

Empowering Women to Eliminate Gender Discrimination in Asia

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Abstract

Gender is a common term where as gender discrimination is meant only for women, because females are the only victims of gender discrimination and it is more pervasive in Asia. Gender discrimination is not biologically determined but it is determined by socially. This discrimination against women can be and must be changed with proper and perpetuate efforts. Half of the world's population is females. They are doing two-third of labor of the total work in the world but received only one-tenth of the world's total income. Nearly two-third of the women is illiterate and they have possessed only one third of the world's assets. In the world, only one-fourth of the families are headed by female. Bangladesh is a male dominant society and gender discrimination is customized habitually. The paper attempts to address few important issues like- issues related with gender discrimination, areas of gender inequity and how best to eliminate it in the Asian countries.

INTRODUCTION

Gender equality is, first and foremost, a human right. A woman is entitled to live in dignity and in freedom from want and from fear. Empowering women is also an indispensable tool for advancing development and reducing poverty. Empowered women contribute to the health and productivity of whole families and communities and to improved prospects for the next generation. Yet discrimination against women and girls - including gender-based violence, economic discrimination, reproductive health inequities, and harmful traditional practices - remain the most pervasive and persistent form of inequality. There have been several organizations and institutions advocating for women, promoting legal and policy reforms and gender-sensitive data collection, and supporting projects that improve women's health and expand their choices in life. Despite many international agreements affirming their human rights, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and illiterate. They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, credit, training and employment. They are far less likely than men to be politically active and far more likely to be victims of domestic violence. The ability of women to control their own fertility is absolutely fundamental to women's empowerment and equality. When a woman can plan her family, she can plan the rest of her life. When she is healthy, she can be more productive. And when her reproductive rights — including the right to decide the number, timing and spacing of her children, and to make decisions regarding reproduction free of discrimination, coercion and violence — are promoted and protected, she has freedom to participate more fully and equally in society. Gender equality implies a society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between men and women exists when both genders are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence; have equal opportunities for financial independence through work or through setting up businesses; enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity to develop personal ambitions. A critical aspect of promoting gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances and giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all. Where women's status is low, family size tends to be large, which makes it more difficult for families to thrive. Population and development and reproductive health programmers are more effective when they address the educational opportunities, status and empowerment of women. When women are empowered, whole families benefit, and these benefits often have ripple effects to future generations. The roles that men and women play in society are not biologically determined - they are socially determined, changing and changeable. Although they may be justified as being required by culture or religion, these roles vary widely by locality and change over time.

KEY ISSUES AND LINKAGE REGARDING GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

1) *Reproductive health*: Women, for both physiological and social reasons, are more vulnerable than men to reproductive health problems. Reproductive health problems, including maternal mortality and morbidity, represent a major - but preventable - cause of death and disability for women in developing countries. Failure to provide information, services and conditions to help women protect their reproduction health therefore constitutes gender-based discrimination and a violation of women's rights to health and life.

2) *Stewardship of natural resources*: Women in developing nations are usually in charge of securing water, food and fuel and of overseeing family health and diet. Therefore, they tend to put into immediate practice whatever they learn about nutrition and preserving the environment and natural resources. But this practice is yet to

implement in Asia.

3) *Economic empowerment*: More women than men live in poverty in Asian countries. Economic disparities persist partly because much of the unpaid work within families and communities falls on the shoulders of women and because they face discrimination in the economic sphere.

4) *Educational empowerment*: About two thirds of the illiterate adults in the world are female. Higher levels of women's education are strongly associated with both lower infant mortality and lower fertility, as well as with higher levels of education and economic opportunity for their children.

5) *Political empowerment*: Social and legal institutions still do not guarantee women equality in basic legal and human rights, in access to or control of land or other resources, in employment and earning, and social and political participation. Laws against domestic violence are often not enforced on behalf of women especially in Asia. Experience has shown that addressing gender equality and women's empowerment requires strategic interventions at all levels of programming and policy-making.

6) *Women's Work and Economic Empowerment*: In nearly every country in Asia, women work longer hours than men, but are usually paid less and are more likely to live in poverty. In subsistence economies, women spend much of the day performing tasks to maintain the household, such as carrying water and collecting fuel wood. In many Asian countries women are also responsible for agricultural production and selling. But at the end of the day, what they are paid is far more less than the male working in the same organization or same job.

