

WOMEN IN THE SOUTH ASIAN LABOR MARKET : A CRITICAL ANALYSIS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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Received on 17 October, 2022; Accepted on 03 May, 2023; Published on 30 June, 2023 (Online); 20 July, 2023 (Print)
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.58964/JBA44N102>

Abstract

Despite the universal acceptance of gender equality as an important policy objective for human development and an important aspect of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), inequalities persist in almost all socio-economic segments, including labor and the labor market. Gender disparity remains a common barrier to sustainable development, varying in severity across countries and regions. The issue of gender inequality thus remains a hot-button topic. This policy research paper critically analyzes the different dimensions of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market. As a part of the methodological approach, the study reviews the concurrent working papers, technical notes, strategic dialogues, policy papers, conference proceedings, relevant books and journals, and e-materials. The study has found gender gaps in labor force participation, occupational segregation, and wage patterns in South Asian labor economies. Several policy options are recommended, at both the country and regional levels, to reduce the persistent gender gap in the labor market to a minimum level. This study will primarily benefit academics, researchers, labor economists, and policymakers.

Keywords : Women at Work, Gender Gap, South Asian Labor Market

JEL Classification : J11, J71, R23

1. INTRODUCTION

Gender, as a distinct field, has received significant attention in social science research within academic settings. The increasing focus on the role of women in human development has made this field of study unique and interesting for academics, researchers, and institutes at large. Being a topic of increasing concern, gender remains a vital factor in development policies, including economic, political, and social issues (Adema et al., 2014). Thus, gender and development are two sides of the same coin. Although women are perceived as a vital and inseparable segment of the development process, no gendered perspective existed for development studies before 1970. It led policymakers to not incorporate women into existing development paradigms. The scenario started to change when Boserup (1970) claimed in her book, “*Woman’s Role in Economic Development*”, that development affects men

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and women differently, and it is thus critical to focus on women and development separately. Accordingly, the increasing debates and discussions regarding the absence of women's perspectives in the modernization process and practices of growth, development, and development policy have brought the term "gender inequality" into focus in development studies. This gender inequality has subsequently received significant attention among the policymakers of development organizations.

In response to gender inequalities worldwide, the United Nations introduced the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) in 1999 to portray the gender disparities in the areas of a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living. One year later, this organization incorporated women into its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), focusing on Goals 3, 4, and 5. Notably, the goal of promoting gender equality and empowering women (goal 3) sheds light on the gender inequality issues resulting in significant changes in socio-economic and development policies across countries and regions. These changes have been made in all national and development policies, including education, employment, health, and empowerment. As a series of initiatives, the World Economic Forum (WEF) introduced The Global Gender Gap Report in 2006, followed by UNDP (the United Nations Development Programme)'s Gender Inequality Index. According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, the gender gap is supposed to be closed by 68.1% by the end of 2022 (WEF, 2022). Moreover, if things keep going at this rate, it will take 132 years to achieve full parity. More significantly, this global report also identified South Asia as the lowest region among the eight regions covered by the survey, with only 62.3% of the gender gap filled in 2022. It is somewhat encouraging to learn that Bangladesh and Nepal lead the area in performance, having closed their gender gaps by over 69% (*ibid.*).

Despite the increasing importance and subsequent actions of national and international development organizations, gender inequality still exists at national and regional levels in almost all segments of human life. The case is more severe when women's involvement in economic aspects is considered. The persistent gender gap adversely affects economic growth and livelihoods (Collins et al., 1993; Seguino, 2013). Although employment is a crucial mechanism for promoting gender equity, inequalities exist in labor force participation, occupational segregation, and wage differentials (Seguino, 2007; Ridgeway, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2013). Hence, gender disparities are one of the pressing challenges facing the world of work today (Tobin, 2017). The labor market inequalities, especially gender disparity, have produced numerous literatures, making it an exciting field of study for academics, researchers, international organizations, research institutes, and political pressure groups (Witkowska, 2013). However, labor market gender disparity in developing economies remains poorly studied to a large extent, especially from a cross-national perspective. This study critically analyzes various aspects of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market.

The remainder of this paper is organized into four consecutive sections. At first, the rationale for conducting such a study is justified, followed by a short note on the methodological approach used in this paper. Second, several studies concerning

gender inequalities in the labor market are reviewed. The paper then critically analyzes the different dynamics of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market using supportive studies and statistical facts. Finally, the paper is concluded by providing several policy options to reduce gender disparities to a minimum extent at both the country and regional levels, along with a brief direction for future research.

2. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Out of many, five distinct factors justify the rationale for conducting this study. The first and foremost rationale is the persistent research gap in the respective field. Although several studies (e.g., Anastasia, 2013; Domagala, 2016; England, 2005; Altonji & Blank, 1999; Mills, 2003; Rosenfeld & Kalleberg, 1991; Reva, 2012; Triventi, 2015; Witkowska, 2013) were conducted so far on gender inequality in the labor market, very few of them focused on regional labor markets. Despite the enormous labor market potential in the South Asia region, especially on the part of women, literature about gender inequality in South Asian countries is scarce. Few studies like Strachan, Adikaram, and Kailasapathy (2015), Kanwal (2015), and Unni (2001) are available from a South Asian perspective. However, these studies focused on isolated issues, lacking comprehensive literature on gender inequalities in the labor market. This study is intended to explore the multidimensional aspects of gender disparities in South Asian labor economies. The paper is therefore supposed to fill in the existing research gap to a large extent.

