

GENDER SECURITY IN SOUTH ASIA: DOES THE REGIONALISM APPROACH REALLY ADDRESS THEM?

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ABSTRACT

The paper is a qualitative meta-analysis of the relationship between gender and regionalism and the impact it has on women's rights and welfare in South Asia. Despite some progress in recent years, women in the region still face significant social, economic, and political barriers that hinder their ability to exercise their rights. Regional organizations like SAARC can play a crucial role in promoting gender equality and social justice throughout the region by providing a platform for international discussion and cooperation and supporting laws and programs that advance women's rights. However, these organizations must also address their challenges, including financial, accountability, and governance issues. Women's rights movements in South Asia have made significant contributions to promoting gender equality and social justice in the region by raising awareness of the problems women face and advocating for laws and policies that support their empowerment. However, they face challenges such as a lack of funding for lobbying and outreach efforts and opposition from conservative organizations. The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted existing disparities and underscored the need for ongoing assistance and advocacy for women's rights in the region. The paper argues that a multidimensional and coordinated approach involving regional organizations, governments, civil society, and the corporate sector is necessary to address the complex issues of gender and regionalism in South Asia. By working together, these parties can advance social justice and gender equality and build a more equitable society for women in the region.

Keywords: Gender Security, Regionalism, South Asia, Empowerment, Rights, Social Justice.

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INTRODUCTION

Gender and regionalism are two critical issues that intersect in the South Asian context. South Asia is one of the world's most diversified regions, containing countries with a wide range of economic, social, and political situations. Despite its variety, the area is characterized by a patriarchal social framework that marginalizes women and limits their opportunity to participate meaningfully in social, economic, and political life. In contrast, regionalism refers to the processes of economic, political, and cultural integration within a certain geographic region. South Asia has seen some regional integration attempts, including the South Asian Association for Regional

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Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC).

Gender and regionalism are two significant topics that overlap in the South Asian environment in a variety of ways. Depending on the policies and practices implemented, regional integration programs can either perpetuate or challenge existing gender inequality. Trade liberalization policies, for example, may disproportionately harm women employees who work in informal and insecure jobs and lack the social protections and negotiating strength that formal workers have (*Women and Trade: The Role of Trade in Promoting Women's Equality*, 2020). Similarly, infrastructure development projects, such as dams and highways, can have substantial gender implications since they can displace women from their homes and communities, as well as disrupt their access to resources and livelihoods (Lei et al. 2019). Regional integration programs, on the other hand, might give possibilities to advance women's rights and gender equality. Regional organizations and initiatives may serve as significant venues for advancing gender-sensitive policies and practices, as well as for establishing safe places for women's voices to be heard. Regional cooperation can also give opportunities to address regional issues that affect women, such as gender-based violence and discrimination.

This paper will explore the intersections of gender and regionalism in South Asia, examining the challenges and opportunities for promoting gender equality and social justice within the context of regional integration initiatives. The paper will focus on three main subtopics: women's political engagement, women's labor rights and economic empowerment, and gender and environmental sustainability. The study hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the complex dynamics of gender and regionalism in South Asia through this analysis and explore ways for encouraging more inclusive and sustainable regional development.

Women's Political Participation

Women's political engagement in South Asia has been a hotly debated subject in recent years. Notwithstanding regional advances towards gender equality, women continue to confront major impediments to participation in official decision-making processes. Cultural standards, a lack of access to education, and restricted possibilities for political engagement are examples of these hurdles (Altuzarra et al. 2021). The continuance of patriarchal attitudes and customs is one of the most significant barriers to women's political engagement in South Asia. Men are frequently

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expected to hold positions of power and influence under traditional gender roles and expectations, while women are supposed to focus on domestic tasks and caring. This socialization process can lead to a lack of confidence among women in their ability to participate in politics, as well as reluctance among male political actors to support women's political engagement (Preece & Stoddard 2015).

