

## Gender and Human Development: A South Asian Perspective

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“Gender equality is a necessary condition for sound human development”, said Mahbub ul Haq in the UNDP *Human Development Report* of 1995. That Report, prepared just before the Beijing conference, set the tone for discourse on issues of women’s development and empowerment. Its analyses questioned the very assumptions of national income accounts and socio-economic development performance of a country based on gender-blind indicators. Two new indicators, Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and Gender Empowerment Measures (GEM) were introduced in that Report. These indices provided the world with much-needed practical measures to compare the performance of countries vis-à-vis their women.

The human development model puts the concerns of all people, irrespective of gender, at the centre of all policies, strategies and actions. A truly engendered human development model would at least have three guiding principles:

- i. Equality of rights between women and men in legal, economic, political and cultural spheres must not only be enshrined as fundamental rights, but must also be enforced and implemented.
- ii. Women’s capability must be built through investments in their education, health and nutrition.
- iii. Economic and political opportunities to women must be provided to women through conducive policy environment and affirmative action.

But these principles have hardly been guiding the policies uniformly throughout the world such that even today, twenty-five years after the first women’s conference, an analysis of women’s situation globally can easily show that:

- Women’s legal, political, economic and other rights are getting violated in many countries, especially in developing countries and countries in conflict.
- Women’s capability may have been improved through education and better health facilities, but opportunities to use their enhanced capabilities have still remained limited.

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- In most parts of the world, women are mostly invisible in the economy; this economic invisibility leads to women's low status in their societies.

Now where does South Asia stand in this respect? South Asia as a region achieved much progress since the region became independent; but this progress has been neither adequate nor equitable. As documented in the reports published by the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, South Asia has emerged as the poorest, most illiterate, most malnourished, and the least gender sensitive region in the world. It has also emerged as one of the most poorly governed regions. South Asia has entered the 21st century with 515 million people in absolute poverty, some 400 million illiterate adults, and approximately 80 million malnourished children. Preventable diseases kill 3.2 million children each year. Girls and women form the vast majority of these deprived millions.

However, the balance sheet of the region need to be put in proper perspective to objectively assess the region's performance. During the last half century, significant economic growth has taken place in South Asia. Gross domestic product (GDP) per capita has almost tripled since 1960. All three major sectors - agriculture, industry and service - have witnessed reasonable growth rates over the last 30-35 years. In particular, the service sector has expanded greatly; in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, it now contributes over 45 per cent of GDP. Significant productivity gains accompanied these structural transformations. Across the board, there have been improvements in output per worker, including in agriculture.

But the political history of South Asia has been a turbulent one. Political independence, the breakup of Pakistan and the subsequent formation of Bangladesh, are the most conspicuous examples of this turbulence. Nevertheless, over the last 50 years South Asia has made strides toward stability and peace. Most South Asians are now citizens of democratic states. Decentralization of political power is gaining ground in most countries. These are important steps forward for a region characterized by diversity of religion, ethnicity, class, caste and language.

Political and economic progress in the post-War era has been complemented at times by healthy progress in social indicators. Indeed, there have been startling improvements in certain areas: between 1960 and 1997, life expectancy has increased from a minimum of 11 years in Sri Lanka to a maximum of 24 years in Bhutan, with the average increasing from 44 years to 63 years. Similarly, adult literacy rates have

increased dramatically - by as much as 25 per cent in Nepal - between 1970 and 1997. The region's average literacy rate has increased from 32 per cent to 51 per cent. These improvements reflect great enhancements in the quality of life for many South Asians. Indeed, the magnitude of these changes is only slightly less impressive than how quickly they have come about. No single era of South Asian history has been witness to such rapid advances in health, education, nutrition and human development in general.

As always, when discussing human development in the region, Sri Lanka and the Maldives stand out due to their impressive initiatives in the social sectors. Particularly impressive is the extent to which education has been prioritized in these two countries. With over 90 per cent of adults literate, these countries have achieved one of the primary prerequisites for sustainable economic growth and human development. The other countries in the region, while still far from having adequate education facilities and attainment levels, have managed to make substantial headway into the problem of reducing illiteracy. In Pakistan, adult female literacy has increased by almost five times in the period 1970-95.