Second, this study is critically important due to the subject matter's relative importance. According to the 2023 World Bank report, South Asia's regional growth is projected to average 5.6 percent in 2023 and is expected to remain moderate at 5.9 percent in 2024. Moreover, this region has 40% of the world's working-age population, with more than half of them being women. South Asian countries are, therefore, in an advantageous position to reap the fruits of the "demographic dividend." However, this will remain a dream until the challenges resulting from gender gaps are effectively handled. This requires rigorous research at both the national and regional levels. This paper is the first comprehensive overview in this regard.

Third, in addition to analyzing the existing labor market differentials based on a gender perspective, this paper provides a list of policy options addressing critical insights into gender inequality in South Asian labor economies. The paper is thus expected to be useful for policymakers, development organizations, labor economists, and pressure groups. Fourth, the paper brings the gender inequality in the South Asian labor market in a more comprehensive form, opening the doors for debates and discussions. This will lead to more research in the labor research field. Finally, the study is significant for Bangladesh, where women's participation in the labor market has increased in the last few decades. The country's female labor force participation rate is 42.6 percent (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2023), compared to a 79.71 percent participation rate by the male labor force. Nonetheless, the rate is lower than that of their male counterparts. This calls for time-worthy policies, as addressed in this paper.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The main objective of the study is to critically analyze the various aspects of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market. In alignment with this central objective of the study, the specific objectives of this paper are:

- (i) To explore the multidimensional aspects of gender disparities in South Asian economies
- (ii) To craft the implications of existing labor market inequalities for economies
- (iii) To recommend policy options to address the gender inequalities in the labor market at both the national and regional levels

4. METHODOLOGY

The nature of the study under investigation encompasses the characteristics of public policy research mainly because the researchers intend to bridge research and policy. Therefore, this paper is a policy research paper focusing on the significant facets of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market. Since the analysts and decision-makers in the government exert active roles in the policy process (Eichbaum & Shaw, 2007), policy research has enormously expanded and differentiated (Heinrichs, 2005). Accordingly, policy research is the best option from three perspectives to demonstrate the relevance of this research.

First, policy research is critical because it is intended to inform policymakers and stakeholders in the respective field and explore critical insights into the research problem from multidimensional perspectives (McClurea & Jaegerb, 2008). As a result, it significantly impacts aspects of public-interest decision-making. Second, compared to traditional basic research, the in-depth scope of analysis posed by policy research is best suited to this study (Etzioni, 2008). Finally, this policy research is supposed to draw the attention of a larger audience, resulting in better communication of the findings to influence policy more effectively (Crewe & Young, 2002).

The required data for the study were collected from secondary sources. The primary data sources include working papers, technical notes, strategic dialogues, background papers, policy notes, manuals, annual reports, conference proceedings, books, journals, and relevant e-materials. Since there is an increasing debate about the credibility of the data sources in policy research, which Doberstein (2016) terms the *source effects of policy research*, data were collected mainly from reputed international organizations, including the ILO (International Labor Organization), World Bank, UNDP, WEF, UN (United Nations), and ADB (Asian Development Bank). ILOSTAT, the official statistical database of ILO, is this study's primary source of statistical facts.

Since documents' subjectivity is another considerable factor in policy research (Bowen, 2009; O'Leary, 2014), the collected data were scrutinized based on their relevance to the phenomena under investigation. Finally, the scrutinized data were analyzed from multidimensional perspectives. More specifically, in alignment with

the scope of the study, an attempt was made to identify and explain various aspects of the labor market from a gender perspective. At first, socio-economic structures such as demographic profiles, the overall gender gap, gender disparities in educational attainment, and working-age population structure were identified and explained. And then, different significant aspects of the labor market, such as labor force participation rate, unemployment, underemployment, informal employment, and earnings differences, were critically discussed. In this way, the fundamental aspects of the labor market were covered in the study. ILO's KILM (Key Indicators of the Labor Market) was considered in this respect. Furthermore, since data availability differs across countries, facts about the same phenomenon for different years were used.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

Men dominate at the top of the economic summit, while women are saddled with debt and poverty (IPS, 2018). Women's rights are not being fully realized worldwide, and gender equality in all sectors of private and societal life is still a long way off (UN Women, 2015). Accordingly, policymakers and practitioners are increasingly cognizant of the significance of women's empowerment in lowering poverty (Quisumbing, Meinzen-Dick, & Malapit, 2022). According to UNICEF (2021), social conventions and patriarchal attitudes perpetuate gender inequality throughout South Asian nations. Cerise and Francavilla (2012) identified social institutions—norms, laws, and practices—as the root causes of gender inequality in society, which broadly supports the outcomes of previous studies such as Jütting et al. (2008), North (1990), and Sen (2007).

