



A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS ON THE PERSISTENCE OF GENDER STRATIFICATION AND INEQUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Social scientists and development activists are giving increasing emphasis to these fields in their agenda for research and development. In all South Asian countries, patriarchal values and social norms keep gender inequalities alive. Women as a category and South Asia as a region for analysis brings up the issue of heterogeneity vs. homogeneity. South Asian women and the persistence of gender stratification and diversity are being analyzed here to highlight the similarities in the conditions faced by women stemming from class, religion, culture and locality. This analysis is undertaken on the basis of a select set of human development indicators with reference to the Human Development Reports regarding the status of women. Sustainable human development implies engendering the development paradigm. The issues considered here to highlight the gender inequalities that constrain women from their legitimate claims to participate in and benefit from development in South Asian countries are limited by the availability of data, quantifiability and comparability across countries.

Keywords: *Patriarch belt, Human Development Index (HDI), Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Inequality Index (GII), Men-streaming*

Introduction

Gender equality and gender equity are emerging as major challenges in the global development debate. Social scientists and development activists are giving increasing emphasis to these fields in their agenda for research and development. From a theoretical perspective, the term gender is a basic organizing principle of society that shapes how people have to think about ourselves. While gender concerns differ, it also involves hierarchy, because it affects the opportunities and constraints we face throughout our lives.¹ For instance, the position of women in Indian society, contains a duality. On the one hand women are seen as fertile, benevolent, and as bestowers of fortune. On the other hand, the female is represented as aggressive, malevolent and destructive.² In all South Asian countries, patriarchal values and social norms keep gender inequalities alive. Discriminatory practices begin even before birth and affect every aspect of a child's future. But research shows no overall differences in intelligence between males and females.

Women as a category and South Asia as a region for analysis brings up the issue of heterogeneity vs. homogeneity.³ South Asian women and the persistence of gender stratification and inequality are being analyzed here to highlight the similarities in the conditions faced by women stemming from class, religion, culture and locality. This analysis is undertaken on the basis of a select set of human development indicators with reference to the Human Development Reports regarding the status of women. Human development has four components: productivity, equity, sustainability and empowerment and it also emphasizes gender equality. It is a known fact that as long as women are excluded from the development process, development will remain weak and lopsided. Sustainable human development implies engendering the development paradigm. There are certain human development indicators to analyze the status of women in the society. They are: (i) demography; (ii) literacy; (iii)



health; (iv) work participation rate and (v) political participation. If we examine these human development indicators, we can clearly understand the status of women in the society. The issues considered here to highlight the gender inequalities that constrain women from their legitimate claims to participate in and benefit from development in South Asian countries are limited by the availability of data, quantifiability and comparability across countries.

Persistence of Gender Stratification and Inequality in South Asia

South Asia comprises of seven different sovereign nations (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan and Maldives) with diverse socio-cultural and ethnic populations, a range of religious faiths, legal frames, economic and political forces, all of which impact upon the lives of women in the region. The region is also recognized as a “patriarch belt”⁴ where women are subordinated to men in a kin-ordered social structure,⁵ have low status, little or no access to property and land⁶ and suffer from non-recognition of their work which is largely unpaid. Gender stratification refers to a society’s unequal distribution of wealth, power and privilege between men and women. In the social structure of South Asia, one can notice that men dominate in most of the sectors of job and owners of property. In the case of earnings also disparity prevails between men and women, though earning differential has been narrowing in countries like United States and Europe. During the 1980’s, proponents of gender equality responded to this mindset by proposing a policy of “comparable worth”.⁷ Several nations including UK and Australia have adopted this policy but it has found limited acceptance in the United States. A second reason for gender based income disparity is related to family. Though men and women have equal responsibility to look after the family, practically the parental responsibility is shouldered by women.

