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CHALLENGES FOR ECONOMIC
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN
IN SOUTH ASIA

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The varied experiences of women in South Asia are examined in this paper to highlight the similarities shared by women across the seven countries in terms of their vulnerabilities and survival based livelihood strategies that continue to be under deep influence of the prevalent gender ideologies even in the context of structural economic reforms and modernisation. Economic empowerment of women considered as income earning or work participation serves to account for one element while neglecting other aspects, thereby questioning the potential for empowerment itself. The positive outcomes of the changes witnessed for women still remain minuscule, and while they portend the power to bring about the desired transformation, the need to change resilient mindsets and people's perceptions towards women and their contribution to society, polity and economy remains a critical dimension to pursue for effective empowerment of women.

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the changing work profiles of women in the South Asian region, with all elements of contradictions, in terms of doubling their burdens or empowering them. Are the newer avenues for women's employment created post economic reforms reflective of alterations in gender relations and suggest improvements in the socio-economic balances? There are very progressive and exhilarating changes witnessed in certain spheres that portray the development of women in the region. Export-oriented manufacturing and service sectors have generated job openings for women's labour absorption. While these beneficial alterations are changing the lives of a few women, the mass of them remains subjugated and subordinated even with their increased economic participation.

The economic empowerment for women in South Asia poses multi-dimensional challenges when its potential as a transformative mechanism to achieve a gender balance in society is considered. Can economic empowerment be viewed as employment generation and women's access to paid jobs, in the context of this region where women's contribution to the economy is concentrated in unpaid work spheres? The economic participation of women and their contribution is very often poverty-induced and hence assigned lower value rather than being viewed as a process towards alleviating poverty and thereby providing the opportunity for women to be considered as equal partners in improving well being. The internalisation of these perceptions of gender inequalities through socialisation processes prevents even women themselves from becoming agents of change, unless collective awareness is brought about and they are organised to do so (Antony, 2001; Banerjee, 2004).

The resilience to change noted in the prevalence of gender ideologies lies in the hierarchisation and power equations that define gender relations and persist in retention of women's relatively lower position, especially in certain domains that are generally prevented from being challenged (marriage, inheritance, divorce, control over women's bodies and sexuality) even while there may be alterations in other arenas that are being accepted relatively more easily (as in the case of women's education, employment, expansion of responsibility within the domestic spheres). The domination and pervasive prevalence of gender ideologies that subjugate women within families, and assign lower social status to them irrespective of their roles and responsibilities, and consider them as requiring male protection and guardianship militates against any autonomy enhancing processes that women may be involved in (Mathema, 1998; Mukhopadhyay and Sudarshan, 2003; MHHDC, 2000).

The distinctiveness of gender ideologies prevalent in the region stems from the pluralities that influence patriarchy, thereby entangling with and producing complex diversities that generate differences and overlaps among relationships between men and women across caste, class, region and religion. The principle of hierarchy derived from caste and social inequalities, that is the socio-cultural context of power and authority structures, their non-linearity, absence of bi-polarity and constantly changing nature defines the uniqueness of gender relationships in the South Asian region (Sangari, 1995; Kalpagam, 2000; Ganesh and Risseuw, 1998).

The recent economic policy changes induced phenomena present conflicting and contradictory scenarios, displaying progressive and retrogressive forces, in women's development, adding to the complexities of understanding the dynamic changes being witnessed in the South Asian region. The region comprises seven independent nation-states², is predominantly rural (70 per cent), populous (accommodates one-fifth of all humanity), poor (is home to 40 per cent of world's poor), marked for its inequalities (especially gender based; complicated further by caste, religion, ethnicities) and human deprivations. The inequalities prevalent in this region provide an interesting kaleidoscope that simultaneously poses multidimensional challenges for development – human and gender. The situation is further complicated by the fact that these countries are located at different junctures of their social and economic development.

Women are governed by social values, customs and norms, subjugated to the power of the male heads of households that imposes restrictions on their mobility, autonomy in terms of decision making, sexuality, health, reproduction and so on. Even the universality of marriage (with the absence of the right to choose one's own partner) along with the poor access to property (since inheritance in most cases follows patrimonial, patriarchal systems³) constitutes segments of their lives wherein women are made to feel disempowered and dependent.