Like the multidimensional nature of causes, gender inequality occurs in education, employment, business, health, and political participation (World Bank, 2011; IFC, 2011; Jones, Harper, & Watson, 2010). Despite significant progress in economic development to varying degrees around the world, gender inequality in the labor economy remains a concern. At the global level, women's participation in the labor market is 49.4 percent, compared to 76.1 percent in the case of their male counterparts (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017). Even though women's employment is critical for a perfectly competitive labor market resulting in economic growth and development (Klasen & Lamanna, 2009; OECD, 22), gender inequalities in the labor market are prevalent in the form of gender-based recruitment practices (McConnell & Brue, 1986; Kot, 1999), occupational and sectoral segregation (Luci, Jütting, & Morrisson, 2012), discriminatory social institutions (Alexander, 2011; Kimerling et al., 2009; Meisel, Chandler, & Rien, 2003); informal employment (OECD, 2012; Chen, 2010); and wage differentials (Cerise & Francavilla, 2012).

The impact of gender inequality in the labor market has been widely documented. The most notable consequence is losing the human capital required to boost economic productivity (Pouliakas, 2009). This unutilized human capital leads to a weak economy (Dollar & Gatti, 1999). According to the OECD (2012), a narrow gender gap in the labor market accounts for accelerated economic growth. In addition, the gender gap in employment is associated with the increasing risk of social exclusion and poverty for women, resulting in a barrier to achieving inclusive

growth (Eurofound, 2016). Workplace gender inequality has also been identified as a cause of work-life imbalance for working families (European Commission, 2015). In response to the contemporary debates and discussions, there are two notable research trends in gender inequality in the labor market. The first group of researchers (e.g., Adamchik & Bedi, 2003; Ćopić, Daza, & Ramos, 2011) has focused on the gender pay gap in the labor market, i.e., whether female workers earn less than their male counterparts. However, several studies have found no significant relationship between a narrow gender wage gap for women and economic growth. Research presented by Hertz et al. (2008) and Blau and Kahn (2001) are two good examples supporting this premise. The second group of researchers (e.g., Gardeazabal & Ugidos, 2005; Young & Wallace, 2009) has attempted to examine whether gender-based wage differentials are directly linked to productivity differences.

In addition to the general scenario of gender inequality in the labor market worldwide, there are significant regional differences in different aspects of gender inequality (Cerise & Francavilla, 2012). While there is an impressive progress in closing the gender gap in education in many parts of the world, a wider gender gap persists in some parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, resulting in a low labor force participation rate and poor working conditions for women (OECD, 2012). Reva (2012), for instance, conducted a study on gender inequality in the labor market in Serbia and found that women are in a much more disadvantageous position with a significant wage gap than those of other countries. Domagala (2016), on the other hand, studied gender inequality in highly developed countries and concluded that the proper functioning of the labor market is confronted with gender inequality in the context of flexible employment, working time, and the wage gap. Thus, the facets of gender inequality vary across regions to a large extent.

Although a significant number of studies have been conducted so far about gender inequality in labor markets across countries and regions, a Google search shows very few studies (e.g., Unni, 2001; Strachan et al., 2015; Kanwal & Munir, 2015) focused on the South Asian labor market. Moreover, the existing studies dealt with the isolated issues of the labor market from a gender perspective. Therefore, this paper explores the dynamics of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market from multidimensional perspectives. The literature gap is therefore supposed to be reduced to a large extent in this field due to the comprehensive nature of the study.

6. DISCUSSION

With an above-average rate of 6 percent economic growth in the last few years, South Asia has become the fastest-growing economic region in the world. According to World Bank estimates for 2023 and 2024, the region's growth will average 5.6% and 5.9%, respectively (World Bank, 2023). This scenario is expected to continue over the coming years due to policy reforms and infrastructure upgrades made in recent years. As noted in World Population Prospects 2022, by 2037, Central and Southern Asia is anticipated to overtake Eastern and South-Eastern Asia as the world's most populous region since the population of the latter may begin to decline (United Nations, 2022). According to World Bank (2021), South Asia's population growth

rate is 1.0 percent. Almost all of the countries in this region have a population growth rate of more than 1%, except India and Sri Lanka. See Table 1 for detailed statistics.