Women in South Asia suffer structural impediments to political involvement in addition to cultural constraints. Women are frequently barred from official political organizations such as political parties and elected posts, and they may lack the resources and networks needed to traverse these structures successfully. When women strive to enter the political realm, they are frequently exposed to violence and harassment, thus restricting their prospects for involvement (Jennings 1983). Notwithstanding these obstacles, there are chances in South Asia to promote women's political engagement. Gender-sensitive policies and efforts, such as quotas and affirmative action, can help to address women's underrepresentation in formal decision-making processes. The use of technology and social media can also help to amplify women's voices and provide them with new avenues for political engagement (Smith 2015).

In South Asia, a variety of initiatives have been undertaken to encourage women's political engagement. For instance, quotas for women in local government organizations have been implemented in several nations, such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India. In many nations, women's networks and caucuses have also been created, giving women a forum to discuss their experiences and promote gender-sensitive laws and women's rights. Concerns exist, nevertheless, over how well these projects support true female empowerment (Priebe 2017). For instance, the use of quotas may occasionally lead to the election of female candidates who are not sincerely devoted to women's rights and gender equality. Women's networks and caucuses also struggle to remain relevant and have a long-lasting influence (Nazneen, Hossain & Chopra 2017). To effectively promote women's political participation in South Asia, a comprehensive and sustained approach is needed that addresses the cultural, social, and political barriers that women face. This approach should prioritize the promotion of gender-sensitive policies and initiatives and engage with women as agents of change in regional decision-making processes.

Gender-Based Violence and the Role of Regional Organizations

Millions of women and girls in South Asia experience gender-based violence (GBV) each year. GBV is generally founded on patriarchal views and gender inequality, and it can take many different forms, including physical, sexual, and psychological abuse (Jejeebhoy, Santhya, & Acharya 2014). In South Asia, regional organizations play a significant role in tackling GBV and advancing gender equality. The continuation of societal and cultural practices that support violence against women is one of the major obstacles to ending GBV in South Asia (Decker et al. 2015). Particularly in rural and impoverished groups, these norms can be difficult to confront since they are frequently ingrained firmly. Moreover, GBV is frequently not reported because of shame and fear of retaliation, which can worsen violence and restrict access to justice for survivors.

Regional organizations in South Asia, such as the South Asian Organization for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), have taken action to advance gender equality and women's empowerment after realizing the need of resolving GBV (Taukobong et al. 2016). The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Unit was founded by SAARC, and it strives to advance gender equality and combat GBV in the region via capacity-building projects, policy advocacy, and research (Mohan, 2013). Civil society groups (CSOs), in addition to regional organizations, have been crucial in combating GBV in South Asia. CSOs have been at the forefront of promoting legislative and policy changes as well as offering assistance and services to GBV victims. These organizations work to raise awareness about the issue of GBV, challenge social norms that perpetuate violence against women, and provide crucial support to survivors.

Yet, there are difficulties in tackling GBV in the area. The lack of political will and commitment to combating GBV at the national level is one of the main obstacles. Several countries in South Asia have taken a long time to establish and put into practice laws and policies that safeguard women's rights and combat GBV. Weak legal and criminal systems that fall short in their attempts to address GBV frequently exacerbate this lack of political will. The lack of coordination and cooperation among regional groups and CSOs working on the problem of GBV is another difficulty. While many organizations are working to address GBV in South Asia, there is often a lack of coordination and collaboration between these organizations, which can result in duplication of efforts and limited impact.

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A thorough and coordinated strategy including regional organizations, governments, and civil society groups is required to successfully address GBV in South Asia. The advancement of gender equality and women's empowerment should be given priority in this strategy, together with the adoption of regulations and frameworks that safeguard women's rights and deal with GBV.

South Asia is plagued with GBV, a problem that calls for a coordinated response by regional organizations, governments, and civil society groups (Doron & Broom 2013). Regional organizations, like SAARC, have a crucial role to play in advancing gender equality and combating GBV via measures to strengthen capacity. Furthermore, important in questioning social norms, increasing knowledge of GBV, and helping survivors are civil society groups. A comprehensive and coordinated strategy that prioritizes the promotion of gender equality, the execution of laws and other regulatory frameworks, and the coordination and participation of regional organizations and CSOs are required to successfully combat GBV in South Asia (Paranjpe 2017).