7) *Unpaid domestic work* – From food preparation to care giving – directly affects the health and overall well being and quality of life of children and other household members. But still they are neglected and not appreciated for what service they provide to the family and society. Women's voices and lived experiences – whether as workers (paid and unpaid), citizens, or consumers – are still largely missing from debates on finance and development. Poor women do more unpaid work, work longer hours and may accept degrading working conditions during times of crisis, just to ensure that their families survive.

8) *Intergenerational gender gaps*: Women's lower access to resources and the lack of attention to gender in macroeconomic policy adds to the inequity, which, in turn highlights gender gaps. For example, when girls reach adolescence they are typically expected to spend more time in household activities, while boys spend more time on farming or wage work. By the time girls and boys become adults; females generally work longer hours than males, have less experience in the labor force, earn less income and have less leisure, recreation or rest time. This has implications for investments in the next generation. If parents view daughters as less likely to take paid work or earn market wages, they may be less inclined to invest in their education, women's fastest route out of poverty.

AREAS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

There is specific research on gender discrimination mostly in favor of men over women. Due to a lack of objective research on gender discrimination against men, it is perceived that it is only women who are suffering. The research often conducted is selectively sampled, where men are left out of the picture. Women are perceived to be disadvantaged at work, and conclusions are drawn that their capabilities are often underestimated.

Discrimination against women has led to their lack of autonomy and authority. Although equal rights are given to women, equality may not be well implemented. In practice, land and property rights are weakly enforced, with customary laws widely practiced in rural areas. Women do not own property under their own names and usually do not have any inheritance rights to obtain a share of parental property.

The areas of gender discrimination in Bangladesh are-

Education: One of the main causes of gender discrimination is outdated views regarding women's education. Some people view a woman as being the weaker opponent, with less education and experience than a man. Even though women today are doing all of the things that men do, with some even being more educated than their male counterparts, some people still have old views that women are not as good as men and do not belong in the workforce or other places. In many countries, women are forced to stay home to clean and cook. However, the men are sent to school, furthering inequality. Another serious problem is education for women. Women are often unequally treated during the education process and sexual harassments are also present here. Asian women, very seriously suffer this punishment and Pakistan is one of these Asian countries. According to a non-official survey, female learners in Pakistan have 90% less chances of education than the male learners. On the other hand the local, tribal and religious life style and values here also exert pressure on the female education and this attitude

makes them stay behind the men. So far, NO NGO and NO GOVERNMENT have done anything to solve this problem. Other problems based on the gender, like during the interview process refusal to hire or to promote, wrongful termination based on the gender and unequal payment can also include discriminatory questions. Sphere like housing, borrowing and credit can also be touched by sex discrimination.

Religious beliefs : Gender differences in religion can be classified as either "internal" or "external". Internal religious issues are studied from the perspective of a given religion, and might include religious beliefs and practices about the roles and rights of men and women in government, education and worship; beliefs about the sex or gender of deities and religious figures; and beliefs about the origin and meaning of human gender. External religious issues can be broadly defined as an examination of a given religion from an outsider's perspective, including possible clashes between religious leaders and laity, and the influence of, and differences between, religious perspectives on social issues.

Culture : Culture shapes the way “things are done” and the thinking of people who believe that things should be done in a certain way. In many cultures we still witness male misogyny and machismo. According to our culture, women have several limitations over men. For instance, they need to get married within a certain age limit or they are considered as old, married women need to have children at an early age otherwise they are called by various names, in most cases, parents of a bride are forced to provide dowry unless she faces tremendous sufferings, in other cases women are bound to quit their career to make their in laws satisfied and for the in house responsibilities. Almost in all the culture and religion, men have all the right to use hands over women, give divorce to their wives and can get married many times. In Hindu culture, a widow is forcefully burned with her husband. According to the Muslim culture, it is believed that wives heaven lies under their husbands’ feet!!

Employment: Women and men also face different challenges as they advance through their career. Women report greater barriers than do men, and greater difficulty getting developmental assignments and geographic mobility opportunities. The ‘old boy network’ of informal friendships forged over lunch, at social events, or at club meetings is usually not open to women, although it’s often here that promotional decisions are made. A lack of women mentors makes it harder for women to find the role models and supporters they need to help guide their careers. Unlike many men, women must also make the “career versus family” decision, since the responsibilities of raising the children and managing the household still fall disproportionately on women. So balancing work and family life can be a challenge for a woman. (Human Resource Management by Gary Dessler).