Health status in South Asia has also improved across the board. A person born in South Asia can now expect to live almost twice as long as someone born 50 years ago. Once again, the example of Sri Lanka offers a great example of appropriate people-centred policies: life expectancy in Sri Lanka at 62 years in 1960 was approximately what India's life expectancy was in 1998. An average person in Sri Lanka can now expect to live for 73 years - only 4 years less on average than those living in the industrial world.

Access to basic preventive healthcare has also resulted in dramatically reducing mortality rates. Child immunization against preventable diseases is not quite universal across the region yet, but great gains have been made. In 1980, the South Asian average for one-year olds that had been fully immunized against tuberculosis and measles was 13 per cent and 1 per cent respectively, and by 1997 these figures were 95 per cent and 79 per cent. Infant mortality rates have dropped by 65 per cent in Nepal and 51 per cent in India. In 1998, all South Asian countries had succeeded in reducing infant mortality rates to below 100 per 1000 live births, in 1960 only Sri Lanka had such a rate. at 90 per 1000 live births.

Yet, as table 1 shows, colossal human deprivation pervades South Asia. Progress in some areas, as mentioned above, has been made compared to the initial conditions at Independence. But high population growth rates in some countries have neutralized

progress achieved earlier. Also concern for human development has not been enough of a priority for most policy makers in the region. The result is that there are now increasing absolute numbers of people in poverty, without adequate health and sanitation, under-nourished children, and people who are illiterate. Also increasingly distressing is the withering away of traditional livelihoods due to unsustainable environmental practices.

In this setting of huge human deprivation, women in South Asia bear the heaviest burden. As shown in table 2, pervasive gender disparity in access to education, health, employment, and in all other areas has led to a situation where South Asia has some of the lowest values of GDI and GEM. In addition, women in South Asia are victims of some oppressive and rigid customs and traditions that perpetuate their disadvantage. They bear children early and often, and are pressured to produce sons rather than daughters. Many perish in the process. Many women become victims of so-called 'honour killings', sati, and other crimes against humanity. A weak judicial system fails to uphold women's rights, and struggling economies provide opportunities predominantly for men. The relentless forces of globalization put a further squeeze on poor women working in the informal sector. The latest challenges of armaments built-up, both conventional and nuclear, and ethnic and sectarian strife add a frightening dimension to the region's already poor state of human development.

With this introduction, I would like to analyze the issues of women's human development in South Asia from the perspective women's human rights. How far have women and girls in South Asia been able to enjoy the right to education and health, to earn a living, to legal justice and to participate in governance? We will note that in all these areas, women do not enjoy these rights as men do, and in some areas women's rights, although enshrined in their countries' constitutions, are violated everyday.

### **Education of women**

Although statistics vary significantly between and within South Asian countries, as a region South Asia presents a shocking profile of educational deprivation of women. For example,

- More than half of South Asian adult illiterates are women.

- More than two-thirds of South Asian out-of-primary school children are girls.
- Nearly two-fifths of girls enrolled in primary school drop out before grade 5.
- Of the already low vocational education enrolment of less than 2 per cent of secondary school students, female students comprise only a quarter of one per cent.
- The disparity between primary school enrolments of boys and girls ranges from 2 percentage points in Maldives to 31 percentage points in Nepal. Within Pakistan alone this gap varies from 11 percentage points in Punjab to 21 percentage points in Baluchistan.

While the developing country average for female literacy rates has increased from 32 to 63 per cent between 1970 and 1997, the South Asian average has increased only from 17 to 37 per cent. Of the total illiterate population in South Asia, 63 per cent are women and of the total out-of-primary school children, 71 per cent are girls. Pakistan and Nepal have the worst female adult literacy rates at 25 and 21 per cent respectively. Moreover, while the gender gap in education in South Asia as a region is the largest in the world, this gap is particularly glaring in these two countries.

