

# A Comparative Study of Gender Gaps among SAARC Nations

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## ABSTRACT

This paper makes a comparative study of gender inequality in the SAARC region by taking the parameters like Economic participation and opportunity, Educational attainment, Health and survival and Political empowerment. For the analysis, the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 of World Economic Forum has been utilized. Though women have experienced significant improvement in literacy and educational attainment, there exists considerable disparity in terms of economic participation and political empowerment. The study shows that considerable scope exists to improve the economic, social and political prospects of women in this region. Continuous policy action, both at country and regional level is required for achieving gender equality.

**Key Words:** Gender Gap, SAARC Nations, Women Empowerment

## INTRODUCTION

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) was initiated with the broad objective of promoting the well-being of the peoples of South Asia and improving the quality of life through accelerated social progress, economic growth and cultural development in the region in a meaningful collaboration among its member countries. Since its inception, it has given due priority for the empowerment of women in this region. This region is the home of 860 million women, of which three-fourth live in India. [1] South Asian women have least access to development duo to poverty, patriarchal nature of the society, poor governance, military confrontation etc. These factors

continue to restrict women in every sphere of life including women's ownership of property and other economic resources, their mobility and access to information and education. [2] Intra-household gender disparity in this region is a major source of intra-generational and intergenerational inequalities and differences in opportunities and capabilities. [3] In fact, they face more discrimination in terms of health services, human rights, employment opportunities and education as compared to women of other parts of the world. The forces of economic liberalization and globalization also exert a negative influence on women working in both formal and informal sectors. It has been observed that countries that are high-achiever in terms of health and education, have also achieved rapid demographic transition early in their development process. [4] In order to mitigate the conditions of women, SAARC heads have organized various international conventions and acted accordingly for the improvement of the status of women in the region. But in spite of all these efforts they are yet to arrive at the desired goals. The recent Gender Global Gap Report 2020 of World Economic Forum also shows the dismal picture of this region in achieving the gender parity. Out of the eight regions of the world South Asia Region stands at the seventh position, just above the Middle East and North Africa. South Asian countries have able to close only 66.1% of its overall gender gaps. According to WEF, if the present rate of progress continues, it will take another 71 years to close the gender gap of this region.

The analysis of the persistence of gender inequality gained momentum after the introduction of the concept of “missing women” by A. Sen in 1990. For every missing woman, many more women fail to a job, an education or a political responsibility than their male counterparts. [5] South Asian countries are significantly lagging in achieving gender parity and empowerment of women as compared to other regions of the world. According to an estimate, GDP of this region could add up 3.4 trillion US \$ by 2025, if gender equity is ensured. [6] Across the SAARC countries, social norms and values favour men and boys in accessing the opportunities and control over resources, while women faces challenges in social mobility and work participation. [7] In terms of educational attainment, South Asia has the second highest school dropout girls of 46.5 million, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa. [8] Despite some improvement in education and literacy rates, gender parity in participation in leadership, employment opportunities, political decisions and empowerment is still low in South Asian countries as compared to other developed countries. [9] Besides, this region also experience high prevalence of child marriage. 59% girls in Bangladesh, 40% in Nepal and 27% in India got marriage before the legal minimum age of marriage. [10]

**Objectives:**

The basic objective of the study is to compare the present status of the different SAARC nations on the basis of the Global Gender Gap Index scores calculated by the World Economic Forum. It also aims at to

recommend some appropriate suggestions to address the issue of gender parity and making them gender just nations with fair and balanced Gender Gap Index scores in future.

**METHODOLOGY**

The present work is basically descriptive and analytical in nature from a gender perspective. Various secondary data sources from published reports, journals and blogs have been used in this study.

