

# Gender disparity in South Asia

**T**HE gender question has seized the imagination of world-famous social scientists over the last few decades in a powerful way. There is now a general consensus that a day must be designated as International Women's Day, so that we may pause and reflect on the plight of billions of women trapped in cultural and social quagmires around the globe. Women's issues are as old as life on this planet, and different parts of the world face different sets of problems.

The central theme of the 1995 global *Human Development Report* revolved around the gender debate on various fronts. The Beijing Conference shocked the world by telling the truth about the inhuman conditions affecting women's lives. Subsequently, the Mahbub-ul-Haq Human Development Centre in Islamabad raised several pertinent questions in its report issued in 2000 on the gender question, such as: Why are women so severely disadvantaged and how can specific structural disadvantages be redressed? Why are women invisible in social, economic and political spheres? How can women's capabilities be enhanced in the face of innumerable hurdles? What institutional mechanisms are needed to bridge the relevant gender gaps in South Asia?

Human and women's conditions in South Asia, on the eve of the 21st century, can be characterized as pathetic, but not hopeless. We are entering the new century with 515 million people in absolute poverty, above 400 million illiterate adults and approximately 80 million malnourished children. Sadly enough, girls and women constitute the vast majority of these deprived millions.

It is indeed becoming painfully clear that women in South Asia do suffer from greater poverty of educational, health, economic, political and legal opportunities, relative to both their male counterparts and women around the world. The history of the subcontinent, replete as it is with layers of religious, cultural, social and political structures, was shaped over centuries of colonialism, external invasions and shocks, internal strife and shifting populations. All these and similar factors, generally oppressed women, impeded their prospects for social and economic development necessary to support progress.

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place, and protectional laws are inadequately enforced. Social-sector budgets remain severely inadequate. Women's issues, as they have been conceptualized in the region, continue to take a backseat to other government priorities, such as political and economic crises, conflicts and violence." Undoubtedly, the revealed preferences of the ruling elites have not been consistent with women's needs.

The analysis in the *Human Development Report* marshalled statistical evidence and ascertained

level studies in Pakistan, women's contribution to total income in crop production is between 25 to 40 per cent, and in India the value of household services of an urban home is estimated at about 42 per cent of family income. Women account for 60 per cent of unpaid family workers in South Asia. In Pakistan, 54 per cent of all employed women are counted as unpaid family helpers — note the word "helpers" instead of the term homemakers. Again, 96 per cent of economically active women work in India's informal sector; in

Illustration by Bisma Shaheen



gender inequality through composite indices. First, the Human Development Index that measures the average achievement of a country in terms of the extent to which the people enjoy a long and healthy life, are educated and knowledgeable, and maintain a decent standard of living. Secondly, the Gender Development Index was used to bring the unequal achievement of women and men into the HDI index. The greater the gender disparity in basic capabilities, the lower a country's GDI as compared to its HDI.

Pakistan 65 per cent. In the labour-market generally, gender-specific inequalities in pay and job security are widespread.

The conditions of South Asian women are pathetic, not hopeless, because their deprivations have also stirred into action several large-scale, grass-roots movements. It is true that the defining moments of these movements are yet to come, but their struggle is valuable and must be appreciated. It would be naive to think that we can launch and sustain an agenda of equality of

economic development necessary to support progress.

Despite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1947; Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women, 1979; Education for All Conference, 1975; Children's Summit, 1980; UN's Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Platform for Action aimed at National Plans of Action, significant changes in the social, political and economic environment in which South-Asian women live have not materialized mainly because of the weak political will to implement them.