Cultural pluralism in South Asia – which is home to several major religious groups, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians as well as many smaller, more localised traditions followed among the multi-ethnic populations of the region – defines the customary values and forms the basis, very often, for the legal systems followed

in most countries of the region. The manner in which universal legal systems function and the simultaneous operation of community, religion based and personal laws that are followed for marriage, divorce, guardianship, inheritance and so on introduce conflicting situations that contest gender equalities despite the constitutional provisions for it (UNIFEM, 2003; MHHDC, 2000).

Legal universalism or standardization is clearly not the desired solution, since implementing equality – a central objective of human development – is not the same as implementing uniformity. As upheld in the Human Development Report (HDR) 2004 which focuses on the theme of cultural liberty, there is a need for “internal reform of all customary laws, upholding gender equality rather than imposing identical gender-biased, prejudicial laws across all communities” (pp. 57; UNDP, 2004).

The resilience to change and persistence of gender ideologies over generations witnessed in the region can be understood in the context of these divergences across institutional structures. Under these socio-cultural and patriarchal structures even where women are economically active, the manner in which their contribution is treated by the various agents – family, labour markets, the state as well as the women themselves – crucially impacts the extent of economic empowerment that is feasible. Participation of women in paid labour market spheres itself is facilitated by the increasing acceptance of their presence in public domains, which is in turn promoted as a result of enhancing educational attainments among them. Appearances of women in various roles of prominence within media, as political leaders, as senior officials of government bureaucracy, as executives within the corporate sector, as celebrities in the entertainment sector and various other capacities have facilitated the social change that is resulting in the readiness to accept women’s employment. Albeit gradual and slow, this is making space for increasing labour force participation among women in addition to the growing economic pressures which have always compelled them to work. The empowerment of women is, however, subject to many other factors than this.

The term ‘empowerment’ has multi-dimensional connotations which range from “development of personal instrumental competencies and skills, to the process of challenging existing power relations, to household decision-making, to gaining access and control over resources like credit, income, land, knowledge, etc. as well as to subjective variables like the sense of personal power of self-efficacy” (Mukhopadhyay and Sudarshan (eds.), 2003; pp.4). As a hold-all term, ‘empowerment’ has evolved into a concept that can be invoked in virtually any context, be it human rights, basic or strategic needs, capacity building skill formation or overall economic security (Beteille, 1999; Karlekar, 2004). Economic empowerment of women considered as income earning or work participation serves to account for one element while neglecting other aspects, thereby questioning the potential for empowerment itself.

This paper discusses the varied experiences in South Asia in order to highlight the similarities shared by women across the seven countries in terms of their vulnerabilities and survival based livelihood strategies that continue to be under deep influence of the prevalent gender ideologies even in the context of structural economic reforms and modernisation.

The first section following the introduction provides the background context of the region, laying out the characteristic features that lend themselves to the complexities witnessed. The second section focuses on women's work in the context of discussing issues relevant to their economic empowerment. Elements of women's participation in the labour market are deliberated upon to elucidate the nature of such involvements. Finally, the concluding section observes that positive outcomes of the changes witnessed for women still remain minuscule. And while they portend the power to bring about the desired transformation, the need to change resilient mindsets and people's perceptions towards women and their contribution to society, polity and economy remains a critical dimension to pursue for effective empowerment of women.

II. REGIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

South Asia is a predominantly rural, tradition bound, culturally diverse region inhabited by a vast population that is dependent on primary sector activities based on land, forests, livestock and water. The region consists of seven independent nation-states with historical roots that are intertwined, geographical contiguity, socio-cultural similarities, especially the patriarchal domination that subordinates women through kinship ordered structures and caste-class hierarchies, as well as economic linkages fostered through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) initiative that aims to propel trade across the region and work towards enhancing the well-being of its people.

Most of the countries of the region have opened up their economies over the last two decades or so, having initiated economic policy reforms under the structural adjustment programmes at different points of time that intensified over the 1990s. Industrialisation, modernisation, technological innovations and changes have made inroads, affecting economic growth, structures and patterns of production and employment. By the turn of the century, although different countries were at different levels of growth and development, the growth experienced has been low in labour absorption and has resulted in increasing income and social inequalities (MHHDC, 2000; Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

Each of the seven South Asian countries is at diverse junctures of economic and social development. Nepal and Bangladesh have the lowest per capita income, while Maldives and Sri Lanka record relatively higher per capita income (based on 2002 Gross Domestic Product calculations). The levels of urbanisation vary with one-third of Pakistan's population living in urban areas, while over 92 per cent of Bhutan's populace inhabits rural areas.

