

Achieving Gender Justice through Human Development Approach: The South Asian Experience

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Ensuring gender justice has emerged as a big challenge in South Asian societies. This paper aims to understand gender issues and existing paradoxes of this region through the perspective of human development, especially in terms of the Gender Inequality Index. Sex-selective abortions, patriarchy and honour, and socio-cultural bias are the cardinal features of South Asian society. Poverty is one of the perennial issues of this region that gives rise to a vicious circle of exploitation and subordination. At the same time, a few people and families in all the countries of South Asia have control over the resources. Similarly, almost all South Asian countries have witnessed a female head of the state/government; yet gender discrimination is rampant in this region. This paper aims to examine various issues that are responsible for the prevalence of gender discrimination. It will also discuss how the human development approach could promote gender justice and strengthen the process of gender empowerment in South Asian countries. The paper is based on the hypothesis that if issues of health, education and a decent standard of living are addressed in the right direction, the idea of gender justice can be realised to a large extent. It particularly focuses on the status of women in this region to produce a more precise analysis.

Keywords: Human Development, Gender Justice, Patriarchy, South Asia, Discrimination

Gender justice and human development both emphasise the importance of human beings and their equality, hence working in close symbiosis. The bottom line of all sorts of discrimination lies in inequality prevalent at the socio-economic, political and cultural levels. The structural violence present in South Asian societies has been observed as one of the biggest stumbling blocks in the process of human development and gender justice. Human development aims to provide good living conditions to all women, men and persons with different sexual orientations. If women remain excluded from the mainstream society, the power distribution and economic activities, a society cannot flourish, and it is also not able to realise the full human potential for multidimensional development. According to Human Development Report 2019, 'Gender disparities are among the most ingrained forms of inequality everywhere. Because these disadvantages affect half the world, gender inequality is one of the greatest barriers to human development (HDR, 2019, p.12). In South Asia, most of the policies and programmes of social welfare have failed because of illiteracy, unawareness and lack of acceptability to change. Due to poor literacy among the females, the oppressive systems and traditions like dowry, female feticide, honour killing, exploitation in the name of traditions etc., are continuing. Added to this, poor access to health facilities makes women of this region physically and mentally incapable of participating in any economic activities. Poor health and illiteracy jeopardise the possibility of living a decent life. Similarly, illiteracy along with poverty has been instrumental in the poor level of nutrition among the females of South Asia. Gunnar Myrdal has emphasised this aspect in his famous work Asian Drama. He argues that 'the monotony of the diet is not caused by poverty alone, although poverty is the main reason why people embrace one staple food, like rice or wheat. Ignorance of the nutritional value of various foods and tastes that disregard nutritional considerations, together with poor methods of food preparation, also play a part' (Myrdal, 1972, p.83). This is how literacy, health and a decent standard of living, the constituent parts of human development, determine the dynamics of justice in general and gender justice particularly.

Moreover, the discriminatory attitude of the family and society, which is further reflected in the functioning of the institutions at large, affects the lives of women. They are not able to get access to health facilities, both physical and mental, education is either not available, or if provided, it is of poor quality, and dropout rates are very high. Added to this social norm, values also reinforce gender discrimination. These stumbling blocks have created impediments to limit the capabilities of women, their opportunities and choices keeping them subordinate to men in society and in every aspect of life. The full potential of women is not able to reach an optimal level, and consequently, the society too is not able to benefit from the optimal potential of women. Women, in fact, constitute almost fifty per cent of the total population in South Asian countries but their participation in the economic sector, political power structure, administration and even in the decision-making process of the family is almost negligible.

This paper is basically descriptive and analytical in nature based on secondary data. Concepts of Human development have been devised as a framework to evaluate gender justice in the South Asian region. This paper has made a modest attempt to look through the human development approach to capture the major issues of gender justice in South Asia. The paper has tried to understand the level of gender justice using reliable data provided by Human Development Reports, World Bank and other institutions of international repute. Literacy, health and indicators of decent standards of living will be used to measure the status of gender justice in the South Asian region. The paper is largely based on secondary sources that are analytical and comparative. The main objectives of this paper are; to examine the factors responsible for gender discrimination in South Asia; to analyse the major programs and policies implemented by the countries of this region through the lenses of human development; to find out alternatives to bring gender justice in this region by keeping human being at the centre of the development process. The paper begins with the argument that if human beings, especially women, are made the focal point of development discourse instead of laws and institutions, the South Asian region can thrive rapidly in a positive direction. Additionally, since gender is a comprehensive discourse, the issues related to women only have been taken up for the unit of analysis to keep this paper focused.

Human Development

Human development as a concept came into existence in 1991 when Mahbub ul Haq of Pakistan put forward the perspective on development. Amartya Sen further elaborated on this concept. At the core of human development is the idea that human beings should be the centre of all institutions, programs, and policies. It considers a dignified life as the sole motive of the development process. According to the first Human Development Report (HDR) 1990, "People are the real wealth of a nation. The basic objective of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This may appear to be a simple truth. But it is often forgotten in the immediate concern with the accumulation of commodities and financial wealth." (HDR,1990, p.9). The report further provides the historical underpinnings of human development. The report cites examples of many thinkers whose thoughts consisted of the seeds for the idea of human development. For instance, Aristotle argued for seeing "the difference between a good political arrangement and a bad one" in terms of its successes and failures in facilitating people's ability to lead "flourishing lives". Human beings as the real end of all activities were a recurring theme in the writings of most of the early philosophers. Emmanuel Kant observed: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in their person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as means only."

