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Does Declining Female Labour Force Participation Result in Fewer Gender Gaps?

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Abstract: South Asia has the second highest gender gap in8 major regions in the world. The highest gender gaps are for economic participation and political empowerment. Economic participation and opportunities grow as more women pursue professional and technical education.The over-all gender gap has marginally declined from 54.08 in 1998 to 50.8 in 2021. This indicate that the progress has been remarkably slow in terms of female labour force participation, with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Maldives on the lowest side. While South Asia is the fastest-growing region globally, the female labour force participation rate is only 23.6% versus 80% for men. There is a significant negative relationship between the two variables. With every increase in per capita income level in South Asia, labour force participation shows an inverted U relationship. This contradicts the empirical estimations in the literature showing a U shape relationship. The main finding is that gender gaps in employment, job characteristics, and working conditions are growing as per capita incomes rise. Further, per capita, income growth speeds upthe reduction process of gender inequality and gender gaps. This again confirms the proposition that labour force participation does not directly lead to reduction in gender gaps. Reduction in gender gaps does lead to increased labour force participation. Effective implementation of gender-centric policies, creating a level playing field for women, accelerates the process of gender-balanced opportunities and outcomes. Technological interventions cannot act as a substitute for policy interventions.

Keywords: Economic participation, gender inequality, panel regression, South Asia

Introduction

Gendering seeks to analyse a particular problem with a bottom-up approach. It is related to the socialisation and implementation of any activity according to the dominant gender norms.The status and empowerment of women get affected by access and equity issues in society within the changing economic structure. Economic transformation and development are expedited by investing in gender equality and female empowerment (USAID). This essentially requires equal access to and control over education, healthcare, technology,physical and financial resources, supplemented with active participation in market-based activities. Kabeer N. (2003) explains the arguments and rational for gendering the Millennium Development Goals strategy. One of the three arguments is the fact that females are at the “intersection of production and reproductive activities”.

The other two arguments elaborated are related to prevalence of gender inequalities and female vulnerabilities across societies and social classes. Enhancing women's agency involves improving their access to essential resources like income and education.Gendering is vital for faster progress in human and sustainable development by minimizing gender gaps. It is the most convenient and fundamental solution for all development problems. Yet it is the most difficult rather rigid target to be achieved for the sustainable development. Gender inequality is the extensively analyzed theme in development research.It has various forms and multiple determinants specific to the social structure and economic progress of a country. Gender inequality is inevitable due to two underlying characteristics in every country (ADB 2013). Women confronts with the limits on their access to education and employment opportunities. This restricts their financial freedom and undermines their power to negotiate in the family and society.Because of their reduced bargaining power, they have limited influence over household decisions. However, they have a major responsibility for caregiving and unpaid work, leading to worse health and nutrition outcomes. Second, the discrimination they face not only exposes women to material deprivation. Further, it makes difficult for them to fulfill their vital roles of reproduction, household care and active economic agent for the economy. activities.Gender equality, if left to the family or society, will take a longer time; therefore, international organizations and research studies suggest empowering women in terms of control over resources and access to public services directly through policy provisions.The paper adds to the literature on reducing gender gaps through female labour force participation in South Asia. The paper discusses gender disparities prevalent in South Asian countries with the help of two indices. The Gender Inequality Index and Global Gender Gap Index are used to measure gender disparities. The paper is divided into four sections. The second section, after the brief introduction section, distils upon the status of gender gaps in South Asia. Research gap and research design of the paper is explained in the third section. Fourth section contains the data analysis and Panel regression results followed by the conclusion and couple of policy recommendations.