Table 1 : Demographic Profiles

Country	Population Growth Rate	Population Sex Ratio	Sex Ratio at Birth	Country	Population Growth Rate	Population Sex Ratio	Sex Ratio at Birth
Afghanistan*	2.3	0.95	0.943	Maldives	1.79	0.58	0.935
Bangladesh	1.00	0.98	0.944	Nepal	1.83	1.18	0.939
Bhutan	1.11	0.88	0.944	Pakistan	1.98	0.94	0.920
India	0.99	0.92	0.908	Sri Lanka	0.53	1.09	0.944

* Data is not available

Source: World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2022)

Although the estimated sex ratio for the entire world population was 1.02 in 2017 (102 males to 100 females), the ratio is above average in South Asian countries, resulting in a more significant gender imbalance. This gender imbalance is primarily associated with higher female fetal mortality, environmental contaminants, sex-selective abortions, infanticides, aging, and deliberate gendercide (Davis, Gottlieb, & Stampnitzky, 1998; Orzack et al., 2015). In addition, the sex ratio at birth remains above 0.90 in all South Asian countries. This gender imbalance in South Asia, at birth or in the total population, adversely impacts non-marital cohabitation, fertility, and women's labor supply. Furthermore, several studies have found that changes in the sex ratio over time hurt married women's labor supply (Amuedo-Dorantes & Grossbard, 2007). The current sex ratio is therefore supposed to exert a negative impact on labor supply in the South Asian labor market shortly. However, women's participation in the labor market is negligible among the existing population.

Table 2 : Trends in the Global Gender Gap Index

Country	Global Gender Gap Score		Economic Participation and Opportunity		Country	Global Gender Gap Score		Economic Participation and Opportunity	
	2006	2022	2006	2022		2006	2022	2006	2022
Afghanistan*	-	0.435	-	0.176	Maldives*	-	0.648	-	0.531
Bangladesh*	0.627	0.714	-	0.427	Nepal	0.548	0.692	0.465	0.641
Bhutan*	-	0.637	-	0.537	Pakistan	0.543	0.564	0.369	0.331
India	0.601	0.629	0.397	0.350	Sri Lanka	0.720	0.670	0.545	0.556

* Data is not available

Note : (i) The Global Gender Gap Index comprises four fundamental categories (subindexes): economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment.

(ii) The highest possible score is 1, which denotes perfect equality for women.

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2022)

Table 2 shows a notable trend in the global gender gap score in almost all South Asian countries between 2006 and 2022. The overall gender gap score in Bangladesh, for example, has progressed to 0.714 (compared to only 0.627 in 2006), which is the highest in this region. Thus, this country has made a significant improvement in attaining gender parity, followed by India (0.629), the Maldives (0.648), and Sri Lanka (0.670). However, this country is far behind in women's inclusion in economic activities. The gender parity score of Bangladesh in 2022 is only 0.427 in the economic participation and opportunities dimension, compared to 0.537 and 0.531 in Bhutan and the Maldives, respectively.

Table 3 : Gender Disparities in Educational Attainment (F-M) (2022)

Country	Gender Gap in Enrollment in Primary Education	Gender Gap in Enrollment in Secondary Education	Gender Differences in Tertiary Education Enrollment
Afghanistan*	---	-30.05	-9.23
Bangladesh	----	13.94	-5.86
Bhutan	2.85	11.00	0.99
India	2.22	-0.38	3.50
Maldives	2.44	-5.87	48.82
Nepal	---	2.74	0.60
Pakistan	---	-6.30	-0.20
Sri Lanka	-1.77	4.59	10.15

* Data is not available

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2022)

Education is perceived as an essential and considerable factor in tracing the labor market outcome in labor economics. Several studies (e.g., Angrist & Krueger, 1991; Harmon & Walker, 1995; Card, 2001) supported the idea that education levels influence the income generated by a labor market. Moreover, education received at an early stage of life significantly influences socioeconomic background at the adult stage (Cunha et al., 2006; Currie, 2006). In the South Asian region, as reflected in Table 3, a more significant disparity is found in education and educational attainment levels. A huge gender gap exists in educational attainment at both secondary and tertiary levels in Afghanistan. The cases are nearly identical in other countries in this region. The rate of male and female enrollment at all levels of education is closer in Nepal. In the case of Bangladesh, female enrollment increases at the secondary level but decreases as students' progress to the tertiary level. In the Maldives, women outnumber men in tertiary education enrollment. However, this wider gender gap in education will result in skill and wage differentials in the labor market.

Table 4 : Working-Age Population (Ages 15–64)

Country	Female (% of female population)		Male (% of the male population)		Country	Female (% of female population)		Male (% of the male population)	
	1990	2021	1990	2021		1990	2021	1990	2021
Afghanistan	53.89	54	56.16	54	Maldives	56.38	70	61.17	76
Bangladesh	54.73	68	56.16	67	Nepal	58.00	66	56.31	63
Bhutan	55.22	70	55.85	72	Pakistan	54.57	59	58.19	59
India	56.43	67	56.83	68	Sri Lanka	52.15	65	54.62	66

Source : ILO (2022)

Although South Asia is home to about 40 percent of the world's working population, gender disparity is found to some extent in this segment of the population structure. Almost every country's female working-age population has increased, albeit to varying degrees. As seen in Table 4, Sri Lanka made significant progress in increasing the proportion of the female working-age population (e.g., 65 percent in 2021 compared to 52.15 percent in 1990), followed by Bangladesh and the Maldives. Despite some gender inequality, this region is blessed with a large working-age population, which positively impacts workforce size and productivity.