In the case of education, gender disparity has been prevailing in the society and the lives of women revolved round home. However, the things are changing in the twenty-first century with the democratization of education. But still there are sociological reasons behind this phenomenon. Girls are systematically disadvantaged across the region as structural inequalities and the low status of women affect their rights. Social norms in South Asia prioritize a son receiving higher education, so the girl child often loses out on continuing her education. This is seen in the stark differences in the girl-boy ratio in secondary level classrooms across the region. Women make up less than 5 per cent of the police force and less than 10 per cent of judges in South Asia – reflecting the strength of social norms and the disparity in justice systems.⁸ Huge disparities by region, caste, class and income affect the use of maternal and child health services in South Asia. The young age at which many girls first become pregnant – combined with their poor education, inadequate decision-making power and poor control over resources – means that many enter pregnancy ill-equipped to support healthy foetal growth and subsequently raise a healthy child. The region has the second highest number of maternal deaths worldwide.

Between 2005 and 2015, female employment rates declined by 5 per cent per year in India, 3 per cent per year in Bhutan, and 1 per cent per year in Sri Lanka.⁹ But South Asia has been booming and during the year 2018, GDP growth for the region as a whole is 6.9 per cent, making it the fastest growing region in the world.¹⁰ The region stands together on a number of counts and the women of South Asia too, face similar conditions on various fronts. For instance, the fast GDP growth has not translated into fast employment growth. In fact, employment rates have



declined across the region, with women accounting for most of this decline. While it is not surprising for female employment rates to decline, with economic growth and then increase, in what is commonly known as the U-shaped female labour force function (a term coined by Claudia Goldin in 1995), the trends observed in South Asia stand out. Not only has female employment declined much more than could have been anticipated, it is likely to decline further as countries such as India continue to grow and urbanize.

The disparity observed in the above mentioned fields has been revealed in politics also. Women were denied political rights. In many nations, due to social barriers, women could not participate in political activities. Within a democratic system, policies are implemented by a government that is formed “by the consent of the governed”. In India, even though fair elections are held at regular intervals for State Assemblies and the National Parliament, they do not reflect the true consent of the people because a larger number of women voters are “missing” from the electorate.¹¹ Therefore, these elections reveal the preferences (or the will) of a population that is artificially skewed against women.

In addition to the above, both girls and boys are affected by the prevalence of violence, sexual abuse and harassment in South Asia. Only four countries (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Bangladesh) in South Asia have laws prohibiting domestic violence. Patriarchal societal norms weaken the participation of women and children in family and decision-making especially adolescent girls. This reduces their ability to demand fulfillment of their rights to education, health and protection. This affects the ability of duty-bearers in fulfilling these rights. Therefore, it is imperative to integrate a gender perspective across all UNICEF programmes to promote the value of women empowerment in South Asia.

The basis of gender inequality has been studied from the angle of genetic diversity. It is assumed that individual differences in behaviour reflect the genetic diversity of individuals. One basis reason for competition is the fact that our genetic interests are different because of the genetic diversity of individuals.¹² Therefore, the genetic diversity of individuals has intensified conflicts of interest and competition for scarce resources. As a result, genetic dissimilarity of individuals is reflected in occupational and status differences, in class structure, in unequal sharing of power and privileges and in general inequality of people.¹³

Analysis of Gender Stratification and Inequality in South Asia

Human Development is about people, about expanding their choices to live full, creative lives with freedom and dignity. Economic growth, increased trade and investment, technological advance are all very important. But they are means, not ends. Fundamental to expanding human choices is building human capabilities: the range of things that people can be. The most basic capabilities for human development are living a long and healthy life, being educated, having a decent standard of living and enjoying political and civil freedoms to participate in the life of one's community. The human development concept evolved in the 1980s in response to the increasing emphasis on economic growth as a measure of development. It is a paradigm which is equally applicable to developing as well as industrial countries.¹⁴ Ever since 1975, coinciding with various international efforts most of the South Asian countries have also intensified their respective country level endeavours to assess the status of women, comprehend the nature of gender inequalities and introduce institutional mechanisms to enable movement towards



equality. By the end of the twentieth century, gender equality and empowerment have become accepted norms in any discussion on development.