Status of Gender Inequality and Gender Gaps in South Asia

South Asia's share in world GDP (according to the purchasing power parity) was 12.3 in 1990 which has risen to 33.58 in 2023. The region holds one fourth of the worlds' population which is expected to grow 40 percent by 2050. Further, it also shares 29 to 33 percent of the world's extremely poor population living at or below $ 2.15 per day (the second largest after Sub-Sahara Africa but largest in numbers) 7917.7 million.With high poverty ratios and large population size, there are unlimited development challenges. The sustainable development goals covers all possible development challenges and prioritize women's involvement in the development process. South Asia region has one of the highest levels of gender disparities in terms of access to financial and physical resources, mainly land and capital.Further, restricted freedom to exercise their rights leads to low socio-economic development outcomes. There are several measures for Gender Gaps. Gender Inequality Index, introduced in 2010, is a composite measure developed by the UNDP. It is a metrics capturing and quantifying the loss in human development because of inequality suffered by women across three major dimensions. Maternal mortality and fertility rates are used to

gauge the first dimension of women's reproductive health.The second dimension explores empowerment through political representation and education achievements in secondary and higher education.The third dimension captures the labour market participation of women workforce including unpaid work and wage gaps. The value of this inequality index lies between 1 (highest inequality) and 0 (equality). Table 1 illustrates the slow change in the Gender Inequality Index. Bigger values show greater loss because of gender inequality, while values closer to zero show equality between male and female with respect to human development. Bhutan and Sri Lanka have seen significant improvements in gender equality since the introduction of the index. The lower inequality values exhibit the lowest gender inequalities and the successful policy inventions for gender equality. There is a close interrelationship between equal access to education for women and economic participation, in these countries, since last many decades. This further has resulted in better health outcomes for women and overall human development levels. It is important to note that the index values are lower than the average of South Asia and medium human development countries.on the contrary, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have remained with larger gender inequalities. Maldives and Nepal have shown significant improvement to reduce their human development losses between 1990 and 2021.

Table 1

Gender Inequality Index (GII) for South Asia

Index Values	AFG	BANG	BHU	IND	MALD	NEPAL	PAK	SL	South Asia
1990	0.748	0.730	0.526	0.710	0.713	0.726	0.811	0.469	0.721
2021	0.678	0.530	0.415	0.490	0.348	0.452	0.543	0.383	0.508

Source: compiled by the author from http://ourworldindata.org

Global Gender Gap is a wider index introduced in 2006 by the World Economic Forum to measure gaps in four development outcomes for women vis-à-vis men. In other words, the Global Gender Gap Report published by the World Economic Forum, 2006 onwards, measures the four critical dimensions of gender disparities. The four dimensions include, a) Economic participation and opportunity, b) Political empowerment, c) Educational attainment, d) Health and survival. Economic participation and opportunity is a weighted index of five ratios, viz, labour force participation rates; wage equality for similar work; estimated earned income; women as technical and professional workers and women as legislators, senior officials and managers. Educational attainment is a weighted index of literacy rate, enrolment ratios at primary, secondary and higher education levels. Political empowerment is a weighted index covering three ratios, viz, women in parliament; women in ministerial positions and number of years in a State with women head. Health and survival sub index is a weighted index measuring ratios of sex ratio at birth and health life expectancy.

Table-2 presents a comparative status of increasing gender disparities across South Asian countries. Compared to the starting year 2006, each country has a decline in rank for all sub-indices, indicating slow progress. Moreover, the decline appears to be highest in the economic participation and opportunity index which measures gender gaps in labour force participation, wage gaps, income earnings, participation and access to high-skilled employment. Apart from the ranks decline, the values of the indices are also noteworthy. The lowest values are for political and economic participation, which can be explained through the involvement of more than 70

per cent of these females in the informal sector or unpaid jobs other than household work. Despite the improvements in health outcomes and educational attainments, labour market participation is still rigid for women in South Asian countries.Despite improved health outcomes and educational attainments, labour market participation is still rigid for women in South Asian countries.