Family situation : Family laws that force arranged marriages often lead to gender discrimination. The women in these marriages are often abused both physically and mentally, especially in the cases of dowry and giving birth to baby girls. Article 16 of the Universal Declaration is about the equality in marriage:
“Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution. Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses”.
In many cultures, arranged or forced marriages are still very common, often resulting in sexual abuse. Women often do not have the same rights regarding divorce or inheritance. Polygamy is also a cause of discrimination.

On the name of family history: In many families, the successors often follow the trend of their elders where they opposed to allow their women to work outside their house. They believe that it will simply destroy their family image and reputation that their grandparents had build and maintained for years.

Customs and beliefs : Many people simply carry some norms and beliefs about women’s ability and their image. According to them, ‘Women are belonged at home and are not committed to career’ (Human resource Management by Gary Dessler). If people possess such kind of values towards women, a country, even a society can’t move forward. Moreover, when a boy is born in most developing countries, friends and relatives exclaim congratulations. A son means insurance. He will inherit his father's property and get a job to help support the family. When a girl is born, the reaction is very different. Some women weep when they find out their baby is a girl because, to them, a daughter is just another expense. Her place is in the home, not in the world of men. In some parts of India, it's traditional to greet a family with a newborn girl by saying, "The servant of your household has been born." A girl is treated as a liability in most of the Asian countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sonalde Desai (1994) observed that parent’s reluctance to educate their daughters has its roots in the situation of women. Parents have several incentives for not educating their daughters. It’s a belief that education of girls

brings no returns to the parents and that their future roles, being mainly reproductive and perhaps including agricultural labor, require no formal education.

Kalyani Menon Sen and A.K.Shivkumar (2001) found that girls in India are discriminated against in several ways- fewer months of breastfeeding less of nurturing and play, less care of medical treatment if they fall ill, less of “special” food, less of parental attention. As a result, girls are far more susceptible than boys to disease and infections, leading to poor health and a shorter lifespan.

Berta Esteve-Volart (2004) described that gender discrimination against women in the market place reduces the available talent in the economy. Many social practices seen as normal from a religious or cultural point of view have women out of the economic mainstream. These social practices may have profound economic consequences because they do not allow society to take advantage of the talent inherent in women.

Anna-Maria Lind (2006) stated that India’s population still leads traditional lives in rural areas. Religious laws and traditions still determine the lives of many people, particularly women. Even if women are formerly entitled to own land and resources social and religious factors make many women refrain from this right in order not to cause distortions within the family. The preference for having sons permeates sets the standard for girls throughout their entire lives.

Julie Mullin (2008) indicated that the developing world is full of poverty stricken families who see their daughters as an economic predicament. That attitude has resulted in the widespread neglect to baby girls in Africa, Asia and South America. In many communities, it’s a regular practice to breastfeed girls for a shorter time than boys so that women can try to get pregnant again with a boy as soon as possible. As a result, girls miss out on life-giving nutrition during a crucial window of their development, which weakens their resistance to disease.

GENDER INEQUITY IN ASIA

To fully appreciate the status of women in Asia, one must take into account the prevailing economic, social, and political institutions. It would be obvious that the institutions have ill-served women and subjected them to inferior status in societies in Asia. I am citing various sources below to establish the disenfranchise status of women (Asian Development Bank Annual Year Book, 2012).

Gender discrimination costs lives. Close to 100 million women in Asia are estimated to be 'missing' because of discriminatory treatment in access to health and nutrition, pure neglect, or pre-birth sex selection. Here are 12 things to know about gender equality in Asia and the Pacific.

