

# Gender (In)Equality in South Asia: Problems, Prospects and Pathways

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## Abstract

This paper is the guest editorial for this Special Issue on Gender (In)equality in South Asia of the South Asian Journal of Human Resources Management. This paper offers a perspective on the gender (in)equality issues as well as prospects in South Asia. The paper examines equalities and inequalities in national and regional labour markets, national legislative frameworks and within companies and organisations and recognises that women themselves are a heterogeneous group. Further, we introduce the papers included in this special issue representing India, Sri Lanka and Pakistan.

## Keywords

Gender, (in)equality, South Asia, equal opportunity

Gender (in)equalities in workplaces have emerged as a key concern in the contemporary world of work with concepts and practices such as diversity management, equal treatment, equal opportunity, human rights and human dignity having gained immense popularity and advocacy. Gender (in)equality has become a main item in the human resource management (HRM) agenda (Dickens, 1998) with HRM professionals, policy makers and educators being very attentive and mindful to the diverse and complex issues related to gender (in)equality in organizations.

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While areas and issues of gender (in)equality have been in discussion to a great extent in the West, there is a critical need to bring this pressing subject to the forefront and provide space for broader discussion in the South Asian context (Ozbilgin & Syed, 2010, p. 1).

Gender inequalities in the labour market, occupations and at the workplace have been, and remain today, a feature of the social and economic relations in most nations. The universality of gender inequality remains. This has major human rights implications and is recognized as having a profound economic impact: “People and their talents are two of the core drivers of sustainable, long-term economic growth. If half of these talents are underdeveloped or underutilized, the economy will never grow as it could”. Indeed, “companies who fail to recruit and retain women—and ensure they have a pathway to leadership positions—undermine their long-term competitiveness” (Schwab, 2014, p. v).

The examination of gender inequalities presents a picture of differences and similarities across nations and even within national boundaries (Strachan, Burgess, & Sullivan, 2004). The differences are complex: national and regional labour markets vary; national legislative frameworks are different; the type of employing organization and employment contract differs; and women themselves are a heterogeneous group. Yet, there are broad similarities: women are more likely than men to experience insecure employment; a gender pay gap is widespread; horizontal segregation by gender abounds with women occupying a narrower range of occupations than men which frequently reflect women’s accepted social roles of nurturer; and vertical gender segregation is an international issue as women remain a very low proportion of senior managers, CEOs and company board members. If one examines past practices and outcomes, then more similarities appear. Despite the similarities, the differences can be profound, and equity and diversity scholars and practitioners need to be very aware of these and this is why there is the call to understand these issues within a specific context. This special issue responds to this call and adds to the literature which focuses on employment in South Asia.

Women in South Asia are recorded as having low labour force participation rates. In Pakistan, India and Bangladesh, women represent between 18 and 26 per cent of employees (Ali, 2010, p. 32) with Sri Lanka reporting relatively higher rate of 35 per cent (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013) and there has been minimal change in these rates in the last two decades (Pio & Syed, 2013, p. 141). These rates reflect participation in the formal labour market and many women are concentrated in low-paid and low-status jobs and employed in the unorganized sectors (Ali, 2010, p. 32; Pio & Syed, 2013, p. 142). Their participation rate in the informal labour market is higher than the formal sector, particularly among agricultural workers (Basu & Thomas, 2009; Pio & Syed, 2013, p. 141). It is also interesting to note how women in the Asian countries have become unpaid family workers, participating in economic activity, but not being paid or considered as economically active. In Sri Lanka, for example, from the total women employment rate, 20.5 per cent is said to be unpaid family workers as against only 3 per cent of employed men (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013). Underemployment is also more prevalent among women than

men, devaluing women's efforts, capabilities and educational qualifications. The 2014 Gender Gap Index ranks Bangladesh 68 out of 142 countries, with Sri Lanka ranked 79, India ranked 114, Bhutan ranked 120 and Pakistan ranked 142. All countries receive a low score for female labour market participation (World Economic Forum, 2014). Even though low levels of education is cited as a reason for this low labour force participation (Pio & Syed, 2013), countries such as Bangladesh and Sri Lanka report higher scores for female participation in education (World Economic Forum, 2014).