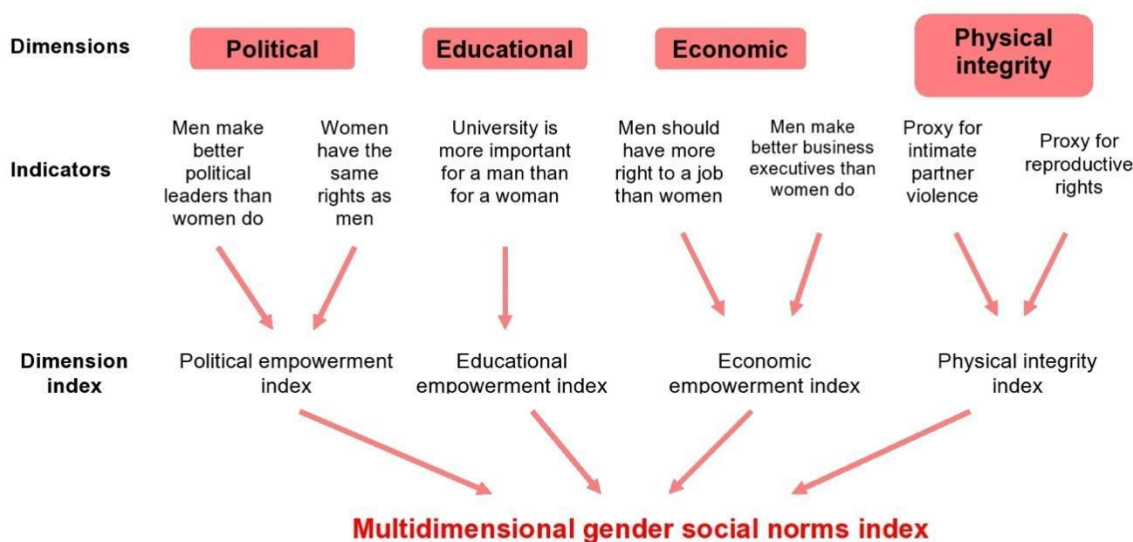
The same motivating concern can be found in the writings of the early leaders of quantification in economics - William Petty, Gregory King, Francois Quesnay, Antoine Lavoisier and Joseph Lagrange, the grandparents of GNP and GDP. It is also clear in the writings of the leading political economists - Adam Smith, David Ricardo, Robert Malthus, Karl Marx and John Stuart Mill. All these thinkers and philosophers have tried to establish the importance of human beings because due to the increased importance of the institutions, laws, and traditions, the real issues of the people were not getting judicious attention. However, there has been a difference of ideas regarding achieving a decent living style for the people that consists of health and education as crucial aspects. The notion of human development has been expanding gradually. As human development report 2010 has enlarged the notion of human development by adding a few more indicators like Multi-dimensional Poverty Index, Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index etc. The primary elements of human development are; Health, Education and a good Standard of Living. The area of human development has been expanding gradually, and these three parameters mentioned here have been further elaborated on the lines of environment, governance, and gender, etc. This has been now realised that gender justice has emerged as one of the fundamental concerns of the human development approach. This issue must be addressed in order to bring social justice, equity and inclusive development to the South Asian region.

Gender Justice

Gender is a social construct. It is the socio-cultural interpretation of sex differences. It reflects the expectation of society, from a person, based on a person's sexual orientation. Gendered social norms and values give rise to gender discrimination-based understanding and interpretation of social acts and systems. Social institutions like family, marriage, kinship etc. also follow gender-biased practices giving rise to sex-selective abortions, low literacy levels among females and poor health, etc. Women are denied access to the institutions that work for the multidimensional development of the

personality such as health centres, schools, legal aid etc. Consequently, women have the least exposure in comparison to their counterparts which results in the building blocks for the patriarchy. It reinforces patriarchy and its norms. It has been highlighted in the Human Development Report, 2019 that biased social and cultural norms are the worst enemy of gender justice. This is well depicted in figure 1.

FIGURE 1. Multidimensional Gender Social Norms Index



Source: HDR, 2019, p. 154

The above-mentioned Multidimensional Gender Social Norms Index illustrates that although gender discrimination has its political, economic and educational dimensions, social norms and the mindset that evolves and thrives on these social norms have put women in a secondary position. The perceived notions of society don't allow women to realise their full human potential. For instance, if society believes in the notion that 'Men make better political leaders than women do', the consequences will be reflected in the form of lower representation of women in the corridors of political power and at the higher echelons of bureaucratic administration. The impact of the cultural dimension has been rightly observed by Harms (2020); he contends that cultural influences can exert subtle, intangible controls over behaviour or can be used more overtly to control individuals and their responses. For some, this can lead to experiencing marginalisation, oppression and silencing; for others, it leads to power, privilege and access to all sorts of resources (p.63). According to HDR (2020), none of the South Asian countries has a 50 per cent share of seats in national parliament by women data say; Afghanistan (27%), Bangladesh (20 %), Bhutan (15%), India (13%), Nepal (33%), Maldives (5%), Pakistan (20%) and Sri Lanka (5%). Thus, with this skewed set of representation of women, gender-sensitive socio-economic policies cannot be formulated in a country. The same was reflected during the COVID 19 pandemic when women were delivering babies at the roadside and there was no provision of sanitary napkins for menstruating females. This happened due to the lack of a women-specific policy as no such aspects were discussed in the disaster management policies of the countries of this region to address women-specific issues, which must be considered equally pertinent. Similarly, Gangoli (2007) points out that the issue of violence against single women in the family was not debated in the legislative debates during the 1980s was not accidental. It illustrates our discomfort with any image of women that goes beyond the institution of marriage. The centrality and sanctity of marriage in the legislative debates were visible in many other ways, too, limiting the applicability of the law in many situations. Non-recognition of marital rape by the institutions of policy formulation and governance in this region speaks about the poor participation of women in the decision-making process as the issues of women's concern are not being taken up seriously because of the patriarchal mindset of those who are in the realm of power. Now the time has arrived to take up this issue seriously by policymakers so that the same could be implemented to address this issue in the right direction.