Bangladesh and Nepal have experienced the highest gender parity in South Asia across all parameters, with rank and value improvement together. Bangladesh is the only country in the selected sample where female labour force participation has increased from 28 to 39 per cent in the last 15 years. Improvements in literacy rates and industrial diversification have led to this higher labour force participation. Further, the health outcomes have improved significantly. Health outcomes are limited in terms of life expectancy and sex ratio. Nepal has experienced improved health & survival, and economic participation but needs educational attainments. On the contrary, Sri Lanka has experienced a sharp decline in the ranks of gender gaps, particularly in academic achievements and economic participation. It is important to note that in Sri Lanka participation of females in the services sector has increased considerably along with females with higher education and technical education. India has the most widening gender gaps despite the faster economic growth and robust service sector growth (World Bank 2012; Ghani et al. 2012; Kerr W. et al. 2013). Female ownership and participation have risen with wide variations at the state and district level, mainly in the unorganised, informal sector. The female labour force

Table 2

Global Gender Gap: A comparative view in South Asia

Global Gender Gap Rank (Index Value)	Year	AFG	BANG	Bhutan	India	MALD	Nepal	Pakistan	SriLanka
Overall Index	2006	156 (0.444)	91 (0.6269)	93 (0.665)	98 (0.6010)	99 (0.635)	111 (0.5477)	112 (0.5433)	13 (0.7199)
Overall Index	2022	146 (0.435)	71 (0.714)	126 (0.637)	135 (0.629)	117 (0.648)	96 (0.692)	145 (0.564)	110 (0.670)
Health & Survival	2006	149 (0.952)	113 (0.9495)	82 (0.973)	103 (0.9624)	120 (0.951)	111 (0.9531)	112 (0.9506)	1 (0.9796)
Health & Survival	2022	140 (0.952)	129 (0.962)	125 (0.962)	146 (0.937)	138 (0.956)	109 (0.965)	143 (0.944)	1 (0.980)
Political Empowerment	2006	111 (0.132)	17 (0.267)	122 (0.051)	20 (0.227)	87 (0.075)	102 (0.039)	37 (0.148)	7 (0.365)
Political Empowerment	2022	107 (0.132)	9 (0.546)	125 (0.093)	48 (0.267)	114 (0.121)	58 (0.247)	95 (0.156)	93 (0.157)
Educational Attainment	2006	156 (0.514)	95 (0.868)	116 (0.884)	102 (0.819)	1 (1.000)	109 (0.734)	110 (0.706)	52 (0.990)
Educational Attainment	2022	146 (0.482)	123 (0.923)	111 (0.955)	107 (0.961)	89 (0.984)	125 (0.916)	135 (0.825)	80 (0.988)
Economic Participation & Opportunity	2006	156 (0.180)	107 (0.423)	27 (0.753)	98 (0.601)	106 (0.514)	100 (0.465)	112 (0.369)	84 (0.545)
Economic Participation & Opportunity	2022	146 (0.176)	141 (0.427)	126 (0.537)	143 (0.350)	127 (0.531)	98 (0.641)	145 (0.331)	110 (0.670)

Source: compiled from the Global Gender Gap Reports

participation in services has increased with decreasing dependence on agriculture, as has the gender gap.

The Global Gender Gap Report 2022 finds that among the eight regions covered in the report, south Asia is progressing slowly to cover the gender gaps. The highest gender gaps exist in economic participation and opportunities (Table 2). 30 to 60 per cent of women still lack access to formal credit across South Asian countries. Further, it will take 197 more years to cover the existing gender gap 'Ceteris Paribus. The Covid-19 pandemic, like every other crisis, reconfirmed that women and girls are always at higher risk of economic and social disparities. Moreover, the pandemic had a backsliding impact on gender equality, exacerbating the gender violence and unpaid care work burden the most. This paper explores the status of gender gaps in South Asian countries in labour force participation rates and its relevance for Sustainable Development Goal 5 through its interlinkages with other goals related to poverty, hunger, employment, health and education. Gender gaps are a persistent feature of the development process (Shang:2022; Duflo:2012; Klasen S. 2018). Moreover, every dimension of this gap is not caused by the development outcomes. They are driven and affected by complex factors, such as persistent structural and social barriers, socio-economic transformation, and economic shocks. For instance, female literacy rates are lower than men, even in Kerala, the state with the highest literacy rates. In Norway, the higher education attainment ratio for women is 46 per cent compared to 38 per cent for men, but the female-male wage gap is 25 per cent. Armenia has the most favourable sex ratio (81 males for every 100 females) and females with higher education (56 per cent), but their participation in different levels of government ranges between 10 to 24.2 per cent.

