

POLICY BRIEF | Gender (In)Equality – SDG 5 plus in South Asia

MALLIKA JOSEPH
Senior Fellow, WISCOMP

As Secretary-General, I see one overwhelming global injustice: gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls. Gender equality is fundamentally a question of power. We still live in a male-dominated world with a male-dominated culture and have done so for millennia. Centuries of discrimination, deep-rooted patriarchy and misogyny have created a yawning gender power gap in our economies, our political systems and our corporations. This simply has to change.

UN Secretary-General, 9 March 2020

A third of the world's poor live in South Asia, home to 860 million women. Until recently, it was considered the fastest-growing region globally and had worked hard to close the gender gap across all sectors quite significantly. Yet, it continues to have the second largest gender gap in the world, and it will take 71 years to close the gender gap in the region. Across all gender-related global indices, the region continues to rank poorly compared to other regions. South Asia's female labour force participation rate is 28.3 percent, and reducing. Gender gaps in education have narrowed significantly, but literacy among women continue to be lower than men. The number of children, particularly girls, dropping out of school and not completing their secondary school education is simply too large to be ignored. Structural and actual violence against women widens the gender gap and increases inequalities between men and women, and among women.

SOUTH ASIA'S RANKING IN GLOBAL GENDER INDICES

	HDI*	GDI**	Gender Inequality Index	Social Institutions and Gender Index	Global Gender Gap Index / 153				
					Rank	Economic	Education	Political	Health
Afghanistan	169	0.660	0.655	Very High 53%	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Bangladesh	133	0.904	0.537	Very High 55%	50	141	120	7	119
India	131	0.820	0.488	Medium 34%	112	149	112	18	150
Nepal	142	0.933	0.452	Medium 36%	101	101	133	59	131
Pakistan	154	0.745	0.538	Very High 59%	151	150	143	93	149
Sri Lanka	72	0.955	0.401	High 43%	102	126	88	73	1

*Human Development Index, ** Gender Development Index

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer an excellent integrated framework to adopt a holistic approach in achieving gender targets in the region. Most countries have progressed significantly in localising specific targets, and they have set up institutional mechanisms to monitor and report progress. Parallel civil society voluntary national reports and analysis continue to provide complementary and alternative analyses and narratives on integrated approaches to achieving gender equality through SDG 5 plus. The combination of SDGs that complement SDG 5 and best fit the South Asian context in achieving gender equality are SDG 1

on ending poverty, SDG 3 on health, SDG 4 on education, SDG 10 on reducing inequalities, and SDG 16 on peace, justice and strong institutions.

However, South Asia is not on track to achieve gender equality by 2030. And this was before COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown, which has exacerbated pre-existing challenges and created new impediments to achieving gender equality in the region. The World Bank estimates a 7.7 percent contraction in regional economic growth, with India's economy, the largest in the region, set to shrink by 9.6 percent. Maldives will face the worst recession in its history, with its GDP set to contract by 19.5 percent.

Poverty and Inequality (SDG 1, SDG 10)

According to a [UNDP study](#), South Asia's female poverty rate before the pandemic was 10 percent. It has now been revised to 13 percent. The UNDP has further revised the estimate for female poverty rate in 2030 from 15.8 percent to 18.6 percent – 121 poor women for every 100 poor men. That's about 150 million women driven to poverty. The inequality is estimated to be more pronounced among women in the age group of 25-34 years. The economic lockdown triggered by the pandemic will increase poverty due to job losses, disproportionately impacting vulnerable groups. In Bangladesh, the readymade garment sector, which employs about three million women, is the worst hit. A quarter of garment workers lost their jobs due to declining global orders during the pandemic.

Economic Participation (SDG 5)

In South Asia, women are already overrepresented in the informal sector and do three times as much unpaid care and domestic work as men. About 92 percent of women in rural Bangladesh are employed in the informal sector. And even in the formal sector, women experience high levels of horizontal and vertical segregation and receive lower wages. In India, for instance, women earn just one-fifth of male income. The region's gender gap in economic participation and opportunity stands lowest globally, and women's economic prospects are minimal. In Pakistan, just about 32 percent of women have access to economic opportunities.

Education (SDG 4)

Another sector severely impacted due to COVID-19 is education. Education is the single most significant factor that determines the outcome of every gender-related programme. In India, three out of four trafficked persons are illiterate. The prevalence of child marriages and teenage pregnancies are higher among communities with little or no education. The economic cost of children out of school is equally alarming. According to the [World Bank report](#) on the impact of COVID-19 on the informal sector, the lockdown across South Asia kept 391 million students out of school. A minimum of five months out of school and accompanying learning losses will have a lifetime impact on a generation of students' productivity. The report estimates that South Asia will lose \$622 to \$880 billion in future earnings due to the current learning losses triggered by the pandemic, subsequent lockdown and online learning. This does not take into account the enormous inequality created among students due to the lack of smartphones, laptops and internet for online classes. For instance, in India, just about 8 percent of students enrolled in government schools were using online classes. School closures will equally impact nutrition among children dependant on midday meal schemes.

