

South Asia's women leaders: Disaster management, gender equality and COVID-19

*Women leaders in South Asia continue to remain invisible in the global discourse on women's leadership in the COVID-19 crisis. Here **Sugandha Parmar** and **Akhil Neelam** (co-founders of [Women for Politics](#)) argue that despite high levels of gender inequality in South Asia, the region has many positive examples of effective leadership of women politicians fighting the COVID-19 crisis.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has opened up discussions about the effectiveness of leaders worldwide in handling crises, and women political leaders in Germany, Norway and New Zealand have dominated the headlines as examples of effective leadership during this current crisis. While these women are being looked up to for their [success in tackling the crisis](#), we studied their counterparts including some women sarpanches (heads of villages) and Members of Legislative Assembly (MLAs) in India, mayors in Nepal, the Health Ministers in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, MPs in Afghanistan and Pakistan to understand the work of women political leaders in South Asian nations.

The political leadership demonstrated by women while fighting COVID-19 is different from the more conventional form of leadership. This alternative style of leadership has shown itself to be [collaborative](#), empathetic, relying on [transparent communication](#). Women leaders, along with the frontline health workers, have shouldered the responsibility of outreach work, including conducting sanitation drives, monitoring surveillance activities, contact tracing, ration distribution and various other measures in villages and wards. This sense of ownership has helped them rally people behind the fight to the COVID-19 crisis.

The work of these women politicians across South Asia was captured in [Beyond Victims Series](#) by [Women for Politics](#) with an aim to highlight their work, despite the limited resources, difficult geographies and existence of patriarchal structures. Often the focus on the challenges and limitations to women's work depict them as victims, this series emphasised the achievements of these women politicians to move their narrative from victims to leaders. An analysis of women politicians' work across the region shows some common leadership traits, including preparedness to act, collaboration with the government and other stakeholders in delivering essential supplies while dealing with the challenges of developing nations.

Keeping the public updated

In India, Kerala's Health Minister, K.K. Shailaja, redirected resources and devised a communication strategy, taking advantage of all social media channels to continuously update the public and combat fake news and myths about the pandemic. On similar lines, Mayor Kantika Sejuwal in the remotest part of Nepal used local radio and TV stations, as well as effectively engaging teachers to spread awareness among children and adults. Sarpanches Daljit Kaur (Rurkee, Punjab, India) and Ritu Jaiswal (Singwahini, Bihar, India) have created WhatsApp groups and used social media to communicate directly with young people and families about essential supplies, information on COVID-19, and other relevant updates.

These examples of direct and honest communication with their constituents about the outbreak, measures for containment, and disseminating information about their containment work has helped these political leaders build credibility with their residents and citizens.

Collaborations to ensure awareness and essentials

While many of these women took up the responsibility to protect the community, they also mobilised the community to fight the COVID-19 crisis. Mayor Kantika in Nepal has been working in collaboration with the Nepal Army, the Police Department, District Administration, and teachers to incorporate best practices to mitigate the risks of the pandemic.

Sarpanch Priyanka Medankar (Medankarwadi, India), Sarpanch Pallavi Thakur (Hara, Punjab, India), MLA Veena George (Kerala, India), and many other women politicians at the grassroots level of India have collaborated with women and young volunteers to stitch masks, deliver sanitary napkins, conduct surveillance, run community kitchens, and spread awareness on the virus. Pinky Bharti (Zilla Parishad Chairperson, Bihar, India) has mobilised community resources (financial as well as non-financial) to run community kitchens, deliver essential supplies and manage quarantine centres to name a few, thereby ensuring a shared responsibility and active participation from the community.

Thinking Ahead: Using technology, preparedness and adaptability

Bhutan Health Minister Dechen Wangmo proactively responded to the pandemic with a [preparedness plan](#) and implemented early screening, enhanced testing and mandatory quarantine that has resulted in no COVID-19 deaths, so far. In addition, the preparedness plan adopted by the Ward Councillor, Sana Ahmed (Kolkata, India) helped in tackling the Amphan cyclone and heavy floods in the region while fighting Covid-19. Anticipating extensions in lockdown and limiting mobility, many other women sarpanches in India worked to ensure the supply of essentials early on, either through procurement or by engaging the community to self-produce masks, sanitary napkins, etc.,.

Sarpanch Vijanandbhai (Gujarat, India) leveraged technology to ensure government cash transfers has reached the accounts of daily wage labourers, under the MNREGA and *Jan Dhan* schemes. Another young sarpanch Naseembanu Pathan (Gujarat, India) approached the Police department to employ drone surveillance to ensure lockdown and fortification of her village.

The women politicians discussed above have kept themselves updated with information on the disease, policy guidelines released by the government and the international organisations like the WHO and continuously worked on adapting to the changing situation on the ground and consequently responding to the needs of their communities.

Having preparedness plans – plans that are adaptive to dynamic challenges leveraging technology, staying informed and updated – have been key factors for these women leaders to stay ahead in the battle and contain the COVID-19 crisis.

Inclusion, Empathy and Transparency

MLA Danasari Anasuya (Telangana, India) has identified communities living in inaccessible terrains, mostly tribal pockets and organised for the timely supply of essentials. MP Fawzia Koofi in Afghanistan has been running a fundraising campaign for people living in poverty and affected by Taliban, alongside [actively participating in peace negotiations](#) with the Taliban.

Sana Ahmed, Ward Councillor (Kolkata, India) made arrangements for the minority Muslim population (then fasting for Ramadan) by creating a safely organised vegetable market, removing the wreckage from the Amphan cyclone for easy movement, as well as arranging for door-to-door delivery of essentials during the time of fasting. Young women sarpanches, such as Pallavi Thakur (Punjab), Samreen Khan (Jammu and Kashmir) and Akhila Yadav (Telangana) have inspired and mobilised young women in their villages in aid work, delivering food and other essential supplies. In some cases, women from conservative families have also stepped out of their houses and have taken up sanitisation work.

One may argue that the region is still far away from gender equity in politics, however, there are these positive examples of effective leadership of women politicians in fighting the COVID-19 crisis. Despite their contribution to crisis management in their respective communities, women leaders in this region continue to remain invisible in the global discourse on women's leadership in the COVID-19 crisis. While we get a grasp on the nature and effects of this epidemic, we need to be inclusive in our debates on the success of women's leadership and recognise the achievements of women leaders in South Asia.

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