Declining labour force participation is expected from the ongoing technological transformation and adaptation in middle- and low-income countries. The female labour force participation rate (age +15) has declined sharply in middle and low-middle-income countries. South Asia, in particular, always had the lowest female labour force participation rate. In the World Bank's data records, this rate was 30 per cent in 1995, declining to 26.5 in 2021. ILO stats show that it declined further to 23.6 in 2022. The Global Gender Gap Report 2022 estimates the highest decline of gender parity in the labour force participation rate for South Asia. The gender gap was 54.08 in 1998, which has come down to 50.8 in 2021, only indicates huge differences within South Asian countries in female labour force participation, with India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Maldives on the lowest extremes. The labour force participation rate is among the most important instruments to reduce gender disparities in all socioeconomic dimensions of human life. Even if there are gender wage gaps, females can access the resources (for their everyday living and during emergencies) only if they can participate actively in economic activities. Gender gaps are a persistent feature of the development process (Shang:2022; Duflo:2012; Klasen S. 2018). Moreover, every dimension of this gap is not caused by the development outcomes. They are driven and affected by complex factors, such as persistent structural and social barriers, socio-economic transformation, and economic shocks. For instance, female literacy rates are lower than men, even in Kerala, the state with the highest literacy rates. In Norway, the higher education attainment ratio for women is 46 per cent compared to 38 per cent for men, but the female-male wage gap is 25 per cent. Armenia has the most favourable

sex ratio (81 males for every 100 females) and females with higher education (56 per cent), but their participation in different levels of government ranges between 10 to 24.2 per cent.

Data and Methods

According to the Global Gender Gap Report 2022, closing economic gender gaps require 197 years, given the stagnating and reverting global progress towards gender parity (Gopinath G, 2022; Azcona G. et al., 2020). There are systemic health and social inequalities, including gender gaps in access to resources such as land, capital, technology, and common property resources, which play a crucial role in providing women with the autonomy and power to respond to any crisis. Studies have raised their concern about women and girls having a disproportionate burden of every emergency in the social and economic spheres, whether the household or the nation. Thus, women-specific and responsive policies with effective implementation are urgent policy challenges. In the recent deliberations at the international and national levels, eliminating gender disparities remains the only solution for sustainable development, with an additional focus on gender parity accelerators (i.e. national-level public-private collaborating platforms). Thus, South Asia has the most enormous gender gap of all regions globally, with low scores across all measured gender gaps and the lowest progress. The economic gender gap has closed by 1.8%, with increases in the share of women in professional and technical roles in countries including Bangladesh, India, and Nepal.

Shang B. (2022) explains the conceptual differences between gender gaps and gender inequalities. Gender gaps are observed differences, whereas gender inequality is those gender gaps which are generated due to gender bias, unequal rights and opportunities in various socio-economic indicators. The gender bias and the restricting social norms of women's freedom and opportunity lower the overall welfare and lead to the misallocation of human capital and investment for making women more productive and skilled. In a seminal paper, Duflo E. (2012) discussed the bidirectional causality (more often weak given the less availability of women-specific data in production and investment activities) between women empowerment and economic development. The paper discusses how more extensive opportunities in the labour market affect the perception and recognition of females in all age groups within the household. Gradually this recognition percolates the society and economy, resulting in the acceptance of females as an integral component of human capital and thus more allocation of resources and investment, mainly in females' health and education. The author provides a detailed survey of the empirical literature on low-income, underdeveloped settings from various countries. Bertay A.C. et al. (2020) estimates a positive effect of low gender inequalities on tangible economic outcomes such as value-added output growth and labour productivity. The authors explain how women as a labour resource are underutilised and misallocated. If women's labour is allocated more to productive industries, their effective utilisation increases the total output faster. The empirical estimations show that women-intensive industries not only enlarge human capital but also enlarge production and productivity growth, for instance, in the textile sector. Broadly, gender gaps are discussed in the quantitative framework. The quantitative framework uses descriptive statistics or absolute numbers to explain the differences in different categories of gender outcomes.

