

Interview with Amrita Thapa
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CPN Maoist HQ, Kathmandu, Nepal

Amrita, would you mind to tell a bit about yourself.

My name is Amrita Thapa. I am born in the western part of Nepal in a Syangja district. I have seen discrimination and disparity in the society since my childhood which encourages me to join the politics in my student years when I was in a college. I was involved in the 10 years People's war, where I also served as a Brigade Commissar. And along with the peace process I was also the member of the Interim Parliament, and now I am a CA member representing CPN Maoist. I am also working for the women's issues in the party where I am serving as the Secretary General of the All Women's Association of Nepal-Revolutionary, the women wing of CPN Maoist. In addition, I am serving as the central committee member of the party.

In your opinion, what do you think are the key elements to why you were able to get the position in the politics that you have today?

Firstly, women should be aware, they should also feel that they can contribute to the society and the nation. Secondly, something of great importance is that there should be conducive policies and a favorable environment. The political parties must be able to create such a conducive environment. There is a need of a movement to bring the change to society. The people who are the victims or marginalized should fight for their rights on their own. The substantive issues also effect women ability to get in to decision making positions. Women should strive to be involved in such movement.

Is there anything with the current quota system that you think should be changed to open up more space for women?

As we have seen, the quota system is applied in few countries. Quota system is better than having nothing. Quota system helps to bring the representation up but quota system is not enough, we need to develop certain policies (as based on the physical and mental situation.) We need to develop policy, create a conducive environment. Gender quota should be limited for a certain time/period. Otherwise people feel that there is quota system and there is nothing more to do. In that case, quota could be the barrier.

The state should take responsibility for education, employment and health so that more women can come in politics. If the state can take responsibility for children and elderly people and build women friendly infrastructures, this will also encourage women and increase their representations.

This also include the conducive laws that you were taking about?

Yes.

Can you mention some examples of laws that you think is necessary?

As in the Interim constitution, we have education, employment and health under the fundamental rights and if we can translate that into legislation women would not need to be the full care take of the children and the elderly people. If we can establish child care facilities and free health services, women do not need to find a husband and wait for him to build his career (to live in wealth). For example, in the property law there is a 20 percent subsidy for women if they register property. Due to that women's access to property has increased. We have a certain quota for women and other marginalized groups in the civil services with the aim to achieve inclusiveness in the entire sector. That is also a good example of legislation that works to women's advantage.

The state is trying to make a conducive environment. If the Interim constitution had not made a provision facilitating for a Proportionate Representation (PR) system in the CA election, even the 33 percent of the women representation would not have been met and we would not have had such diversity in the CA (Janajati, madesh etc). Law is important as it creates the environment.

In your opinion who is responsible or held accountable for women access position of power and decision making

The state is responsible and must be accountable in this case because it is related to the policies that will guide the access and build capacity of the citizen. Further more, women also need to be aware and concern about their nation. They should feel that they can contribute to their nation. The third is the awareness that comes with the time (and the process).

You talked about quota being a short term measure how would you see women to remain in high or critical numbers in parliament? What do you think is needed to maintain the numbers?

First of all the state should continuously support women by (gender equal/sensitive) building policies. The state should give priority to education, employment opportunities and provide for health facilities. Such as encouraging free health services and education for girls' and employment opportunities for women.

Now the situation is positive to certain extent, as the government has initiated free maternal services. The state should provide for social security to women. There should be an environment where women are secure. There must be special provision to sustain the position of women as equal to men at all levels. There must be a system of good governance to encourage women's representation until the gender equality is fulfilled. This should be supported by developing certain policies and methodologies and we also need the good governance system.

Do you think that the State can also change its culture?

That is not always possible. The state has a certain character and its culture. To change the culture of the state the citizen's should be aware. We can see from our history that the different

movement and the revolution have also changed the culture of the state. Changing the culture of the state happens rarely. What is needed is that people should have access to decision making regarding the state's culture and they should always be acting as a watch dog. People should be aware.

It seems like CA is going to make a lot of decisions and a lot of gender equality bills have already been drafted, why do you think it is hard to implement?