**DISCUSSION**

**Data Description:** World Economic Forum (WEF) started measuring gender gap globally from 2006. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 covers 153 countries. It ranks countries according to their Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) based on their achievement of parity in four key areas: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. Altogether there are fourteen sub-indicators under this four areas and the scores for each of these sub-indicators varies between 0 and 1 (except two health indicators), where the score 0 implies imparity and 1 indicate parity in closing gender gaps. For the sub-indicator, sex ratio at birth, the benchmark is 0.944 and for healthy life expectancy the equality benchmark is 1.06. [1] Among the eight SAARC nations the report does not provide data for Afghanistan. So, the present study is confined to seven SAARC countries. Data structure of the World Economic Forum is summarized in table 1.

**Table 1: Data structure for Global Gender Gap Index, 2020**

Sub-index	Indicator	What it measures
Economic Participation and Opportunity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Labour force participation rate (%)</li> <li>❖ Wage equality for similar work 1-7 (best)</li> <li>❖ Estimated earned income (PPP, \$)</li> <li>❖ Legislators, senior officials and managers (%)</li> <li>❖ Professional and technical workers (%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Difference between women and men in labour force participation rates</li> <li>➤ Ratio of estimated female-to male earned income</li> <li>➤ Ratio of women to men in this two categories</li> </ul>
Educational Attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Literacy rate (%)</li> <li>❖ Enrolment in primary education (%)</li> <li>❖ Enrolment in secondary education (%)</li> <li>❖ Enrolment in tertiary education (%)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Ratio of women to men literacy rate</li> <li>➤ Ratio of women to men in primary education</li> <li>➤ Ratio of women to men in secondary education</li> <li>➤ Ratio of women to men in tertiary education</li> </ul>
Health and Survival	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Sex ratio at birth (%)</li> <li>❖ Healthy life expectancy (years)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ To capture the phenomenon of “missing women”</li> <li>➤ Gap between women’s and men’s healthy life expectancy</li> </ul>
Political Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Women in parliament (%)</li> <li>❖ Women in ministerial positions (%)</li> <li>❖ Years with female/male head of state (last 50)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Gap between men and women at the highest level of political decision-making thought</li> <li>➤ The ratio of women to men in ministerial positions</li> <li>➤ The ratio of women to men in parliamentary positions</li> </ul>

### Country-wise analysis of Gender Gaps

Among the SAARC nations, Bangladesh occupies the first position with a reasonable Gender Gap Index (GGI) of 0.726 (Fig. 1). It is positioned in the 50<sup>th</sup> place globally and is the only country among SAARC nations that takes a place within the top 50 nations of the world. It has improved its position as compared to 2006 (91<sup>st</sup> place with GGI 0.627). Nepal stands second among the SAARC nations with a GGI score of 0.68 occupying the 101<sup>st</sup> place globally. Its position has also improved as compared to 2006 (111<sup>th</sup> place with GGI score of 0.548). Sri Lanka stands third with a score of 0.68 being ranked 102<sup>nd</sup> globally. Though the GGI scores of Nepal and Sri Lanka are same, Nepal lies ahead of Sri Lanka because it has improved its position as compared to 2006. With a GGI score of 0.668, India stands fourth among the SAARC nations. It is ranked 112<sup>th</sup> globally

and its position has deteriorated as compared to 2006 (98<sup>th</sup> position with GGI score of 0.601). Maldives, with a GGI score of 0.646, is ranked 123<sup>rd</sup> globally. Bhutan stands 6<sup>th</sup> with a GGI score 0.635. Pakistan ranks last (151<sup>st</sup> globally) among the SAARC nations with a GGI score of 0.564. From Fig. 1 it is clear that except Sri Lanka, GGI score of all the other countries of SAARC has improved as compared to 2006. But in relative term (in terms of global Rank) only Bangladesh and Nepal have able to improve their position. This implies that though the GGI score of most of the SAARC nations have improved in absolute value, but the other countries of the world have improved much as compared to SAARC countries so that the overall global rank of the SAARC countries have not improved so much (only exception is Bangladesh).