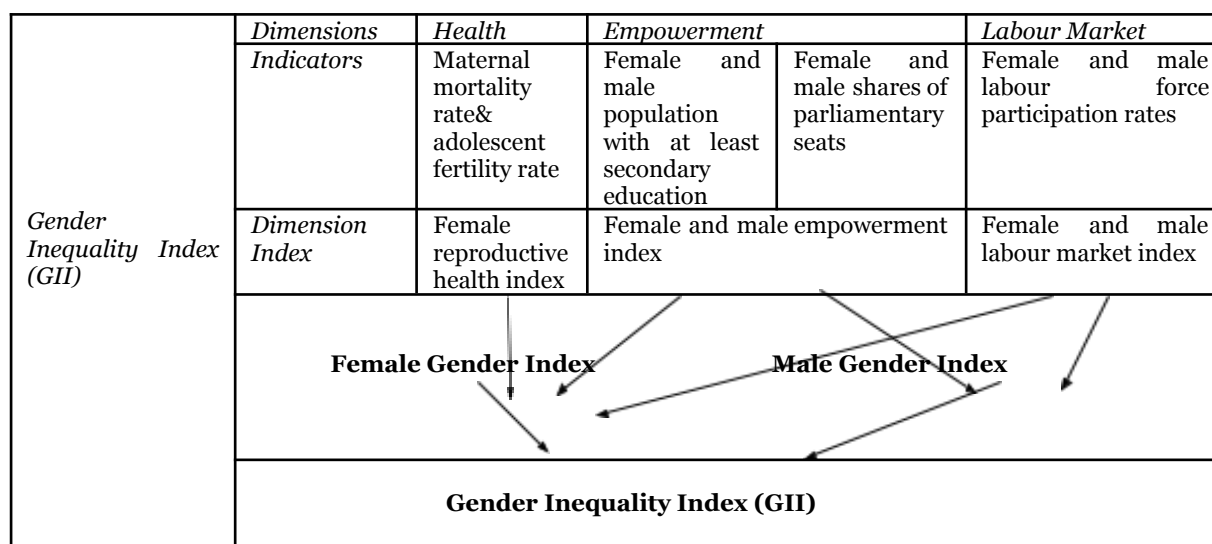
Ensuring Gender Justice through Human Development

Human development is the fundamental requirement in ascertaining any form of justice. Because, without the three basic things that form the very core of human development that is; health, education and a decent standard of living, gender equity cannot be ensured. For gender justice that claims equal participation of women in every walk of life, health, education, and a decent standard of life are the basic requirements. Added to this, human development's major focus is on 'enlarging the choices' of the people. The phrase, enlarging the choices of the people is very vast and comprehensive. It includes one's right to have food, dressing style, right to choose a life partner, pursue religious faith of one's choice etc. All these choices can be respected and maintained only when society also provides a conducive environment along with efficient and unbiased institutions of governance. It should be the responsibility of every institution to develop an inclusive and friendly environment. In a society where women have poor literacy rates, high dropouts, child marriages are rampant, the number of adolescent mothers is high, they are anaemic, and maternal mortality is high, it seems a big challenge to ensure gender justice. According to UNDP 1995 Global Human Development Report,

The UNDP 1995 Global Human Development Report attempted to capture gender inequalities through the Gender-Related Development Index (GDI), which is essentially the HDI adjusted for gender inequalities, with a GDI of 1 reflecting absolute equality in the respective attainments of men and women. This Report also introduced the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) – which is a measure of the extent to which men and women can actively participate in economic and political decision-making and the professional/work arena. The GEM reflects the extent to which men and women can achieve and use their inherent capabilities to take advantage of development opportunities.

Through its efforts at the ground level and by Human Development Reports at the academic and policy level, UNDP has always tried to develop a mechanism that can measure inequality based on gender. Human development report 2010 provides Gender Inequality Index. Gender Inequality Index is a composite index measuring loss in achievements in three dimensions of human development—reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market, due to inequality between genders. It has three dimensions to comprehend Gender Inequality: Health, Empowerment, and Labour market. The indicators of these dimensions are Maternal mortality rate & adolescent fertility rate in case of health, Female and male population with at least secondary education as well as Female and male shares of parliamentary seats in case of empowerment, and Female and male labour force participation rates in terms of the labour market.