1. In South Asia, more women die in childbirth – 500 for every 100,000 live births – than in any other part of the world except Sub-Saharan Africa. The proportion of deliveries attended by skilled birth attendants is as low as 18% in Bangladesh, 19% in Nepal, and 20% in the Lao PDR.
Source: ADB, Paths to 2015 MDG Priorities in Asia and the Pacific
2. Many Asian women report experiencing physical violence from their intimate partners - 30% of women in Viet Nam; more than 40% in Bangladesh, Samoa, and Timor-Leste; and more than 60% in Kiribati, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.
Source: UNSTATS, UNDP. Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India: National Family Health Survey (NFHS-3) Volume III
3. An extra year of primary school encourages girls to marry later in life and have fewer children. It also makes them less likely to experience violence and increases their eventual wages by 10-20 percent.
Source: Council of Foreign Relations 2004 - What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World
4. In Pakistan a half kilometer increase in the distance to school will decrease girls' enrolment by 20%. In Afghanistan, Indonesia and several other countries, building local schools in rural communities has led to increases in girls' enrolment rates.
Source: UN Women: CSW 56 - Facts and Figures on Rural Women
5. Only 30% of women in Asia and in Pacific are in non-agriculture wage employment, with only 20% in South Asia—the lowest among the world's regions.
Sources: ADB, Paths to 2015 MDG Priorities in Asia and the Pacific; FAO, IFAD & ILO, Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment
6. Nearly 50% of women in South Asia and over 60% in the Pacific Islands are still concentrated in agriculture. Unpaid work on family agricultural enterprises accounts for 34% of informal employment for women in India.
Sources: ADB, Paths to 2015 MDG Priorities in Asia and the Pacific; FAO, IFAD & ILO, Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment
7. Gender inequality in wage differentials remains entrenched, with women typically earning 70%–90% less of the male wage (50% in Bangladesh and 80% in Mongolia).

Source: ADB & ILO, Women and labor markets in Asia: Rebalancing for gender equality

8. In the East Asia and Pacific region, output per worker could be 7-18% higher if female entrepreneurs and workers were in the same sectors, types of jobs and activities as men, and had the same access to productive resources.

Source: World Bank, Towards Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific: A Companion to the World Development Report, 2012

9. Across the East Asia and Pacific region, female-headed households own less land than male-headed households. Few women own farms despite the fact that 40% of the region's women are employed in agriculture.

Sources: World Bank Towards Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific: A Companion to the World Development Report, 2012; FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011

10. If women had the same access to productive resources as men in agriculture, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 - 30 percent. This could raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 - 4 percent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12 - 17 percent
Source: FAO, The State of Food and Agriculture 2010-2011

11. Many food insecure countries also exhibit low Gender Inequality Index rankings - Afghanistan (135), Bangladesh (116), and PNG (133), Cambodia (88) and the Lao PDR (95).

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2010

12. A study of women elected to local government in India found that female leadership positively affected the provision of services for both men and women. Of the 22 countries where women constitute more than 30 percent of the national legislature, 18 have some form of quota for addressing gender gaps.

Sources: World Bank, Towards Gender Equality in East Asia and the Pacific: A Companion to the World Development Report, 2012; UNIFEM, Who Answers to Women? Gender and Accountability

IS ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT A PANACEA?

Development experts have argued that women have the potential to change their own economic status, as well as that of the communities and countries in which they live. Yet more often than not, women's economic contributions go unrecognized, their work undervalued and their promise unnourished.

Unequal opportunities between women and men continue to hamper women's ability to lift them from poverty and gain more options to improve their lives. Research shows that inequalities persist in the way paid and unpaid work is divided between women and men; in the fact that women remain the sole caregivers at home, and in their limited access to resources. What's more, these imbalances slow economic growth.

Women's economic empowerment – that is, their capacity to bring about economic change for themselves – is increasingly viewed as the most important contributing factor to achieving equality between women and men. But economically strengthening women – who are half the world's workforce – is not only a means by which to spur economic growth, but also a matter of advancing women's human rights. When governments, businesses and communities invest in women, and when they work to eliminate inequalities, developing countries are less likely to be plagued by poverty. Entire nations can also better their chance of becoming stronger players in the global marketplace.

Consider some of the positive outcomes of women's economic empowerment:

- Where women's participation in the labor force grew fastest, the economy experienced the largest reduction in poverty rates.
- When women farmers can access the resources they need, their production increases, making it less likely that their families are hungry and malnourished.
- When women own property and earn money from it, they may have more bargaining power at home. This in turn can help reduce their vulnerability to domestic violence and HIV infection.
- When women have access to time-saving technologies – such as a foot-pedaled water pump or a motorized scooter – economic benefits can follow. ICRW research has found that technology helps women increase their productivity as well as launch income-generating pursuits and entrepreneurial ventures. Those kinds of outcomes empower women to become stronger leaders and to more effectively contribute financially to their families, communities and countries.
- Recognizing women's rights and believing their ability are essential for women's empowerment and development. Females should realize their own capabilities and potentials which will strengthen their self image and foster them with confidence to take action in life.
- Empowering women is the basic to the basics to the basics of human rights where she wants neither to beg for power nor search for power hierarchy to exercise power against others. On the contrary she demands to be accepted as human first of all. She as a person in command of herself and for that

necessarily all the resources physical, social, economical, political, cultural and spiritual to be equally accessible to her.