Table 5 : Labor Force Participation Rate (Ages 15+) (%)

Country	Female (% of female population ages 15+)		Male (% of the male population ages 15–64)		Country	Female (% of female population ages 15+)		Male (% of the male population ages 15–64)	
	1990	2021	1990	2021		1990	2021	1990	2021
Afghanistan	14.12	15	88.46	76	Maldives	19.82	34	78.75	87
Bangladesh	19.95	35	89.71	84	Nepal	48.47	79	92.04	86
Bhutan	38.32	52	77.72	77	Pakistan	13.21	21	86.92	85
India	27.94	19	86.61	80	Sri Lanka	36.20	31	82.91	79

Source : ILO (2022)

The rates of gender disparity in female labor force participation vary across countries in South Asia. As noted in Table 5, the female labor force participation rate in Bangladesh, for instance, is only 35 percent compared to 84 percent male participation in 2021. Although there is an increasing trend of female participation in the labor market except in India, a more significant disparity persists in all South Asian economies. Bangladesh has made more progress in increasing female labor force participation than other countries in this region (the rate was 19.95 percent in 1990 compared to 35.0 percent in 2021). However, from the standpoint of the labor market, the gap is far from satisfactory. Gender inequality in the South Asian region continues to hinder labor market development and the demographic dividend opportunity. As a result, policymakers face a difficult challenge in determining how to maximize women's labor force participation.

Table 6 : Employment-to-Population Ratio (Ages 15+) (%)

Country	Female		Male		Country	Female		Male	
	1991	2021	1991	2021		1991	2021	1991	2021
Afghanistan	12.69	12	76.59	58	Maldives	21.35	32	75.90	63
Bangladesh	22.52	32	86.34	76	Nepal	77.68	75	86.00	77
Bhutan	50.27	49	75.13	65	Pakistan	11.54	20	80.75	75
India	33.78	18	81.21	66	Sri Lanka	32.05	28	70.16	66

Source : ILO (2022)

In addition to the significant gender difference in labor force participation, it is evident that women are less employed in the South Asian labor market than their male counterparts. As seen in Table 6, the employment-to-population (EPR) rate varies in terms of gender and time across countries. Although the female EPR rate increased from 22.52 percent in 1991 to 32.0 percent in 2021 in Bangladesh, the current male EPR rate is 76.0 percent, which is far above the female EPR rate. The situation is even more frustrating in India. The female EPR rate fell from 33.78 percent in 1991 to 18.0 percent in 2021, indicating the country's inability to generate employment at the expected level for women. Although female EPR rates have increased in Pakistan and the Maldives, gender disparities in the EPR ratio remain significant. Thus, employment opportunities remain a dream for most working-age women in South Asian countries.

Table 7 : Trends in Unemployment Rate

Country	Female (% of the female labor force)		Male (% of the male labor force)		Country	Female (% of the female labor force)		Male (% of the male labor force)	
	1991	2021	1991	2021		1991	2021	1991	2021
Afghanistan	14.56	19.1	11.62	12.1	Maldives	1.39	5.7	0.63	6.2
Bangladesh	2.92	7.9	2.02	4.1	Nepal	3.69	4.9	5.11	5.2
Bhutan	1.68	5.6	1.24	3.5	Pakistan	16.55	5.2	4.24	4.1
India	3.95	4.5	3.79	6.3	Sri Lanka	23.04	8.4	10.23	3.9

Source : ILO (2022)

Unemployment status also varies across countries, as seen in Table 7. In South Asia, Afghanistan is burdened with more female unemployed people. This nation had the highest female unemployment rate (19.1%) in 2021, followed by Sri Lanka (8.4%), Bangladesh (7.9%), and the Maldives (5.7%). Bangladesh's labor economy has seen the region's most significant increase in female unemployment rates. The UR was 7.9 percent in 2021, compared to only 2.92 percent in 1991. This indicates the absence of expected labor market performance resulting from gender differences in labor force behavior and trends. Sri Lanka's economy has utilized its female population to a large extent since 1991 (the current rate is only 8.4 percent compared to 23.04 percent in 1991). The success of Pakistan in reducing female unemployment is also notable.

The consecutive increase in female unemployment in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Bhutan is primarily associated with social, cultural, and economic factors.

Table 8 : Time-Related Underemployment (%)

Country	Year	Female	Male	Country	Year	Female	Male
Afghanistan	2012	27	16.1	Maldives	2016	14.4	7.2
Bangladesh	2017	3.3	2.6	Nepal	2008	3.7	3.7
Bhutan	2010	2.4	3.2	Pakistan	2015	0.5	0.4
India*	-	-	-	Sri Lanka	2014	3.2	2.4

* Data is not available

Source : ILO (ILOSTAT, 2018)

Time-related underemployment (TRU) has emerged as a measure of labor underutilization, indicating the share of employed people who are willing and able to do more work. Because the unemployment rate is not enough to measure the volume of work at the national level, labor economists have started to use TRU to better quantify labor underutilization in terms of lower employment and wasted working time (Pisica, Caragea, & Vasile, 2015). As noted in Table 8, about 27 percent of Afghan women are time-relatedly underemployed, followed by 14.4 percent of women in the Maldives, resulting in the loss of maximum utilization of human capital. Gender disparity is found in almost all South Asian economies, except Bhutan and Nepal, when TRU is considered. Thus, policymakers need time-worthy policies (both short-term and long-term) to ensure the full employment of male and female workers in this region.

