of number of women voters in North East India surpassing men voters across different elections is being observed as women's empowerment, but when it comes to the legislative assembly, women are hardly seen getting tickets from National as well as State level parties, despite their active participation in movement politics.

On the other hand, both **Shandana** and **Poonam** see gender as an interdisciplinary subject and that it is essentially a part of politics and political participation. For Shandana, her interest stems from the realisation of the interdisciplinarity of gender. While studying electoral politics, a question that stayed with her was about the women who were trying to get into political spaces and how for a long time, there was hardly anyone who studied women as decision-makers in politics.

While working with women's groups in Nepal, Bangladesh, North India and other South Asian countries in 2002, **Chulani's** realisation that Sri Lanka did not have affirmative action for women led her to further research on the subject which eventually led to some level of activism.

Shraddha stepped into the field of Queer Politics through the lens of lesbian suicides. In her Masters in Psychology, she came across a case of suicide by a lesbian couple in Nandigram (West Bengal) that was publicised. In 2012, after watching a documentary on this issue, she began thinking more robustly on questions of gender, power, discrimination, marginalisation and the intersections of 'physic' and 'social' life. She moved on to work with an organisation working towards lesbian, gay and queer rights. Through her book, she analysed the representation of the lesbian women in the documentary. She concluded that it was a limited in many ways, specially the selective labelling of lesbian and leaving out their caste identity, labelling them as lesbians. Still, these women did not call themselves lesbians or trans or

gay. These questions are very relevant to the political representation of queer people in a South Asian context where many people might not want to call themselves. What would it mean to coalesce those identities in an electoral discourse? Other questions include the cost of identifying as queer or trans or gay and the cost of not identifying as one.

Both **Proma** and **Irma** discussed how during their studies they identified gaps in literature and experienced the gaps in opportunities that sculpted their interest in approaching their research areas with a gender lens. While reviewing literature for her PhD, **Proma** astoundingly noticed a lack of literature on women in party politics in an Indian context, comparative politics and gender, particularly gender norms in institutional procedures and party culture. In addition, she witnessed the severe lack of representation in parliament and legislative assemblies. An economist by training, **Irma**, during her PhD found that economic opportunities for women and men were not the same in India. And she observed that these opportunities were not only important for livelihood but also took away women's bargaining power and the lack of representation in politics. During the time there was only the paper by Chattopadhyay and Duflo analysing the effects of quotas in a couple of districts in India and Irma was left with a question about women's leadership in political systems other than panchayats that did not have a quota system. Following her research, she found interest and scope for understanding women's voters and political parties' impact on women's political participation and leadership.

Reflecting on Contemporary Research in South Asia – Weakened Solidarity and Unique Challenges

We asked the experts about the evolution of research areas and methods on gender and politics in South Asia in the last two decades. The panellists discussed in detail how the concept of South Asia sisterhood has slowly diminished over the years owing to factors like conflicts in South Asia, which led to a weakened scope for collaboration. Discussants noted that discussions like this roundtable have reduced, and connections have become weaker. Earlier, when such groups met, there was a possibility of South Asian solidarity, which could impact political solidarity too. The possibility seems to be non-existent without such platforms. Discussants also noted that such platforms seem to have diminished. In terms of electoral democracy, there are very similar issues across the region.

While discussing the barriers, the discussants underlined the linguistic barriers, missing collaboration opportunities, disproportionate data accessibility and availability across different nations, and India's dominant influence on South Asian literature, debates and conferences.

Afiya recollected the interconnectedness of South Asian feminists in the women's movement and feminist discourses a couple of decades ago. Most of the discussants agreed and shared their experience of a South Asian collective and solidarity which now seems to have weakened. Some of this was attributed to the neo-liberal, global regime that has ironically, in a way, encouraged the idea of research within the nation-states. Moreover, the lack of resources in education and research within the region limited the opportunities for South Asian scholars to study these topics, and this further leads to more non-South Asians (being

able to) study the subject and potentially adding to a colonial bias and creating a gap. **Chulani** discussed how the hope for South Asian solidarity and possibly influence on politics and institutions, is in some ways lost with the decline of political and institutional platforms like SAARC, internal crises like that in Sri Lanka that also fractured the women's movement from within. Further, the NGOization of the women's movement could have also impacted this, as many of the projects are often driven by donor funding.