The levels of economically active female population vary across the countries, with Pakistan recording the lowest, while Bangladesh and Maldives have relatively higher levels. The percentage of female workers among total workers, however, is lowest in Maldives and Pakistan (see Table 1; ADB, 2000; UNDP, 2000, 2003). Education, early marriage and high fertility rates are often associated with changes in women's labour participation rates. Mukhopadhyay (1999) – in her study based on five larger South Asian countries – notes that the age specific labour force participation curve for women assumes a plateau-like shape, suggesting continued involvement throughout the reproductive years as well. This is

reflective of the necessity based participatory behaviour of women in the region marked by the peculiar characteristics of poverty, caste and gender.

Table 1
Adult Literacy Rates and Female Workers - South Asian Countries

Countries	Adult Literacy Rate (15 years and above)		Percentage of Female workers
	Female	Male	
Maldives	97.2	97.3	22
Sri Lanka	89.6	94.7	36
India	46.4	69.0	32
Bhutan	-	-	32
Bangladesh	31.4	50.3	42
Nepal	26.4	61.6	40
Pakistan	28.5	53.4	27

Source: UNDP, 2004; MHHDC, 2000.

Despite positive indicators on gender equality in Sri Lanka – stemming from the matrilineal and bilineal descent kinship (which allows for some degree of inheritance rights among women and provides considerable natal family support for daughters), late marriages, relatively high female education – the country shows a less favourable picture (ADB, 1999a; Aturupane, 1996; Malhotra and DeGraff, 2000).

Demographically, the peculiarity of South Asian population is that it is largely young with 35 per cent below the age of 15 years. This implies increasing proportions of expected future entrants into the labourforce.⁴ Already, most of the countries of the South Asian region are facing saturation in employment generation with growth patterns being low labour absorbing (MHHDC, 2003). The challenge of generating employment and providing access to sustainable livelihood under the changing socio-economic environment wherein vulnerabilities are heightening and aspiration levels mismatch with prevailing conditions in the labour market are ominous dark clouds that need to be dispersed.

Over the years, in a number of gender based development indicators, South Asian women are seen to be better off today than they were a few decades ago. Their survival in terms of life expectancy has been improving, and more women are educated and working. Many of them have entered politics at least at the local governance levels⁵ (MHHDC, 2000; Rustagi, 2004). There is an increasing recognition of the need to address women's issues specifically, to understand gender relations and work towards equality and empowerment for women.

Women located within households, with no ownership of economic assets, working mostly in unpaid family activities, are assigned lower economic worth. This, together with the already defined lower status they wield in social contexts within patriarchal, hierarchical structures, leaves them vulnerable and disempowered. Traditionally, women have had very poor access to and ownership rights of land resources. Even in the case of matrilineal and bilineal communities where women have had greater land rights, control and management of land has remained circumscribed (Agarwal, 1994). Land reforms, wherever they have

been effective even to a limited extent, continue to leave gender gaps in actual ownership and effective control of land. Thus, the ability of women to benefit from legal changes is circumscribed by a complex set of interlinked factors influenced by socio-cultural institutions. Any effort towards empowerment of women must address these power and authority relations that define institutional processes and structures.

As an achievement of the ongoing concerted efforts at international levels as well as the discourses on gender equality and empowerment the world over, governments in all of the South Asian countries have evolved mechanisms to work towards empowerment of women (UNIFEM, 2003). These regional and national endeavours have gone through the processes of changing nomenclatures, making mandatory alterations in all concerned governance structures, government policy documents, plans and schemes. These have accompanied a simultaneous parallel process of monitoring, evaluation and pointing out the 'tokenism' of most of these efforts (Mathema, 1998; ADB, 1999b; 2001a). The policy documents in many South Asian countries drafted on empowerment of women have only initiated the first steps. The entrenched systems that defend the status quo against improving gender balances pose many hurdles for concrete actions to take shape.