Like most countries, the formal labour market is characterized by high levels of horizontal and vertical segregation and lower earnings for women. In Pakistan, for example, the "labour market is highly segmented based on gender-role stereotypes" (Ali, 2010, p. 36). Although it is difficult to generalize issues in India, "there are gender-based different standards of behaviour which men and women are expected to carry over into the work environment" (Ali, 2010, p. 34). Reflecting the international situation, women are extremely scarce in senior positions, forming only three per cent of legislators, senior professionals and managers in India and two per cent in Pakistan, but 25 per cent in Bangladesh (Ali, 2010, pp. 33–34) and 15.2 per cent in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2013). Metaphorically known as the glass ceiling, various ideological, cultural and structural barriers for women's upward mobility in workplaces are extensively discussed (Benson & Yukongdi, 2005; Fernando & Cohen, 2011; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). Social expectations, gender role stereotyping, gendered occupations and organizational policies and practices are found to be the main and common barriers women face in the South Asian region. While some scholars do attest to improved opportunities for South Asian women (Nath, 2000; Yukongdi & Benson, 2005), some others point otherwise (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006; Wirth, 2001). Women in management and decision-making positions clearly face additional difficulties, resistance and marginalization than men. Fernando and Cohen (2011), in a study exploring how highly skilled women workers in Sri Lanka navigate organizational contexts, highlight the everyday struggle women face in highly gendered workplaces to progress in their careers. This study further emphasizes how Sri Lankan women manage their circumstances and work contexts rather than attempting to transform prevailing circumstances, unlike women in developed Western countries.

Universally, women's involvement and representation in trade unions is low, especially at the leadership and decision-making levels (Trebilcock, 1991), which is also clearly evident in many South Asian countries (Kirton & Healy, 2004; Singh & Hoge, 2010). This, together with low women's participation at the policy-making levels in governments and organizations, raises questions about the equitable participation of women in the process of social dialogue, collective bargaining and policy development, processes through which important labour issues that also concern women are discussed and addressed. In this milieu, women's issues such as child care, maternity benefits and sexual harassment, the performance of emotional labour (Perera & Kailasapathy, 2013) and aesthetic labour (Nath, 2011), does not get articulated into policy and is concealed and overlooked without women's voices being heard (Kirton & Healy, 2004).

The need to recognize that there is a wide range of diversities which women bring to the labour market is profound (Haq, 2014, p. 119). Even within one industry and workplace this can be seen. For example, a survey in one workplace in the IT industry in Pakistan revealed a workforce of women and men, six languages, 11 ethnicities, 30 castes and three major religious sects (Ayub & Jehn, 2010, p. 113). As Pio and Syed (2013, p. 142) explain, “Attempts to understand women from South Asia must be contextualized through socio-economic, religious and geo-political particularities along with an understanding that a legal provision does not mean implementation, and that discrimination persists within the family and societal institutions”. While these issues are universal, in each geographical and historical setting they are experienced in many different ways. Ozbilgin and Syed (2010), however, sound a note of caution for researchers, particularly those from non-Asian cultures:

At first sight the Asian context appears rich in cultural constructs such as systems of caste, networks of social and economic relations, as well as assumptions of organisation and work. However, this perception of wealth of culture in the region can partly be explained by the perceived dissimilarity of these cultural constructs to the dominant cultural constructs in the English language literatures. (p. 4)

So we can return to the notion of similarities in the concept of understanding heterogeneity among women as a group, but the specificities of this are different in different settings and at different times.