Beyond the descriptive levels are the qualitative investigations behind the causes of these gender disparities. Qualitative investigations reveal growing differences in complicated interdependent and subjective dimensions despite consistent policy commitments across countries (Filho W.L et al. 2020).Sustainable Development Goals has 9 targets and 14 indicators to track the Goal of Gender Equality and Empower All Women & Girls. It is important to note that this goal is among those where the data across countries are least available. UNWomen mandates women's empowerment, along with closing gender gaps in the world of work, as core in achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development encompassing, Goal 5 (gender equality), Goal 8 (full and productive employment and decent work for all), Goal 1 (no poverty), Goal 2 (zero hunger), Goal 3 (health and human well-being) and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities. Filho W.L. et al. (2022); Hirsu L. (2019) uses the matrix approach to illustrate the interaction of different SDG goals with gender inequalities. Various aspects of deep-rooted gender inequalities and vulnerabilities are targeted through SDG 5 to mobilise gender equality as an accelerator for higher growth and sustainable development. Eden L. & Wagstaff M. F. (2021) recommends for the evidence-based policy approach for making SDG 5 more instrumental policy tool for faster progress towards Agenda 2030. There is a research gap in terms of exploring the gender inequalities through the global gender gap reports. Further, there are fewer studies investigating the relationship between female labour force participation and economic growth in South Asia.

South Asian countries often reveal contrasting situations regarding GDP growth, female labour force participation, females in informal non-agricultural jobs, political participation and educational outcomes. These are perhaps the countries with inclusive policies with ineffective implementation resulting in wide gender gaps. This paper explores the status of gender gaps in South Asian countries in labour force participation rates. It is assumed that improvements in health, education, and selected socioeconomic indicators will have a positive effect on female labour force participation during 2006-2022. This paper also discusses the progress of women's participation in the workforce and economic opportunities in South Asian economies. An attempt has been made to elaborate upon the interlinkages of sustainable development goals related to poverty, hunger, employment, health and education.It is hypothesized that the decline in female labour force participation across South Asian countries is due to the increasing per capita income levels. Further, it is hypothesized that improvements in health and education outcomes reduces the gender gaps in the labour market participation for South Asian women. The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap and the World Bank's Gender Data sets are utilised to construct a panel of eight South Asian countries.

Results and Discussion

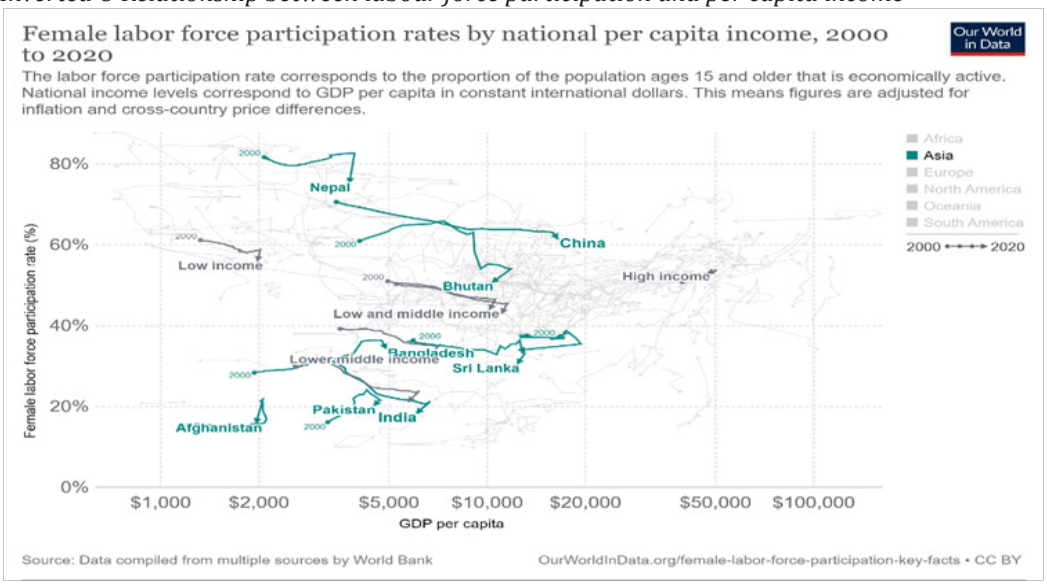
SDG report 2022 states that 286 years are required to close gaps in ensuring complete coverage of legal protection and removing discriminatory laws related to any violence against women. Equal representation in decision making (managerial and government power positions) is appearing an achievable goal within 100 years. Recent few global crises have created a cascading effect on existing gender inequalities in all the goals mentioned above and thus require comprehensive policy interventions. Table 2 presents a profile of SDG 5 with all targets and indicators for all south Asian countries. For majority of the targets, there is non

