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## **A Study of Women Empowerment in SAARC Countries: Role of Women in Development of INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

Women's empowerment is a critical aspect of societal development, particularly within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) countries. This abstract examines the status of women's empowerment in SAARC nations, with a special focus on Indian women. Despite concerted efforts and progress in some areas, significant challenges persist across the region, including low rates of female labor force participation, limited access to leadership roles, digital gender divides, financial exclusion, and high levels of gender-based violence. In India, while women have made notable strides in various sectors, such as politics, business, and science, there remain disparities in areas like labor force participation and access to leadership positions. Government policies and initiatives, such as Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, aim to address these challenges and promote gender equality. However, comprehensive strategies are needed to overcome deeply entrenched socio-cultural norms and structural barriers. Collaboration among SAARC member countries, along with targeted interventions, data-driven policymaking, and inclusive economic development, can foster women's empowerment and contribute to more equitable and sustainable societies in the region.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The SAARC Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) represents a diverse tapestry of nations, each enriched with unique cultures, histories, and traditions. Women's empowerment, encompassing economic, social, and political dimensions, is central to the holistic development agenda within SAARC. Recognizing the pivotal role women play in family dynamics,

community resilience, and national progress, the member nations have committed to fostering an environment where women can realize their full potential. This commitment is anchored in the understanding that empowering women is not just a matter of social justice; it is an imperative for sustainable and equitable development. Historically, the status of women in SAARC countries has been shaped by a myriad of factors, including cultural norms, colonial legacies, and socio-economic structures. Over the years, women have transcended traditional roles, breaking barriers in education, entering the workforce, and participating in political processes. The historical journey of women's empowerment in SAARC countries lays the foundation for contemporary efforts, illustrating both progress and persistent challenges. Within the SAARC context, the journey towards women's empowerment is dynamic and varied. From the plains of India to the mountains of Nepal, and the islands of Sri Lanka to the deserts of Afghanistan, each country navigates its unique challenges and opportunities. The SAARC region serves as both a melting pot of diversity and a crucible for shared aspirations, where the empowerment of women becomes a collective endeavour. SAARC countries are not working in isolation; rather, they are part of a regional community committed to shared goals. This collaboration provides a platform for the exchange of best practices, the formulation of common policies, and the fostering of a supportive regional environment for women's empowerment.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

In her 2004 book "Violence, Law and Women Rights in SAARC," Savitri Goonesekere explored the legal position of women in three SAARC nations and how their legal systems addressed violence against women. She has provided an overview of the similarities and contrasts across the three legal traditions and their approaches to combating violence against women. In line with this, she talks about the prevalence of violence against women and how people violate the laws that are in place to protect them.

Dasarathi Bhuyan's book, "Women Empowerment," published in 2006, provides a concise and insightful definition of the concept, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of women's empowerment. According to the author, women's empowerment is a dynamic process meant to help them get beyond barriers that stand in their way. Additionally, Bhuyan underscores the broader dimensions of empowerment, incorporating social, economic, and political aspects. Furthermore, he highlights the role of globalization in raising awareness about women's rights and the imperative of their empowerment.

Muhammad Jalal-ud-Din's article, "Socio-economic and Cultural Constraints of Women in Pakistan," published in 2010, provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by women in underdeveloped areas of Pakistan. The author explores the socio-economic and cultural factors that hinder women's progress and evaluates their status in comparison to women in other countries worldwide. The article aims to shed light on the limitations that impede women from actively participating as members of society.

Suguna M. (2011) advocates for the recognition of education as a pivotal factor in empowering women in India, framing it as a cornerstone for addressing challenges to traditional roles and

facilitating transformative changes in the lives of women. The linkage between women's education and India's broader development goals is also emphasized in the passage.

### 3. STATUS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SAARC

According to IFC data challenges and gaps in women's empowerment in SAARC, particularly in the context of labor force participation, leadership, digital access, financial inclusion, gender-based violence, data availability, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic:

- Low Labor Force Participation : With little progress made since 1990, SAARC has one of the lowest rates of female labor force participation in the world. Due to the underrepresentation of women in full-time employment, there are economic gaps..
- Lack of Private Sector Leadership: Women are significantly underrepresented in private sector leadership positions, with only a small percentage holding senior leadership roles or CEO positions, especially evident in India.
- Digital Gender Divide: While SAARC women have seen improvements in digital access, significant gaps persist, including lower usage of mobile internet and ownership of mobile phones and smartphones compared to men.
- Financial Inclusion Challenges: Despite improvements in bank account ownership, there are still gender gaps, with variations among countries. A significant portion of accounts in SAARC are inactive, and many women-owned MSMEs rely on informal financing.
- Gender-Based Violence: High rates of gender-based violence persist across the region, with underreporting of incidents. Intimate partner violence affects a significant portion of SAARC women, surpassing the global average.
- Data Gap: Data on women's inclusion in various sectors and their experiences as employees, entrepreneurs, and community members are either outdated or lacking, hindering evidence-based policymaking and interventions.
- Impact of COVID-19: The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing gender inequalities, leading to a disproportionate impact on women's employment and economic participation, with higher job-loss rates compared to men globally.