Equality between women and men is recognized in the constitutions of India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and these countries prohibit discrimination on the basis of gender (Ali, 2010, pp. 38–43). Similar protective legislation exists which prohibits women from working at night, underground or near machinery in motion (Ali, 2010, p. 50), concepts familiar in many Western industrialized countries and only changed in the latter part of the twentieth century. Many South Asian countries also ensure maternity benefits to women workers. Yet, overall these benefits can be said to be far below the benefit provided in Non-Asian countries. Protection of women from termination of employment during maternity leave is seen only in few countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan. Paternity benefits, however, are not provided to working men in many South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lankan government sector employees being the exceptions). These further highlight the gender inequalities present in these countries.

While the basic legislative framework of Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) exists across South Asia, India and Bangladesh “have relatively strict and clear EEO laws compared with Pakistan” (Ali, 2010, p. 47). In order to operationalize equality for the most disadvantaged castes and tribes, India was the first nation to introduce reserved places in employment in 1950 and named this affirmative action. Thus, legislating for equality is not new to India. In countries such as Sri Lanka, equality is evident in labour legislation, but there are still areas where discrimination for women persists.

Like most countries, commentators focus on the gap between legislation and policy and practice. Haq (2010) concludes that:

while the strong legal framework and government inclusion is a reflection of India's national vision for equality, the low scores for workplace diversity and social inclusion are a reflection of the reality regarding the continued discrimination and exclusion of certain groups in the Indian labour market and society. (p. 102)

Ali (2010, p. 32) paints an extreme picture saying that the impact of reforms on female employment "remains less than satisfactory, generally representing an empty-shell or toothless tiger construction of EEO". Ali concludes that "what seems to be common...is an unrelenting alliance of patriarchal traditions and gender inequalitarian interpretation and practices of various religious and/or tribal codes" (Ali, 2010, p. 51). Yet many of the South Asian countries have ratified or acceded various standards and conventions related to equality and non-discrimination. For example, India, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Nepal and Afghanistan have ratified the 'Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination (CEDAW)' while Bangladesh, Maldives and Pakistan have acceded CEDAW. Many South Asian countries have ratified International Labour Organization (ILO) gender equality Conventions such as Equal Remuneration Convention (No. 100), Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156) and Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183). Through these actions, these countries have declared their intent to protect gender equality through domestic legislation and practices, yet to what extent this is actually accomplished is questionable. Laws may exist but are seldom used, particularly with reference to women (Pio & Syed, 2013, p. 140). While laws might be indispensable to ensure equality, alone it is not sufficient. Unbiased implementation, effective enforcement, awareness creation and continuous monitoring together with change in attitudes, norms and beliefs are necessities to create equitable workplaces.

There is a great variety in the outcomes for women in different types of organizations, especially between the public and private sectors (Ali, 2010, pp. 38–43). For example, the public sector in India has had a constitutionally mandated reservation policy since 1950 for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. Bangladesh recently introduced a quota system for female recruitment in the public sector, with 10 and 15 per cent quotas reserved for female gazetted and non-gazetted jobs (Ali, 2010, p. 46). Yet, disparity of male/female representation in the public services in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh is still significant, with women under represented in higher decision making levels (Kabir, 2013). In contrast, the private sector "has historically claimed to be 'caste-blind' and 'merit based' in its human resource management (HRM) processes, denying the need to track caste information on its employees and to implement any voluntary affirmative action reservation policies for these groups" (Haq, 2010, p. 101). Within the private sector, MNCs, which "often seek consistency and integration of approach" of their global operations (Jain, Sloane, & Horwitz, 2003, p. 3), implement corporate EEO policies

(Haq, 2010, p. 101). Haq (2010, p. 101) notes that in India “increased lobbying efforts and governmental pressures have led to some awareness-building and voluntary action in the private sector in efforts to thwart the threat of the legislated imposition of reservation quotas”. Ali (2010) reports that “an increasingly large number of companies are taking steps” and “such initiatives have improved employment opportunities for women, reaching around 20 per cent of the MNC workforce through diversity initiatives” (p. 45). Indian women have begun to move into middle- and senior-management positions in MNCs “as a result of their equal opportunity policies and gender equity focus of diversity programmes, initiatives and directives from the parent company” (Haq, 2014, p. 118). Similarly in Pakistan, the degree to which EEO policies and practices exist in organizations varies from sector to sector. For example, MNCs have formal EEO policies and these are more likely to be found in large organizations (Ali, 2010, pp. 43–44).