FIGURE 2. Gender Inequality Index



Source: HDR, 2010

Thus, it is evident that human development and gender justice both reciprocate. One cannot be achieved in the absence of the other. Because human development keeps human beings (male/female/LGBTQIs) at the centre of all the institutions, policies, and programmes. Gender justice cannot be achieved until women are made the shareholder in the centre and their role as a member of the

periphery and their work that is considered peripheral get judicious recognition. Similarly, a good level of human development needs women as active agents of socio-economic and political changes.

The South Asian region has very peculiar features when it is seen through the lenses of gender justice. The region consists of eight countries that are; Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka almost all the countries have witnessed women political leaders and some of them have been very powerful heads of the state/government. However, the lop-sidedness of the story is that deep-rooted patriarchal social norms have inhibited the process of gender justice. Even today it is a herculean task for a common female to aspire to politics as a career. A glaring example of this is the continuous postponement of the women's reservation bill in India for providing their due representation in the parliament. Similarly, in Pakistan women human rights activists have to face violent challenges; political turbulence in Afghanistan has demolished the entire discourse of gender justice in the country. When gender justice is looked through the parameters of human development in South Asia, the condition of women is very poor. On all three parameters, that is health, education and standard of living, women are lagging far behind as compared to their male counterparts. The literacy rate among the women of South Asia is not praiseworthy and there is a high dropout rate due to poor infrastructure in the schools like toilet facilities, water availability etc. Similarly, sexual harassment, eve-teasing etc are the other factors that highly discourage parents to send their daughters to school. Apart from this early marriages, adolescent maternity rates etc also hamper women's efforts toward gender justice. The following table illustrates the same.

TABLE 1: Female -Male Achievements in Human Development

Country	Life Expectancy at birth		Expected Years of Schooling		Mean Years of Schooling		Estimated Gross National Income per Capita	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Afghanistan	66.4	63.4	7.7	12.5	1.9	6.0	819	3566
Bangladesh	74.6	70.9	12.0	11.2	5.6	6.9	2873	7031
Bhutan	72.2	71.4	13.5	12.8	3.3	4.8	8117	10287
India	71.0	68.5	12.6	11.7	5.4	8.7	2331	10702
Maldives	80.8	77.5	12.3	12.1	7.0	7.0	7908	22931
Nepal	72.2	69.3	13.0	12.6	4.3	5.8	2910	4108
Pakistan	68.3	66.3	7.6	8.9	3.8	6.3	1393	8412
Sri Lanka	80.3	73.6	14.5	13.8	10.6	10.6	7433	18423

Source: Gender Development Index, HDR,2020

The above table demonstrates the miserable condition of women in terms of expected years of schooling, mean years of schooling and estimated gross national income per capita. However, women have fared well in terms of life expectancy. The important observation is that expected and mean years of schooling are very low in the case of both females and males. Therefore, ensuring gender justice seems to be a difficult task in such a situation because poorly literate men are often guided by existing socio-cultural bias rather than the principles of gender equality.

We need to assess the condition of human development in South Asia by applying three major indicators of health, education and standard of living in the last decade (2010-2020). This decade was characterised as a blend of optimism and pessimism. Despite several conflicts that occurred in the region as a whole and the domestic sphere of individual countries, countries of this region made serious efforts to achieve the targets mentioned in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The issue of gender discrimination is multi-causal and also needs multipronged strategies to deal with it. The region needs major reforms on socio-economic, cultural and political fronts. The most important thing is bringing changes at the familial level. This is mainly because the family that is considered the first social institution of an individual's life is very much biased against the female child in this region. Son meta preferences still compel couples to go beyond more than two child norms. Family planning efforts in this region have been biased by their very nature. Therefore, the presence of unwanted girl children in the families of South Asia in the expectation of a male child is a very common phenomenon.

Health Care

There is a famous saying that ‘Health is Wealth’; however, it has been often ignored by the governments in South Asia, especially in the case of women. The number of women suffering from anaemia, malnutrition and other diseases is very high. Although all these issues are interlinked to each other, there is also important to look at them separately.

TABLE 2. Maternal Mortality Rate & Adolescent Birth Rate

Regions	Maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births)	Adolescent birth rate (birth per 1,000 women ages 15-19) (2015-2020)
Arab States	135	46.8
East Asia and The Pacific	73	22.1
Europe and Central Asia	20	27.8
Latin America and The Caribbean	73	63.2
South Asia	149	26.0
Sub-Saharan Africa	535	104.9
World	204	43.3

Source: HDR, 2020, p.364

This table highlights the cardinal issues of health-related to women in South Asia and the major regions in the world in a comparative manner. As far as the higher maternal mortality ratio is concerned South Asia holds the second position. The maximum number of deaths per 100,000 live births occurs in Sub-Saharan Africa (535) followed by South Asia (149). Likewise, in terms of adolescent birth rate, Sub-Saharan Africa is at the top (104.9) followed by Latin America and the Caribbean (63) and Arab States (46). South Asia has 26 births per 1000 women as adolescents. According to UNICEF¹, in South Asia, there are a staggering 340 million adolescents and it constitutes almost 30 per cent of the total adolescents in the world. Therefore, this 26 per 1000 is also an issue of serious concern. The UNICEF further highlights that,

In South Asia where family and community relationships tend to be hierarchical and patriarchal, girls and boys experience adolescence differently. Girls tend to face more limitations on their ability to move freely and to make decisions affecting their work, education, marriage and social relationships. 89 million adolescent girls are anaemic. Almost 1 in 2 girls in the region are married before the age of 18 and 1 in 5 give birth before they reach 18. Gender discrimination and social norms in the region expose girls to a high risk of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, child domestic work, poor education and health, sexual abuse, exploitation and violence.

