

# Reflections and Refractions of Poverty on Gender in South Asian Countries

## Abstract

Today, when world economy is moving at a faster pace on the path of development, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men. It is not that efforts are not made to develop women's capabilities. There is an improvement in education and health front for them. But they are rarely allowed to cross the doors, which are open to them to enter economics and politics. This indicates that men and women still live in different world. In this paper an attempt has been made to examine to what extent women in South Asia are deprived of essential human rights by not allowing them to participate equally in all spheres of socio-economic life and how does this deprivation broaden the conception of poverty for them.

**Keywords:** Gender, Poverty, South Asian Countries, Deprivation, Development, Disparity, Socio- Economic.

## Introduction

In the last 40 years, South Asian Countries have experienced economic transformation at massive scale. Since 1990, majority of South Asian countries have undertaken significant reforms as part of their policy framework and laid strong foundations for growth. South Asia stands as the poorest region of the world, with more than 522 million people below the poverty line (of US \$ 1 per day 1998 PPP) accounting for the largest proportions ( 40 percent) of the world's poor. For years together in this region there existed a high rate of unemployment, low productivity, and low remuneration contributing to the incidence of poverty. In most of the South Asian Countries the level of human development is still quite low. This poor level human development is feeding adversely on productivity and growth.

"No society can surely be flourishing and be happy, of which by far the greater part of the numbers are poor and miserable". (Smith, 1776) Therefore, eradication of poverty has to be an important objective of economic development that would give opportunities to both genders to participate equally in all the spheres of life- social as well as economic. This will in turn lead to direct higher economic growth and productivity, as development of any region directly depends upon the progress of the people in general and women in particular. Combination of social traditions, economic structure, women's education and socio-economic organization of production accounts for differences among both the genders. It is social and traditional framework, which restricts and curtails their participation in various spheres of life. Gender relation analysis the social relationship and distribution of power among both the genders in private as well as public spheres can prove to be helpful in understanding how such inequalities among genders are created in households, markets, states and societies. Moreover, in order to formulate development strategies, it becomes essential to understand the factors underlying gender inequality.

Today, when world economy is moving at a faster pace on the path of development, women do not enjoy the same opportunities as men. It is not that efforts are not made to develop women's capabilities. There is an improvement in education and health front for them. But they are rarely allowed to cross the doors, which are open to them to enter economics and politics. This indicates that men and women still live in different world.

This paper attempts to examine to what extent women in South Asia are deprived of essential human rights by not allowing them to participate equally in all spheres of socio-economic life and how does this deprivation broaden the conception of poverty for them.

## Multi Facets of Poverty

Poverty is conventionally defined in terms of income poverty, i.e. number of people below the poverty line and is measured in different ways, predominantly in terms of inadequacy of income to procure a minimum level of calories. But over a period of time with the changes in problems, prospects and perceptions, the concept of poverty has gained new dimensions. "Defining poverty as a multidimensional concept subsequently



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raises the question of how to measure overall poverty and how to weigh the different dimensions.

“Since the 1990s the poverty status of women is subject to increased attention of economists and policy makers. In 1995 the issue was put on top of the international development agenda at the Fourth World Conference on Women taking place in Beijing in 1995” (World Bank, 2001a and 2007)

While there is a large literature documenting the disadvantage of women in many aspects of well-being, including education, health, and survival (World Bank 2001a, Klasen and Wink, 2003), the claim of the feminization of income poverty has been harder to substantiate empirically.

