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Development Challenges in South Asia: A Contemporary Discussion on Gender Inequality

Abstract

The human development index (HDI) ranking and its value indicate the development challenge in South Asia, where the region is performing impressively in terms of economic growth. However, social development is still perceived in terms of the worst scenario. The South Asian region continues the policy of socio-economic exclusion on the basis of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. According to the study, the international organisations and the countries of the region are following the development indicator adopted by the United Nations and its institutions. The background of South Asia is like a battleground for a cycle of conflicts; religious, ethnic, and caste conflict cause people to be economically marginalised due to these tensions. The political tension between India and Pakistan results in a constantly fragile situation. In this context, the article explores contemporary development challenges and gender inequality in South Asia.

Key words: Development Challenges, South Asia, Human Development, Gender Inequality, Economic Growth

Introduction

Economic growth is a key to widespread problems such as poverty, unemployment, access to basic amenities, and low living standards (Rodrik 2007). The falling employment rate in South Asia has been a significant development problem, especially for the last five years. It is a matter of stable economic growth and development. Poverty in any developing country requires a study to adopt appropriate policies in or-

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der for it to be tackled. The study of poverty focuses on the causes and elimination of poverty. The economic development method of studying poverty emphasizes growth and structural changes, as well as their acceleration through continuous improvement in per-capita income and the economic welfare of a country (Ibid.). The South Asian economy has witnessed a remarkable increase in recent years, but many people are still living on less than \$1.90 per day. However, South Asian economic growth has improved in the last 20 years, but the region is facing the challenges of social development and poverty elimination.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also an indicator of adhering issues and problems for the countries or regions that are not just an analysis of the SDGs necessary to meet them. There are some core global challenges and issues that we are facing, such as those related to poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, prosperity, peace and justice. Besides the points mentioned above, goals are themselves a target for the issues and challenges related to development. Poverty eradication and hunger are vital issues in the global sphere, where 836 million people live in extreme poverty. The European Union (EU) and other donors intend the eradication of poverty and hunger to be the aim of their aid and assistance programmes for developing countries (Bharti 2022: 23). Poverty is a global issue, which, without attempts to combat it in this world, cannot be imagined to be just and equitable. South Asia is one of the regions where people live in extreme poverty after sub-Saharan Africa. However, we need to understand the discussion of South Asia's social development challenges, besides the issues and problems and how they impact the lives of people. However, this study focuses on the common economic growth and development, and social development challenges which are mainly facing South Asia in the context of gender inequality and related issues.

The European Union is also working in accordance with the UN development indicators, goals, and norms related to development policy. This study also strictly follows the norms practiced by international organisation. The United Nations adopted the eight goals of international development at the Millennium Summit in 2000. Poverty eradication was a main issue among the eight goals, and development issues in the UN are a priority for the international donor agencies and countries. The main objective of development policy is poverty eradication, as well as, more recently, sustainable development, adopted as the thematic priority of international development in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The EU development cooperation incorporates the aid and assistance programme under its development policy. The EU

follows the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs of the norms and priorities of the United Nations (Bharti 2020: 279). The MDGs ended in 2015, the EU acted as an initial development cooperator with South Asian countries, and now they are following the seventeen sustainable development goals for the region.

But under current regional programming, the EU operates development cooperation in accordance with the Asia Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014–2020 with all eight countries in South Asia. Before MIP 2014–2020, EU's MIP 2007–2013 played an impressive role in the MDGs. The EU development policy for South Asia discussed the role of MIP 2014–2020 in the context of dealing with problems and mitigation through EU policies for the challenges (Bharti 2020: 279, 286). Similarly, the development discourse covers the growth of anthropology, economics, geography, political science, and sociology that helped develop several indicators of human development. For generating arguments and filling the gaps in research, mainly qualitative content and discourse analysis have been applied. In relation to data, this research is affected by the discussion raised by several research institutions, and internet communication-based data such as newspapers, magazines and reports not only by the government but also by other development organisations. These research methods allow researchers to examine textual data and generate meaning from primary and secondary sources (Lamont 2015: 105). To provide support to the argument, several sources of literature have been used to validate the gender inequality discourse in South Asia based on the period before COVID-19.