Equality refers to equal opportunities in terms of access to sources of livelihood, health and education, as well as to social, economic and political participation without discrimination. Gender inequalities stem from relations of power and authority, class-religion-caste-ethnic hierarchies and socio-cultural traditions, customs and norms.¹⁵ Empowerment is the process of transforming these structures and institutions, thereby ensuring equality. Over the years, in a number of well being indicators, South Asian women are seen to be better off today than they were a few decades ago – their survival in terms of life expectancy has been improving; more women are educated and working; many of them have entered politics at least at the local governance levels and there is an increasing recognition of the need to address women’s issues specifically, understand gender relations and work towards equality and empowerment for women. Despite these improvements, the aggregate picture of women’s development reflected in the quantitative indicators in any of these spheres reveals that the journey has only begun, and there are many more processes that require transformation.¹⁶

TABLE 1

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX (HDI) TRENDS BASED ON CONSISTENT TIME SERIES DATA AND NEW GOALPOSTS, 1990 - 2017

	1990	2000	2010	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	Change in HDI Rank 2012-17
India	0.427	0.493	0.581	0.600	0.618	0.627	0.636	0.640	2
Sri Lanka	0.625	0.685	0.745	0.757	0.763	0.766	0.768	0.770	-3
Bangladesh	0.387	0.468	0.545	0.566	0.583	0.592	0.597	0.608	7
Pakistan	0.404	0.450	0.526	0.535	0.548	0.551	0.560	0.562	1
Nepal	0.378	0.446	0.529	0.548	0.560	0.566	0.569	0.574	0
Bhutan	---	---	0.566	0.585	0.599	0.603	0.609	0.612	4
Maldives	---	0.606	0.671	0.688	0.705	0.710	0.712	0.717	8
South Asia	0.439	0.503	0.584	0.602	0.618	0.625	0.634	0.638	--
WORLD	0.598	0.642	0.698	0.709	0.718	0.722	0.726	0.728	--

Source: Data refer to 2017 or the most year available, published in 2018.

The key indicators of human development including the Human Development Index (HDI), the Gender Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Inequality Index (GII) have been provided in the Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3. India’s HDI value for 2017 is 0.640 – which put the country in the medium human development category – positioning it at 130 out of 189 countries and territories. The human development progress, as measured by the HDI, can usefully be compared to other countries. For instance, during the period between 1990 and 2017 India, Pakistan and Bangladesh experienced different degrees of progress towards increasing their HDIs. South Asia experienced the fastest HDI growth among developing regions with a 45.3 per cent increase since 1990. During that period, life expectancy grew by 10.8 years, as did expected years of schooling for children (by 21 per



cent). The loss in HDI due to inequalities is about 26 per cent. South Asia has the widest gap between men and women in HDI at 16.3 per cent.¹⁷ About 26.8 per cent of India's HDI value is lost on account of inequalities. This confirms that inequality remains a challenge for India as it progresses economically, though the government and various state governments have, through a variety of social protection measures, attempted to ensure that the gains of economic development are shared widely and reach the farthest first. In India despite considerable progress at the policy and legislative levels, women remain significantly less politically, economically and socially empowered than men.¹⁸ Female participation in the labour market is 27.2 per cent compared to 78.8 for men, it said. "Still India performs better than its neighbours, Bangladesh and Pakistan, ranking 127 out of 160 countries on the Gender Inequality Index", the UNDP said.