Policies developed in organizations to remove discrimination against women and ensure equitable treatment of women are varied and driven by legislation and international ideas and practices. Reserved places or mandated quotas such as that practiced in India is often given the term affirmative action. Other policies which focus on equitable treatment are often referred to as equal employment opportunity or equal employment policies. This framework for equity is based on a human rights perspective that people should be treated equitably, and employment decisions should not be based on irrelevant characteristics such as sex or ethnicity (Strachan, French, & Burgess, 2010). A more recent concept dating from the late 1980s is that of managing diversity which focuses on the idea that organizational practices which recognize individual differences in employees can be harnessed to produce benefits for the organization (Strachan et al., 2010). In reality, a mix of these ideas is present in organizations based on national legislation, social beliefs and organizational goals. This is no different in South Asia, so a varied mix of policies and practices are found, although Rowley, Yukongdi and Wei (2010, p. 183) find that managing diversity is a relatively novel concept in Asia.

Mainly stemming from these inequalities, as well as various social and economic facets, gender issues such as sexual harassment, work-life issues and gender-based violence (GBV) persist to a greater degree in South Asian workplaces. Sexual harassment at work is common and pervasive, with many South Asian countries reporting higher incident rates as well as double risk of harassment both at work and on the way to work (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014). In particular categories of working women such as women working in the plantation sector and garment sector, harassment tends to occur in line rooms (houses of workers in plantations) (Wijayatilake & Zachariya, 2001) and boarding houses. The fact that many South Asian countries have taken important initiatives to address this pervasive issue, especially through specific legislation, needs particular acknowledgement. Sri Lanka was the first South Asian country to introduce legislation to address the issue with an amendment to the Penal Code (Section 345 of Penal Code (Amendment) Act No. 22 of 1995) in 1995 making sexual harassment a criminal offense punishable with imprisonment, fine or both. Going beyond the ‘Vishaka guidelines’ used to address the issue, India introduced the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and

Redressal) Act in 2013. Similarly, Pakistan's Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, and the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 2009, makes sexual harassment of women a crime punishable by law. However, once again, it is at the implementation stage where the system breaks down: "Many studies repeatedly and consistently point to system failures, such as lack of monitoring and follow-up in law enforcement, gender biases among those tasked with implementing laws, corruption in systems and the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators" (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014, p. 120). In addition to these legislative enactments, numerous other formal and informal initiatives have been introduced by non-governmental, employer, employee and women's organizations to address the issue. Yet, it is disheartening to see that many of these initiatives have not made significant contributions towards preventing or addressing the issue.

Other forms of GBV such as verbal abuse and assault are serious issues working women and men face in workplaces, with significantly more women than men being affected by such violence. South Asian women are specifically victims of GBV "[b]ecause they have low status, lack power, and face a host of other related social and economic challenges" (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014, p. 6). Even violence that occurs outside the spheres of workplace can have vital effect for working women:

[A]buse that leads to physical and psychological harm is bound to inhibit women's ability to seek employment and perform in a job to the extent that those who do not suffer violence are able to do; controlling actions by spouses or in-laws also prevent many women from exploring their potential in the workplace. (Solotaroff & Pande, 2014, p. 15)

With this experience of gender inequalities, much needs to be done to address the many issues and challenges women face. Many cultural, structural and organizational barriers identified through research have to be addressed. More specifically, gender role stereotyping beliefs, gender-based division of labour (at home and work), work-family conflict (Kailasapathy, Kraimer, & Metz, 2014), effectiveness of legislation and lack of organizational commitment to gender equality, equal treatment and social support (Benson & Yukongdi, 2005; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006) should be dealt with seriously. To this end, government, organizational and social support mechanisms are vital. Prior research has highlighted the need for legislative reforms, effective implementation, monitoring, as well as educating the general public and employees of their rights (Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006).