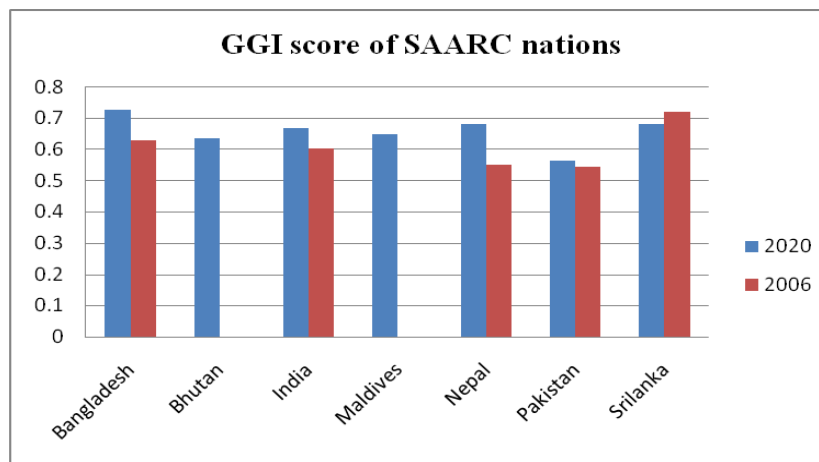


Fig. 1: GGI score of SAARC nations in 2006 and 2020

Source: Global Gender Gap report 2020.

Note: GGI data of Bhutan and Maldives for 2006 is absent in the report.

### Economic Participation and Opportunity:

In terms of economic participation and opportunity, Nepal stands 1<sup>st</sup> among the SAARC nations. The country has a score of 0.632 in this sub-index and is positioned at 101<sup>st</sup> place globally (Fig. 2). With a score of 0.558, Sri Lanka stands in the second place among the SAARC nations and 126<sup>th</sup> place globally. Then Bhutan comes in the third place among SAARC nations with a score

of 0.544 and occupies 130<sup>th</sup> place in the global rank. Among the SAARC nations 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> place is occupied by Maldives, Bangladesh and India with scores of 0.518, 0.438 and 0.354 respectively. Their positions in the global list are 131<sup>st</sup>, 141<sup>st</sup> and 149<sup>th</sup> respectively. Pakistan with a very low score of 0.327 is ranked 150<sup>th</sup> globally and is ranked last among seven South Asian nations.

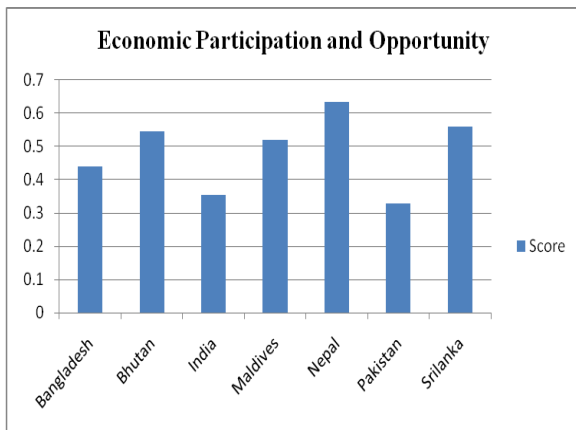


Fig. 2: Economic Participation and Opportunity score of SAARC nations in 2020

Source: Global Gender Gap report 2020.

### Health and Survival:

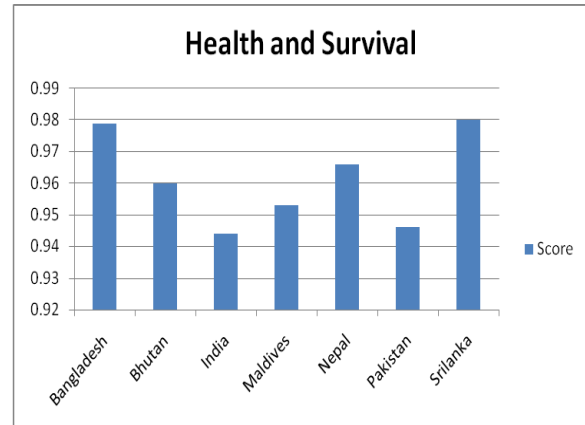


Fig. 4: Health and survival score of SAARC nations in 2020

Source: Global Gender Gap report 2020.