### 4. STATUS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

India's adherence to international labor standards is demonstrated by the country's ratification of 47 ILO treaties and one ILO protocol. With significant misgivings, it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 after signing it in 1980. The National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security and the Optional Protocol of the CEDAW, however, have not yet been ratified by India. To address gender-based violence and discrimination within the country, India has enacted various laws. The Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961, criminalizes the practice of dowry, which is a significant issue affecting women in India. The Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005, aims to provide legal protection and recourse to victims of domestic violence. In 2017, the Indian government took a significant step by increasing maternity leave from 12 weeks to 26 weeks for women working in the private sector under the Maternity Benefit Act. This move aims to support working mothers and promote gender equality in the workplace by providing adequate maternity benefits.

The Indian legal system, despite having legislation in place to protect women and girls, faces challenges in effectively enforcing these laws and convicting perpetrators. Systemic bureaucracy, corruption, and

delays in the judicial process contribute to weak enforcement, as evidenced by the lengthy delay in the Nirbhaya gang rape case. Furthermore, there is a disparity in the visibility of women's empowerment between rural and urban areas in India, which is concerning given the significant rural population. Urban women generally have greater access to education, employment, healthcare, and decision-making power compared to their rural counterparts.

In rural India, particularly in the Hindi heartland, gender disparity remains pronounced. Women are often confined to traditional household roles, with limited involvement in economic decisions. Educational attainment, nutrition, and access to healthcare are lower in rural areas compared to urban settings, contributing to wider social welfare gaps, particularly when compared to neighbouring Bangladesh. The SAARC region as a whole faces significant gender inequality, with the gender gap being one of the largest globally, second only to the Middle East and North Africa. Female parliamentary representation is also low across the region, except for Sri Lanka.

These challenges in achieving women's empowerment within the SAARC region are deeply rooted in societal norms, cultural traditions, and gender stereotypes. Efforts to address these issues must take into account the religious, cultural, and socio-economic particularities of the region, recognizing that legal provisions alone may not be sufficient to bring about meaningful change. Researchers emphasize the importance of addressing discrimination within societal and family structures and promoting gender equality through holistic approaches that consider the complexities of SAARC culture and society.

Notable gains in women's empowerment in India highlight significant advancements across various sectors:

- 1. Leadership and Representation:** Women are increasingly occupying leadership positions in diverse fields such as politics, business, science, and the armed forces. The leadership roles of female scientists at the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) for the Chandrayaan-2 mission and the Supreme Court's decision allowing women to serve as army commanders signify breaking traditional gender barriers and challenging stereotypes.
- 2. Government Initiatives:** The Indian government has launched several flagship schemes and initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women. Schemes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, and Mahila-E-Haat target areas such as education, health, and entrepreneurship to uplift both urban and rural women.
- 3. Grassroots Empowerment:** Alongside government efforts, grassroots initiatives by civil society organizations play a crucial role in empowering women. Projects like Mahila-E-Haat leverage technology to support female entrepreneurs and self-help groups, facilitating economic independence and community engagement.
- 4. Partnerships and Collaboration:** Collaboration between government agencies, international organizations, NGOs, and private corporations further amplifies efforts towards women's empowerment. Initiatives such as the collaboration between the World Bank and the Andhra Pradesh government to improve healthcare services, and the UN-

India NITI Aayog Investor Consortium for Women Entrepreneurs, demonstrate the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships in fostering female entrepreneurship and advancing women's rights.

## 5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, women's empowerment within the SAARC region faces numerous challenges but also presents significant opportunities for progress. Despite some advancements, including increased representation in various sectors and the implementation of policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality, significant gaps and barriers persist. These include low rates of female labor force participation, limited access to leadership positions in the private sector, digital gender divides, financial inclusion challenges, high levels of gender-based violence, and inadequate data availability.

To address these challenges and promote women's empowerment in SAARC countries, the following recommendations are proposed:

SAARC member countries should prioritize the enactment and enforcement of policies that promote gender equality and women's rights across all sectors. This includes measures to increase women's participation in the labor force, ensure access to quality education and healthcare, and address discriminatory practices in the workplace and society.

Private sector organizations should actively work towards closing the gender gap in leadership positions and promoting inclusive workplaces

Financial Inclusion: Financial institutions should develop and implement gender-responsive financial products and services that meet the specific needs of women, including access to credit, savings, insurance, and other financial tools.

SAARC member countries should strengthen legal frameworks and support services for survivors of gender-based violence, raise awareness, and promote gender-sensitive education to prevent violence against women and girls

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