Development Challenges in South Asia: In-depth Analysis

Before discussing issues and challenges in South Asia, it is necessary to discuss first the economic growth and development and related issues as well as prospects. The study of poverty must be based on a deeper understanding within the nation and the generation of the proper strategies to fight them. Meiser and Bladwin pointed out that a study on the poverty of a nation was more urgent than a study on the wealth of nations. Next, both focus on 'accelerating development in poor countries', which is primarily as the subject of studies on such crucial issues as population pressure, capital deficiency, and market imperfection. These issues also are major problems of the largest underdeveloped countries (Meiser & Bladwin 1959). The economic development also includes social, cultural, and institutional changes that occur in the development process (Robinson 1972).

Bangladesh: In the 2018 Gender Inequality Index (GII) report by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Bangladesh rank as 134, with a value of 54% as the gender inequality between women and men. There were 442 deaths per 100,000 women for the maternal mortality ratio; the adolescent birth rate is 111.8 per 1,000 women among the ages 15–19 in 2015–2020, and the share of seats in parliament was 14% in 2017. The education position is also not very impressive for a population with at least secondary education, 44% of women and 48.2% of men (UNDP, 2019). However, in 2005, Bangladesh's GII rank was 121, there is no very satisfactory trend in the last decade, and the basis of the informal sector of the Bangladesh economy is entirely dependent on women. In the textile and export-based garment industries, a large number of women work and they have active participation in the national level's agenda seeking a presence in civil societies (Tripathi 2011: 154).

The position of Bangladeshi women is better in South Asian countries in comparison to any of the other nations included within the study. Over the two decades, women in Bangladesh have made tremendous progress specially in the rural and microfinance sectors. Through microfinance, women entrepreneurs have made a remarkable contribution to the economy of Bangladesh, they have not only gained a new identity, but they have also helped to reduce poverty. These are a simple reason behind the economic growth in Bangladesh (Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre 2015: 169).

However, despite the economic level's growth among the women in Bangladesh, the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) reports tell different stories, in which data on the economic participation rank (133), the educational attainment rank (116), and; health and survival rank (117) are not very appreciable. However, these cores are much better than they were in 2006, respectively, in education (107), education (95) and health (113). Overall, Bangladesh has improved its rank in GGGI 2018 to 48, where its position was 91 in 2006 (World Economic Forum 2018: 21, 74). There is more effort needed to abolish particular practices on the road of development in Bangladesh such as custom, patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal social system insofar as the life of women is regulated by the social system. Despite these, there are many other societal problems like rape, assault, human trafficking that are commonly practised, and this is normal headline news in the local press. Human trafficking and the sex trade have been on the increase in the decade, equally child sales have also become part of kidnapping, abduction, marital migration and other social problems.

Sri Lanka: Sri Lanka is considered among the middle-income countries despite having only a developing income, but gender inequality still

exists in the country. The participation of women in politics and public decision-making is still underrepresented, and is lowest among South Asian countries as represented in Political platform. The GII rank of Sri Lanka is 80, but the share of female seats in parliament is only 5.8%, as well their labour participation being only 35.1% across the nation (UNDP, 2019). But the gender gap rank is 100, which was ranked 13 in 2006, and participation in economic opportunity (125) has also recorded as very inappropriate, while political empowerment is ranked 65 (World Economic Forum 2018: 255, 308). Sri Lanka slipped in the ranking of gender gap due to a lack of political and decision-making processes and participation in economic growth. In Sri Lanka, the lack of political and economic participation of women is considered due to a structurally patriarchal society, so the country still needs to fight this kind of discrimination in order to achieve the goal of development.

Nepal: The overall GII rank of Nepal is 118 with a value of 0.480, and data is not satisfactory where maternal mortality ratio has 258 deaths per 100 thousand. The adolescent birth rate is 60.5 for 2015–2020, but the share of seats in parliament (29.6%) is better than the above two countries. The educational performance of gender inequality is respectively 27.3% and 43.1% between female and male; here, the gender educational performances is deficient (UNDP 2019). While Nepal is considered to be one of the LDCs in the world, they have made some remarkable performances in comparison to 2000. The global gender gap has also defined the position of Nepal, and the situation is very serious across the country. Nepal has improved only by 6 position jumps in GGGI in comparison to 2006, where the position was 111, and now the current rank is 105. However, if we follow the four indicators as economic participation and opportunity (110), educational attainment (123), health and survival (128) and political empowerment (66), which are burning issues all over the world (World Economic Forum 2018: 201, 254), except for political participation, all of the above indicators are not a pleasing or satisfactory performance of Nepal.