According to the Mahbub-ul-Haq Human Development Centre report on the gender question: "Women ministries, departments, commissions and bureaus remain underfunded and lacking in authority to mainstream gender concerns. While women remain severely under-represented in political offices, civil services and other public bodies, the established and effective implementation of quotas is rare. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality, discriminatory legislation remains in

being the unequal achievement of women and men into the HDI index. The greater the gender disparity in basic capabilities, the lower a country's GDI as compared to its HDI. Thirdly, the Gender Empowerment Measure was employed to capture opportunities available to women vis-a-vis men in participation in the economic and political life of a country. The following results were obtained:

South Asia's regional GDI was only 0.51, compared to the developing countries average of 0.63 and the world average of 0.70. South Asia was the second lowest in the whole world. Within South Asia, Pakistan's GDI was slightly better than that of Bangladesh, but considerably behind India. Most significantly — and sadly — South Asia's GEM score at merely 0.24 was the world's lowest. Pakistan pulled down the South Asian average because at 0.176. The country's GEM was pathetically low.

The vast majority of South Asian women work long hours in their households and the informal sectors. Yet, their work is hardly recognized in the respective national income accounts. According to some micro-

these movements are yet to come, but their struggle is valuable and must be appreciated. It would be naive to think that we can launch and sustain an agenda of equality of women at a massive scale, but it is not unreasonable to expect that we can modify the prevailing structures and finances, and introduce changes in the long-standing premises of social, economic, political and cultural life.

The following sections provide a positive agenda developed by the MHHDC, other similarly inspired institutions and individual social scientists/reformers in a few major clusters to promote gender equality. Actions are needed on at least four fronts: equality under the law, equality in economic opportunities, equality in access to capability building and equality in governance. Let's briefly elaborate the key components of possible actions in these areas.

To achieve greater gender equality through law, actions are needed on several fronts: enforcement of the constitutional rights of women, repeal of discriminatory laws, acceptance of the principle of affirmative action, introduction of posi-

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tive legislation to minimize violence against women, treating the so-called "honour-killings" as murder cases, using and interpreting family laws in gender-specific ways and striving to provide women-positive legal education through NGOs and relevant government apparatus.

Meaningful actions to ensure equality of economic opportunities would require a combination of enlightened legislation and genuine political commitment. This, in turn, would require legislative action aimed at: abolishing discriminatory laws related to economic activities, introducing pro-active legislation such as minimum quotas for public service jobs for women, protecting the rights of informal sector workers where the majority of workers are women, ensuring the same minimum wage level for men and women and creating jobs for women on priority basis, collecting, analyzing and using for policy analysis and policy formulation; a comprehensive set of gender-disaggregated accurate data on regular and timely basis.

To provide equality of access to capability building, it is necessary to take actions on several fronts. To start with, we must reduce gender disparity in education by focusing on: rapidly putting all girls in schools to reach the goal of universal primary education, enacting compulsory primary education laws and enforcing them in all provinces, providing schooling facilities sensitive to girls needs and concerns, recruiting female teachers from girls-schools catchments areas and training them, ensuring community participation in planning and management and providing easy and cost-effective facilities for higher education and distance learning to women at a large scale.

To reduce gender disparity in health care, we must: set monitorable targets to reduce infant and maternal mortality rates as well as manage population dynamics, enforce laws against feticide, improve access of quality health facilities and services in rural areas when women are the worst sufferers.

Peace in the region is absolutely essential to achieve a spectacular shift of resources towards human and social development needs. If India and Pakistan resolve their conflicts, they can divert over the next 10 years at least \$65 billion in India and \$25 billion in Pakistan to their economic and social development needs. These peace dividends will be half of what they would otherwise spend on conventional and nuclear weapons of mutual destruction.



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Only the most insensitive persons can be forgiven to ignore the following stunning statistics: South Asian women occupy only 7 per cent of the parliamentary seats, 9 per cent of the cabinet positions, 6 per cent of the judiciary and 9 per cent of the civil service cadres. We have made some progress in these areas but the advance is painfully slow.

Even the fully articulated and most thoughtful blueprints and action programmes will yield only insignificant results if they are not matched equally with unwavering political will, motivated personnel, adequate funds, specific targets and monitoring mechanisms to ascertain progress. We must learn from our past mistakes, reintroduce changes needed in the strategies and marshal financial and intellectual resources. ■