Increased income controlled by women gives them self-confidence, which helps them obtain a voice and vote in:

- Household decisions such as domestic well-being decisions. For instance, women tend to use income clout for more equitable decisions about sons and daughters' diet, education and health.
- Economic decisions: acquiring, allocating, and selling assets.
- Fertility decisions: economically empowered women tend to have fewer children
- Land use and conservation decisions: rural women tend to favor sustainable environmental practices since they are usually the ones that collect the families' natural resources such as water and firewood.

Female economic power also enhances the "wealth and well-being of nations." Women who control their own income tend to have fewer children, and fertility rates have shown to be inversely related to national income growth. Women are also more able - and generally more willing than male counterparts - to send daughters as well as sons to school, even when they earn less than men. In turn, a woman's level of education affects her decision-making process when it comes to questions about contraception, age of marriage, fertility, child mortality, modern sector employment and earnings.

SOLUTION FOR GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

To solve the gender discrimination problem the E4SD factor would be very useful. The E4SD factors are-

- 1) *EDUCATION* : Napoleon once said, "Give me a good mother, I will give you a good nation". Education develops the skills, knowledge, changes the attitude and improves the self confidence. It provides employment opportunity and income. Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. Girls' education also means comprehensive change for a society. As women get the opportunity to go to school and obtain higher-level jobs, they gain status in their communities. Status translates into the power to influence their families and societies. Even bigger changes become possible as girls' education becomes the cultural norm. Women can't defend themselves against physical and sexual abuse until they have the authority to speak against it without fear. Knowledge gives that authority.
- 2) *EMPOWERMENT* : Employment gives the income and improves the economic position of the women. Employed women are given importance by the family members. It gives the economic independence for the women.
- 3) *ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE* : In most of the countries of Asia, women in the young age- depends on her father, in the middle age- she depends on her husband and in the older age- she depends on her son. Woman always depends on somebody for her livelihood. Economic independence will free the women from the slavery position and boost the self confidence. It will also help in the national progress.
- 4) *EMPOWERMENT* : Empowering women with the help of laws, education and employment will make the society to accept the women as an equal gender like male. Empowering them will help to use her full capability and mitigate the economic dependency of women.
- 5) *SELF-CONFIDENCE* : Uneducated and unemployed women haven't had the self-confidence. They need it to live an ethical and self esteemed life. Hence, boosting the morale and self confidence of the women, is the key eliminate the inferior complex of her.
- 6) *DECISION MAKING* : Even in the family as well in the society, the decision making power of women is denied. Mostly males make the major decisions. This makes women as voice less and destroyed her confidence and she feels less important in the family as well as in the society. So to end the gender discrimination, women must empower with decision making power.

THE UN MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS REGARDING GENDER DISCRIMINATION:

To end gender inequity and discrimination, one has to look beyond one-factor determinism. The UN Millennium Development Goals clearly points to multi-pronged approach to combat the issue. It is obvious in the seven strategies outlined:

1. Strengthen opportunities for post-secondary education for girls while making commitment to universal primary education;
2. Guarantee sexual and reproductive health and rights;
3. Invest in infrastructures to reduce women's and girls' time burdens,
4. Guarantee women's and girls' property and inheritance rights;
5. Eliminate gender inequity in employment by decreasing women's reliance on informal employment,

- closing gender gaps in earnings, and reducing occupational segregation;
6. Increase women's share of seats in parliament and local government; and
Combat violence against girls and women.

CONCLUSION

It is well-established that gender inequity resulting from discrimination and prejudice is impeding out attempt to move forward as a world community. However, because of the work by many agencies and governments, women today appear to be better off than their counterparts 50 years ago and better off in relation to men. If the momentum continues, one can expect to see women enjoying equal status and moving the global community forward to a rate of unprecedented social, economic, and political growth.

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