Efforts to address gender disparities in education have, in general focussed on improving enrolments at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels. Yet the minimum target of universal primary education has been met only in Sri Lanka. The rest of South Asia, has yet to achieve universal primary education even for boys. Progress, however, has been made in female literacy rates in all South Asian countries, and primary school enrolment ratios for girls in India and Bangladesh are fast approaching those for boys' enrolments.

The mean number of years of schooling that South Asian children receive is very low: in India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Bhutan, girls receive less than 1.2 years of schooling. Boys' averages are considerably higher, indicating that there is a gender gap in learning achievement as well. But Sri Lanka and Maldives have better records even in this area.

Differences within countries by state and province, and by urban and rural areas are marked. However, they also reflect the initiatives taken by individual states or provinces to address this issue. In India, for example, while the disparity between urban and rural areas in female literacy rates is large, there is almost parity in net primary enrolment rates.

However, there are huge differences in female educational achievements between states in India: Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan have extremely poor female

education indicators, whereas states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala do consistently well. In Rajasthan, girls are only half as likely as boys to attend school while in Kerala there is no gender disparity in education. The experience in Kerala shows that a relatively poor state can overcome the hurdles of providing education to females, with appropriate policies and strong political will.

Beyond primary education there are the issues of tertiary enrolment rates as they indicate the extent to which South Asian women can acquire knowledge and skills to participate in economic and political fields. In South Asia, women have limited access to vocational and technical education and thus to job opportunities in traditionally 'male' fields. This can be attributed to cultural and traditional attitudes, held by both women and men, towards women's roles and responsibilities in the household and labour market. As a result, current vocational and technical education programmes in South Asia are seriously inadequate in scope and relevance. South Asia's overall enrolment rate in vocational education, at less than 2 per cent of secondary school enrolment, registers well below the developing country average of 10.6 per cent, and below the least developed countries (LDC) average of 5.1 per cent. Of this already low number, girls on average comprise a mere 17 per cent of technical students in South Asia.

Studies reveal the extremely low participation of girls in vocational education systems in South Asia. Of the people trained under Pakistan's Labour Department programmes, less than one per cent are women. In 1991, women constituted only 20 per cent of students in one of Sri Lanka's three agricultural schools, although half of the agricultural labour force is made up of women working as economic producers.

Out of nearly one thousand polytechnics in India, only seventy are exclusively for girls who comprise only 17 per cent of all polytechnic students. Of the more than 25,000 students admitted by 11 Technical Training Centres in Bangladesh between 1988-1994, only 6.7 per cent were female.

South Asian governments spend approximately 4.4 per cent of their education budgets on technical/scientific education. Expenditure on female vocational students comprises less than one per cent of the education budget. The data presented so far refer to only more formal training programmes. Much vocational training occurs through less formal modes, such as apprenticeships. Women are extremely marginal in apprenticeship systems for a number of reasons, including lack of women trainers and attitudes that perpetuate occupational segregation

Higher education, though a distant dream for most South Asian women, is important because those who are able to access it are likely to be among those who push forward the structural changes needed to achieve gender equality. Cultural norms that perpetuate educational disparities between boys and girls extend to and intensify with higher education. Given the perception of women's roles and the degree of gender discrimination in the workplace, higher education in non-traditional fields is rarely viewed as a sound investment for women. Low rates of female enrolment at higher and technical levels contribute to the very low number of women working as administrators, managers, professionals, and technicians.

### **Women's Health**

South Asian women suffer greatly from a lack of access to health care, based not only on an absolute lack of health facilities - particularly in rural areas - but also on the relative inaccessibility of such facilities to them. Health statistics clearly reflect gender discrimination in South Asia. An estimated 208,000 women die annually due to pregnancy and birth-related complications. Norms of early marriage continue to predominate. A large proportion of women do not seek pre- and antenatal care. A majority of women suffer from chronic energy deficit due to insufficient daily caloric intake.