The health issue in South Asia if analysed through the lenses of gender justice needs a lot of corrections by policy interventions. Child marriages, child labour, sexual abuse etc are very closely related to the health of women of this region.

Menstrual Hygiene in South Asia

¹Adolescents in South Asia UNICEF South Asia. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/adolescents>.

According to Menstrual Hygiene in South Asia-Synthesis Report², Cavill, Mahon and Lihemo (2021), observed that South Asian countries are making multipronged efforts to address the issue of menstrual hygiene. For this, safe location, age-specific facilities, privacy, access to water supply and adequate lighting. Rubbish bin hand washing, etc. are being promoted by the governments. Added to this age-specific communication facilities are made available that provide practical guidelines in this regard. Social support like ensuring everyone receives information about menstrual hygiene so that men, boys, teachers and parents can understand what girls are experiencing and can support to break down barriers. Apart from this sanitary material and their effective disposal is also important. There are several taboos, restrictions on girls and beliefs are followed in South Asian countries especially concerning religious taboos. Therefore, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have actively engaged religious persons, media and celebrities from different fields to spread awareness among the people. For instance,

TABLE 3. Menstrual Hygiene in South Asian Schools

<i>Country</i>	<i>Efforts Made by the Countries</i>
Afghanistan	In Afghanistan, MHM committees exist in Kabul (2016) and the five zones (2018).
Bangladesh	In Bangladesh, the MHM Platform has reduced the price of products, and waived the tax on pads.
Bhutan	The Red Dot Campaign was launched on MH Day in 2019 to promote the segregation of used sanitary pads before their disposal in schools and nunneries.
India	In India the Menstrual Health Alliance (MHAI)
Maldives	Various projects and campaigns (e.g. #Cupvert) have been launched
Nepal	The Menstrual Health Practitioners Alliance now has 50 organisations working on around 80 initiatives throughout the country.
Pakistan	The National Technical Working Group (TWG) in Pakistan meets once a month, chaired by the Ministry of Climate Change.
Sri Lanka	Learning from MH in schools is being applied to households and public places such as offices. Bus stands, marketplaces and religious temples

Source: UNICEF,2021

The above table elaborates on those South Asian countries actively involved in addressing the issues and challenges related to the menstrual cycle in the region. However, it is well-known fact in South Asia that policies are the best formulated, but implementation becomes the worst. The same can be observed in the case of menstrual hygiene in South Asia. The need of the hour is to sensitize kids through their curriculum and other activities so that they become sensitive to the issue and the adults should be made aware through workshops, and awareness programmes. Added to this, due to poverty women and girls are unable to have access to sanitary napkins.

Access to Education

According to Ahmad (in Rahman and Tiwari, 2022, p.182), these countries must set education as their national priority and invest more in education so that their future generation could compete globally. In the absence of advanced labs and better educational setups, affluent and meritorious students are going to the advanced world and getting settled there, a big loss in terms of a 'brain drain' for these nations. Whereas on the other hand the meritorious and poor students are deprived of better facilities, and again the nations are at loss. We have examples of South Korea, Taiwan, Malaysia and Singapore in our neighbourhood who have transformed their status from a third world country to an advanced industrial one in a short time with reasonable funding for education. Since education is put in second position women are also not getting judicious access to education. Availability and access to education is another crucial constituent of human development and it needs to be analysed to understand the status of human development in general and gender justice in particular. In general, the education

²Menstrual Hygiene in South Asia-Synthesis Report, Cavill, S., Mahon T., Lihemo, G.(2021) URL:<https://www.susana.org/en/knowledge-hub/resources-and-publications/library/details/4308>

system of South Asian countries focuses on the examination and rote studies. There is limited scope for innovation and out of the box thinking. The reason behind it seems to be the feudal mindset of the leadership in most South Asian countries, interference by politics in the education system of the country and low investment in the field of education.

TABLE 4: Population with at least some secondary education (% ages 25 and above)

<i>Regions</i>	<i>Female (2010-2018)</i>	<i>Male (2010-2018)</i>
Arab States	45.9	54.9
East Asia and The Pacific	68.8	76.2
Europe and Central Asia	78.1	85.5
Latin America and The Caribbean	59.7	59.3
South Asia	39.9	60.8
Sub-Saharan Africa	28.8	39.8

Source: HDR, 2019

The above table illustrates that South Asia fares well than Sub-Saharan Africa. Although 60 per cent of the male population in the region has access to at least some secondary education, the females' access to secondary education is below 40 per cent. This raises a very serious issue of illiteracy in the South Asian region. Low literacy level causes many other challenges while dealing with gender justice. Women remain unaware of their rights due to illiteracy which creates impediments for them to emerge as proactive citizens within a country. Lack of awareness, poor hygiene and education compel them to follow those traditions and social norms that make them second class citizens. For instance, son preference is followed by both males and females similarly women are exploited by Godmen in this region due to their belief in totems and superstition, etc. According to World Bank data, the representation of women in tertiary education and academic staff is also very pessimistic. The following table illustrates the same.

