

“We need the talent and insights of girls today to lead our businesses tomorrow. That’s why expanding educational opportunities for girls isn’t charity. It’s a smart investment in a stronger global economy and in our future.”

- Indra Nooyi, Chairman and CEO of PepsiCo

Gender Equality, as a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG), envisions to empower all women and girls and work towards building a more inclusive environment to nurture young girls and women alike. History speaks about the inequalities faced by girls and women in all the spheres around the globe, starting from unpaid domestic work to unfair economic and political representation. While numbers and indicators suggest that there is substantial progress, but the overall scenario depicts that the indicators are declining. Gender Inequality is a deep-rooted structural issue based on conventional societal norms and attitudes which are undermining the progress achieved so far and the ability to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 in the near future. According to recent data from some 90 countries, women devote on an average roughly three times more hours a day to unpaid care and domestic work than men, limiting the time available for paid work, education and leisure and further reinforcing gender-based socioeconomic disadvantages. They continue to be underrepresented at political levels and this gap is only widening. Only 57 per cent of women aged 15 to 49, married or in a union, make their own decisions about sexual relations and the use of contraceptives and health services.

Often quoted as the worst public health and economic crisis in a century, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about multifarious negative impacts around the world. It has impacted the fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the fifth goal Gender Equality has suffered its own share. It is a fact that in order to achieve a sustainable future, ending discrimination towards women and decreasing inequalities are of utmost importance. The United Nations has described the worldwide increase in domestic abuse as a ‘shadow pandemic’ alongside the coronavirus one, with low access to health facilities and essential emergency needs. Due to this pandemic, women are overburdened with unpaid domestic work, forced to live with their abusers and perpetrators within those four enclosed walls, lost jobs and their source of livelihood, facing the digital divide with mere access to educational facilities and high dropout rates. The already existing vast differences at several forefronts have been aggravated.

However, if we focus on the South Asian countries, one can witness different scenarios as per the Sustainable Development Report 2020 and Global Gender Gap Report 2020 by the World Economic Forum. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 reports that this year the progress has not only been larger than in the previous years but also widespread with 101

countries improving their score but 48 has seen their performance unchanged. This report is a record of performance of countries across four dimensions, viz. economic participation, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Country-wise Profiles of the SAARC Nations

Afghanistan

Afghanistan ranks at the 139th position out of 166 nations states according to the Sustainable Development Report 2020. The fifth goal 'Gender Equality' holds a distorted future in the nation with major challenges attached to it. The literacy rate of women in the nation is less than a third when compared to their male counterparts. According to the report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation* has been moderately improving, *female-to-male education received ratio* remains stagnant, *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is improving, but the *political participation of women* remains marginalised.

Last year, Kazakhstan, the European Union, and the UNDP launched an education programme to train and educate several dozen Afghan women in Kazakh universities over the next five years, a long-term vision that is achievable through collaborative efforts. [According to UN Women](#), more than 8 million students are enrolled in school, including more than 2.5 million girls, however, the regular targeting of girls attending the school, continued stigma against girls' education, and the increasing influence of violent extremism are posing increased challenges.



Image source: Better Work

Bangladesh

As per the Sustainable Development Report of 2020, Bangladesh is positioned at 109th, with the stagnation of SDG 5 goal as there are significant challenges remaining. According to the report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation* has been moderately improving, *female-to-male education received ratio* is decreasing, *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is on track, and *seats held by women in National Parliament* is in stagnation. Though the government is building efforts to make the country gender-inclusive and gender-responsive, there are still challenges and issues to be solved.

Bangladesh has made appreciable progress in South Asia ahead of Nepal, Sri Lanka and India and ranks 50th in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report 2020 by closing 72.6 per cent of the overall global gender gap. As per the GGG Report, it is the only country in the world where women have had a longer tenure than men at the helm of the state over the past 50 years. This country has focused on policies and interventions to reduce infant mortality rate, poverty alleviation, women entrepreneurship, education and health. Various initiatives have been taken by the government to provide financial inclusion and economic opportunities to women.