Both women and men in South Asia are vulnerable to many preventable and curable diseases - tuberculosis, malaria and hepatitis, which become life threatening when the diseases are exacerbated by lack of information, poor health facilities, and the lack of sanitation facilities and safe drinking water. But the burden of disease tends to be heavier for women, due to barriers to health facilities, social and cultural restrictions, and their low socio-economic status. Often the most trivial health problems and normal processes of child bearing become a cause of mortality.

South Asia is one of very few regions of the world, in addition to China and parts of the Arab world, where men outnumber women. The global ratio (excluding South Asia) of females to males is 106, whereas in South Asia there are only 94 women per 100 men. This unfavourable ratio is primarily a consequence of the high levels of mortality among young girls and women in their child-bearing years. For instance, in Pakistan, the female mortality rate during peak childbearing years (ages 20 -29) is twice as high as that for men in the same age group.

For South Asian women, discrimination begins at birth, and since the introduction of prenatal screening methods such as ultra-sonography and amniocentesis, sometimes even before birth. In South Asia, excluding the Maldives and Sri Lanka, there is evidence of inequitable feeding practices for boys and girls from infancy. The gender biases in feeding practices continue into adulthood and result in chronic under-nutrition and micro-nutrient deficiencies in girls and women. Failure to nourish girl children limits their capacity for healthy adulthood while an overarching reluctance to provide medical care compounds these problems. As a result of this discrimination, it is estimated that some 79 million women are simply missing from the region.

Over the past fifteen years, genetic testing for sex selection, although illegal, has become a booming business in India, China and South Korea in particular. Female foeticide has been reported in 27 of India's 32 states. Anecdotal evidence suggests that while outright female infanticide takes place in only a few communities in South Asia, it is more often the case that discrimination in health care cuts short the lives of unwanted girl children.

Oppression of girls in South Asia tends to increase during their adolescence. Once a girl reaches puberty, families often invoke social and cultural taboos to restrict her to the household. Although pregnancy is a serious health risk for women under 18 years of age, the tradition of marrying off daughters once they reach puberty is still prevalent in some communities in South Asia.

### **Women and the economy**

The glaring lack of gender-disaggregated statistics makes it impossible to obtain a true picture of women's contributions to the economy in South Asia. Some degree of statistical invisibility of women in the economy is a worldwide phenomenon, but in South Asia it is particularly pervasive because of historical, traditional and cultural reasons. After the 1995 UNDP Human Development Report, attempts have been made by some countries to take account of women's work. But these efforts have been neither systematic nor comprehensive.

In South Asia, women's reproductive and productive work, both so essential for caring, nurturing, household maintenance and income earning, are intertwined and indistinguishable in men's as well as women's minds. Within the household, South Asian men rule and women obey across religious and cultural divides.



The invisibility of women's work in economic accounting systems is due to a flawed definition of economic activity. Also, the official data collection machinery is not adequate, uniform or equitable. Thus reliable, accurate and comprehensive information about women's economic activity and labour force participation is almost non-existent. Although there have been efforts to integrate gender-specific questions and issues into data collection, the knowledge-base remains limited and in no South Asian country do national figures reveal the full extent of the kinds of work that women do, the amount of time women spend working for free or for wages, or the extent of women's unemployment or under-employment. However, recognizing these and the fact that there are differences among the countries of the region regarding women's participation, recognition and remuneration in economic activities, some general conclusions could be made from available data and studies.