TABLE 5. Tertiary Education and Academic Staff

<i>Country</i>	<i>(% Female)</i>
Afghanistan	14
Bangladesh	28
Bhutan	30
India	42
Maldives	67
Nepal	16
Pakistan	17
Sri Lanka	52

Source: World Bank, 2005

The above table illustrates that except for the Maldives and Sri Lanka none of the South Asian countries provides 50 per cent participation to women in the higher education system. Two major countries in this region India and Pakistan could not perform well in this regard. The situation of primary and secondary education is also not very encouraging as discussed in previous paragraphs. It is now witnessed that the educational level amongst women as a whole is so alarming. There is a need to pay attention to the respective government for improving the socio-economic conditions of half of

the population in the region. No country or region can afford to sustain the development on account of the great challenges plaguing the South Asian countries.

Standard of Living in South Asia

Standard of living is the factor that affects the health and education of the people. It is often argued that with the improvement of the standard of living people tend to access good health and education facilities. However according to the Human Development Report (2019); existing social biases such as the patriarchal mindset of the society, preferences given to the achieved status etc. have been identified as the biggest obstacles in the path of human development. In South Asia, the prevalence of dogmatic views and ignorance dominates the very basic orientation of the people.

TABLE 6: Quality of Life and Standard of living of People in South Asian Countries, 2020

<i>Country</i>	<i>Vulnerable Employment (% of total employment)</i>	<i>Rural population with access to electricity (%)</i>	<i>Population using safely managed drinking water services (%)</i>	<i>Population using safely managed sanitation services (%)</i>
Afghanistan	79.7	98.3	n.a.*	n.a.
Bangladesh	55.3	78.3	n.a.	n.a.
Bhutan	71.5	100	36	n.a.
India	74.3	92.9	n.a.	n.a.
Maldives	19.5	100	n.a.	n.a.
Nepal	78.4	93.5	27	n.a.
Pakistan	55.5	54.4	35	n.a.
Sri Lanka	39	99.5	n.a.	n.a.
South Asia	68.9	88.0	n.a.	n.a.

Source: HDR 2020,
*n.a. means not available

The above table illustrates the domestic status of South Asian countries regarding the quality of standard of living. Except for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, all the countries have more than 50 per cent population that has vulnerable employment. However, the rural population with access to electricity has a positive indicator in this region. Data regarding the population using safely managed drinking water and sanitation services are not available. According to UNICEF³South Asia,

The majority of the world's open defecators (more than 600 million) live in South Asia. Millions have limited access to safe water services and practice poor hygiene behaviours, which are the leading causes of child mortality and morbidity. These further contribute to undernutrition and stunting and act as barriers to quality education for girls and boys in the region. In South Asia, the proportion of people practising open defecation fell from 65 per cent to 34 per cent with India, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Pakistan achieving more than a 30 per cent reduction in open defecation. However, despite the great progress, 610 million people in South Asia still practice open defecation (over 60% of the global burden). In South Asia, access to improved water has increased from 73 per cent to 93 per cent since 1990. However, over 134 million people still do not have access to improved drinking water. It is currently estimated that in South Asia between 68 to 84 per cent of water sources are contaminated.

³UNICEF South Asia: Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH).
<https://www.unicef.org/rosa/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash>.

South Asian countries have started recognising the importance of a good standard of living. But due to lack of awareness among the common people, apathy on the part of governance, and deep-rooted gender bias, women have not been able to emerge as beneficiaries of the effort made in this direction.

It is being argued that biased socio-cultural norms are the biggest stumbling blocks for women throughout the world. Amartya Sen has highlighted in his 'capability approach' that freedom to make life choices are fundamental to human development. If this approach is devised to assess the standard of living of women in contemporary South Asia, the results will disappoint us. Women are deprived of making choices for their life and family. For instance, women's sexuality is always controlled and commanded by the male patriarch so that the structural bias can be maintained such as the caste system, religious fundamentalism can thrive on. The caste system provides lifeblood to patriarchy as it limits the choices of women to select their partner leading to dowry deaths, female feticide and adverse sex ratio. The family structure in South Asia promotes son preferences. Women are unsafe in public places in South Asia which limits their right to access education institutions, work types etc. as per their choices.

Throughout the South Asian region inequalities arising from caste, class, religion, ethnicity, and location is further complicated by severe gender-based discriminations that hold back progress and development for both girls and boys. Existing evidence points to the fact that despite considerable progress (especially concerning education and health) critical gender gaps persist. Across all South Asian countries, patriarchal values and social norms tend to privilege men and boys' access to opportunities and control over resources. These inequalities are manifested across the life cycle – from conception to birth, to childhood, adolescence through to adult life.⁴

This aspect of cultural bias has been highlighted and analysed in the Human Development Report (2019). As far as standard of living is concerned, women in South Asia are not allowed to take independent decisions be it their personal life viz. food habits, clothing and number of children they want to have etc. The sexuality of women is controlled by caste narratives and religious dogmas. These norms are often decided by the male head of the family, dictated by biased social norms. Even at the societal level, patriarchy tends to subordinate women. Rules of patriarchy are so deeply rooted that women internalise patriarchal norms, and the birth of a female child is looked down on by females themselves. In the field of politics, women have done a commendable job; however, more often than not, those women have succeeded who had political backgrounds were made by their fathers or husbands. It is still a daunting task for a woman coming from an ordinary family to excel and carve out a place in the corridors of power. The basic political right of South Asian women, which is the 'right to vote' is determined or influenced by the decision of the patriarch of the family.