The HRM departments' critical role in this milieu is of crucial importance. In order to fulfill national goals of equality, HRM departments must develop and implement a range of policies including equal employment opportunity policies and practices affecting recruitment, promotion and training, family friendly policies, procedures and support mechanisms such as flexi-time, childcare and elder care support (Benson & Yukongdi, 2005; Budhwar, Saini & Bhatnagar, 2011; Wickramasinghe & Jayatilaka, 2006). These initiatives, together with social and cultural changes would improve the representation, status and acceptance of

women in workplaces. While legal and organizational changes may be possible, whether cultural change is attainable is questionable. Yet, as Yukongdi and Benson (2005, p.146) state, “societies have undergone shifts in values, including values regarding the role of women and the concept of gender equality”, indicating hope for the future.

However, much research remains to be done within organizations in South Asian countries to assess these issues. Budhwar and Debrah (2001, p. 2) ask the question: Are all activities of an organization affected by national culture to the same degree? For “if the nature of HRM is known to be ‘context-specific’...then the degree and direction of influence of both culture-bound and culture-free factors on HRM vary from country to country and are responsible for the context-specific nature of HRM”. This special issue of *South Asian Journal of Human Resources Management* looks at some of these issues in a variety of organizations in some of the countries of South Asia.

In this special issue, we cover a few of the specific situations facing women in the countries of South Asia. The first article by Muttukrishna Sarvananthan focuses on the impediments experienced by women in post-civil war Sri Lanka. This article explores and explains the numerous obstacles women face in a war-affected zone in actively participating in the economic growth. Specifically, the article highlights the institutional and socio-cultural barriers to women’s economic empowerment, and provides recommendations to empower and assist women to seize the many opportunities available in a reviving economy.

The second article by Arosha Adikaram and Kanchana Wijayawardena reviews Kanter’s theory of group proportions (also known as tokenism). The sample used is women in the male-dominated IT industry in Sri Lanka. The authors look at the challenges faced by the women in IT project teams and what happens to them in male-dominated teams. The challenges revealed are not due to numerical minority alone but are the result of the spilling over of gender role expectations in the workplace.

A study undertaken in India is the third article by Surendra Kumar Sia, Bharat Chandra Sahoo and Pravakar Duari who examine whether women’s perceived gender discrimination and future time perspective have an impact on physical, cognitive and emotional work engagement in textile and apparel industry in Chennai and the Puducherry region of India. They also examine if future time perspective is a moderator in this relationship. This study finds that perceived gender discrimination is negatively related to cognitive and emotional engagement; future time perspective is related to all the work engagements and future time perspective is found to moderate the relationships between perceived gender discrimination and cognitive as well as emotional dimensions of work engagement.

This special issue also presents a case study by Fseeha Rizvi, Tanzeela Hussain and Dan Walsh of the British Council, Pakistan, on ‘finding the right balance—improving the gender profile of the British Council in Pakistan’. In this case study, the authors analyze how the marked gender disparity was addressed through a planned process of assessment, problem identification, management intervention and evaluation. The importance of an evidence-based intervention is clearly highlighted, where the final outcome has led not only a culture change with increased



women's representation but also an improvement of overall performance through improved terms and conditions. It is interesting to note how the general assumption that culture is a reason for the low number of women employed is challenged as a major reason for this situation was identified as the uncompetitive pay and benefits of British Council in Pakistan.

This issue also includes interviews with Ms. Smita Saha, Vice President-HR, Astra Zeneca Ltd., and Ms. Uma Rani TM, Senior Vice President, SAP India on the theme of gender (in)equality. The interviewees discuss their careers, the challenges they faced, issues of work–family and provide advice to the younger generation women. They also explore the role of HR and senior management in encouraging gender diversity in workplaces and also the role of organizational culture in women's careers. The special issue concludes with two book reviews: Savita Kumra, Ruth Simpson and Ronald J. Burke (Eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender in Organizations* reviewed by Erin Watson-Lynn; and Sheryl Sandberg's *Lean In* reviewed by Anjali Chaudhry.

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