Caste, class, gender, and ethnic diversity all contribute to the creation of gender disparity in Nepal, and their basis is rooted in a patriarchal society. In the whole country, the position of women is not equal, and society is divided mainly into two ethnic groups, the Tibetan-Nepalese and the Indo-Aryan community, which also used as a term of “Pahari/Newari.” The patriarchal setup of Nepalese society is different from other South Asian countries that are more linked with exploitation and forceful religious practice. Especially in the Indo-Aryan Hindu family, girls are encouraged to the concept of purity, and early marriage is com-

mon practice (Tripathi 2011: 155–157). Besides issues of caste and ethnic customs, there is also the human trafficking of women and children such as kidnapping, marital migration for forced sex work, and other discrimination faced by them on a daily basis.

India: India in GII ranks 127 in the world, and has an economy of more than 3 trillion USD. However, women's participation in human development is still very inappropriate. The adolescent birth rate is 23.1 per 1000 and the share of seats in parliament was 11.6% in 2017. There is also a huge disparity between male and female education rates, at least at the secondary level, respectively 63.5% and 39% for the period 2010–2017, while the labour force participation rate (27.2) of women is also very low in India in comparison to male 78.8% (UNDP 2019). The GII 2018 reports show the vulnerable status of women in India and that they are struggling to improve the equal participation. The status of India is little different from that of other nation in the region, and there are many institutions, civil society, and activist groups that continue to fight against gender inequality, which is also an inspiration for other countries. India has constitutional provisions, even legislation for protection from domestic violence against women, as well as national level and state-level women commissions for any kind of violation against women. Despite the institutional effort, there is still a continued violation of violence, exploitation, and discrimination in the country.

If we follow the gender gap index of the World Economic Forum (WEF), India's position remains unchanged, ranked 108th in GGGI 2018. But there is an economic opportunity rank of 142 out of 149 countries participation sub-index. India maintains a consistent ranking with almost 67%, but there is still a 33% gap yet to be bridged. In 2006, India's rank was 98 overall, while economic participation and opportunity was 110, which is 142 in 2018, and a similar tendency has been observed in the subindex of health and survival, which was 103 in 2006 and then it was worse at 147 in 2018. The educational ranking has also fallen from 102 to 114 between 2006 to 2018. Except for the political position, India's gender gap is not remarkable, being the world's fifth-largest economy (World Economic Forum 2018: 123, 176).

Human trafficking, domestic violence, rape, child abuse, marital migrants, and sexual harassment in the workplace are common practice, and make daily headlines in India's newspapers. On the 16th December 2012, Delhi's famous 'Nirbhaya' gang rape case received international attention, and Delhi frequently faces this social evil which is now a constant practice; consequently, Delhi is often referred to as India's 'rape capital'. Even after this incident, the national capital has witnessed

a 67% rise in rape cases, and if we see the headline of ‘Independent’, ‘New Delhi and Sao Paulo are the worst places in the world for sexual violence against women, shows study’ (Revesz 2017). According to Delhi Police, “five women were raped and eight were molested every day on average in the national capital last year.” The Delhi Police data is extremely shocking: 2,043 rape cases were registered in 2018, 2,059 cases in 2017, and 2,065 cases in 2016, as well as between 3000–4000 cases of molestation. The most surprising data from Delhi Police are that 43% of the accused in rape cases were committed by friends or families of friends, 16.25% by a neighbour, 12.04% by relatives, and 22.86% by other known persons (India Today 2019).

According to the statistics of the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) for 2016, 13,803 rape cases were reported throughout India, and this is 4% higher than 2014, where 13,260 cases were reported. The famous newspaper in India, Hindustan Times published the headline ‘NCRB data reinforces Delhi’s rape capital tag, city leaders in crimes against women’ (Alavi 2017). There are 63 million women statistically ‘missing’ in India that show increased crimes against women (Biswas 2018).

Maldives: The Maldives is an independent island country in the north-central Indian Ocean, consisting of 1,200 small coral islands and sandbanks; there are only 200 inhabited islands (Zeidan 2021). Maldives has a GII ranking of 76, and the share of seats in parliament (5.9%) is considerably less than the education rate of women (44.9%) and men (49.3%). There are huge gaps in the participation rate in the labour market of women (42.9%) in comparison to men (82.1%) (UNDP, 2019). However, according to WEF data in GGGI, the health and survival indicator is ranked 144 out of 149 countries, and political empowerment at 132. The overall rank is 113, but records are still not good in terms of health, political, and educational levels (World Economic Forum 2018: 175, 228). According to UNDP Maldives, “Gender inequalities within political, economic, and social spheres are the result of structural, functional, and cultural barriers to women’s participation in public life.” The ground of socio-economic life is based on Sharia law; that is, what legislation and policy are obliged to follow (UNDP Maldives 2011: vi).