Violence against Women (SDG 5, SDG 16)

Gender-based violence is endemic in South Asia. Intimate partner violence is the most prevalent form of violence. On average, one in three women faces violence at home, though this percentage varies from country to country. For instance, in Bhutan, it is about 26 percent, while in Bangladesh, it is about 53 percent, and in Pakistan, it is as high as 85 percent. A 2014 CARE

study found that in Sri Lanka, 16 percent of surveyed women who experienced intimate partner violence took days off work, and 32 percent had to seek medical attention for their injuries.

In India, over 400,000 crimes against women were reported in 2019, a third of which was perpetrated by the women's husbands and in-laws. One-fourth of those who experienced spousal violence sustained physical injury, including eye injuries, sprains, dislocations, broken bones, broken teeth or burns. Rape constituted 8 percent of all reported crimes against women, with 32,260 cases of rape registered. An almost equal number of 26,229 cases of child rapes were also registered in the same year. That's about three women and three children raped every hour. And these are just the reported cases of crime against women. Due to the social stigma attached to sexual offences, most of these cases are unreported or underreported.

Social practices and culture, patriarchy, and centuries-old traditions are responsible for the prevalence, perpetuation and persistence of structural violence against women and girls in all South Asian countries. For instance, in Pakistan and India, women continue to face 'honour' killings to preserve the family's honour. Pakistani activists claim there are about 1000 honour killings every year. Punjab accounts for the highest numbers of honour killings in Pakistan. In Nepal, gender inequality stems from deep-rooted social practices.

COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown has increased violence against women worldwide. On the one hand, the factors that trigger violence like stress, restricted mobility, unemployment, job loss and financial instability have increased domestic violence incidents. On the other hand, it has also made help and assistance inaccessible to many women undergoing abuse. The Indian National Commission of Women registered twice the number of domestic violence cases at the beginning of the lockdown in March-April 2020 compared to earlier months. In a span of just 11 days during the lockdown due to COVID-19, the government helpline registered 92,000 child abuse cases in the family and the communities. In Bangladesh, there was a four-fold increase in the number of calls to women helplines.

Justice and Strong Institutions (SDG 16)

Given the enormity of the structural, physical and emotional violence that women suffer, South Asian governments must have accountable state institutions, an independent judiciary, gender-sensitive law enforcement agencies and a free and stable political environment. Only four countries in the region – Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka – have laws prohibiting domestic violence. The conviction rate for crimes against women, particularly sexual offences, are extremely low in South Asia. In India, it dropped down from 27 percent in 2006 to 18.9 percent in 2016. In South Asia, women make less than five percent of the police force and less than 10 percent judges.

Political Participation and Leadership (SDG 5, SDG 10)

India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are among the top ten countries with most years with a women head of state in the past fifty years. However, women's representation in the parliament and cabinet in the region stands less than 20 percent. In Bangladesh, women constitute about 8 percent of the cabinet and 20 percent in the parliament. In India, the figure stands at 23 percent in the cabinet and 14 percent in parliament. At the last parliament and provincial council in Sri Lanka, women's representation was just about 5.2 and 3.9 percent. In comparison, Nepal has a better performance with 33.8 percent of women representatives in national parliament, 34.4 percent in provincial parliaments and 40.75 percent in local government bodies. Only ten percent of women occupy high positions within the government in Sri Lanka in other leadership positions. The ratio of men-women at the highest decision-making level stands at 6:1. In Bangladesh, women occupy just about ten percent of leadership roles in the corporate world.

Women’s low representation in political, economic and security decision-making levels impedes their uninhibited participation in social dialogue, collective bargaining and policy development.

Recommendations

Since the adoption of the SDGs, South Asian countries have made significant progress in achieving the targets. Most countries have adopted a consultative process engaging various stakeholders across different sectors. Almost all countries have designated SDG focal points responsible for collating all data relating to SDGs, and some have developed integrated indicator frameworks and online monitoring dashboards. While some countries like India have attempted to develop country-specific indicators to reflect local realities better, few others have adapted suggested global indicators for the various targets. Existing developmental plans, programs, and schemes are being aligned with the SDG targets, and SDG budgeting is visible in some countries.

SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES SDG RANKING		
	SDG* Rank/ 193	SDG Score
Afghanistan	139	54.2
Bangladesh	109	63.5
India	117	61.9
Nepal	96	65.9
Pakistan	134	56.2
Sri Lanka	94	66.9

*Sustainable Development Report

However, all countries continue to lag in their progress on achieving gender-related targets. In Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, the progress has been stagnating or increasing at less than fifty percent of the required rate. In Nepal, where the performance is much better than the other South Asian countries, the score is moderately improving, yet it is insufficient to attain the goal by 2030.