The gender ideologies that adversely impact women are predominant in the region in spite of the development noted by conventional well-being indicators. Thus, even Sri Lanka – the most developed country in terms of female educational attainment, life expectancy, low fertility rates, better survival of girls and so on – witnesses certain resilient stereotypes. Many policymakers and administrators continue to view women as 'dependent wives' or 'supplementary earners' to be used as labour reserve (ADB, 1999a). Despite extension of women's economic roles, and women's work participation increasing, the inequitable gender division of labour within households has changed very little. Household work is seen as 'women's work' and most women in the region tend to internalise these norms.

The responsibility of household work that is almost entirely upon women often acts as a deterrent to their participation in paid economic activities. The work burden and time taken to undertake these domestic chores often makes the kind of regular and timely participation required within a highly competitive labour market difficult for women. Women in negotiating the public and private domains are doubly burdened, and those belonging to the socio-economically backward sections of the population have an added burden borne out of caste based subjugation. The economically active women participating in paid work spheres but out of compulsion for survival may be empowered to some extent, however, such changes do not generate alterations in other spaces, thereby leaving unchallenged the position bestowed upon them under patriarchal structures.

The poverty-induced, vulnerability-led economic participation of women in South Asian countries is often highlighted, and the increasing feminisation tendencies are being noted. These were used as indicators of increasing financial crisis experienced by households ever since the economic reforms pressures intensified. In India, women belonging to the economically backward communities that coincide with the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Castes (OBCs) have a significantly larger proportion of workers

among them as compared to the upper castes where women are generally not allowed to undertake manual paid labour activities. The lower social position occupied by these castes, their poorer access to land and productive resources as compared to other castes leaves these households and their women with few options other than supplying their labour services for a livelihood.

The share of women's participation in the organised sector employment in India has been rising over the years, even displacing men from this coveted job sphere as a result of the increasing educational attainment levels among women. Most of these working women belong to the socio-economically better-off sections of Indian population, while the bulk of female employment remains in the unorganised, insecure and unprotected segments.

The entry of women into paid work, the compulsions and voluntary elements that allow for their acceptance in erstwhile hostile socio-cultural environs trace the changes witnessed in the economic spheres that display seemingly more flexible regimes as compared to the complex institutions governing female bodies, marriage, reproduction, sexuality and so on. The non-linearity and disparate change in different domains – the socio-cultural as compared to the economic, for instance – add to the contradictory signals and defy simple explanations. This understanding, however, contests the notions of inflexibility and rigidity of norms and structures, and highlights the dynamism of these institutional processes and the non-fixity of how these evolve under different situations.

Instances abound across the region to indicate how changes are occurring and the conflicting outcomes for gender equality and empowerment that are witnessed. In Maldives, the traditional participation of women in public spaces was marked by the absence of overt gender discrimination, and women of the archipelago have been described as the “most emancipated in the Islamic world” since they did not practice purdah (veiling) or seclusion (ADB, 2001a). In the changing modern context with economic development, however, Maldivian women's traditional roles are being redefined. And in spite of educational attainment, their participation in the new sectors of employment such as tourism, entertainment, and mechanised fish processing remains restricted (UNDP, 2000). Gender differences and stereotypes are beginning to be noted in the current scenario quite starkly⁶. These patterns are visible in all the South Asian countries irrespective of the varied levels of social, cultural, political, legal and economic development.

III. WOMEN'S WORK IN SOUTH ASIA: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES FOR EMPOWERMENT

Three basic issues define the vulnerability and lower status assigned to women's work in South Asia. Firstly, there is the issue of invisibility, the non-recognition of women's entire contribution to the economy, since it is conceptually viewed as directed towards the household or family and hence remains unaccounted. Secondly, is women's excessive concentration in traditional or conventional tasks and occupations, many of which tend to intermingle with their non-economic or extended economic activities – i.e, extended System of National Accounting (SNA) activities – that have remained outside the purview of GDP

calculations and are unpaid most of the times. This leaves such women un-enumerated, that is, not counted as workers. Thirdly, the structure of the labour market and its operational dynamics keeps women employed predominantly in unorganised sector in low paid, low skilled, manual and monotonous jobs. The role based stereotyping and gender division of labour that is prevalent in all categories of employment, irrespective of educational and skill development, exhibits resilience that is a derivative and extension of socio-cultural gender subordination experienced by women. This explains why even policy makers and administrators continue to view women as 'secondary workers' and 'supplementary earners', very often discounting or affecting their access to government programme based employment, earnings and other benefits.