Bhutan: Bhutan’s GII position is 117 and the share of seats in parliament 8.3%, but a population with at least some secondary education is worse for women (6.0%) and male (13.7%) (UNDP 2019). Bhutan is a small country in the eastern Himalayas between China and India; they have a rich natural and cultural heritage. Bhutan did well in gender gaps in the labour market, but the female labour force slightly declined in

comparison to men in 2016, which is the highest in South Asia (Lhaden 2018).

In gender gap, Bhutan is the second lowest country in South Asia according to WEF data on GGI ranked with 122, and its lower performance in subindices is respectively ranked with economic participation and opportunity (104), Education (125), health and survival (141) and political empowerment (138) (World Economic Forum, 2018, p.33 & 86). According to Gerald Daly, Resident Coordinator of the United Nations in Bhutan, gender inequality in Bhutan is based on the foundation of so many obstacles, such as the rights and choices of women and girls. Next, he added: "Child marriage means a lack of schooling, a greater likelihood of gender-based violence, and fewer choices in life." The World Population Report, 2019 stated that 30% of women had experienced violence related to physical, sexual, psychological, and economic issues within the previous one year (Norbu 2019).

Pakistan: Pakistan has HDI ranked 150 in the category of average human development and its GII is 133. Both of rankings are the second worst in the region, which indicates that women are more vulnerable in this country. There is a maternal mortality birth rate of 178 deaths per hundred thousand, and the adolescent birth rate is 36.9 per 1,000 women, and the share of seats in parliament is 20% for women. There is a huge disparity in education at the secondary level, which is respectively for females (27%) and male (47.3%) between 2010 and 2017. The labour force participation rate (24.9%) is also much worse in comparison to male (82.7%) (UNDP, 2019). The gender gap is ranked 148, which is a worse performance in comparison to 2006, when it was ranked with 112. Pakistan's position in GGI is worse in all the 4 indicators, respectively, economic participation and opportunity (146), educational attainment (139), health and survival (145) and political empowerment (97). In 2006, all ranks were between 110 to 112, except the political (37) (World Economic Forum 2018: 215, 268). Pakistan's position in the global gender gap has drastically slipped in comparison to the data of 2006, because the country's economy is suffering from a very poor condition and the observance of religious customs. The gender gap reveals that the honour system is causing regression, and Pakistan is standing second last in the GGI report just ahead of Yemen (149).

There is the nastiest form of patriarchy, which is also visible in the legal framework of Pakistan, and there is no uniformity in the law. Marriage is conducted according to religious beliefs, and honour killing is committed to save the family's honour. General Zia-al-Haq introduced the Hudood ordinance into criminal law in 1979 as part of the process of

the Islamisation of Pakistan (Kennedy 1987: 153–154). This ordinance has become very controversial, because it equates adultery with rape, and there is no required acceptance of a women's testimony in the case of rape. A case of rape or adultery requires four-reputed Muslim men to testify. There are several cases registered and the majority of women in Pakistan are in jail due to this law. There is another law 'Qasas' that is also used to victimise women in Pakistan, while marriage according to the religious setting is another common practice in the Sindh region of Pakistan. According to this law, women are allowed to live without a husband throughout her life and keep the land of their sisters and daughters (Tripathi 2011: 153–154).

There are three ethnic groups with the highest disadvantaged in Pakistan such as Sindhi, Saraiki, and Pashtun, and Sindhi women and girls are poorest among them as well as those in rural households. Child marriage is also common practice, where 63 % of girls get married from the most disadvantaged backgrounds before the age of 18 years old. There are large disparities in income distribution in the workplace due to gender-biased norms such as discrimination in jobs and fewer opportunities in job markets (Dagia & Ismail: 2018). In 2021, the issues of marriage became more crucial in Pakistan when a Member of the National Assembly (MNA) from Balochistan married a 14 year-old girl. After that, police launched a probe when an NGO worker from Chitral filed a complaint.

