
Gender Issues In South Asia

South Asia is home to roughly one-fourth of the entire world's population with a median age of 27.6, hence making it the region with the highest number of youth (Population of Southern Asia (2019) - Worldometers, 2019). One of the biggest concerns of South Asian countries is the increase in the growth of population in a region that is already so overpopulated. Much of the problem lies in the deep-rooted gender inequalities, and because of the large population of South Asia, the region has the highest number of out-of-school girls in the world (Education and Gender Equality Series 9. Girls' Education in South Asia Girl at school in Bangladesh, n.d.)

To get a better understanding of the problem, we have to dig deeper and look for its source. For any population, the growth of it depends on fertility rates, social status, and stigmas women face in the society; considering other factors like death rates, immigration, and emigration are constant. In most of South Asia, the major imbalance in the literacy rate and social status between men and women is one of the key reasons why the population growth is so high in this region of the world. The inequality in the level of education received, sex selective abortions, child labor, child marriages, abuse and harassment, dowry, honor killings are just some of the things south Asian women go through on a daily basis. So, the real question is, how can a society thrive and control population when the females of its population are not getting the same treatment as the males?

While we have made huge advancements in the field of technology, human rights, discrimination, marginalization, and inequality; women in South Asia still face the effect of gender discrimination, inequality, and objectification. Ayesha Banu in her article Human development, disparity and vulnerability: women in South Asia, states that Gender disparities are not directly correlated with income poverty, and many studies show that often there is no correlation between per capita income and gender disparities in health and education outcomes (Filmer et al. 1998). Other dimensions of inequality touch on freedom, personhood, dignity, mobility, autonomy, choice and options, space to express ideas and orientations, rights and access, decision-making capacities in relation to the allocation of resources, and the ability to control one's own body and life choices. Many of these human rights and choices are denied to women even in these countries. She goes on explain how these gender inequalities usually more often than not stem from the oldest household traditions that have been prevalent for centuries.

It all starts from birth. The birth of a girl is always the less preferred option for their families. A girl is seen as a burden; as someone of no future value as she would belong to another family once she gets married. A girl is only expected to stay indoors doing house chores and helping with other family needs. She should not go to school, or work, or even step outside of her house past dawn. Sadly, these are the kind of thoughts that prevail in the minds of most people in the rural areas of South Asia. Hence, the problem of gender disparity has never been related to income but the century old mentality that has been passed down from previous generations.

This is where the role of education comes to play. A huge reason why South Asia is so overpopulated is because of child marriages and unwanted pregnancies among other factors. Despite laws against the practice, child marriage is common throughout South Asia, and it

effectively puts a stop to the educational progress of many girls (Education and Gender Equality Series 9. Girls' Education in South Asia Girl at school in Bangladesh, n.d.) Girls lower than the age of fifteen are getting married and this is usually seen as families getting rid of their "burden". Furthermore, most girls drop out of schools, or colleges, because their parents would rather get them married off and use that money for dowry than invest it in their education. Girls all over South Asia receive less encouragement, and investment, when it comes to getting a proper education. With little to no knowledge of the human anatomy and sex-education, these girls who are barely teenagers experience pregnancy from a very young age. They end up having multiple pregnancies by the time they are twenty-five.

Another crucial concern for most parents not sending girls to school is the case of sexual harassment which again stems from lack of education. Countries like India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh make up most of the population of South Asia. The social stigmas and gender roles are so strong there, it is nearly impossible to change the mindset of people who have been brainwashed with the same mentality since the 1900s. The notion of "women should wear fewer revealing clothes out in public to avoid getting harassed" is deeply engrained in the ever so patriarchal societies of most South Asian countries. The focus has always been on the do's and don'ts of women rather than men which is why sexual abuse and harassment like "eve teasing" is so widely reported in these areas. Because of this, parents from poorer neighborhoods are always reluctant to send their daughters to school and receive an education. A girl runs the risk of being harassed, assaulted, abducted, or even murdered on the way to or from school, and she is by no means free from risk within the school. For this reason, many girls are withdrawn from school when they reach puberty. Girls who live at some distance from the school are particularly vulnerable; the further they have to travel to school, the more remote the area, the greater the potential risk. Some parents compromise by sending their daughters to a nearby school, even if it is known to be of poor quality, or it does not offer the full range of subjects. The girls' brothers are allowed to go farther afield to find a better-quality education (Education and Gender Equality Series 9. Girls' Education in South Asia Girl at school in Bangladesh, n.d.)

Jungho Kim's paper on Female education and its impact on fertility states that a school construction program that took place in Indonesia between 1973 and 1978 provides an example for a developing country. One study found that an increase in women's education by one year, compared to their husband's education level, reduced their fertility at age 25, by 0.1 children, on average [5]. A study on Nigeria investigated a universal primary education program that took place between 1976 and 1981 and found that it also influenced fertility behavior [6]. Accordingly, women with an additional year of schooling had, on average, 0.26 fewer children before age 25 than they would otherwise have had. Both studies compared students from the same area before and after the education programs were introduced. Findings show innate differences in the preference for children between educated and uneducated women. However, they do not explain why better-educated women have fewer children nor do they determine which mechanisms (associated with education) were involved (Kim, 2016)

Learning from other countries, South Asian countries have also started to take steps to combat this problem. In Pakistan, Malala Yousafzai, youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, is the pioneer of modern-day women's education rights. She took a bullet to the head while protesting against the Taliban who took over her hometown and shut down all schools and educational institutions. In Afghanistan, there are several radio stations run by women educating the public on cultural, social and humanitarian issues. The RAWA foundation of Afghanistan also supports

refugee women and provides schools and other basic necessities for women. In the last decade, more women have access to higher education, more women have employment and the fertility rate has gone down significantly. Furthermore, India has recently introduced incentives similar to the Bangladesh secondary stipend program, in which every family with a single girl child will be eligible for free education from Class 6. The motivation seems to be less of an EFA strategy than an attempt to control population (by keeping girls in school longer) and to redress the alarming population imbalance caused by son-preference. 5 However, as happened in Bangladesh, the secondary stipend will probably have a very positive indirect effect on primary enrolment for girls (Education and Gender Equality Series 9. Girls' Education in South Asia Girl at school in Bangladesh, n.d.)

I strongly believe that the population growth control is in the hands of the government of these countries. The government should make more public schools in the underdeveloped areas fully free of charge. They should ensure quality education and comprehensive packages that allows these families to earn some sort of grant or stipend by sending their daughters to school. The government should really emphasize the importance of education to people in these areas. As South Asia has one of the highest numbers of youth population in the world, now would be the perfect time for the government to make the most out of the new generation. Increasing the literacy rate among the locals will have a domino effect; as more education will lead to more information on birth control and human anatomy which will then result in more women focusing on education and career rather than domestic needs. All of these changes could prove to be pivotal in tackling population growth in the future.

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