It is noteworthy that despite tremendous variations across the South Asian countries, these basic elements hold relevance for all women belonging to this region. Women are concentrated in primary sector activities, largely subsistence oriented and low in productivity. A large chunk of the women is self-employed, unpaid family worker or home based contractual worker. The working environment is poor, and security or protection levels are non-existent. Except for a few women who are educated, professionally qualified, employed in formal sector jobs that are secure and protected, a large mass of women is struggling for a livelihood to survive in the unorganised segments of the economy.

Before discussing the sector specific, area or country wise instances of women's economic work participation, it is worth mentioning those activities that involve women but do not get calculated as economic contribution. The role played by women in the care sector, predominantly their reproductive work (bearing, rearing, nurturing children and household maintenance), falls outside the national accounting systems that are followed by different countries. While these activities are crucial for household members' well-being and effective participation in different spheres – economic, social and political – they continue to remain non-economic activities. By virtue of women performing these roles which are statistically not counted as economic and hence not monetarily valued, women's roles and their contribution are assigned a lower status.

Efforts are ongoing to prepare satellite accounts which can capture women's work through alternative methods such as time use surveys to overcome the existing limitations. Nepal among the South Asian countries has pioneered the preparation of such statistics as part of its national level labour force surveys (Acharya, 2000). India has also undertaken a pilot survey (CSO, 2000). The Human Development in South Asia (HDSA) 2000 based on some observations reports that South Asian women work for 10 to 12 hours per day, which is 2 to 4 hours more than the men.

Women's contribution to activities that are recognised by definition as economic activities also remains unrecognised and non-enumerated. This is due to cultural and traditional values which constrain recognition of women's economic participation. In the South Asian countries, the historically derived gender roles, spaces and stereotypes of the 'public' male breadwinner (provider) and 'private' female care-giver are espoused even under changing situations. This is due to the association of household status with women's non-work that

has been perpetuated by the circumstances of women having to supply their labour in the paid market work spheres under extreme economic stress and poverty. It is ironical that at times even the opposition to changing gender roles comes from women themselves who have internalised its social construction.

In South Asia, the interaction between religious and cultural beliefs and economic forces reinforces patriarchal cultures. Clearly, the value or self-worth of women might have been set very high if it were measured based on their indispensability to the household. Hanna Papanek (1990), highlighting the outcome of such 'symbolic' work rather than its content, terms them as "family status-production work". A shift from emphasising upon women's worth or 'value' to others in the socialisation process, to focus upon their own sense of value to themselves – their sense of self-worth – is crucial to understanding the persistence of inequality and evolving basic strategies for change.

Questioning why children (who are witness to the work undertaken and gender division of labour) as well as women do not unlearn these norms of inequality ingrained through the process of socialisation, Papanek explains it through what she calls the existence of "escalator hierarchies". Age and gender differences confer power on some over others in societies such as those of South Asia, wherein the young and powerless must await their turn to enjoy control over others as they age. Rebellion endangers this possibility and hence unlearning is made more difficult (Papanek, 1990).

A large proportion of women's work undertaken within the household for the family as unpaid workers remains unaccounted due to the conceptual, methodological and definitional flaws. The percentage of women workers ranges from 22 per cent in Maldives to 42 per cent in Bangladesh. A large majority of South Asian labour force is involved in primary sector activities – agriculture, hunting, forestry and fisheries. As per the latest comparable figures used by Mukhopadhyay (1999), nearly 94 per cent of women in Nepal, and between 70 to 80 per cent in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are to be found engaged in the primary sector. Women in South Asia participate in crop farming, animal husbandry and a host of off-farm activities. A substantial amount of time is spent by South Asian women in looking after livestock, from rearing to protecting animals, finding and collecting fodder and water, collecting eggs, milking, ensuring the health of animals, poultry, etc.

Bhutan⁷ – a landlocked, independent country (was never colonised) with self contained rural economy that is seeking a sustainable relationship with nature, and pursuing the goal of maximising people's happiness⁸ – is operating on the Buddhist philosophy of 'need rather than greed'. Only 8 per cent of its land is cultivated, while 70 per cent is under forest cover. An estimated 65,000 farming families own, on average, 1.5 hectares of agricultural landholdings per household (RGOB, 2000). Women's participation in traditional roles has been vital; however, their participation in government jobs remains low due to educational inadequacies.