Afghanistan: The worse position of women in South Asia is observed in Afghanistan, where their rank is not only last in the region, but they also have the worst obstacles globally. Gender inequality is the biggest problem in the country where more than half of the region is ruled by an extremist religious organisation, the Taliban, and women are bound to follow Shariah Law. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) of Afghanistan is 153, and other indicators show worse data, that is respectively maternal mortality (396 deaths per 100,000 births), the adolescent birth rate (64.5 per 1000 women), and shares of seats in parliament (27.4%). The population with at least some secondary education is also very low, respectively, for women (11.4%) and men (36.9%) in 2010–2017. There are large disparities in participation in the labour force, which is 19% for women and 86.7% for men in 2017 (UNDP 2019).

According to UNICEF Afghanistan, women and girls continue to face widespread gender discrimination and the abuses of human rights across the country. Violence against them is a common practice, and most girls do not go to school, especially as the majority of girls get married before the age of 18 UNICEF (Afghanistan 2021). According to The

Week, "In 1923 Afghan law gave women equal rights, but the Soviet invasion – and the Taliban – brought violence and oppression" (The Week 2015). According to a survey by Thomson Reuters Foundation on gender inequality, "Afghan men strongly oppose giving women more freedom - two of three think they have already too much right - and young men are even more reluctant than their elders" (Elks 2019).

Conclusion

South Asia has achieved the fast economic growth and tremendous development goals in many areas in recent decades. But once again the situation is worsening and newspaper analysis says that during the pandemic (COVID-19) it is women who suffer the most of gender discrimination and domestic violence issues. Societal values are based on patriarchal norms and traditional values in practice, which lead to gender discrimination among women in South Asian countries. This study specially traced the situation immediately before pandemic and tried to make an argument that the situation of women was actually worse. The core problem of gender inequalities is observed during the life cycle of a woman, e.g., from conception, to birth, to Childhood, adolescent to adult life (UNICEF South Asia 2021). Gender disparity is one of the major problems in overall development of South Asia. A recent report of UNICEF *Gender Counts: South Asia* mentioned that gender inequality leads to serious fundamental challenges to sustainable development in the region.

In contemporary gender inequality analysis, the major problems noticed in Afghanistan created the most unsafe place for women in the world in terms of equal rights. After the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the country has again fallen in all gender indexes and lost the development decade. The core problem is the imposition of Deobandi Islamic values that do not allow women modern democratic rights. This means that a woman cannot have rights such as studying in co-ed schools and universities, working together with men, clothing must fully cover the body and even face as per 'Burka' & 'Hijab', a news anchor on television and several other obligations. It has been more than a year of the Taliban's new authoritarian regime in Afghanistan and still girls' schools remain closed, which is a major example of gender inequality in the region. There is also another region where inequality is rising in South Asia due to failed of regional integration called the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) and rising populism across the region. There are major concerns that South Asia's gender inequality is falling in each and every index.

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Wyzwania rozwojowe w regionie południowej Azji: Współczesna dyskusja na temat nierówności płci

Streszczenie

Ranking rozwoju społecznego (HDI) i jego wskaźniki wyznaczają aktualne wyzwania rozwojowe w południowej Azji. Region ten notuje wysoki i ciągły wzrost gospodarczy. Niestety, zgodnie ze wskaźnikiem HDI poprawy wymagają wskaźniki dotyczące rozwoju społecznego. W regionie Azji Południowej utrzymuje się zjawisko wykluczenia społeczno-ekonomicznego ze względu m.in. na takie czynniki, jak kasta, pochodzenie etniczne, religia i płeć. Organizacje międzynarodowe i państwa kierują się wskaźnikiem rozwoju przyjętym przez ONZ i jej instytucje, a w opisywanym regionie można zaobserwować szerokie spektrum konfliktów – od militarnych, religijnych po ekonomiczne i etniczne. Przykładem tego typu zjawiska jest napięcie polityczne między Indiami a Pakistanem, które destabilizuje sytuację w regionie zarówno z perspektywy ekonomicznej, jak i społecznej. Niniejszy artykuł analizuje współczesne wyzwania rozwojowe i nierówność płci w Azji Południowej na podstawie dostępnych wskaźników rozwoju, w tym HDI.

Słowa kluczowe: wyzwania rozwoju, Azja Południowa, rozwój kapitału ludzkiego, nierówność płci, wzrost ekonomiczny