As it has been identified by the scholars of human development, cultural bias has been highly detrimental to gender justice. There are strong pressures on both men and women to act in a certain manner. A gender perspective on human development highlights the underlying factors that perpetuate gender inequality. In the case of South Asia, the concept of 'Cultural Lag' was propounded by William F. Ogburn in his work *Social change concerning culture and original nature*. According to this concept, culture takes time to catch up with technological innovations, and consequently, social problems and conflicts are caused. This perspective can be applied to understand all-pervasive gender inequality in South Asia. In this region, technology has been misused to undermine the very existence of women and girls; sex determination is a glaring example of this. Added to this, the technological advancement of the region has not been translated into developing progressive attitudes in the social system of South Asia. For example, *khap panchayats* give verdicts for honour killing and in most of the region's birth of a female child is seen as a curse.

Poverty and Women in South Asia

South Asia comes under the worst poverty-ridden region of the world. This region has been listed at the top of the extremely poor economic regions' list. Per capita income (in current US\$) of South Asia is lower than in other regions of the world. GDP per capita income of South Asia, as per World Bank data based in 2018 is 1,902.8 (current US\$). It is the lowest when compared with other regions as enumerated by World Bank (2018 data). For instance, East Asia and the Pacific have (11,142.5US\$),

⁴UNICEF, South Asia. <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/what-we-do/gender-equality>.

the Middle East and North Africa (8,044US\$), Europe and Central Asia (25,130US\$) current US \$. All of the regions classified by the World Bank enjoy a better position than South Asia. As per the Multidimensional Poverty Index⁵ of Human Development Report 2019, 31.0 per cent population comes under multidimensional poverty in South Asia. Region-wise, South Asia is in the second position; the first place is Sub-Saharan Africa, with 57.5 per cent population facing multi-dimensional poverty. Whereas merely 1.1 per cent of the population of Europe and Central Asia, 5.6 per cent of East Asia and the Pacific, 7.5 per cent of Latin America and the Caribbean, and 15.7 per cent of Arab States are multi-dimensionally poor. Consequently, another important dimension that hampers human development and gender justice in South Asia is rampant poverty in the region. Economic insecurity is part of a vicious circle that puts women in a disadvantaged situation. Poverty magnifies the challenges faced by women leading to poor education, health and standard of living. In South Asia, women do not own family assets as it is often registered in the name of the male and with limited decision-making power, they are not able to pull themselves out of poverty. If women migrate within the region or outside the region they have to face double challenges of being a woman and a migrant. The economic dependence of women on male members of the family compels them to follow orthodox cultural norms that strengthen patriarchy. Poverty has multiple ramifications, for instance, trafficking of women and girls known as the body and flesh trade, adolescent marriage, adolescent motherhood etc. Moreover, women also suffer from malnutrition and various kinds of diseases. When all these reach their culmination, women become less assertive or sometimes unaware of their basic human and fundamental rights. Consequently, they are not able to make their life choice thus, the goals of human development remain unfulfilled.

It has been further witnessed that UNDP has made several efforts while publishing Human Development Reports to reach the multidimensional aspects of poverty, deprivation, and inequality. According to Human Development Report 2020;

The Human Development Report introduced 2010 the Multidimensional Poverty Index, which measures deprivations without including income. In the same year, it introduced the Inequality-adjusted HDI, which addresses another criticism of the HDI—it is based on average achievements and does not consider disparities across the population. The Inequality-adjusted HDI discounts the average achievement in each dimension by the level of inequality in that dimension. Building on the pioneering 1995 Human Development Report on gender, which also proposed indices to measure gender inequalities in both wellbeing and agency, the Report now includes two indices on gender, one accounting for differences between men and women on the HDI dimensions, the other a composite of inequalities in empowerment and wellbeing (HDR 2020, p. 246).

South Asia and Gender Inequality Index

Females have made several strides since the 1990s, however, they have not gained gender equity so far. Women and girls are in disadvantaged positions due to inequality that undermines their capability and freedom of choice. Gender Inequality Index⁶(GII) is an inequality index. It reveals differences in the distribution of achievements between women and men. It measures the human development cost of gender inequality. Thus, the higher the GII value the more disparities based on gender, consequently more loss to human development. The indicators underline areas in need of critical policy intervention, and it stimulates proactive thinking and public policy to overcome the systematic subjugation of women and girls. The following table illustrates the status of South Asian countries viz a viz Gender Inequality Index.

⁵The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) is published by the UNDP's Human Development Report Office and tracks deprivation across three dimensions and 10 indicators: health (child mortality, nutrition), education (years of schooling, enrolment), and living standards (water, sanitation, electricity, cooking fuel, floor, assets).

⁶It measures gender inequalities in three important aspects of human development i.e. reproductive health, measured by maternal mortality ratio and adolescent birth rates; empowerment, measured by the proportion of parliamentary seats occupied by females and proportion of adult females and males aged 25 years and older with at least some secondary education; and economic status, expressed as labor force participation rate of female and male populations aged 15 years older.