The share of agriculture in GDP has been showing a declining trend in most countries of the region. However, intensification in feminisation of agriculture over time is noted, except in Bangladesh where percentage share of women in agriculture declined from 50 per

cent in 1991 to 47 per cent in 1995--6. In India, women workers as a percentage of total workers in agriculture rose from 37.6 per cent in 1972--3 to 39.4 per cent in 1993--4. In Pakistan, they rose from 14.3 per cent in 1984--5 to 21.1 per cent in 1993--4. In Sri Lanka, they increased from 27.6 per cent in 1953 to 34.6 per cent in 1990. In Nepal, there has been an increase of female share in the agricultural workforce, from 35.5 per cent in 1971 to a high of 45 per cent in 1991 (Mukhopadhyay, 1999). Male involvement in agriculture has, on the other hand, undergone a rapid decline over the years. Women are entering subsistence farming activities to fill the void created by men who move to better job avenues or migrate in search of more lucrative employment.

Commercialisation of agriculture and changing cropping patterns have impacted and altered the gender division of labour, and increased female labour use is noted with operation-wise changes. However, these changes have occurred strictly within the parameters of gender hierarchies. The diversification of cropping pattern, labour use systems involving women are not seen to be associated with greater control over earnings (ICIMOD, 1997). In the cotton cultivation undertaken in Pakistan, women predominantly do the job of picking cotton (UNDP, 2003). In Sri Lanka, most of the agricultural women workers are involved in the plantations sector (UNDP, 1998).

Women's labour in traditional sectors such as post-harvest activities and fish processing has been affected by mechanisation, modernisation, and automation; and very often they have been displaced. Such instances abound across the South Asian countries. Mechanised rice mills in Bangladesh have displaced women involved in manual paddy pounding (dhenki) (Mukhopadhyay, 1999). Similar instances are available from India. Maldivian women known for their higher work participation were involved in the processing of 'Maldivian fish' – a delicacy also exported to Sri Lanka. Downstream fish processing activities such as preparation of frozen, canned, chilled/fresh and salted/dried fish for export market occupy a bulk of local Maldivian labourforce.

The point that has been highlighted and needs to be reemphasised is that the problem or fault does not per se lie with technology, but with the social context of women's work in traditional systems (Sen, 1984). Technological innovations occur in tasks that are generally undertaken by men; alternatively, mechanised tasks displace women replacing men instead. Associated with these changes are skill impartation and higher wages for such tasks that in effect go to men and are viewed as being usurped by them. These changes are definitely linked to the prevalent gender ideologies that undermine the significance and due returns of women's work.

The transformation of economic structures in South Asia – which have followed a shift or easing of dependence on agriculture, focusing on non-agricultural growth – has had limited impact on employment patterns, especially in rural areas and certainly in the context of women. The post-liberalisation period with increased emphasis on export-orientation and opening up the economy for trade has accompanied the shift of countries from being net exporters of foodgrains to net importers of larger quantities of foodgrains. The Nepal HDR (2001) noted that 45 districts of Nepal have recently been officially declared as food

deficit (UNDP, 2002). Given that the women are 'in-charge' of food preparation and home management, the inadequacy, shortage or constraints in the sphere of food availability often victimises women, even resulting in domestic violence.

The inequalities in land ownership, and trends towards concentration of landholdings pushing small and marginal farmers into a state of landlessness have implications for food security levels within poorer households and the heightening of vulnerabilities that define livelihood strategies for majority of the women. Traditional avenues in the off-farm and non-agricultural spheres that occupied women and served as buffers in times of resource constraints, if not as regular income generation activities, have also been eroded in most areas. A shift to alternative cheaper, bulk produced commodities has affected handlooms, textiles, pottery and a range of handicrafts.

Manufacturing activities in industrial enterprises and factory units under one roof or complex where workers come together to work are giving way to contractual, sub-contractual, piece rated, home-based work. This has implications for women's recognition as workers, and their being organized to raise a united voice, which in turn adversely affect their economic empowerment.

Since the 1980s, the aggregate growth of Bangladeshi economy has been steady but slow (UNDP, 1996). The share of non-agriculture in the total rural employed population rose from 29 per cent to 34 per cent (1981--94). The rise in this share of non-agricultural employment has been higher for rural female employed population. A large number of women workers in Bangladesh are young, mainly single, although some are divorced, abandoned or married as well (ADB, 2001b). Such patterns of deployment are noted in the context of other sectors, such as fish processing, export processing zones, electronics and so on in India and Sri Lanka too.