### Educational Attainment:

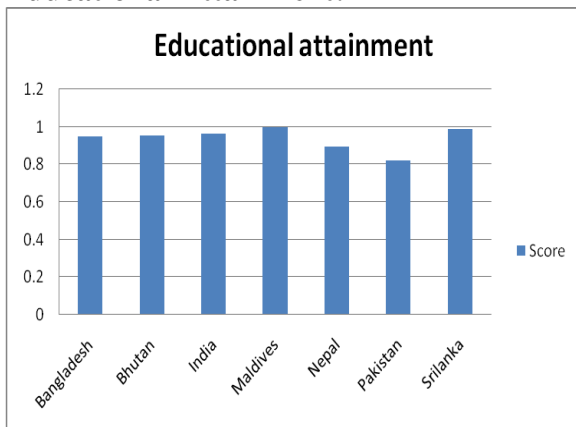


Fig. 3: Educational attainment score of SAARC nations in 2020

Source: Global Gender Gap report 2020.

With regard to educational attainment sub-index, Maldives has fared excellently as it is ranked first globally and also among SAARC countries with a score of 1 (Fig. 3). It is the only country among the SAARC nations with a score of 1 indicating to have absolute gender parity in all the indicators under this sub-index. With the second highest score of 0.988, Sri Lanka occupies the second place in this sub-index among the SAARC nations and globally it is ranked at 88<sup>th</sup> place. India ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> in this region with a score of 0.962 and occupies 112<sup>nd</sup> place globally. The 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> place in this region is occupied by Bhutan, Bangladesh and Nepal with global ranks of 116<sup>th</sup>, 120<sup>th</sup> and 133<sup>rd</sup> and the scores are 0.954, 0.951, and 0.895 respectively.

Sri Lanka ranks first globally and also among the SAARC nations in this sub-index with a score of 0.98 (Fig 4). It ranks first in the two indicators of this sub-index i.e., sex ratio at birth and healthy life expectancy globally as well as among the SAARC nations, with scores 0.944 and 1.060. Bangladesh, with a score of 0.979 ranks second in this region and 119<sup>th</sup> position globally. The third place is occupied by Nepal whose score is 0.966 in this sub-index with a global rank of 131<sup>st</sup>. Bhutan, Maldives and Pakistan ranks 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> among SAARC nations with the sub-index scores of 0.96, 0.953 and 0.946 and 144<sup>th</sup>, 147<sup>th</sup> and 149<sup>th</sup> global places. India, with a score of 0.944 stands at the bottom among SAARC nations and 150<sup>th</sup> place globally. For the two indicators of this sub-index namely sex ratio at birth and healthy life expectancy, the country has the scores of 0.910 and 1.020.

### Political Empowerment:

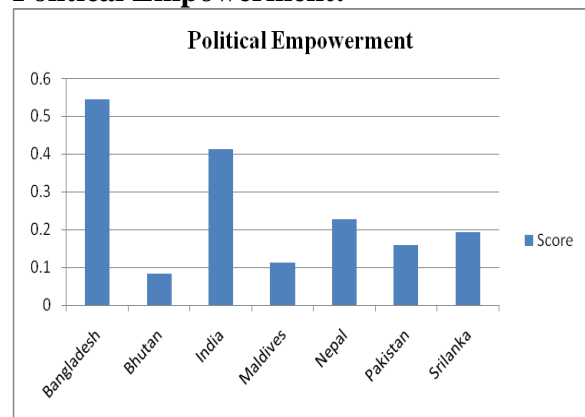


Fig. 5: Political empowerment score of SAARC nations in 2020

Source: Global Gender Gap report 2020.

Bangladesh fares well in political empowerment sub-index scoring 0.545 globally placing it in the 7<sup>th</sup> position and highest position among the SAARC nations (Fig. 5). The country ranks 86<sup>th</sup> globally with a score of 0.26 in the sub-category of the presence of women in parliament and with the scores 0.087 and 1, the country is positioned 124<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> globally for the presence of women in ministerial positions and years with female heads of state respectively. India comes second among the SAARC nations with a score of 0.411 and a global rank of 18<sup>th</sup>. Nepal, with a score of 0.227 stands at the 59<sup>th</sup> place globally and 3<sup>rd</sup> among SAARC nations. Then come Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Maldives with scores of 0.193, 0.159 and 0.111. With a very low score of 0.082, Bhutan has been placed in the 132<sup>nd</sup> position globally and last among SAARC nations in this sub-index.