Most of the countries have limited their indicators to globally suggested targets. ***Governments in South Asia need to go beyond and adopt context-specific additional indicators for crime and violence against women.*** For instance, the target for violence against women is limited to capturing only spousal violence/intimate partner violence. Other crimes against women like rape, honour killings, acid attacks or trafficking have been left out. They come under a general category of crimes against women per 100,000 population. This generalised categorisation is woefully inadequate to acknowledge and address the gender-specific crimes that women suffer.

There is an urgent need for the South Asian governments to develop additional gender-specific indicators for all relevant goals and targets, apart from SDG 5. For instance, India introduced an additional indicator on increasing institutional deliveries to reduce maternal mortality. ***South Asian governments should establish a committee of experts from civil society organisations and networks to help mainstream gender in all relevant targets and goals and develop gender-specific indicators.***

There is immense scope to expand gender-specific indicators under SDG 4 on education. For instance, in India, no schooling or less than five years of schooling is the common factor among girls who suffer child marriages, teenage pregnancies and adolescent motherhood. They are also exposed to a higher incidence of spousal violence, higher incidence of crime against women, and

high levels of child and women trafficking happen among this group. The indicator developed by India under SDG 4 is limited to gender parity in higher education. ***Given that education is the single most important driver for achieving other targets and goals, South Asian governments should develop more gender-specific indicators on education.*** According to key facts on violence against women put out by the [World Health Organisation](#), men who have low education levels are more likely to perpetrate violence against women. Likewise, women with low levels of education experience more intimate partner violence. ***Therefore, education indicators under SDG 4 must be localised with greater sensitivity to gender goals and targets and not just for employability.***

Entrenched parochial customs, regressive norms, harmful practices and prejudiced traditions in South Asia have placed women in an unequal position within the society, and generations of women have willingly upheld the patriarchy without question. Centuries of socio-economic and cultural constructs have been used to explain and understand the violence against women and persisting inequality between them and men. However, very little attention is paid to addressing the inequality among women perpetrated through social norms, caste structures and the urban-rural divide. The SDGs call for an end to inequality; unfortunately, the focus has remained restricted to inequality between the sexes. ***Through specific localised indicators, governments in South Asia must actively address persisting inequalities among women, in addition to inequalities between men and women, to attain true gender equality in the region.***

One of the critical challenges that all the countries face is the non-availability of gender-disaggregated data to report across the various targets. Where gender is concerned, whatever data is available, it is often underreported or unreported. As a result, countries have chosen to leave out adopting important targets. The ***South Asian governments should prioritise developing these databases and acquire gender-disaggregated data to get an accurate overview of where gaps continue to exist for gender equality and seek to address them.***

India is one of the very few countries globally that has adapted and localised the SDG framework until the grassroots level by integrating SDGs within the local Gram Panchayat Development Plans. In addition to the national indicator framework, the states have also developed their SDG vision documents, strategies, action plans and state indicator frameworks. Localisation has resulted in ownership of the Agenda 2030 at all levels of the government. The country is moving the needle from an “all of government” engagement to a “whole of society” approach. Other South Asian governments have also adopted different processes to engage stakeholders across various sectors. Going forward, ***South Asian governments must locate the SDG implementation at sub-national and local levels as much as possible to reflect local realities and make it an all of society effort.***

The Pacific Islands Forum has developed a [Pacific Roadmap for Sustainable Development and reports](#) on its member states’ progress on achieving Agenda 2030. The African Union uses its Agenda 2063 as its vision document and has [linked Agenda 2063 to the SDGs](#). Closer home, the ASEAN brought out in 2020 its ASEAN SDG Baseline Report that provides the latest data on the SDG goals, targets and indicators at the regional and national levels. In South Asia, there is immense scope and opportunity for SAARC to provide thought leadership at the regional level on SDG implementation in its member states through multi-stakeholder engagement. As of 2020, they were still proposing to [set up an inter-governmental process](#) to “contextualise the SDGs at the regional level,” and in November 2020, [Planning Ministers from South Asia](#) met online to discuss achieving SDGs in South Asia. ***SAARC, through a dedicated nodal body, should actively engage with its member states on SDGs, share good practices, and forge regional partnerships in fast-tracking Agenda 2030 in the region. More particularly, its inter-***

governmental mechanisms on gender like the Ministerial Meetings on Women, Technical Committee on Women, Youth and Children and SAARC Gender Policy Advocacy Group should take the lead in mainstreaming gender in all relevant SDGs and bring out periodic progress reports on the member states' progress on gender targets.

Conclusions

South Asian countries were struggling to meet their gender targets even before COVID-19. As a region, its gender gap is worst, second only to the MENA region. The region has one of the lowest female labour participation rates in the world, and an overwhelming majority of women are employed in the informal sector. Despite relatively higher percentages of women representation in political spaces (comparable to other regions), their collective bargaining power remains low. The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities between men and women, and among women. The future of 800 million women in the region is at stake if gender targets are not met. More than before, South Asian governments need to fast track the implementation of their gender targets and localise more indicators across all relevant targets. There is an urgent need to widen and deepen policy engagement on gender equality and adequately capture the pervasive inequality among women.