Even in new export oriented industries, such as garments, footwear, electronics, pharmaceuticals, food processing sectors, gender discriminatory practices – in terms of tasks and skill levels of women workers and their pay and working conditions – remain unchanged (Unni, 2001; MHHDC, 2000).

Trading activities in certain countries, communities and specific areas within South Asia are undertaken by women (eg. Bhutan, Manipur in North-eastern region of India, fish sellers in Maldives and other fishing communities of India and so on). Among other services, an extension of socially acceptable and traditional role stereotypes is commonly noted, as in education, health and care sectors where women are concentrated.

In Nepal, of the seven per cent rural women workforce involved in non-agricultural activities, nearly half of them are in the service sector. Poor working environment and socially defined constraints and difficulties for women entrepreneurs are noted as an additional factor delimiting women's non-agricultural participation.

Poor ownership and access to economically productive assets forms a strategic constraint affecting women's nature of economic participation in Nepal (ADB, 1999b). The unequal inheritance laws reinforced by social norms define women's limited access to productive assets. The socialisation into unpaid, low productivity, low skilled and low paid work begins

early in women's lives, since education of females is assigned low priority. The population of girl child labourers exceeds as compared to boys (UNDP, 2002). The arguments that these are compulsions of poverty are challenged by the gender inequitous patterns of child work participation.

The impetus within governance structures to stress on economic participation of women initially began with an association to poverty reduction. The female-headed households being predominantly poverty ridden and the earnings of these women being utilised for better provisioning of basic needs, such as food, nutrition, education, health care as opposed to their male counterparts lends further support to encouraging women to undertake paid work (Hoddinott, 1992; Kabeer, 1994).

In the tiny idyllic archipelago of Maldives, nearly one-third to one-half of all households is reported to be female-headed households. Women claim this is based on 'their desire to be in-charge'. Yet, the social norm that is applicable legally too, is that girls and women will have a legal guardian (normally the male head of the household). It is also a fact that large number of women is trapped in the quagmire of early marriage, with a majority of them having limited autonomy in household decision making. The islands are also known for one of the highest rates of divorce and remarriage in the entire region with no social taboos associated to these practices. However, the freedom to choose partners, and the social sanction for remarriage under the changing circumstances of monetary relations and market based existences put undue pressures that have the effect of negating the element of freedom in these choices.

The labour force participation rates (LFPR) in Maldives fell from 72 per cent in 1977 to 20 percent in 1990. This decline can be partly explained by the reduction in women's involvement in fish preservation (dry fish) activities due to mechanisation and export of raw rather than dry fish as well as the limited opportunities for higher education due to both geographical and infrastructural constraints. There has been a drastic decline in female LFPR in agriculture, and women have not been able to benefit from the boom in tourism by direct employment due to socio-cultural constraints and gender biased mindsets. The poor access to higher education as well as the social taboos against work in the entertainment industry has limited the possibility of women benefiting from tourism sector that heavily employs expatriates from other South Asian countries (ADB, 2001a). The inaccessibility to own incomes often compels the women to opt for quicker remarriages for ensuring financial security.

In Bangladesh, both the government and the NGO sector have helped create self- and contractual employment for nearly 15 per cent of rural women (above the age of 15 years) (ADB, 2001b). There are over 1,000 local and national organisations in Bangladesh that generate self employment opportunities for over 8 million poor, mostly women, through micro-credit, training in literacy, technical skills, and legal rights. Similar efforts are ongoing in other parts of South Asia as well.

The employment based cooperatives such as in dairying, textiles, specific agro-based food items that operate with assistance from government and NGOs are other efforts that

are increasingly being viewed from the angle of their potential for economic empowerment of women.