The World Development Report 2000/2001 has emphasized upon and accepts that poverty encompasses not only low income and consumption but also a low achievement in education, health, nutrition and other areas of human development. Hence, inadequate consumption, education health, power and voiceless ness would also be accounted as poverty. “It is also pronounced as deprivation in well being” (WDR, 2000/01)

Defining poverty as a multidimensional concept subsequently raises the question of how to measure overall poverty and how to weigh the different dimensions relating to it. Several solutions to the aggregation problem have been proposed, but all have been unsatisfactory on one or more accounts. On the one hand, composite indices, such as the Human Development Index (HDI) of the UNDP, assign arbitrary, usually equal, weights to each dimension. Poverty thus means more than lack of what is necessary for material well being. “It can also

mean denial of opportunities and choices most basic to human development to lead a long, healthy creative life and enjoy a decent living”. (HDR, 1997) “The goal of development is not merely to initiate a process of economic growth but also a process, which will improve the lives of people. This implies improvement in the quality of lives of all segments of the population, particularly those groups that have been traditionally marginalized such as women” (Ghosh, 1998)

In any society poor people are often among the most vulnerable due to their exposure to wide array of risks. Majority of women belongs to vulnerable class due to their weak and disadvantageous position. Women belonging to poor strata of society face double disadvantage in access to resources and voices, the reason –they are poor and also that they are women.

#### Human Deprivation, Poverty & Inequality

Poverty is pronounced deprivation in well being. All the forms of deprivations that can restrict the “capabilities that a person has i.e. the substantive freedoms he or she enjoys to lead the kind of life he or she values”. (Sen, 1999) Even today there still exists the human deprivation in South Asia. No doubt that progress is made in some areas, but this is being eaten away by the fast growth rate of population. This in turn leaves behind absolute number of people without adequate provision for sanitation, malnourished children, and a large proportion of illiterates compared to rest of the world. To enhance prosperous future of south Asia, what is required is to find solution to such deep-rooted problems that act as a hurdle in the smooth functioning of these economies.

**Table 1**  
**Population in South Asian Countries**

Countries	PP (in Thousands)						No. of male /100 female 2010
	1950		1980		2010		
	F	M	F	M	F	M	
S. Lanka	3791	4499	7378	7682	10368	10042	97
Maldives	38	44	75	83	155	158	102
India	178748	193108	332121	360517	587266	627198	107
Bhutan	82	86	204	219	335	373	111
Pakistan	18339	22838	39179	43430	89638	95115	106
Bangladesh	20191	23404	43869	46528	81292	83134	102
Nepal	3845	4281	7335	7722	15028	14824	99

Source: United Nation, 2010

In some studies it is being found that the population distribution by sex shows that, there is a “gender spiral”, with more boys and men in the

younger age groups and more women in the older age groups

**Table 2**  
**Human Development, Poverty & Inequality**

Countries	HDI Trends			Inequality Adjusted HDI value 2011	Gender Inequality Index 2011		Multidimensional Poverty Index	
	Value				Rank	Value	Rank	Value
	1990	2000	2011	2011				
S. Lanka	0.583	0.633	0.691	0.579	74	0.419	2003(W)	0.021
Maldives	---	0.576	0.661	0.495	52	0.320	2009(D)	0.018
India	0.410	0.461	0.547	0.392	129	0.617	2005(D)	0.283
Bhutan	---	---	0.522	---	98	0.495	2010(M)	0.119
Pakistan	0.399	0.436	0.504	0.346	115	0.573	2007(D)	0.264
Bangladesh	0.352	0.422	0.500	0.363	112	0.550	2007(D)	0.292
Nepal	0.246	0.398	0.458	0.301	113	0.558	2006(D)	0.350

Source: UNDP, 2011

(---) Implies data not available

(D) Indicates data are from Demographic & Health Surveys

(M) Indicates data are from Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys, and

(W) Indicates data are from World Health Surveys

During last more than a half a century; a considerable progress has been made by these economies, which is relatively less compared to other developing economies of the world. The annual growth rate of GNP in South Asia was 3 percent for the duration of 1975 to 1995 and the increase in poverty from 270 million in 1960 to 515 million in 1995. During 1989-94 the population below the poverty line was 40 percent. With 90 percent population below poverty line the Bhutan was having critical economic condition amongst South Asian Countries. This clearly reflects the lack of public expenditure on social sector in South Asia is not sufficient. "The lack of political will demonstrated by those making policies cannot be understated. Sri Lanka, long noted for its superior human development recode, has also cut social sector expenditure in recent years; its public expenditure on health as a 2 percent to 1.4 percent between 1960 to 1995". (UNDP, 1999)

Hence it is clear from the given evidences, that, even today vast majority of poor are residing in South Asia without proper access to basic amenities like health, education, sanitation. It also indicates acute situation in the region. It also shows how the problem of underdevelopment still persists in massive proportions since people are deprived of basic human needs.