Table 9 : Youth NEET Rate (15–24 years) (%)

Country	Year	Female	Male	Country	Year	Female	Male
Afghanistan*	-	-	-	Maldives	2016	25.3	21.5
Bangladesh	2017	44.6	9.8	Nepal	2008	24.4	22.2
Bhutan*	-	-	-	Pakistan	2015	53.6	7.4
India*	2012	49.3	8	Sri Lanka	2014	37.3	17.5

* Data is not available

Source : ILO (ILOSTAT, 2018)

Nearly half of the young Bangladeshi females (44.6 percent in 2017) are not in employment, education, or training (NEET), exerting significant implications for potential youth labor market entrants. Although data availability varies across countries with time, Table 9 notes that more significant gender disparity is found in youth NEET in all South Asian countries. The highest female NEET youth rate is prevalent in Pakistan (53.6 percent), followed by India (49.3 percent) and Bangladesh (44.6 percent). However, the male youth NEET rates of these three countries remain below 10 percent, indicating that more female youth are discouraged workers or do not have access to education or training. The reasons for this significant gender difference in youth NEET must be investigated for potential policy interventions.

Table 10 : Workers in Informal Employment (%)

Country	Female	Male	Country	Female	Male
Afghanistan*	-	-	Maldives*	-	-
Bangladesh	87.7	80.7	Nepal	99.4	98.8
Bhutan*	-	-	Pakistan	73.2	71.0
India	70.3	75.7	Sri Lanka*	-	-

* Data is not available

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2017)

As seen in Table 10, most workers in the South Asian labor market are engaged in informal jobs disregarding their sexual identity, and lack basic social or legal protections or employment benefits. Based on the available data, Nepalese workers are highly involved in informal employment (99.4 percent female and 98.8 percent male), followed by those of Bangladesh and Pakistan. This high level of informal employment results in labor relations based chiefly on casual employment and personal and social relations (ILO, 2013). Thus, the jobs in the South Asian economy are less secure and characterized mainly by excessive working hours, low wages, and minimal bargaining power. Ultimately, as per the statistics presented in Table 10, women are the prime victims in this regard.

Table 11 : Contributing Family Workers and Own Account Workers (%)

Country	Contributing family workers		Own-account Workers		Country	Contributing family workers		Own-account Workers	
	Female	Male	Female	Male		Female	Male	Female	Male
Afghanistan*	-	-	-	-	Maldives	8.9	2.9	28.0	11.8
Bangladesh	37.6	4.6	33.1	47.6	Nepal	63.9	23.2	26.3	43.8
Bhutan	48.2	24.6	35.9	38.6	Pakistan	54.7	15.0	20.4	40.5
India	31.5	10.3	51.2	67.8	Sri Lanka	20.6	2.9	23.7	36.1

* Data is not available

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2017)

In addition to getting involved in informal employment to a large extent, most workers in South Asian countries are own-account workers or contributing family workers. Gender disparity is evident in this category as well. In Table 11, it can be witnessed that most of the contributing family workers in this region are women, but the rates are incredibly high in Nepal (63.9 percent), Pakistan (54.7 percent), and Bhutan (48.2 percent). The rate is relatively low in the Maldives (8.9 percent), followed by Sri Lanka (20.6 percent). In Bangladesh, women comprise nearly 37.6 percent of contributing family workers, compared to only 4.6 percent of male workers. Thus, South Asian women hold more “self-employment” jobs (operated by a related person living in the same household) without clearly agreed-upon working conditions that put them at risk of decent work deficits. In the case of own-account

workers, the situation is opposed. Except in the Maldives, there are more male independent contractors than women in South Asia. Table 11 depicts that nearly 67.8 percent of male Indian workers are own-account workers, followed by 47.6 percent of male Bangladeshi workers. Thus, male workers in South Asia are more associated with inadequate employment conditions, such as poor income, excessive working hours, and short-duration jobs.

Table 12 : Gender Gap in Estimated Earned Income (Int'l \$1000)

Country	Gender Gap (F-M)	Rank	Country	Gender Gap (F-M)	Rank
Afghanistan*	-2.69k	145	Maldives	-6.25k	95
Bangladesh	-4.06k	128	Nepal	-1.19k	31
Bhutan	-5.74k	99	Pakistan	-6.10k	143
India	-7.77k	140	Sri Lanka	-11.74k	130

* Data is not available

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2022)

South Asian women are also far behind their male counterparts in earnings from employment. Although the earnings are closer in Nepal (31st in gender wage parity), the difference is still noticeable. (See Table 12 for details). In the Maldives, the gender gap in estimated earned income is \$6.25k. However, the gaps are very frustrating in Sri Lanka and India, significantly influencing women's self-esteem and livelihoods. Studies found that the gender wage gap affected women, their children, and future generations (Haas, 2006). This is because women spend their more significant share of household income on activities that benefit children of both sexes (Blau, Marianne, & Winkler, 2001). From a socio-economic perspective, it was found that "general wage inequality within a country is positively related to gender wage inequality" (Brainerd, 2000; Kidd & Shannon, 1996).