Shraddha shared that trends of questioning in women's movements often tend to follow in Queer debates eventually and that the questions discussed in this roundtable will certainly emerge in queer discussions in India. Even though the questions might have different meanings as they translate into LGBT+ experiences and discourses, they are of extreme relevance. With the small body of literature on queer activism and politics in South Asia, she noted that there is body of literature fetishising trans experiences as the *local manifestation* of global transgender category. **Poonam** explained the lack of interconnectedness of disciplines and the emphasis on qualitative research over quantitative research in political science training as factors contributing to this literature gap. Among other issues, **Shandana** and other discussants indicated a gradual decrease in funding on topics covering women's engagement in electoral politics within South Asia. **Shraddha** also discussed the unevenness of funding and resources regarding political engagement of the LGBTQ+ community in the larger scope of research opportunities in gender and politics.

The discussants also spoke about the importance of questioning the research gaps in South Asia and the opportunities it brings, such as comparative analysis of similar trends in women's voting in rural and urban parts across South Asia, electoral democracy and party politics when it comes to women's meaning political participation. The importance of knowledge sharing, collaboration and strengthening South Asian solidarity through roundtables like this one and other organisations supporting such platforms.

Challenges and Opportunities: Unique challenges and Navigating through them

Accessing Information and Data Availability

Most discussants faced access issues when accessing information and data for their research. **Chulani** and **Irma** recalled the difficulty they faced in their respective research work, sometimes spending hours in Election Commission and other government offices individually going through enormous data to get gender-segregated data. Irma also shared her failed attempts at accessing microdata, especially for electoral opinions and surveys.

Shandana suggested that one way of dealing with this has been collaborations and creating collaborative work projects, putting efforts into building, nurturing and maintaining relationships on the ground for research work. And this builds trust with government departments and civil societies for sharing information and data. She also reflected on how in some ways, internationally too, collaborations are recognised and encouraged, facilitating more collaborative authorship. **Afiya** discussed the positive impact of the appointment of a

gender specialist by the Election Commission in Pakistan on the attitudes of provincial governments and other bodies that would've otherwise posed roadblocks for data access. It was also discussed that arguably, the funding for women's participation in electoral politics and violence against women has increased and is welcomed by donors.

The discussants also shared the challenges posed by the lack of trust between most nations in South Asia and the brick wall it creates for inter-state collaborations. They also raised the resistance faced for being a woman on the field in cultures where women are not expected to be in public spaces and raised political questions.

Navigating Research Ethics in South Asia

Proma elaborated on her experiences working closely with a political party and navigating the space as she attended internal meetings as part of her research. She mentioned how this and using her caste identity privileges and affiliation to foreign institutions as access enablers raises critical ethical dilemmas as a researcher. She noted that gendered expectations from women politicians channel them into the roles that fit the accepted 'gender roles'. She drew attention to an evident gap in party literature (like pamphlets or reports) authored by women in political parties. **Shraddha** added to this by highlighting the expectation of women in political spaces to *ungender* and *align* to the norms of the political spaces, and the same applies to the queer members in the space.

Working during the Pandemic

Among the discussants, there was an agreement on the pandemic bringing a newer perspective and drawing attention to some areas that were previously not that evident during field research. **Shandana** shared how her experience of working with informal workers and accessing them through digital means was challenging. Connecting with participants while they were at home, drew her attention to the lack of digital access, domestic challenges and the public and private divide. She added that the response rate for her new survey during the pandemic was low and it was crucial to meet in person to build trust, create a safe space, to carry more in depth conversations, or to evade the challenges in access to digital spaces. Sharing her experiences as a women researcher, **Irma** mentioned that the pandemic limited her field experiences and contextual cues which would have been otherwise possible.

For her research, **Shraddha** moved to digital ethnography, giving them a greater opportunity to understand queer lives concerning domestic barriers and pressure, as many were stuck at home in homophobic and transphobic situations.

While reflecting upon recent protests in Sri Lanka, **Chulani** spoke about the unbreakable tie between digital and physical spaces when it comes to democratic and civic debates and how the pandemic has accelerated it. In agreement, **Afiya** emphasised how digital spaces cannot be dismissed in research now. **Poonam** pointed out how the gender divide in digital spaces could lead to missing out on several dimensions of the lives and experiences across genders.

Scope of funding

Overall, the discussants spoke about the huge gap in funding on topics of research on gender and politics within South Asia. It was also discussed that funding institutions have moved to focus on women in STEM and skills training for women. For the Queer and Trans community, the funding gap on research is humongous as historically, the funding has travelled to HIV Aids prevention and treatment. With the introduction of quota in Sri Lanka, the funding for training women to enter politics has increased, which also raised the point of how this approach is problematic as it reflects the biased opinion on women to be lacking and in need of training to join politics as against men.

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Interested in collaborations? Please email us at contact@cgapsouthasia.org