- The majority of South Asian women work in the informal sector or as unpaid family helpers. In India, 96 per cent of economically active women work in the informal sector. In Nepal, 75.3 per cent are self-employed and 27.9 per cent are unpaid family workers. In Pakistan, 64.9 per cent of the female labour force is officially accounted for in the informal sector. In Bangladesh, 75 per cent of women earned a living in the informal sector in 1995-96.
- Work done by women accounts for the largest proportion of non-mechanized agricultural labour.
- Although more women are entering the paid labour force, many still face severe impediments in entering and participating in the work force.
- Large wage differentials exist between men's and women's work, but these are larger in rural areas. In urban and modern sectors wage gaps are closing.
- Outside the agricultural sector, women are concentrated in a limited number of sectors: the majority in traditional or service-sector employment, others in poorly-paid manufacturing work. More and more younger women are entering the work force in these sectors.
- In the formal sector, women are concentrated at the lower levels, with little job security and few benefits.
- The globalization wave has benefited urban educated women, leaving the vast majority of women in the agricultural and informal sectors to cope with its negative impact.

## **Women in Governance**

Although South Asia has the distinction of being ruled by some powerful women Prime Ministers and Presidents, the vast majority of South Asian women are illiterate, in poor health, invisible in the system of their national accounts, and suffer legal, political, economic and social discrimination in all walks of life. Women in South Asia also have the lowest rates of participation in their governance structures. For example, in South Asia:

- Women occupy only 7 per cent of the parliamentary seats;
- Only 9 per cent of the cabinet members are women;
- Only 6 per cent of positions in the judiciary are held by women;
- Only 9 per cent of civil servants are women; and
- Only 20 per cent members of local government are women.

In the decision-making forums in South Asia, women have a very little role to play. Women hold the top positions in major political parties of the region, yet these powerful positions have not led to positive outcomes for the majority of South Asian women. Most political parties do not even maintain data on their female membership and few women are granted party tickets for elections. In some countries women are more visible in local governance structures than in any other governing institutions. Most gains have been made in India, where one-third of the seats in panchayats are reserved for women. However, gender bias pervades at all levels of governance in South Asia.

The 7 per cent parliamentary seats for women is one the lowest in the world, lower than even East Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Over the years various governments have reserved seats for women to increase their political participation. While this has helped to increase the number of women in governing bodies, it has led to a lot of debates about the representative character of women elected through reservation. Parliamentary seats have been reserved for women in Bangladesh, Pakistan and Nepal. In India, while there is a one-third reservation for women in the local bodies, so far no seats have been reserved for women at the national level.

With the exception of India and Bangladesh, women's representation within local bodies remains minimal. Even in these two countries, despite reservation, female representation barely rises above 20 per cent.

Female presence in South Asian cabinets is also negligible. Currently only 9 per cent of cabinet ministers across South Asia are women. A problem faced by women ministers is that they are seldom appointed to ministries that are considered powerful or influential in terms of their policy making role and control over financial and human resources. No South Asian woman has yet held the portfolio of minister of finance or foreign affairs.

South Asian judiciaries are also dominated by men. While no overall figures exist, the proportion of female judges in both the higher and subordinate judiciaries of South Asia is no more than 5 to 10 per cent combined. As part of affirmative action policies, some South Asian governments have established quotas for women within the judiciary. In Bangladesh 10 per cent of judicial posts are reserved for women. Similarly, in Pakistan, quotas have been established for women in the subordinate judiciary - 2 per cent for civil judges and 5 per cent for district and sessions courts. However, even these minimal quotas remain unfilled.

In the civil service, despite being equally competent women face discrimination in recruitment, posting, promotion and transfer. The posts of powerful secretaries to the government are always held by men. In general, women civil servants are usually assigned to posts related to social sector. Even when quotas are fixed for recruitment of women (for example, 10% quota for women in Bangladesh civil service), they are rarely filled, allegedly due to lack of qualified women. Only in Sri Lanka, women occupy over 20 per cent of civil service positions.

Decision-making has traditionally been regarded as a male domain in South Asia. Often using customs and traditions as a tool, women have been sidelined from most decision-making processes. While the past few decades have witnessed an improvement in the status of women, especially for the urban middle class women who have a degree of freedom in making decisions, for the majority of South Asian women such freedom remains an elusive dream.