availability of data which itself explain the complexity and rigidity of gender gaps in these countries. where the data is available it indicates that existence of legal frameworks itself does not reduce the gaps but the effective implementation and acceptance of gender equality more than a moral issue does make an impact.

Women in South Asia continue to be left out of the region's economic successes. While South Asia is the fastest-growing region globally, the female labour force participation rate is only 23.6% versus 80% for men (World Bank 2020). Several barriers stop women from fully participating at work – including low levels of girls' education, adverse gender norms that limit women's mobility, Gender-based Violence, and unpaid care work and domestic duties that render women's labour invisible. Female employment, however, varies considerably across countries based on age and education levels. Figure 1 shows the interrelationship between per capita GDP and Female Labour force participation in South Asia.

Figure 1

Inverted U Relationship between labour force participation and per capita income



There is a significant negative relationship between the two variables. With every increase in per capita income level in South Asia, labour force participation shows an inverted U relationship. This contradicts the empirical estimations in the available literature showing a U shape relationship. There are two essential features of this inverted U relationship. First, the increasing educational attainments (with low levels of technical and professional education) and gender parity in enrolment ratios act as displacing factors. More females have withdrawn from the labour force and paid work. Second, there is a reverting trend in labour force participation ratios towards the initial levels excluding India. In a given year, female participation in the labour market ranges between 25 to 65 per cent depending on the country and age bracket. Moreover, country-wise variations may gradually narrow down with more integration of economies. Still, more than 50 per cent of the females excluding Sri Lanka, are employed in the agricultural sector, which has more features of work vulnerability as identified

by the ILO (2022). Recently, the share of the tertiary sector in female employment has been increasing but has yet to be on pace with the declining share of agriculture. The spatial dimension, i.e. rural-urban settings, is critical to this displacement. It has been more of an inducing relationship between urban growth and female non-agricultural employment. However, it is also accompanied by higher unemployment rates in the urban areas and a wage gap. Urban female work has remained the same, but rural female employment has decreased to different extents in Bhutan, India, and Bangladesh. The U-shaped relationship is often explained through larger employment ratios for the middle-level education and the median age groups. Thus, higher education necessarily does not lead to higher labour force participation. Among the female graduates, 25 per cent opt for agricultural sciences. 50-60 per cent of graduates in health and welfare programmes are women, and the anemia prevalence is nearly 49-50 per cent in South Asia.We observe asignificant negative relationship for India, Nepal, Bhutan and Sri Lanka between annual changes in per capita income and labour force participation rates. Still, Bangladesh shows a positive relationship due to a positive multiplier effect between all four sub-indices in the Global Gender Gap Index. In the graph, Nepal and Afghanistan are low-income countries but have one of the highest and one of the lowest female-male labour participation ratios, respectively, indicating a puzzling relationship.