TABLE 2**GENDER DEVELOPMENT INDEX – 2017**

	GDI Value	HDI Value	HDI Rank	Life Expectancy at birth	Expected Years of Schooling	Mean Years of Schooling	GNI per capita (PPP US\$)
India	0.841	0.575	130	70.4	12/9	4.8	2,722
Sri Lanka	0.935	0.738	76	78.8	14.1	10.3	6,462
Bangladesh	0.881	0.567	136	74.6	11.7	5.2	2,041
Pakistan	0.750	0.465	150	67.7	7.8	3.8	1,642
Nepal	0.925	0.552	149	72.2	12.6	3.6	2,219
Bhutan	0.893	0.576	134	70.9	12.4	2.1	6,002
Maldives	0.919	0.679	101	78.8	12.7	6.2	7,064
South Asia	0.837	0.571	--	70.9	12.1	5.0	2,694
WORLD	0.941	0.705	--	74.4	12.8	7.9	10,986

Source: Data refer to 2017 or the most year available, published in 2018.

In the year 2014 HDR, HDRO introduced a new measure, the Gender Development Index (GDI), based on the sex-disaggregated Human Development Index, defined as a ratio of the female to the male HDI. The GDI measures gender inequalities in achievement in three basic dimensions of human development: health (measured by female and male life expectancy at birth), education (measured by female and male expected years of schooling for children and mean years for adults aged 25 years and older); and command over economic resources (measured by female and male estimated GNI per capita). Country groups are based on absolute deviation from gender parity in HDI. This means that the grouping takes into consideration inequality in favour of men or women equality. The GDI is calculated for 164 countries. The 2017 female HDI value for India is 0.575 in contrast with 0.683 for males, resulting in a GDI value of 0.841. In comparison, GDI values for Bangladesh and Pakistan are 0.881 and 0.750 respectively as reflected in Table

The phrase "missing women" was coined by Amartya Sen when he showed that in parts of the developing world, the ratio of women to men in the population is suspiciously low. The worsening sex ratio (number of females per 1000 males) in countries such as India and Pakistan reflected the gross neglect of women. It was commonly



believed that “boy preference” at birth and the mistreatment of young girls were the main reasons. And there is, unanimous agreement among experts that this phenomenon is one of the most momentous problems faced by the developing world in modern times. And the general sense is that it can be corrected by political action and public policy.¹⁹ Consideration of three survival dimensions using sex ratios, child mortality and life expectancy display discrepancies in ordering of different countries. Nepal has a more balanced sex ratio, but the worst life expectancy and child mortality rate among females.

TABLE 3
GENDER INEQUALITY INDEX - 2017

	GII		Maternal mortality rate	Adolescent birth rate	Female seats in Parliament (%)	Population with at least some secondary education (%)		Labour force participation rate (%)	
	Value	Rank				Females	Males	Females	Males
	2017	2017							
India	0.524	127	174	23.1	11.6	39.0	63.5	27.2	78.8
Sri Lanka	0.354	80	30	14.1	5.8	82.6	83.1	35.1	74.1
Bangladesh	0.542	134	176	83.5	20.3	44.0	48.2	33.0	79.8
Pakistan	0.541	133	178	36.9	20.0	27.0	47.3	24.9	82.7
Nepal	0.480	118	258	60.5	29.6	27.3	43.1	82.7	85.9
Bhutan	0.476	117	148	20.3	8.3	6.0	13.7	58.0	74.3
Maldives	0.343	76	68	5.8	5.9	44.9	49.3	42.9	82.1
South Asia	0.515	--	176	32.1	17.5	39.8	60.6	27.9	79.1
WORLD	0.441	--	216	44.0	23.5	62.5	70.9	448.7	75.3

Source: Data refer to 2017 or the most year available, published in 2018.