Table 13 : Wage Equality for Similar Work

Country	Score	Rank	Country	Score	Rank
Afghanistan*	-	-	Maldives	-	-
Bangladesh	0.577	109	Nepal	0.614	93
Bhutan	-	-	Pakistan	0.620	86
India	0.506	122	Sri Lanka	0.703	47

* Data is not available

Source : World Economic Forum (Global Gender Gap Report 2022)

Table 13 notes that Sri Lanka has significantly reduced the gender wage gap compared to other South Asian countries. With a wage equality index of 0.703 in 2022, this landlocked country will have the world's 47th-largest labor economy. However, Bangladesh (109th) and Pakistan (86th) are still far behind on gender wage parity, calling for more policy interventions.

7. KEY MESSAGES AND POLICY OPTIONS

Gender inequality, also known as the gender gap, is among the worldwide community's most pressing labor market challenges (ILO, 2017). According to the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2017), gender gaps occur in at least four forms: education, health, employment, and political empowerment. Accordingly, gender inequality in the labor market is a global phenomenon. According to World Bank data, the global labor force participation rate for women is just over 50% compared to 80% for men (World Bank, 2022). Worryingly, emerging economies face the most significant gender gaps in labor force participation rates (nearly a 31 percent gap), compared to only 16 percent in developed economies. Moreover, gender gaps in the labor market vary across countries and regions. For example, despite being one of the fastest-growing economic regions with above-average (6%) GDP growth, the South Asian labor market is characterized mainly by wider gender gaps in almost all employment and wages. Regardless, an increasing population growth rate, a balanced gender structure, and a pool of working-age population are expected to produce the potential human capital needed to keep the wheels of economic growth turning. Indeed, South Asia is blessed with human resources, but the concern is how to utilize this inevitable factor of production at its maximum level. Keeping these prospects in mind, several policy options can be put forward to address the different aspects of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market.

The first and foremost important policy consideration is identifying factors hindering women's entrance into the labor market. In doing so, we suggest here that an investigation into the socio-economic backgrounds of women in a particular region is critically important, as the socio-economic constraints primarily affect the probability of women's participation in the labor force (WEF, 2017). The typical constraints in this respect, though to varying degrees, are education (Khadim & Akram, 2013), work-life balance (Psacharopoulos & Tzannatos, 1989), marital status (Chaudhry & Anwar, 2009), geographical location (Agüero & Marks, 2008), gender role conformity (WEF, 2017), and more importantly, social norms (Verick, 2014). The latter is perceived as a significant barrier to women's participation in the labor market. Accordingly, policymakers and labor economists should study how society and family members in a given economy perceive women's work within external settings. In this respect, two policy options seem workable: (i) undertaking various educational awareness programs in order to change the social attitudes towards women both within and outside the workplace, (ii) transforming institutions to prevent violence, discrimination, and harassment.

Second, it is highly urgent to take action to reduce gender disparity in occupational segregation. Gender disparity across this dimension persists to a large extent in the South Asian labor market. Most female workers in South Asia are either family workers or own-account workers. One of the most effective policy options in this regard is to take steps to make structural changes in traditional gender norms (Charles,

2003). Once positive norms are created, people will start to see women in traditionally male-dominated occupations. This will change the expectations and attitudes of both employers and peer groups about the role of women in the labor market (Cotter et al., 1997). Again, ensuring equal access to educational opportunities, starting from childhood, is a good option. Finally, supporting women's participation in decision-making processes and rewarding paid care work with adequate remuneration can reduce gender-based occupational segregation (WEF, 2017).

Third, policymakers should focus on wage equality in the labor market. South Asian labor markets are characterized by a higher gender wage gap, which significantly impacts women's self-esteem, physical and mental health, social justice, economic mobility, and talent acquisition and retention. Furthermore, in South Asian countries, approximately 46.8 percent of female workers earn less than \$3.10 daily. Women's low skill level, arising from discriminatory participation in education and training programs, is associated mainly with this gender pay gap and the 'working poor' in this region. Although gender inequality in wages is not a direct measure of discrimination, several studies have found that the education gap, harmful social norms, and differences in psychological attributes and non-cognitive skills are the main determinants of the gender wage gap (Ortiz-Ospina, 2018). Family-friendly labor-market policies such as maternity leave coverage (Waldfoegel, 1998), adequate payment for care work (Olivetti & Petrongolo, 2017), changing norms and stereotypes (Ortiz-Ospina, 2018), promoting equal remuneration for work of equal value (WEF, 2017), and raising the minimum wage (Aly, 2017) are expected to be effective in addressing the gender wage gap problem.