Up until now we can see in the entire sector that power is very important in governing of the state. Generally the power is centralized. People who have power can do whatever they want. Even though the CA is trying to do something with a good motive, it can result in an unfavorable environment. There are many things which are cross cutting for example the environment, industry, agriculture, road development and so onwhich might leave women behind. Another reason can be the tendency of not to do anything or leave as it is. The victim or the marginalized group needs to take their own initiative and they have to fight for their own rights. The state need to prioritize. In regard to gender equality, women's issues do not get the priority by the state. There is a lack of women movement, they have to be involved in the movement, and women should force the state to implement the existing policies and laws.

What kind of factors do you think made it possible for you to access the decision making positions? As you have met lots of obstacles in the politics?

I would like to say that we are still in a struggle. The voice that I have been raising is heard at the implementation level. I started my career in politics after seeing the discrimination in the society. I think it is due to the dedication, commitment, time and continuous devotion that have helped me to reach decision making positions.

During the ten year's peoples war the party has encouraged women to participate in the people's army, the party and the women's association. That was a special policy to encourage women. We can see that national and international conventions also increases the representation of the women. The Beijing convention has declared ten years as women's decade...such international intervention has helped women to access decision making positions.

In general, as elected women to the CA, do you think that you share common ideas...why do you think that you are in decision making position today? Do you think there are common characteristics that you have benefited from?

The party called for nomination for the direct election during the CA election. The state committee of the CPN Maoist had only nominated two women out of 19 nominations. Through the All Nepal's Women Association –Revolutionary demanded 50 percent of the women candidacies in the election we ended up with the 35 percent. In the PR system the women representation was 50 percent (as it was mandatory). We understood that the policy of the party

should be democratic and we felt that the party should be able to understand people's aspirations. We feel that we need to lobby, struggle within the party.....that is our perspective.

Not only the Maoist but all the parties...?

Other parties are also struggling and lobbying for this cause but they are not able to achieve the same results. They are not able to change...or influence the party. For example, in the nomination of the chairperson to the committees, we all demanded for 50 percent women. With the aim of least maintaining 33 percent, the CPN Maoists decided to have three seats for women while CPN- UML and NC had only two seats for the women chairpersons. Despite of the women's lobbying the NC did not have even two women chairperson.

Why do you think that women should be in politics? What differences do you think that women make in politics?

First, its not that all the citizens of the nation should be actively involved in politics. What will happen if 50 percent of the citizens of the nation are in politics? Women should be involved in politics because it is the factor that determines women's participation in all sectors. There are other sectors that a citizen can contribute like being a doctor, development worker, engineering etc. Why politics is important to women is because the state or governance develops politics and that is the key factor to decide everything in all the sectors. Women should be involved in politics to open up space in all sectors. There are low numbers of women in all sectors because of the low participation of women in politics.

In Nepal, all the sectors are dominated by men, when we had the king regime... very few political parties were there...women can never reach to top positions where the decisions are made. At that time, women were not considered as capable to do anything. Politics empowers women and the whole gender. So women should come to politics, it is not that 50 percent of the women should be actively engaged in the politics but off course we need significant number of women to be in the decision making positions. When women are in decision making positions they make gender sensitive policies and laws...build institution/infrastructure which are gender friendly. This will encourages more women to come into politics. And now we are in a transition phase, so for the political stability we also need more women in politics.

What was the reason why the lobby for 50 percent women chairs did not succeed?

That is the reflection of the society. Here, we have men with superior complexity and women with inferior complexity. The mind set of the women and men need to be changed. Other important reason are that in the CA we are limited to 33 percent, so being one-third we might not get the share of 50 percent of the Chairs. CPN Maoist has 40 percent and 33 percent from CPN UML and NC. If we had one more chair from NC women could have held at least 40 percent of the committee chairs.

You mentioned lack of strategy and homework?

What is needed is the awareness, special provisions for representation. It is not only the strategy or the lack of the homework. But as we have our foundation is 33 percent and we are demanding 50 percent of the chairpersonship of the committee it looks ambitious. I think that it could only have been achieved if gender equality had been a priority of the political parties (which it is not) and if all the parties had nominated 50 percent women as the chairpersons of the CA committee.