Figure 2

No correlation between Gaps in female labor force participation and Unemployment gap

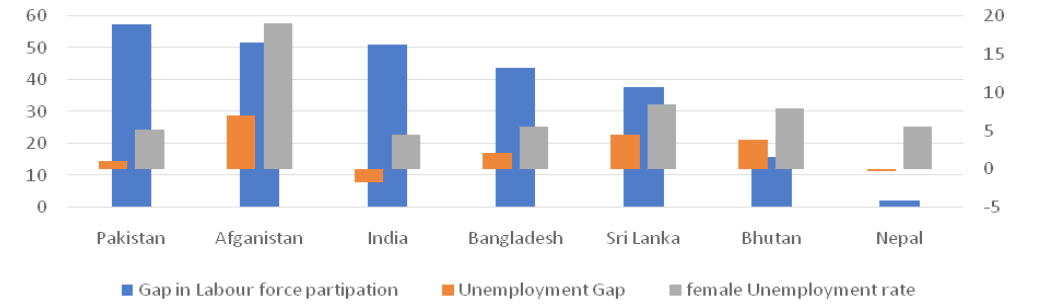
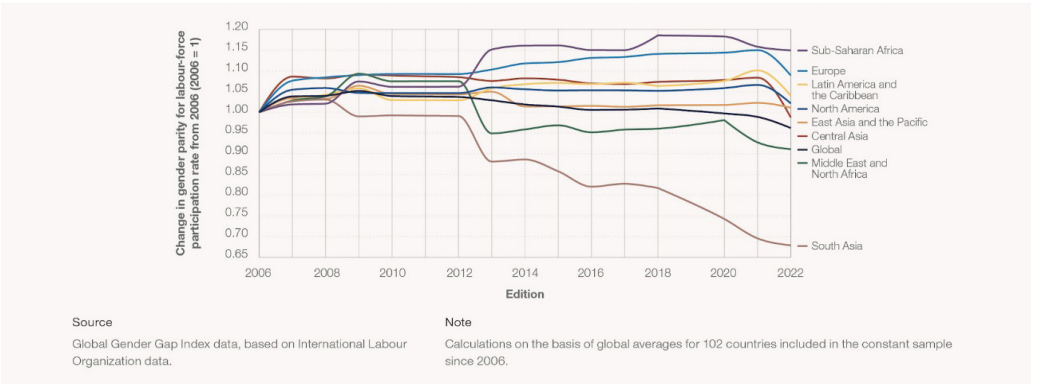


Figure 3

Change in gender parity for labour-force participation rate, from 2006



Source: *Global Gender Gap Report 2022, Chapter 2, World Economic Forum.*

Figure 2 explains the highest and increasing gender gap in labour force participation rates in South Asia, again highlighting the disconnect between economic growth and gender gaps. More so, there is a clear gap in the implementation of gender rights legislation and appropriate levels of technical education for women in these countries. For instance, India and Sri Lanka have full legal provisions for gender discrimination, but women remain disguised decision-makers (Duflo E: 2012). Moreover, the dependence on the agricultural sector does not results in higher enrolments of females in courses such as agriculture sciences. Martin &Revenga (2018) highlight the positive impact of infrastructure, trade, transportation and electricity access contributing more to female employment than education and health outcomes alone.Figure 2 shows a strong positive correlation between female unemployment rates and gender gaps in unemployment rates. Female labour force participation again has no relationship with the female unemployment rates. ILO (2021) rightly mentions that challenges of decent work, higher unemployment and social justice are among the most intriguing and stubborn difficulties for women and, thus, Agenda 2030. New insights for existing and sometimes widening gender gaps in the workforce are challenging to emerge. Many factors may drive and affect these gaps, including long-standing structural barriers, socioeconomic and technological transformation, and economic shocks. More women have been moving into paid work and, increasingly, leadership positions. However, global societal expectations, employer policies, the legal environment and the availability of care continue to play an essential role in choosing educational tracks and career trajectories. The inception of the Gender Gap Index shows that global gender parity for labour-force participation has been slowly declining since 2009. The trend, however, was exacerbated in 2020, when gender parity scores decreased precipitously over two consecutive editions. As a result, in 2022, gender parity stands at 62.9%, the lowest score registered since the Index was first compiled (Figure 3). ILO defines the vulnerability of the women workforce into five dimensions. Shorter hours of work, unpaid work, contributing family workers, less maternity coverage and incomplete social protection access exist across developing countries and sectors, even if it is self-employed women.

