

Second Annual International Women's Day Celebration Breakfast
"Global Dispatches: Women Moving Forward - and to the Top"
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Global Dispatch: Barriers to Women's Political Participation in Nepal
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Namaste.

While we are proud to recognize the accomplishments and movement forward of our sisters in Latin America and Africa, we must also report on the continued challenges and threats to women's full and vibrant political participation.

Having recently returned from Nepal, I witnessed the rising violence against women, the strategic targeting of women political leaders by the current government, as well as the intra-party mechanisms that exclude women's political participation.

In the ten-year armed conflict, over 12,000 people have been killed and a million people have been displaced in what has become an increasing violent and armed encounter. Political instability has been heightened by undisciplined police forces that kill and rape civilians. Women make up over 35% of the fighting forces.

In the weeks preceding the municipal elections imposed by the monarchy on February 8 of this year, 100s of political leaders, students, journalists, human rights advocates, and professionals were detained and imprisoned by the government's police and military forces, the RNA. Our friend, Sarita Giri, was held with a number of women at the Mahendra Police Club under "deplorable conditions." The Protect Human Rights Movement interviewed 38 women prisoners and described the scene: a "majority of the women in prison are sick, their bodies swollen. They are having headaches, stomachaches, colds, coughs and diarrhea." Because they tried to voice political opposition, women suffered in gender-specific ways during detention, denied right to proper hygiene and healthcare facilities.

The state and Maoist leadership are not the only force inhibiting women's participation in the political arena.

In an article on women's efforts to gain equal rights out this morning to celebrate International Women's Day, Sarita Giri, release just weeks ago, was not intimidated- she's right back at it again. She states: "Male political leaders are very rigid on the issue of women's representation in political parties, especially big [parties]. There is the feeling of being superior among the male political leaders." Sarita said male supremacy in Nepal is high with patriarchy and hierarchy going together.

Meena Pandey, central member of Nepali Congress, outlined the deprivation of women from having property rights as one of the major causes of women not coming to the decision making level. "They, who don't have property rights, can't dare to come to politics where they need money," she said.

The arbitrary detentions of women leaders and intra-party exclusion and prejudice violate Nepal's international commitments as expressed through the signing and ratification of CEDAW and the Convention on the Political Rights of Women.

In Nepal, the detained women were denied a voice and a vote; they were stripped of their fundamental human rights and basic human dignity. Women in the rural communities continue to be deterred from politics by exclusive property laws and practices.

We in the international community, must stand beside our sisters exposed to these brutal and repressive policies that attempt to squelch their political voice and rob them of the basic human rights. While 2005 was a year that marked great progress and development in women's participation in government throughout the world, there are still many challenges that lie ahead. But we find hope, in the success stories and lessons learned, from other regions of the world and spheres of influence as women continue forward... and to the top.