Women's Economic Empowerment and Regional Integration

In South Asia, where women confront several obstacles to obtaining economic opportunities and engaging in the labor force, women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a crucial topic. Regional integration also has the ability to open up new economic opportunities and enhance market accessibility for female business owners and employees in the area (Khan & Khan 2003). Nevertheless, in order to fully realize the promise of regional integration for women's economic empowerment, several issues must be resolved. These issues include resolving discriminatory laws and regulations, enhancing access to markets and financing, and encouraging women's entrepreneurship (Yu & Cui 2019).

The continuance of discriminatory laws and regulations that restrict women's access to economic opportunities is one of the major obstacles to WEE in South Asia. For instance, women may find it difficult to start enterprises or obtain loans in some of the nations in the area because they are not permitted to inherit land or own property (Kleinbooi & Lahiff 2007). In several South Asian nations, women face difficulties starting enterprises or obtaining loans due to restricted property ownership and inheritance rights. In India, widows often lose property rights, while in Pakistan, inheritance laws favor male heirs. Bangladesh's cultural norms limit access to credit, and Nepal's customs discourage women from entrepreneurship. Sri Lanka lacks awareness and

documentation, while Bhutan has legal complexities around women's property rights. Reforms are needed to empower women, promote gender equality, and enhance financial inclusion for economic growth and social progress. Similar to this, according to a study conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2020, discriminatory labor laws and practices have been found to hinder women's participation in formal employment and often lead to unequal pay for the same amount of work. Promoting WEE in South Asia also involves expanding access to markets and financing. Women employees and entrepreneurs frequently have less access to financing and funding, which can make it challenging to launch or expand firms. In addition, women may face barriers to accessing markets, such as limited access to information or networks, or cultural barriers that limit their mobility or ability to conduct business outside of the home.

Regional integration can alleviate some of these issues by giving women business owners and workers in the area better access to markets and new economic possibilities. Nevertheless, for WEE to fully benefit from regional integration, several issues need to be resolved. These issues include resolving discriminatory laws and regulations, enhancing access to markets and financing, and encouraging female entrepreneurship. Regional organizations have taken action to promote WEE throughout the area in response to these issues, including the South Asian Organization for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), which has acknowledged the significance of doing so. The Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Unit, founded by SAARC, strives to advance gender equality and women's empowerment via programs for policy advocacy, research, and capacity-building. The promotion of WEE in South Asia has also been greatly assisted by civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs have been at the forefront of promoting legislative and policy changes that support women's economic empowerment as well as offering assistance and services to female employees and business owners (Hennebry, Hari & Piper 2018).

In South Asia, empowering women economically is a crucial problem that calls for tackling many issues, such as discriminatory laws and regulations, restricted access to markets and financing, and cultural restrictions that restrict women's mobility and capacity to engage in labor. Realizing this potential requires a thorough and coordinated approach that involves regional organizations, governments, and civil society organizations. Regional integration has the potential to open up new economic opportunities and improve access to markets for women workers and entrepreneurs in the region (Rice & Galbraith 2008). South Asia can unleash the potential of its

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female workforce and build a more inclusive and prosperous future for all by supporting WEE and eliminating the obstacles that women confront when trying to access economic opportunities.

Beyond Boundaries: Unraveling Unique Gender Challenges in South Asia and Beyond

Differentiated security threats emerge due to gender inequality, particularly in the context of women and girls, as their vulnerability is heightened in various regions, including South Asia. Gender-based violence, trafficking, and restricted access to resources, education, and healthcare create unique security challenges for women. In conflict zones, women face sexual violence and forced displacement, while traditional norms limit their participation in decision-making, further exacerbating their insecurity. South Asia and other regions may differ in the prevalence of certain threats, but the underlying root cause remains gender inequality. Addressing these issues requires targeted policies, legal reforms, and socio-cultural changes to ensure equal rights and security for women and girls globally (Parmar et al. 2014).