#### Educational Deprivation

"Education and autonomy reinforce each other" (WDR, 2000/01) A better level of education of women makes it possible for a woman to nurture and protect her children. "Women with less education find it difficult to obtain better medical care, comply with instruction. It also becomes difficult for women to obtain health care information, preventing illness and to take care for the sick.

Education imparts proficiencies and capabilities that are vital to human development and enhanced quality of life, bringing inclusive benefits to both individuals and societies. Investing in girls' and women's education in particular produces remarkably high social and economic returns. Education is essential key for women to different walks of her life. Say for e.g. in empowering women and for closing the gap between women and men in respect of socio-economic opportunities; it can reduce inequalities based on gender and alter the historical legacy of disadvantage faced by women. Educated women invest more in their children and contribute to the welfare of the next generation. They are more likely to participate in the labour force, allowing them to earn an income, know and claim their rights, and attain greater influence in the household and public life.

**Table - 3**  
**Education-ALR and Youth Literacy Ratio**

Countries	Adult Literacy Rate (2005-2008) (%)		Youth Literacy Rate (2005-2008) (%)		Women's Share among adult illiterate population 2005-2008 (%)
	Female	Male	Young Female	Young Male	
S. Lanka	89	92	99	97	60
Maldives	98	98	99	99	49
India	51	75	74	88	65
Bhutan	39	65	68	80	60
Pakistan	40	67	59	79	63
Bangladesh	50	60	76	73	55
Nepal	45	71	75	86	67

Source: United Nation, 2010

"Education has long been recognized as a fundamental right with far-reaching consequences for human development and societal progress. The right to education is proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and various international covenants. The importance of education for the advancement of women was highlighted in the Beijing Platform for Action", (UN, 1995) in which it was branded as one of 12 critical areas of concern and affirmed as central for gender equality and women's empowerment. The Platform for Action called for eliminating discrimination in education on the basis of

gender at all levels, eradicating illiteracy among women and improving women's access to vocational training, science and technology and continuing education. With the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the aim of eliminating gender disparities in education has been further intensified as it is essential to the Goals' achievement.

#### Health Deprivation

Health services in a country not only strengthen the self-reliance in the community but also empower people to develop their own means. (Banerji, 1992).

**Table - 4**  
**Health Indicators in South Asia**

Countries	Life expectancy at birth 2005-2010 (year)		Under 5 mortality 2005-2010 (per 1000 live births)		Pregnant women who received prenatal care 2000-2008 (%)	Deliveries attended by skilled attendant 2000-2007 (%)	Maternal Mortality Ratio 2005 (per 100,000 live births)	Contraceptive Prevalence 2000-2008 (%)	People living with HIV, 2007	
	F	M	Girls	Boys					Estimated No. (in thousands)	Women among Adults (%)
S. Lanka	78	70	18	21	99	99	58	68	4	37
India	65	62	86	77	74	47	450	56	2400	37
Bhutan	68	64	59	69	88	56	440	31	-	-
Pakistan	67	66	94	85	61	39	320	30	96	28
Bangladesh	67	65	56	58	51	18	570	56	12	17
Nepal	67	66	55	52	77	19	830	48	70	24
Maldives	73	70	26	31	81	84	120	39	-	-

Source: United Nation, 2010

**Table - 5**  
**Work: Maternity Leave Benefits, 2009**

Country	Length of maternity leave	% wage paid in covered period	Provider of benefit
S. Lanka	12 weeks	100	Employer
India	12 weeks	100	Social Insurance or Employer (for covered women)
Pakistan	12 weeks	100	Social Insurance
Bangladesh	16 weeks	100	Employer
Nepal	52 days	100	Employer