The 2010 HDR introduced the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which reflects gender-based inequalities in three dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity. The GII can be interpreted as the loss in human development due to inequality between female and male achievements in the three GII dimensions. India has a GII value of 0.524, ranking it 127 out of 160 countries in the 2017 index. In India, 11.6 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women, and 39.0 per cent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education, compared to 63.5 per cent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 174 women die from pregnancy related causes, and the adolescent birth rate is 23.1 births per 1,000 women of ages 15-9. India has among the world’s lowest level of female labour force participation and the decline in women’s employment in India is for the most part explained by “occupational segregation” – the concentration of women in certain sectors of the economy. It is a clear fact that women are under-represented in the booming sectors of the economy and over-represented in those that are not adding many jobs. Female participation in the labour market is 27.2 per cent compared to 78.8 for men. In comparison Sri Lanka has been ranked at 80 out of 160 countries which determine its range in the high development countries. Whereas, Bangladesh and Pakistan are ranked at 134 and 133 respectively on this index. Women’s participation, although increasing in South Asia still accounts for the smallest percentage of formal sector employment. Even here women occupy the lower rungs of clerical and low-



skilled occupations. The lower levels of literacy and skill/training among women in South Asia are often blamed for their placement in the lower echelons.

In addition to the above analysis, it is important to highlight here that violence against women in politics is rampant in South Asia, according to a study conducted by the Centre for Social Research and U.N. Women. It has found out that fear of violence kept up to 60 per cent of women out of politics. The study, 'Violence against Women in Politics', has revealed that insufficient implementation of laws, lack of support from the police and the judiciary, low awareness of politics and overall decline in 'moral' values were the major reasons for the violence. While physical violence, verbal abuse and threat of violence are higher in India, character assassination is seen as a greater threat in Pakistan and Nepal. The nature and form of violence is expectation of sexual favours or insinuating sexual misdemeanour, character assassination and threats of emotional violence. Victims of violence were women who were either new to politics, young or first generation politicians. According to the Representative U.N. Women's Office for India, Bhutan, Maldives and Sri Lanka, "Almost 90 per cent of women in these countries feel that violence breaks their resolve to join politics. From the comprehensive review of laws on violence against women, it is clear that none of the three countries has legislations that deal strictly with offenders to prevent violence against women in politics".²⁰

Conclusion

The situation of South Asian women as seen by the set of quantifiable indicators of gender development reflects the improvements being made in a number of spheres with regard to work, mortality, health, education and political participation. The constraints faced by women in South Asia are not merely economic or poverty related but emphasizes the prevalence of deep-rooted ideologies that operate through various institutions and prevent women from enjoying an equal status in different spheres of their lives and these aspects are not always amenable to quantification. South Asia has enjoyed a growth rate of 6 per cent a year over the past 20 years. This has translated into declining poverty and improvements in health and education. For instance, in the case of women development, only 28 per cent of women in South Asia have a job or are looking for one, compared to 79 per cent of men. Though South Asia's development potential is vast, there is a lack of women in employment and economic participation. In India and Sri Lanka, tens of millions of women have dropped out of the work force over the last twenty years. Many factors are holding them back. Almost half of the South Asia's adult women are illiterate and its girls suffer from the highest malnutrition rates in the world. Rates of violence against women and maternal mortality remain among the highest in the world. All these factors translate into the persistence of gender stratification and inequality which leads to widening gaps for women.

Among the many efforts being made at international, regional and national levels to move towards gender equality, highlighting the levels of biases that prevail through the use of human development indicators is one prominent tool. This provides insights into the specific approaches required to address the gender discrimination experienced by women and can help in the process of policymaking. Moreover failure to recognize the role of men and masculinities in women's lives and integrate it within Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE) programming reflects an incomplete understanding of gendered realities; and can pose a significant barrier to both women and men's economic well-being. In simple terms, WEE without integrating men, is not-so-smart economics. Chant



and Gutmann were the first to use the term ‘men-streaming’, and argued that incorporating men into gender and development intervention is a critical and necessary part of gender mainstreaming. It is impossible to achieve real empowerment of women without first involving men as supportive allies. Valuing girls and women is a key factor in making societies more prosperous. Some other promising signs are expanding legislation and support against gender-based violence, increasing programmes for skill development and subsidized loans for women-led businesses. If well-designed and enforced, these policies could remove some of the barriers women face and offer a significant boost to South Asia’s economies.

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