The threat to women is not unique to South Asia. While South Asia does have its specific challenges related to gender inequality and women's security, similar threats exist in various regions around the world. Gender-based violence, limited access to resources and education, discrimination in the workplace, and lack of representation in decision-making are prevalent issues faced by women globally (Fikree & Pasha 2004).

However, South Asia does have its distinctive context that contributes to the gendered threats faced by women in the region:

1. **Cultural Norms:** Traditional patriarchal norms are deeply ingrained in many South Asian societies, influencing perceptions of gender roles and limiting women's autonomy and agency.

2. **Legal and Policy Gaps:** Despite improvements, there are still gaps in gender-sensitive laws and policies in some South Asian countries, which can hinder women's access to justice and protection.

3. **Conflict and Instability:** Several South Asian countries have faced internal conflicts and instability, leading to an increase in gender-based violence and sexual exploitation of women in conflict zones.

4. Socio-economic Factors: Poverty and lack of economic opportunities can disproportionately affect women in South Asia, limiting their ability to escape abusive situations and improve their circumstances.

5. Child Marriage and Trafficking: South Asia has some of the highest rates of child marriage and human trafficking, which put young girls at significant risk of violence and exploitation.

6. Religious and Caste-Based Discrimination: Discriminatory practices based on religion and caste can intersect with gender discrimination, leading to even greater vulnerabilities for women from marginalized communities.

While many of these challenges are not unique to South Asia, the combination and intensity of these factors in the region can make it particularly challenging for women to secure their rights, safety, and well-being. It highlights the importance of addressing gender inequality comprehensively through cultural, legal, and policy changes to improve the security and rights of women in South Asia and beyond.

Gender and Environmental Sustainability

In South Asia, concerns about gender and environmental sustainability are interconnected. Due to their social and economic positions in the area, women and girls are disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and climate change (Patel et al. 2019). Equal rights for men and women can also aid in addressing environmental issues and advancing sustainable development in the area. The continuance of gender inequities that restrict women's participation in decision-making processes and access to resources is one of the major obstacles to achieving gender and environmental sustainability in South Asia. Despite being disproportionately impacted by environmental degradation and climate change, women are frequently left out of environmental management decision-making processes (York 2012). As a result, gender inequality may persist and environmental policies and initiatives may be less successful.

Women are often more closely associated with environmental sustainability due to their unique roles, responsibilities, and contributions to sustainable development. This connection is particularly prominent in the South Asia region for several reasons:

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1. **Traditional Roles in Agriculture:** In many South Asian countries, women play a crucial role in agriculture, especially in rural areas. They are involved in activities like planting, harvesting, and seed preservation, which are vital for sustainable agricultural practices.

2. **Natural Resource Management:** Women are often responsible for collecting water, fuelwood, and other natural resources in South Asian households. Their understanding of the environment and the need for sustainable resource management is essential for maintaining ecological balance.

3. **Conservation Practices:** In various South Asian communities, women actively participate in conservation efforts. For instance, in India's Bishnoi community, women have been instrumental in protecting trees and wildlife through traditional conservation customs.

4. **Climate Change Resilience:** Women are disproportionately affected by the impacts of climate change in South Asia. Cyclones, floods, and droughts have severe consequences on women's livelihoods and well-being, leading them to seek climate-resilient solutions.

5. **Women-Led Entrepreneurship:** Women in South Asia are increasingly taking up eco-friendly entrepreneurship, such as organic farming, eco-tourism, and sustainable handicrafts, contributing to environmental conservation and local economic development.

6. **Advocacy and Grassroots Movements:** Women's groups in South Asia often lead environmental advocacy and grassroots movements. For example, the Chipko Movement in India, led by women, is renowned for its efforts in forest conservation and protecting trees from deforestation.

7. **Education and Awareness:** Women's involvement in education and awareness programs further strengthens their commitment to environmental sustainability. Educated women are more likely to adopt sustainable practices and advocate for ecological protection.

