

Gender Perspectives in South Asian Political Economy

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Postmodernist era has generated a debate on the male and female participation in political economy in the South Asian region. The role of women in labour markets is negligible, except in North West parts of the region where labour force participation rate (female) is higher both in jobs and self-entrepreneurial initiatives. During the last few decades, socio-economic conditions have compelled women to look into their own intellect and skills. Hence, the female human capital increased exponentially in metropolitans, leaving the rural and semi-urban areas far behind. Women remain one of the major victims of this political demographic pattern. The gender biased dichotomy of knowledge still exists in the urban and rural divide in South Asia.

South Asia has experienced a number of economic developments in the past few years, and more are expected in future, too. This speedy growth of the regional economy had a definite impact on women's involvement in the workforce. Hence, women's participation in the labour force and employment increased across the South Asian region. Such positive trends have, however, not been able to offset the root causes of gender inequality. These originate from social, religious and cultural norms. These norms cultivate into skewed reproductive responsibility, domestic labour and male dominance at work and home.

Gender Inequality in South Asia

Gender inequality in South Asian countries is a well-documented fact. Gender equality means women and men should be awarded equal treatment in every sphere of life, including health, education, livelihood, decision-making, etc. Furthermore, there should be an equal access to all resources. Unfortunately, it is missing in the region. Gender inequality persists in the region due to the presence of diverse cultural, social, and religious grounds. The degree of inequality varies from country to country but its main reason is the specific gender roles which are expected from both male and female. Usually, men are expected to be the bread-winners, dominant and assertive, whereas women are usually docile, submissive, and involved in household chores. Most importantly, they are expected to produce heirs to the family. Discrimination is a key factor of networking and is significant inside political regional economy. It's not uncommon that men are holding a powerful status in the job market (Aslam 2002).

In South Asia, gender inequality is multi-dimensional. They are face with a clear-cut discrimination in almost all the spheres of struggle, including

- Access to basic necessities, like health and education
- Access to available resources, i.e. land, credit, business enterprises, etc.
- Working conditions and employment quality
- Income distribution in and outside the home
- Employment opportunities to actively participate in all sectors and occupations of various economic spheres
- Empowerment to participate in social decision-making
- Wage and earning equality.

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The UNDP's Human Development Index 2011 included a Gender Inequality Index of 145 countries. Table 1 shows the vast difference in the composition of labour force in South Asia and its relation to the Gender Inequality Index ranking.

Table 1: Composition of Labour Force Participation in South Asia

Country	Gender Inequality	Labour Force Participation Rate	
		Male	Female
Index Ranking			
Afghanistan	147	81	16
Bangladesh	111	87	60
Bhutan	92	79	69
India	132	84	30
Maldives	64	58	79
Nepal	102	64	56
Pakistan	123	25	86
Sri Lanka	75	39	81

Sources: UNDP and World Bank, 2013

Participation of women in the labour market is very low as compared to men in the South Asian economies. It is evident that if there is more female labour force, inequality can be decreased in various sections of regional political economy, taking into account the relation between the Gender Inequality Index and the composition of the labour force (Gender Inequality Index consists of the dimensions and indicators as well).

Gender Inequality in the Labour Market

Women need to find their own place in the world to become independent. Although regional economy has enhanced economic activities, hence more opportunities to work for women in South Asia, but recent literature explains that customary patriarchal structures and women's virtual absence to exercise leadership, keeps them away from regional market places. It is due to their household commitments that makes attending work difficult.

Low wages, reproduction, semi-skilled work and marginalization are preconceived roles of women in the political economy of South Asia. The male-dominated region further hampers gendered market by dominating various sectors of the market. Market forces isolate them for not utilizing their knowledge and skills hence earning less than their male colleagues. In multi-layered patriarchal markets, women seldom use their skills because of oppression and subjugation. In this context, self-employment is a way out for potential females. Except Nepal and Bangladesh, women are seldom permitted to start large-scale business. However, small-scale entrepreneurs are not uncommon in rural Bangladesh and urban Nepal.


Skills and education play an important part in a woman's life to perform in the field of political economy. Anomalies also exist in education sector, which ultimately make women opt out of the market. Adult female literacy rate (% of females aged 15 and above) in South Asia was

measured at 50.27 per cent in 2010, according to the World Bank. While adult male literacy rate (% of males aged 15 and above) was 73 per cent in 2010. Adult literacy rate is the percentage of people aged 15 and above who can with understanding write and read a short, simple statement during their day-to-day routine. This disparity has an effect on labour market where females' participation reduced due to the low literacy rate. They also have to tackle cultural and social hindrances to contribute fully in numerous sphere of the political economy.

Women contribute substantially to economic welfare through unpaid labour, such as child-rearing and household tasks, which often remains subtracted in the GDP. Sustained growth in the formal economy during the last few decades has forwarded arguments of pros and cons of development pattern for gender. Emerging market mechanisms that connect consumers with producers and workers also benefit marginalized women in the South Asian region. This mechanism benefits women in the form of higher wages and decent working environment. Thus, a key component of modern market system may be the incorporation of economic justice for women in various political parameters of the economy. A strong commitment of political brass in South Asian countries is required for gender equity and women empowerment.

Going Forward

South Asian countries will have to take certain policy and non-policy measures to discourage gender inequality in the labour market:

- The governments of South Asian countries may adopt transformative approach to increase job security for females and improve compatibility of working mothers in the labour market.
- Certain policies may be introduced to provide women with easy access to credit, property rights for increasing female farmers' productivity, and take measures to implement gender-responsive social protection.
- Welfare programmes may be initiated on the local level for supporting female employment. As South Asian economies are mostly agrarian and women in these economies are greatly dependent on earning their livelihood from agriculture, special attention must be given to female farmers. There is also a need to enhance women's participation in vocational training followed by access to technology, information, and financing (for entrepreneurial objectives).
- Anti-discrimination measures may be taken to provide women with satisfactory career opportunities, and safe public spaces.
- Mentoring programmes may be initiated so that the women, who are gradually succeeding in stopping the way of glass ceiling, may serve as mentors to the younger ones having little experience in the labour market.
-  Focus should be diverted towards improving the supply and quality of secondary and tertiary education in government institutions and providing scholarships to girls to ensure their enrolment in schools.
- The demand for women's work is restricted through artificial discrimination in the labour market. Active and passive labour market policies should be implemented to remove the market distortions and create opportunities for increasing market demand for female labour force.
- Part-time employment incentives can also be given, which may prove to be an entry point to the labour market for females, who are unable to join the market due to family restrictions.

- Access to financial assistance and training should be made easy. More developed support networks for female entrepreneurs should be ensured for better economic development in the region. This can be done in partnership with the Chambers of Commerce.
- Gender equality should also be promoted by focusing on the regulatory reforms that support child and elderly care. The regulatory framework should also encourage female participation in the labour market through measures like exclusion of wage disparities, and provision of day care centres. .

References

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