Source: United Nation, 2010

“Women’s health is inextricably linked to their social status. In many parts of the world, particularly in South Asia, discrimination against women starts before birth and continues until death. The reason for women’s ill health often lies within the gender roles they play. Evidences indicate that women are biologically more robust than men, and consequently have a natural edge in terms of expected life. In many south Asian societies, this is completely cancelled out by women’s social disadvantage” (HDSA, 2000)

#### **Economic Participation Deprivation**

Women form an important segment of the labour force and economic role played by them cannot be isolated from the total framework of development as the role and degree of integration of women in economic development is always an indicator of economic independence and social status. (Lalitha Rani, 1996)

In every society, the mass of women have always made a significant contribution to the social

product which enables the society of life and growth their labour contributes a substantial part of wealth that is produced in every society. (Asaf Ali, 1975) Although women have been contributing fully to economic life of the community in every sphere the full significance of this contribution has hardly ever been recognized or rewarded adequately. Women’s place and work generally been considered to in home, their sphere of activity-domestic work and bringing up the family. Even when they participate in economic activity and contribute to family’s earnings, they are expected to be homemakers, too. (Asaf Ali, 1975) “Domestic ideology, rooted in amenities about a perceived threat to family life and the whole social order, influence the definitions of women’s work, so that it got associated with low and paid, low status activities in certain restricted category of labour acceptable only as it was secondary to domestic duties. (Lown, 1990)

**Table - 6**  
**Labour Force Participation & Employment Rates**

Countries	Labour Participation Rate (Age 15+)						Employment to Population Ratio(Age 15+)					
	% of Female			% of Male			% of Female			% of Male		
	1990	2000	2009	1990	2000	2009	1991	2000	2009	1991	2000	2009
S. Lanka	37.2	36.5	34.5	78.8	76.9	75.1	28.4	32.2	31.2	69.9	72.4	72.9
India	34.0	33.0	32.8	84.3	82.2	81.1	32.7	31.6	31.2	80.5	78.6	77.7
Bhutan	45.1	36.9	53.4	67.1	72.0	70.6	42.5	35.9	51.7	66.1	70.0	68.6
Pakistan	13.5	16.1	21.7	84.5	84.0	84.9	11.6	13.5	19.8	80.6	79.3	81.3
Bangladesh	61.3	54.7	58.7	88.5	86.1	82.5	60.9	53.0	56.1	86.8	83.2	79.5
Nepal	52.4	59.9	63.3	84.6	81.4	80.3	52.2	58.8	62.0	82.5	79.7	78.6
Maldives	29.8	37.5	57.1	74.1	71.4	77.0	23.7	30.6	45.3	69.9	67.1	72.7

Source: United Nation 2010

**Table - 7**  
**Female Labour force Participation and Unemployment Rate**

Countries	Women's Share of Adult Labour Force, 2010 (%)	Adult (15+) unemployment Rate 2005- 2007 (%)	
		Women	Men
S. Lanka	40	7	3
Maldives	33	3	3
India	29	-	-
Bhutan	42	24	8
Pakistan	46	-	-
Bangladesh	20	8	5
Nepal	38	9	4

Source: United Nation 2010

### Voice and Power Deprivation

Around the world, a lack of gender balance in decision-making positions in government persists. In South Asia decision making has traditionally been regarded as a male domain. Participation of women in Governance is not only very low but also negligible despite the fact that four South Asian countries have female Prime Ministers.

It proves that participation of women in the overall process of decision making tends to remain

low as compared to that of men. This has resulted in a serious debate on the concept and indicators for participation in decision making in administration and policies. The participation is still negligible despite the fact that all should get an equal legal and human rights. Their under representation is indicated particularly in the region and It shows that women's requirement and priorities at this front receives the least attention.