8. **Sustainable Household Practices:** Women often drive sustainable practices within their households, such as waste management, energy conservation, and adopting eco-friendly alternatives.

By recognizing and empowering women's roles in environmental sustainability, South Asia can harness their potential to address environmental challenges effectively. Engaging women in

decision-making processes, providing education and resources, and supporting women-led initiatives will foster a more sustainable and inclusive approach to environmental conservation in the region.

Women are essential to the management of natural resources, agriculture, and forestry in South Asia, however, their contributions to sustainable development are sometimes underappreciated. Promoting environmental sustainability in the area may be aided by acknowledging and assisting women's involvement in sustainable development. For instance, encouraging women to engage in sustainable agricultural methods like organic farming or agroforestry can result in more robust and long-lasting food systems (Rice & Galbraith 2008). Promoting environmental sustainability may also aid in advancing gender equality and the empowerment of women in the area. For instance, by reducing women's dependency on conventional biomass fuels, encouraging sustainable energy options like solar power or biogas can assist to minimize their burden and enhance their health (Ding et al. 2014). In addition, promoting sustainable transport solutions, such as cycling or public transport, can improve women's mobility and access to economic opportunities.

Women's organizations and civil society organizations (CSOs) have been instrumental in South Asia in advancing environmental sustainability and gender equality. In addition to offering assistance and resources to women who are impacted by environmental degradation and climate change, CSOs have been at the forefront of promoting laws and actions that address the confluence of gender and environmental sustainability (Debusscher & Ansoms 2013). To promote gender equality and environmental sustainability in South Asia, gender inequality must be addressed, and women must be given the tools they need to participate in environmental management decision-making (Zahid et al. 2020). Although promoting sustainable solutions may also assist to empower women and advance gender equality, recognizing and supporting women's responsibilities in sustainable development can help to advance environmental sustainability and resilience in the region. By promoting gender and environmental sustainability, South Asia can create a more sustainable, equitable, and prosperous future for all.

Women's Rights and Social Movements

Women's rights and social movements in South Asia have a long and complex history. Despite the progress made in recent years, women in South Asia continue to face significant social,

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economic, and political challenges that limit their ability to fully realize their rights. Feminist movements in South Asia have yielded notable impacts, such as increased women's political participation in Bangladesh and legal reforms in India granting equal inheritance rights. In Nepal, women's rights advancements have been made, while Pakistan has seen progress in women's economic empowerment. In Sri Lanka, feminist activism has led to greater awareness and support for addressing violence against women. These examples reflect the transformative influence of the feminist movement in South Asian societies. The continued existence of patriarchal attitudes and mechanisms that support gender inequality is one of the major obstacles to women's rights in South Asia. These beliefs are strongly embedded in the home, the business, and the judicial system, among other facets of society. As a result, women in South Asia continue to experience abuse, discrimination, and a lack of access to economic, medical, and educational possibilities (Anitha 2011). Women's rights movements have formed throughout the region as a reaction to these difficulties, promoting social justice and gender equality. These movements have taken on a wide range of shapes, from neighborhood associations to international and national campaigns (Rice et al. 2008). One of the key strengths of these movements is their ability to bring together women from different backgrounds and communities to collectively address issues related to gender inequality.

The advancement of gender equality-promoting legislation and regulations, as well as a rise in the representation of women in political and economic decision-making, have all been the results of South Asian women's rights campaigns in recent years. For instance, India recently approved a rule requiring that women hold at least one-third of the seats in local government organizations. Moreover, women's organizations in the area have pushed for revisions to the region's sometimes discriminatory marriage, divorce, and inheritance laws. Nonetheless, there are still many obstacles to women's rights movements in South Asia, such as opposition from conservative organizations and a lack of funding for lobbying and outreach. Moreover, the COVID-19 epidemic has worsened already-existing inequalities, with women in the region being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic's economic and social effects (Blundell et al. 2020).