### **Women and the Law**

Women do not enjoy complete legal equality with men in any South Asian country or community, despite constitutional guarantees to the contrary. The majority of South Asian women - regardless of class, caste or religion - face unequal access to property; to protection from harm; to decision-making powers within the family and outside; and to

the justice system itself. These disparities have negative repercussions on women's vulnerability to violence and destitution; on their ability to care for themselves and their families; and on their overall sense of citizenship, security and integrity.

Women suffer limited access to the legal system due to lack of education, low social status and limitations on their public mobility. Further, throughout the region, except in the Maldives and to a large extent in Nepal, different religious and cultural communities are governed by separate personal laws - those civil laws which deal with marriage, dowry/dower and divorce; custody, guardianship and adoption of children; and inheritance.

Each South Asian country, except Bhutan which does not have a constitution, maintains constitutional guarantees of women's legal equality with men. In many cases, however, these guarantees are confounded or contradicted by other constitutional articles, amendments and laws, as well as by lack of political will to enforce these laws combined with persistent customary practices. Experience has shown that any ambiguity or lack of clarity in the articulation of rights creates space for misuse and discrimination. Throughout the region, laws continue to exist that contradict the fundamental guarantees of equality laid out in constitutions and international agreements.

The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) remains the central legally-binding international agreement regarding the rights of women. All South Asian states have ratified CEDAW, but only Bhutan, Sri Lanka and Nepal have done so without reservation. While the reservations retained by Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and the Maldives reflect poorly on government commitment to gender equity, the non-implementation of commitments made under CEDAW by all countries is just as important. Despite CEDAW commitments, many discriminatory laws and practices exist in South Asia.

Gender-specific violence against women occurs across all strata of South Asian society. Violence against women includes not only physical violence, but also sexual, psychological and emotional abuse. Physical violence includes murder, sometimes in the guise of 'honour killings', sati and female infanticide. It also includes kidnapping, as well as domestic, custodial and public assault.

Women's dignity, self-esteem and psychological and emotional health are also undermined by less overt forms of violence such as forced and child marriage, forced confinement, and restrictions on mobility.

Many of these forms of violence are not even recognised as such, but rather ignored, condoned or justified by invoking religion, culture or traditional beliefs. Legal and judicial institutions have failed to provide adequate safeguards to women against all kinds of violence. Women thus become victims both of the violence they suffer as well as of social and legal attitudes, often indifferent to their plight, sometimes holding them responsible for it.

## **Conclusions**

The Beijing Platform urged each government to draw up its own national plan of action and formulate specific strategies for eliminating existing gender gaps in access to education and healthcare, opening up economic and political opportunities for women and ensuring their human rights. In South Asia, progress has been made in raising consciousness and undertaking research to identify bottlenecks and actions to improve women's position and conditions. Yet gender equality has remained an elusive goal. The previous discussion shows how far South Asia has to travel to realise the ideal of complete gender equality, which is a *sine qua non* for both development and peace in the region.

While equality and the empowerment of women require actions in a number of areas, four areas stand out as most critically important for achieving the equality of South Asian women with men. These are:

a) Building women's capabilities. Although gender gaps in education and health have narrowed over the last two decades, the pace of progress has been inadequate and uneven within and among South Asian countries.

b) Improving opportunities for women. Without improving the opportunity to earn income or to participate in decision-making forums, South Asian women's concerns and potentials will remain marginalized and hostage to patriarchal prejudices.

c) Ensuring legal justice to women; and

d) Establishing/strengthening institutional machinery to ensure implementation and monitoring of gender-empowerment policies.

Despite the very rich history of South Asian women's efforts, today women in South Asia suffer greater poverty of education, health and nutrition, and greater lack of access to economic, political and legal opportunities, relative to their male counterparts as well

as to women around the world. Although the degree of discrimination varies from one country to another, the overall picture is that of a region where pervasive inequality in one form or another has perpetuated the prevailing unequal structure. What is needed is not only to raise the collective consciousness of the region for speedy implementation of the global and national commitments that governments have made, but also to put structures and finances in place for proper implementation.