Fourth, policies are needed to ensure women's proactive involvement in the agricultural sector. Despite a significant shift in labor from agriculture to industry and the service sector, agriculture remains the most important source of employment in South Asia, particularly for women. Moreover, rural women in poorer South Asian countries rely heavily on agricultural work (WEF, 2017). However, agriculture and rural areas are becoming "feminized" (Lastarria-Cornhiel, 2006; Deere, 2005). Accordingly, increasing agricultural diversification and productivity through technical progress and investment, focusing on reducing women's differential, is a better policy option. Moreover, supporting agro-based small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and promoting women's entrepreneurship is expected to increase women's participation in the labor force, especially in remote areas. Nevertheless, relying on regionally specific information and analysis is wise for good gender-aware agricultural policy-making (FAO, 2011). In addition to this, effective legislation is required to secure land rights for women (IFAD, 2010).

Fifth, since a notable feature of the South Asian labor market is that most young women are not in education, employment, or training (NEET), policymakers should take appropriate steps to ensure that both males and females have equal opportunities to participate in NEET. This implies that either they are reluctant to enter the labor

market due to the lack of good employment benefits, or they find it difficult to enter the labor force. Although young females are doing better in school, their participation rate in the labor market is lower than that of their young male counterparts (Matsumoto & Elder, 2010). Special programs, especially addressing the needs of female youth, such as earlier career guidance, emphasizing vocational education, promoting paid internship programs, providing special incentives for disabled and underprivileged youth, creating opportunities for freelancing work, encouraging youth to stay in education, raising the age for participating in the labor force, and investing in youth development programs are some of the possible policy options to reduce the youth NEET rate.

Finally, policymakers must address the regional differences in gender inequality regarding causes, consequences, and remedies. A country's strategy to reduce gender inequality may not work in other countries. Labor policies are heavily influenced by a country's other national socioeconomic policies. Therefore, it is wise to understand each country's socio-economic background, different standing policies, international labor goals (e.g., the ILO's decent work agenda), and the political philosophies of the government in addressing the gender inequalities in the labor market. However, some standard policy options like deeper regional integration, gender-responsive budgeting (GRB), maintaining gender parity policy in governance and decision-making processes, integrating the informal economy into the formal sector, raising minimum wages, skill-based education programs, promoting women's entrepreneurship, and creating quality jobs and part-time jobs for youth are supposed to reduce gender gaps irrespective of the region's identity.

8. CONCLUSION

The current age structure of the population in South Asian countries exerts significant potential for reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend. This region has nearly 40% of the world's working-age population. Reasonably, this adequate labor supply, along with the increasing economic growth rate, are supposed to make this region one of the dominant players in the global economy soon. Despite these opportunities, much work remains to be done to convert this growing labor pool into actual human capital. Still, more than 90 percent of South Asian workers are involved in informal employment. Gender disparity is notably found in labor economies in this region. While women's participation in the global labor force has increased, gender inequality in the South Asian labor market has widened more than in any other region.

As per the ILO's 2017 report on women's employment, less than one in every three women actively participate in the labor market in South Asia. Although women's employment in South Asia varies across countries compared to their male counterparts, it is characterized mainly by a low participation rate, more involvement in informal employment, working poverty, wage inequality, a higher NEET rate, and a role as contributing family workers. Therefore, this region's countries must adopt a comprehensive approach to reduce gender gaps in the labor market.

Although policies vary across countries, the most effective policy options in this regard are challenging the social norms that hold women back, transforming labor institutions, redesigning educational programs for more women's inclusion in education and training, encouraging women to participate in decision-making, ensuring child care benefits, promoting women's entrepreneurship, giving particular focus to the agriculture sector (this sector employs more rural women), and adopting work-life balance initiatives. Finally, reshaping gender role conformity is imperative for improving gender parity in the South Asian labor market.

9. RESEARCH AGENDA

Despite the enormous potential from a regional economic perspective, very few studies were conducted on the South Asian labor market. As a result, this inevitable segment of the South Asian economy presents significant areas for future research. Gender inequality, like the labor market, is a multidimensional concept. Therefore, more labor market research is required to address the multiple facets of gender inequality in the South Asian labor market at both the country and regional levels. Although some research studies are available addressing the general scenario of labor economics in this region, more research is expected regarding factors affecting women's participation in the labor market.

The underlying reasons behind lower women's participation, especially the socio-economic constraints, vary across countries and regions within the same country. Thus, more policy research (both conceptual and empirical) is needed to be conducted. Exploring the causes and consequences of existing patterns of gender-based occupational segregation is a better area of research. Being a global phenomenon, the gender wage gap has received significant attention among academics and researchers. However, comprehensive research on the South Asian labor market has yet to be conducted. Studies have been made to some extent, but policy research is lacking. From a policy standpoint, more research addressing the micro aspects of gender inequality in the labor market is required. This field is more applied than theoretical, and thus, it requires extensive empirical studies related to policy interventions.

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