### Key Findings:

After careful investigation of GGI scores of the SAARC nations, it is found that the performance of all the SAARC nations is lagging behind in most of the indicators.

- Bangladesh is the only country among seven SAARC countries that ranks within the first 50 countries of the world. India ranks 112<sup>th</sup> and Pakistan occupies 151<sup>st</sup> position, only before Iraq and Yemen.
- The average distance completed to parity by SAARC nations is at 66.1% and there is still a 33.9% average gender gap that remains to be closed. Among the eight regions of the world, it occupies 7<sup>th</sup> position, just above Middle-East and North-America in terms of closing the gender gaps.
- Among the four sub-indexes, on average, the largest disparity is found in the economic participation and opportunity (36.5%) section. The second largest gap is in political empowerment; 38.7% of this gap is closed so far. Higher achievements are made in other

two sub-indexes, education (94.3%) and health and survival (94.7%), these gaps have been closed so far.

- The performance of this region in political empowerment sub-index (38.7%) is on par with the leading region (Western Europe 40.9%) of the world. This is due to the fact that Bangladesh (1<sup>st</sup>), India (4<sup>th</sup>) and Sri Lanka (9<sup>th</sup>) are among the top countries with the most years with a female head of state in the past 50 years.
- The condition of SAARC nations in economic participation and opportunities sub-index is miserable, but it has made significant progress in narrowing its educational gender gap and health and survival gender gap.
- India has been able to close two-third of overall gender gap. The economic gender gap in India is a matter of concern. Among the 153 countries, India is the only country where gender gap in economic opportunities is larger than the political gender gap.
- Among the SAARC nations, Maldives and Sri Lanka ranks first globally in educational attainment and health and survival sub-indexes respectively.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 exposes the existence of gender gaps in different socio-economic dimensions of the SAARC nations. The poor performance of these countries may be attributed to the negative social norms that inhibit women participation in the public sphere and lack of adequate opportunities for women empowerment. Moreover, absence of gender specific legislations and policies also acts as hindrances for achieving the desired goals. It is therefore necessary for the SAARC nations to visualize gender related aspects as the top most priority issue to be addressed. For this purpose a continuous periodic meeting and exchange of ideas among the nations is highly solicited for appearing

them to stand on a strong footing in the global economy.

For achieving gender parity in the SAARC nations, following recommendations may prove to be fruitful:

- ❖ A Common Gender Action Plan for SAARC may be undertaken for the betterment of gender gap scores in this region in the coming years that would consider all the shortcomings of the previous policies.
- ❖ Each country should exchange the best practices of their own with the other SAARC nations. For example Maldives and Sri Lanka attains the score 1 (complete gender parity) in educational attainment and health and survival sub-index respectively. They should come forward involving other nations to adopt suitable policy measures according to their requirements.
- ❖ There is a great scope of enhancing human capital formation in this region through technical support, knowledge exchange and capacity building for the comprehensive development of this region with a special emphasis on women and girls as change agents rather than beneficiaries.
- ❖ Social mobilization is a very powerful instrument in achieving gender equity. Therefore special efforts should be made for mobilizing grass root groups by community based organizations through social campaign that addresses gender norms and barriers.
- ❖ A greater collaborative effort can be made by the SAARC countries with international bodies like UNICEF, UNIFEM and UNCHR for addressing gender related issues. These bodies will provide technical support in line with international standards in emerging challenges like migration, urbanization, digitization, climate change where women and girls face severe discrimination.

- ❖ Young women and adolescent girls should be provided with market related vocational skills to cope with the problem of automation and technological up gradation to prevent inequality and polarization of labour force.

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