**Table - 8**  
**Power and Decision Making**

Country	Share of women in Parliament 2009 (%)		Candidate to lower or single House of Parliament 2003-2008			Whether Gender Quota for lower or Single House of Parliament	Share of women among minister 2008 (%)	Share of women among Mayors 2003-2009 (%)
	Lower Single House	Upper House	Share of women (%)	Proportion Elected (%)				
				Women	Men			
S. Lanka	6	-	-	-	-	No	6	-
India	9	10	-	-	-	yes	10	-
Bhutan	9	24	-	-	-	No	-	-
Pakistan	23	17	-	-	-	Yes	4	1
Bangladesh	19	-	-	-	-	Yes	8	-
Nepal	33	-	9	54	10	Yes	20	-
Maldives	12	-	-	-	-	No	14	-

Source: United Nation, 2010

"Women continue to be underrepresented in national parliaments, where on average only 17 per cent of seats is occupied by women. The share of women among ministers also averages 17 per cent. The highest positions are even more elusive: only 7 of 150 elected Heads of State in the world are women, and only 11 of 192 Heads of Government. The situation is similar at the level of local government: female elected councilors are underrepresented in all regions of the world and female mayors even more so.

In the private sector, women are on most boards of directors of large companies but their number remains low compared to men. Furthermore, the "glass ceiling" has hindered women's access to leadership positions in private companies. This is especially notable in the largest corporations, which remain male-dominated. Of the 500 largest corporations in the world, only 13 have a female chief executive officer". (UN, 2010)

"Gender equality is a pre-requisite for effective participation of women in strengthening the institutional structure of democracy. Women have been marginalized because of several socio-economic constraints". (Agrawal & Patel 2000) "The denial of political opportunities to women is thus more

than a matter of country's stage of development, its level of income on education level of its women. It is bound up with many cultural and social constraints" (HDR, 1995)

### Gender Disparity and Poverty

Inequality in education, legal, political and economic participation perpetuates women's lack of access to resources, control over decision-making and participation in public life. It leads to the gross violation of human rights if there continue an extreme inequality among both the genders. This inequality gives rise to many difficulties which further makes the task of establishing a democratic and participatory socio-political order, and an environment of equal opportunity much tough.

The consequence of such gender inequality will be borne by the coming generation in the form of strong repercussion for human capital, since the heavy burden of rearing and bearing children is carried by women. Now the question arises whether or not this gender discrimination is related to poverty or not?

As mentioned in Human Development Report, 1997, "gender inequality is strongly associated with human poverty". "Gender disparities in building human capabilities through education,

health and nutrition, though significant are much narrower than the gaping disparities in income-earning and decision-making opportunities". (HDR, 1995) Gender-related development index for South Asian societies in general and South Asia was 0.511 whereas for all developing countries it was 0.630. The Gender Empowerment measure for the same year was 0.236 for South Asia. This clearly reflects that women in South Asia are being discriminated in all socio-economic spheres of life. They are being deprived of basic requirement of life. It is also clear that women in other region of world still lives a better life compared to South Asian women.

#### **Concluding Remarks**

The gender dimensions of poverty have become increasingly recognized and available data indicate that women constitute an overwhelming portion of the poorest globally. There are no two opinions that both the South Asian societies in general and South Asian women in particular suffer due to low status accorded to them. The South Asian women have least access to primary and reproductive health services. They are also deprived of civil, political and legal equality with men; and even economic and social security. However, arguments can be strengthened from the new indices that the available traditional indicators lack in gender sensitivity. Many analysts have argued that these indicators fail to reflect adequately women's situation in overall level of development in a country. Over a period, the argument is gaining momentum that many policies, which are considered as gender neutral i.e.; treating men and women equally are in reality gender blind. (WDR, 2000/01)

The full benefit of development can only be realized with people's participation and effective use of human resources. Development analysis cannot be divorced from gender categories and the economic role of women cannot be isolated from the total framework of development process, it will remain lopsided. The ultimate goal of social justice can only be achieved with equal opportunities to all irrespective of the gender discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and welfare of the family and of the society; prevents their participation on equal terms with men....and it an obstacle to full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and humanity. (UN, 1967)

What is required is to set right priorities in the developmental process. There is a possibility that these economies may move on to the path of economic growth, with the wider and equitable sharing of benefits. This may further set these economies in a process of virtuous development resulting in high growth, which will ultimately help in the reduction of poverty.

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