TABLE 7: Gender Inequality Index

Country	Maternal Mortality Ratio (deaths per 100,000 live births)	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19)	Share of seats in parliament (% held by women)	Population with at least some secondary education (% ages 25 and older)		Labour force participation rate (% ages 15 and older)	
				Female	Male	Female	Male
Afghanistan	638	69.0	27.2	13.2	36.9	21.6	74.7
Bangladesh	173	83.0	20.6	39.8	47.5	36.3	81.4
Bhutan	183	20.2	15.3	23.3	31.4	58.9	73.4
India	133	13.2	13.5	27.7	47.0	20.5	76.1
Maldives	53	7.8	4.6	45.4	49.6	41.6	84.2
Nepal	186	65.1	33.5	29.3	44.2	82.8	85.1
Pakistan	140	38.8	20.0	27.6	45.7	21.9	81.7
Sri Lanka	36	20.9	5.3	79.2	81.0	35.4	74.6
South Asia	149	26.0	17.5	31.3	48.4	23.2	77.0

Source: HDR 2020

Above table illustrates the status of eight South Asian countries on GII dimensions. This table expresses the inbuilt gender bias in South Asia. Countries of this region have not performed well on the GII parameters as except for Sri Lanka and the Maldives, all the countries have above hundred mortality ratios. Likewise, except for the Maldives, all the countries of adolescent mortality rates are in double digits. Women have been side-lined or have been systematically deprived of the corridors of power. Broadly, women constitute around 50 per cent of the population in these countries of this region, however, none of the South Asian countries has given even a 30 per cent seat share in their parliament. As far as the population with at least some secondary education is concerned, females and males both have poor access to it; however the condition of the female is relatively vulnerable. Similarly, the labour force participation rate demonstrates the low economic space given to females in a country/region. In South Asia, Nepal is the only country that has a very peculiar scenario where females' labour force participation is almost similar to male participation. In other countries except for Bhutan, labour force participation of females could not reach up to 50 per cent. According to research conducted by UNICEF,

Gender disparities remain high in the South Asia region, yet at the same time, there is a growing recognition of the potential of social protection programmes, including for women's empowerment. The research conducted has shown that despite some positive examples, governments in the region still have to invest significantly to make their social protection systems more gender-sensitive, and in turn advance gender equality in the region. One of the key gaps identified relates to the lack of comprehensive grievance and complaints mechanisms, limiting women's ability to make their voices heard and the possibilities of improving the programme. Another key gap relates to programmes' monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which rarely focus on gender outcomes. The review has also shown the importance of conducting gender assessments before implementation, as they can be key in making social protection programmes more gender-sensitive by taking context-specific vulnerabilities and needs into account.

UNICEF has identified the institutional and structural problems that promote gender discrimination in South Asia. Policies are not implemented properly, and monitoring is poor therefore, therefore gender sensitivity could not get introduced as a way of life in the countries in South Asia.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding several efforts made by governments and non-government organisations, women in South Asia, have not been able to realise the outcomes of the efforts made for gender justice due to persistent and entrenched gender inequalities. Factors of shame and stigma as identified by Hodgson (2022), also jeopardise the efforts toward gender justice. Consequently, due to gender bias and patriarchal restrictions, women have neither been able to contribute to the process of human development nor could they get benefit from it. However, the fact cannot be denied that wherever judicious allocation of resources has been made through gender-sensitive policies, positive outcomes are visible. For instance, Women Self Help Groups have performed well in India. Now governments of this region are focusing to extending the benefits of the welfare schemes to adult women of the family. For instance, in India, the Direct Benefit Transfer money goes to the adult woman of the family. Similarly, Sri Lanka has made significant progress on gender equality, particularly in terms of free and equal access to education and healthcare. As Alston (2014) observes, there have been gradual changes in gender practices over time, often facilitated by the necessity for women to work and with assistance from outside countries through global strategies such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action and subsequent transnational covenants. As signatories to these and other strategies, the countries of South Asia report on gender equality measures in international forums.

Added to this, one common feature of almost all South Asian countries is that they focus on the formulation of the programmes and policies to ensure gender justice, however, little is done to achieve positive outcomes. Health, education and a decent standard of living along with gender equity can ensure an egalitarian society. Therefore, religious personal laws as identified by Parashar (2008) need to be deconstructed in the light of feminist arguments to weaken the deep-rooted patriarchal norms. Similarly, as identified by Singh (2017), conflict in the region also jeopardies efforts made toward human development and, consequently gender justice. Therefore, reforms are required at both structural as well as functional levels to deal with the stumbling blocks in the path of human development and gender justice. Here capability approach⁷ propounded by Amartya Sen, can provide a perspective to empower the people in general and women in particular. Because without empowering all the sexes of society, gender justice will remain an illusion.

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⁷The capability approach has its origins in a number of articles in which Sen (1974; 1979a; 1979b) criticizes the limited informational bases of the traditional economic models and evaluative accounts (i.e., utilitarianism and resources). What is missing from these traditional models, Sen argues, is a notion of what activities we are able to undertake ('doings') and the kinds of persons we are able to be ('beings'). Sen calls this notion *capabilities*. Capabilities are the *real freedoms* that people have to achieve their potential doings and beings. Real freedom in this sense means that one has all the required means necessary to achieve that doing or being if one wishes to. It is not merely the formal freedom to do or be something, but the substantial opportunity to achieve it. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/capability-approach/>

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