Bhutan

With a noteworthy rank of 80, Bhutan is one of the top-performing nations in the assortment of its South Asian counterparts. However, the fifth goal still comes with the red tag

signifying major challenges attached to the same. According to the 2020 report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation and demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is on track, *female-to-male education received ratio* is decreasing, and *seats held by women in National Parliament* is moderately improving. According to the GGG Report, women enjoy a longer life expectancy than men do, with the only exception being Bhutan.

The Constitution of Bhutan guarantees equal rights to both women and men and the electoral laws provide equal rights for women in politics. Bhutan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discriminations Against Women (CEDAW) in 1981 and the 53rd session of the National Assembly of Bhutan identified the need to form a women's association to enhance the role of women in the national development process. [According to a World Bank blog](#), the main constraints for women in the workforce are the responsibilities of household chores and childcare which cause gender disparity in overall employment to increase. Despite these, Bhutan is trying to bring forward a gender-sensitive curriculum in its educational system and aims to provide vocational training to empower women upon graduation from schools.

India

India has lost 4 positions since the previous editions of GGG Report 2020 despite a small score improvement and is placed at 112th Rank out of 153 countries. On the other hand, it has been placed at 117th rank out of 166 countries as per the SDR 2020 with the SDG in stagnation and still, there are major challenges to be faced. According to the SDR 2020, *female-to-male education ratio* in India is declining along with *female-to-male labour force participation* and *seats held by women in the National Parliament* is in stagnation. This points out a grave and dark reality that there is a large section of women in the society who lack the basic educational facilities, little or no access to economic opportunities and political representation.

In India, the economic gender gap is larger than the political gender gap with females having low pay or wages which is also among the world's lowest. At the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education, the number of girls and women attending schools and colleges are systematically larger than men but a large difference persists for literacy rate as per the GGG Report 2020. There are various social barriers and deep-rooted stigmas attached towards the role and responsibilities defined for a girl or woman in the Indian society which have contributed to the high dropout cases of girls along. There are just a few females who have attained leadership positions or are progressing in the decision-making sector. Additionally, there is a lack of women-oriented policies which are overshadowing the

participation of women in all spheres of the society. Gender-responsive budgeting is needed for providing women with opportunities and for this it's really important for the institutions to keep girls and women at the centre of policymaking and orientation.

Maldives

As per the Sustainable Development Report of 2020, Maldives is positioned at 91st, with SDG 5 highlighting major challenges. According to the report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation* has been decreasing, *female-to-male education received ratio* is increasing, *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is moderately improving, and *seats held by women in National Parliament* is showing a decline. As per data obtained from Asian Development Bank, Maldives is said to have made noteworthy progress in the race towards achieving gender equality as compares to the previous years. Gender gaps in education are closing in and gender parity has improved in literacy rates, primary education, and enrollment. However, there are still challenges remain in the areas of political, economic, and social participation and empowerment of women. Dominated by Islamic traditions and following a patriarchal set-up, men are labelled as caretakers of their wives, women, and children. Cultural norms link men with activities outside the home and women are considered largely suitable for work indoors.

Of the 87 members in the People's Majlis, the unicameral legislative body of the Maldives, less than 10 of them are women which highlights the severe underrepresentation in the government. Although rare, the practice of polygamy in the Maldives is legal. The government is regularly criticized for failing to carry out adequate investigations into hundreds of cases of sexual assault as gender-based violence is very prominent. Maldivian law bans sexual harassment in the workplace, but the law is seldom enforced.



