



Statement by Richard Bennett
Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal
Delivered at the Program *Democracy Without Violence Against Women in Politics*
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Honourable Deputy Speaker Mrs Chitralekha Yadav, Dr Rohit Kumar Nepali and your colleagues from SAP International, distinguished panellists, participants, and friends:

I am very happy to be here today, at this programme organized by SAP International to mark International Women's Day, and thank you for inviting me to speak.

Nepal's current transition has already faced many challenges. And the opportunities are perhaps greater than this country has seen for many years. There is immense hope that the upcoming Constituent Assembly elections will see an unprecedented number of women taking seats in decision making fora which have so far been predominantly the domain of men. It will not be easy, however. We have already seen that the power structures that still hold sway during this transition phase will not easily make way for women to play their rightful role in designing the blueprint of the new nation.

As you might already be aware, the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Nepal is mandated to perform different tasks, including to monitor the general human rights situation in the country. During the election phase we will be focusing on monitoring respect for political rights, so that the environment may be regarded as conducive to a free and fair election. We have already noted some incidents of violence and intimidation against candidates, who have begun their campaigns, and who appear to have been targeted because they were exercising their right to engage in political activities.

While women and men alike can be targets of such actions, they do face different challenges when they attempt to participate in the electoral process. In many nations, including Nepal, traditions and social and cultural stereotypes discourage women from participating in political and public life. Keeping women away from the political arena, denying them education and information, and shutting them out of decision-making positions can be a denial of their political rights. In order for women to be actors in the elections process, many reforms must take place on the ground. For example, women should:

- Have access to information about political systems, political initiatives, state policies and electoral procedures;
- Be aware of their right to vote independently from male influence, have safe access to polling stations, be able to run as candidates and take an active part in political discussions, and finally;
- Women's issues must be included in the programmes designed by political parties.

Nepal has already taken a step to ensure the participation of women in the elections process by setting quotas for parties fielding candidates in the proportional representation election. Yet as we have seen from recent appointments in the civil service, and from the parties' slates in the First Past the Post contest, it will take longer to transform the political culture into one that accepts women as equal actors. These points support the statement in the concept note prepared for this meeting: "Reservation of seats alone is not sufficient to bring women to decision making; women need to have environments conducive for their political participation and practices."

While those conducive environments do not fully exist yet, I would suggest that meetings such as this and others that have taken place in recent months discussing, among other issues, the implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, are having a positive impact. Women are continuing to claim their right to participate. This political right is especially relevant in the elections process and it is one that OHCHR-Nepal will be monitoring closely until the 10th of April, and beyond. OHCHR strongly encourages increased participation of women in politics and I encourage all of you to communicate with us when you believe that women's right to political participation has been violated.

Thank you again for inviting me to offer these observations.