Despite various challenges, women's rights movements in South Asia continue to be a vital force for change, advancing social justice and gender equality throughout the area. These movements have been crucial in raising awareness of the problems that South Asian women are

experiencing as well as in pushing for laws and other measures that support women's rights and enable them to participate fully in all facets of society (Tohidi 2016). Social movements and women's rights have advanced significantly throughout South Asia in recent years, but more must be done: Viz. Women's rights movements in South Asia have been transformative, but challenges persist. Further action is needed in legal reforms to tackle discriminatory laws and labor practices. Economic empowerment requires improved access to credit, fair wages, and entrepreneurial support. Education and awareness campaigns are vital to challenge stereotypes. Ending violence demands comprehensive efforts and support services. Encouraging more women in politics and bridging the digital gender divide are essential. Intersectionality must be recognized, and male engagement is crucial. Regular monitoring and global collaboration can accelerate progress. Creating inclusive societies will enable women to participate fully in all aspects of life. These movements may contribute to the development of a more fair and just society for women throughout the area by carrying out their advocacy for social justice and gender equality.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the intertwined issues of gender and regionalism continue to significantly impact women's rights and well-being in South Asia. Despite some progress, women in the region face formidable social, economic, and political barriers that hinder their full empowerment. Regional organizations like SAARC possess a pivotal role in promoting social justice and gender equality across the area. They can serve as platforms for international collaboration, advocate for women's rights, and support programs that address gender disparities.

However, these regional bodies must also acknowledge and address internal challenges related to finance, accountability, and governance, to ensure effective implementation of their initiatives. Simultaneously, women's rights movements in South Asia have made significant strides in raising awareness about women's issues and advocating for supportive legislation and measures. Their success lies in uniting women from diverse communities towards a shared goal.

Nevertheless, challenges persist. Insufficient funding and opposition from conservative groups pose obstacles to women's rights movements. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities, necessitating ongoing support and advocacy for women's rights in the region. To comprehensively address gender and regionalism complexities, a multidimensional and coordinated approach involving regional organizations, governments, civil society, and the

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corporate sector is essential. Collaboratively, these stakeholders can pave the way for advancing social justice and gender equality in South Asia, fostering a more equitable society for women. Rigorous planning, resource mobilization, and commitment to sustainable change are key to achieving these transformative goals.

The intricate issues of gender and regionalism deeply impact women's rights and well-being in South Asia. Despite some progress, women in the region continue to face significant social, economic, and political barriers that hinder their full empowerment. Regional organizations like SAARC hold a pivotal role in promoting social justice and gender equality across the area. They can serve as platforms for international collaboration, advocating for women's rights, and supporting programs that address gender disparities.

To address these challenges creatively, a multidimensional and coordinated strategy is essential. Governments and regional bodies should prioritize gender-sensitive budgeting to allocate resources equitably and effectively. Embracing technology can bridge the digital gender divide, promoting digital literacy and inclusive technology initiatives to cater to women's specific needs. Public-private partnerships can fuel women's economic empowerment by creating opportunities for female entrepreneurs and providing mentorship and market access. Involving youth in advocacy and decision-making processes can challenge harmful gender norms and inspire progressive change. Promoting cultural transformation through arts, media, and education can challenge patriarchal norms and stereotypes, fostering a more inclusive society. Investing in data collection and research on gender issues can inform evidence-based policymaking, leading to targeted interventions.

Addressing intersectionality is crucial, recognizing the diverse experiences of women and designing policies that cater to various backgrounds and identities. Integrating gender perspectives into environmental sustainability projects empowers women as agents of climate change mitigation and adaptation. Engaging men as allies in the struggle for gender equality can drive positive change and challenge toxic masculinity. Facilitating South-South collaboration among South Asian countries allows the exchange of best practices and experiences to accelerate progress towards gender equality.

Implementing these creative prescriptions demands dedication, innovation, and ongoing commitment from all stakeholders. Embracing a holistic and inclusive approach can unlock the full potential of women in South Asia, driving positive change and creating a more just and equitable society.

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