Image source: The Borgen Project

Nepal

As per the Sustainable Development Report of 2020, Nepal is positioned at 96th, with SDG 5 highlighting major challenges. According to the report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation* is on track, *female-to-male education received ratio* is increasing, *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is stagnant, and *seats held by women in National Parliament* is showing moderate improvements. Gender-based inequality is a widespread problem in Nepal with women subjected to an array of discriminatory practices and violence. The element of caste adds another layer to the set of problems with twice the amount of subjugation to the so-called 'lower caste women' denied opportunities with regards to housing, money, land amongst others.

The voices and demands of women need to be amplified to ensure true economic and legal progress of women. Changes to the legal framework are needed and the reproductive and sexual rights of women need improvements. It is seen that uneducated or illiterate women

feel that they are not as capable as males which restricts them from enjoying their rights and freedom. Chhaupadi, a menstrual taboo that was criminalised in 2018 is the practice of exiling women to sleep in a hut behind their home during menstruation. Even though it is illegal, it is still practised in certain parts of the country and is accountable for several deaths. Thus, the notion of 'equality' needs transformation into reality. Primary and basic education of girls may have increased in Nepal, but it is not enough to ensure jobs. The female drop-out rates are also high, influenced by a plethora of socio-economic factors. The existing education system needs reformation so as to bridge the gap between young girls and employment opportunities.

Pakistan

The 2020 edition of the Sustainable Development Goals Report has ranked Pakistan 134th out of 166 nations. SDG 5 is still accompanied with major challenges. According to the 2020 report, the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation and education received ratio* has remained stagnant. The *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is moderately increasing, while *seats held by women in the National Parliament* is on a decline.



Aurat March Pakistan/ Image source: REUTERS/Yasir Ali

Pakistan ranks 151st on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index 2020, which is third-to-last having closed only 56 per cent of the gender gap. Although an improvement as compared to the previous edition, it is unclear whether Pakistan will improve their ranks in the future. The labour force participation of women is low, with only one-quarter of them working or seeking employment. Leadership and senior roles comprise of only 5 per cent of the total, which is, however, twice the rate when compared to 2016. With one of the lowest shares on income distribution, only 18 per cent of labour income goes to women. South Asian countries have successfully bridged the gap in terms of education, but Pakistan still remains with a mere 20 per cent. Human Rights Watch states that violence against women and girls remains a serious problem in the country. Rapes, acid attacks, domestic violence, forced marriages, and honour killings are still prevalent, and Pakistani activists estimate that there are about [1,000 honour killings every year](#). Low-cost private schools have blossomed as an alternative to government schools since there is a lack of access to the same. However, these schools lack government oversight and the quality of curriculum and teachers remain questionable. With resistance from the state and religious institutions,

achieving gender equality is still a long walk away.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka ranks 94/166 according to the Sustainable Development Goals Report for the year 2020. The fifth goal pertaining to Gender Equality remains stagnant and is associated with major challenges attached to the same. According to the 2020 report, the *demand for family planning satisfied by modern methods* is moderately improving, while the *ratio of female-to-male labour force participation*, *female-to-male education received ratio*, and *seats held by women in National Parliament* remains stagnant. When it comes to political empowerment of women, it is a common trend in South Asian nations wherein women represent 20 per cent or less of the parliament, while Sri Lanka demonstrates a promising 33 per cent. Even if women are found in decision-making positions across all sectors, their presence remains neglected.



Image source: Asia Foundation

Much like other nation-states, the situation of women in Sri Lanka has also been influenced by deep embedded patriarchal values present in forms of traditions and laws. Despite them, Sri Lanka takes pride in having elected the world's non-hereditary female head of government in modern history, Sirimavo Bandaranaike, who led the country despite having no political experience. Enrolment rates in Sri Lankan primary schools are about the same for boys and girls, and the adult literacy rate is 91.7 per cent. According to UNICEF, the maternal mortality rate has also shown a decline over the last decade, with 98 per cent of births taking place in hospitals and 99 per cent receiving skilled attendance at birth. There is a workforce gender gap in play owing to a shaky demand and supply in terms of skills.

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