In the context of declining employment avenues, and women's participation being residual in nature, the challenge is to plan for pro-poor, labour absorbing growth avenues and address the problems of underemployment and unemployment. Another critical dimension is to effectively implement minimum and gender-equal wages along with social security measures. If women workers are treated equally in the labour market (paid fair wages), this can positively impact, to a certain extent, their economic empowerment. However, the overall structural and institutional changes for women to move towards greater freedom to decide, autonomy and control over earnings require an overhauling of the social perceptions and mindsets within families, labour markets, the state as well as women themselves, regarding their role, status, worth or value, all of which are constituents of the process of inching towards empowerment.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In today's world, value and worth are inevitably equated with monetary calculations and considerations. As mentioned by Kelkar, et al. (2004) in the context of redefining dignity ('samman') for women involved in the microcredit initiatives to help generate incomes for poor, needy rural Bangladeshis: "In a cash economy, it is earning of cash income that brings respect" (pp. 3638). Various studies in the region and elsewhere have emphasised the importance of economic empowerment for improving women's status and enhancing their autonomy levels (Mukhopadhyay, 1999).

A survey based study by the Pakistan Institute of Development Economics on women's autonomy notes that paid employment and women's contribution to family income emerge as the most important determinants of women's intra-household decision making authority (Sathar and Kazi, 1997). Even women's own perceptions about their own work and contribution changes with income or organisational mobilisation and awareness generation (Antony, 2001; Kelkar, et al., 2004). This has even been linked and associated with estimations of stress and tiredness experienced by women to note that there seems to be a decline in mental distress levels (Sonpar and Kanbur, 2003). However, new market roles that are expected to involve women may not necessarily bring about greater empowerment, since "the old order of hierarchies may persist and new forms of subordination may surface, reinforcing the unequal power equations between the sexes" (pp. 22; Mukhopadhyay and Sudarshan (eds.), 2003). Instances of these have been discussed in various spheres of women's lives across the countries of the region.

South Asian social structures are indeed very complex and uniquely hierarchical. They not only define status, power and dignity, but also impinge on decisions and nature of economic participation. Therefore, women belonging to certain sections of society do not enter the labour market at all, while many others abstain from working as paid employees. The overwhelming presence of women in South Asia working as home based informal

sector workers or as self employed is partly a derivative of the social values stemming from patriarchal norms that put limitations on women's mobility and constrain their economic participation in public spheres. To encourage women's participation, some of the South Asian countries have introduced policies of reservation in government jobs. In Bangladesh, 10 to 15 per cent and in Pakistan, 20 per cent government jobs are reserved for women (UNIFEM, 2003).

Economic empowerment clearly cannot be indicated on the basis of participation rates alone, neither is paid work by women in public spheres indicative of increasing freedom and choice for women. Education and skill development are two components that are often cited as essential for women's empowerment. In fact, the millennium development goals and various governmental efforts tend to delimit the approach to empowerment by emphasising upon women's education. It is important to avoid perceiving empowerment of women as a goal or objective to be attained, since it is essentially a process. And under the given circumstances within South Asia, multidimensional approaches are required to ensure movement towards the paths that lead to eliminating inequalities and discriminations faced by women. While there can be no denial of the positive offshoots of human capital development traits, these alone cannot transform the gender imbalances stemming from perceptions and mindsets that have not accepted women as equals in social, economic and political domains.

Notes

1. This is a modified version of a paper presented at the international seminar on Rural Women and Empowerment in South Asia organized by Working Women's Forum and G. B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad, 7-9 October, 2004.
2. The seven countries are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives.
3. There are countries and communities across parts of South Asia where matriliney is followed. Among Muslims, women do inherit a share of ancestral and parental property, albeit unequal in comparison to men who are also legal guardians of all other dependants in the family.
4. The HDSA, 2003 notes that in South Asia another 500 million persons will enter the labourforce in the next five years, which is equivalent to the total population of the European Union (expanded with 25 countries).
5. Many of them have benefited from the reservations policy of their respective governments.
6. Prior to Maldives becoming a Republic, three Maldivian queens ruled among the several monarchs. However, today as per the constitution revised in 1998, being male is a necessary qualification for being elected as president or Vice-President of Maldives. On the other hand, in the year 2000, three women were given the authority to deliver religious sermons and counseling, a role they were not entitled to perform earlier (UNDP, 2002; ADB, 2001a).
7. Bhutan is one of the least researched upon areas in the region and is often left out from analysis since there is relatively very little information available.
8. Bhutan introduced a new index in its national HDR (RGOB, 2000) called the Gross National Happiness (GNH) based on the conceptual frame that development does not mean a blind expansion of commodity production. Instead, a holistic view of life and development is called for that augments people's spiritual and emotional well-being as well.

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