Exhibit-1

Dependent Variable: LABOR_FORCE_PARTICIPATIO
Method: Panel Least Squares
Date: 06/20/23 Time: 11:49
Sample (adjusted): 2004 2018
Periods included: 15
Cross-sections included: 5
Total panel (unbalanced) observations: 30
White cross-section standard errors & covariance (d.f. corrected)

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-Statistic	Prob.
PCGDP	-0.002072	0.000308	-6.737027	0.0000
NET_ENROLLMENT_PRIMARY	0.263367	0.087829	2.998635	0.0068
COST_OF_BUSINESS_START_U	-0.082685	0.073979	-1.117684	0.2763
SHARE_IN_INDUSTRY	-1.020189	0.182526	-5.589293	0.0000
C	58.07980	6.040612	9.614887	0.0000

Effects Specification

Cross-section fixed (dummy variables)

R-squared	0.994878	Mean dependent var	44.68810
Adjusted R-squared	0.992927	S.D. dependent var	16.73488
S.E. of regression	1.407461	Akaike info criterion	3.764777
Sum squared resid	41.59989	Schwarz criterion	4.185136
Log likelihood	-47.47166	Hannan-Quinn criter.	3.899254
F-statistic	509.8589	Durbin-Watson stat	1.335263
Prob(F-statistic)	0.000000		

The panel regression results presented in Exhibit 1 show a negative relationship between per capita GDP (level as well as growth) and female labour force participation. Further, the relationship between women workforce employed in industry is also negatively related with total female workforce participation. As the percentage of women with technical and professional education is very low in these countries, net enrolment ratio in primary education creates a significant positive impact on female labour force participation.

Conclusion

Female labour force participation in South Asia (except Bangladesh and Maldives) shows a negative and inverted U relationship with per capita income. This contradicts the most discussed U-shaped curve relationship with increasing per capita income. Globally, the gender gaps in the jobs gap (a new indicator suggested by the ILO instead of labour force participation rates) have remained roughly unchanged in the last two decades. The significant finding is the evidence of increasing gender gaps in access to employment, nature of jobs and working conditions with the passage of time and rising per capita incomes. Further, per capita, income growth significantly reduces gender inequality and gender gaps. This again confirms the hypothesis that it is not labour force participation which will reduce the gender gaps; rather, the other way round. Effective implementation of gender-centric policies, creating a level playing field for women, will accelerate the process of gender-balanced opportunities and outcomes. Technological interventions cannot act as a substitute for policy interventions. Technological development alone increases the difficulties for females participating in the labour market. However, increasing access to resources, decision-making autonomy and ownership results in faster progress towards gender-balanced development. It is essential to note the dependence of females (as owners or labourers) on informal non-agricultural sector jobs. Female labour force participation is above 50 per cent in agriculture. In South Asia, the ratio is 77 per cent, with Afghanistan (96.3) and Maldives (36.9) on the two extremes. This needs a policy shift of resource allocation from small-scale (industry as well as credit) oriented female participation towards scale-neutral economic participation for women. Gender Gaps are more critical for labour force participation, access to technical & professional education and representation in decision-making positions.Gender gaps are more prominent in the agricultural and services sector, excluding India and Maldives. Per capita income growth significantly reduces gender inequality and gender gaps. This again confirms the hypothesis that it is not labour force participation which will reduce the gender gaps; rather, the other way round. The lowest index values in global gender gap index are for political empowerment; economic participation, and opportunity.

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