Every year, the United Nations Children’s Fund publishes *The State of the World’s Children*, the most comprehensive and authoritative report on the world’s youngest citizens. This year, the international edition of the report analyses the issues of gender equality and women’s empowerment, and argues that one of the most powerful constraints to realizing children’s rights and achieving the Millennium Development Goals at the global level is the discrimination experienced by women.

The South Asia edition of *The State of the World’s Children* examines these issues and their impact on children in the context of the experiences of women and girls in the region. It highlights the extent and pervasiveness of gender discrimination in South Asia, and demonstrates the benefits to both women and children of gender equality in three critical arenas: the household, the workplace, and politics and government.

The report outlines what must be done to maximize gender equality in South Asia through several key actions: education, research, legislation, financing, women empowering women, and engaging men and boys. These measures are less about radical new ideas than they are about a firm commitment to, and focus on, initiatives and paradigms that have proved to work. With concerted efforts, real progress can be made towards transforming patriarchal attitudes and institutions into a society based on universal human rights and equal opportunities for women and men alike. For women, men, and for children, the time to refocus our efforts is now.

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Equality between men and women has been a goal of the United Nations since its inception. The 1945 Preamble to the UN Charter notes its objective “to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small.”

Calls for gender equality were included in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948 and other related proclamations. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 as an internationally binding instrument that provides the basis for equality between women and men, and sets up an agenda for national action to end gender discrimination and to protect human rights and fundamental freedoms for women. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which focuses on the inalienable rights of children, was adopted a decade later.

The Millennium Agenda recognizes the centrality of gender equality to human development. The Millennium Declaration calls for the full implementation of both CEDAW and CRC; these treaties are identified as key human rights standards for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the international community’s blueprint for sustainable development that set time-sensitive benchmarks for promoting gender equality and empowering women. Yet 27 years after CEDAW came into effect, throughout South Asia many women and girls remain powerless, voiceless and without rights.

South Asia’s strong patriarchal and hierarchical systems, based on unequal power structures, both allow and accept gender discrimination. This inequality generally compounds and intensifies oppression of societal groups based on caste, class, ethnicity, religion, language and age, as well as ability or geographical
location. Under these systems, women and girls consistently remain lower in the hierarchy than men and boys, and children have a lower standing than adults. Girl children tend to be among the least empowered and most vulnerable to social exclusion. All females, girls in particular, are also forced to play a subordinate role to men and boys and are generally rendered voiceless and powerless, especially if they are income poor.

However, gender discrimination is experienced differently by women and girls who live in settings with different patriarchal structures. Social exclusion, and the separating lines of caste, extended clan or tribal networks (biraderi), ethnicity and religion result in different forms of gender discrimination. A diversity of gender dimensions also exists within these groups, depending on income and adherence to traditional practices. Upper-caste Hindu women or Muslim women from high-income backgrounds, for example, may be secluded in their homes because of traditional practices, whereas women from the same religious affiliation but who are from low-income groups, working as servants or in the fields or in agriculture for instance, may enjoy freedom of movement because of economic necessity. Other women from Hindu or Muslim backgrounds who do not follow the traditional practice of seclusion and come from educated families can benefit from a variety of educational opportunities and be highly visible and autonomous in the political, social and formal economic spheres. Women who face restrictions of movement are often prevented from taking up roles that may be deemed by society as “unconventional” for them.

The South Asia edition of The State of the World’s Children 2007 analyses the discrimination and disempowerment that women in the region face throughout their lives. The report outlines what must be done to eliminate gender discrimination and empower women. It examines the status of women, how gender equality will move the MDGs forward, and how, ultimately, the investment in women's rights will produce a double dividend – advancing the rights of South Asian women and children.

The rights of women and children are mutually reinforcing

Gender equality furthers the cause of child survival and development. Since women are conventionally the primary caregivers for children, their well-being is directly connected to their offspring. Healthy, educated and economically empowered women are more likely to have healthy, educated and confident daughters and sons than women who lack education or are undernourished. Evidence shows that educated women in particular are more likely to ensure that their daughters attend school.

Gender equality is also central to creating the world envisioned in the Millennium Declaration, one of peace, social justice, equity and equality, tolerance, security, freedom, respect for the environment and shared responsibility in which special care and attention are given to the most vulnerable, especially children. This is the world that the international community has pledged to strive for – a world that would be fit for both women and children.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Form of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child are sister treaties, inexorably linked in moving communities towards full human rights. The two treaties are complementary, overlapping in their call for specific rights and responsibilities and filling in crucial gaps that may exist when either stands alone. Both outline in explicit terms the obligations of families, communities and governments to ensure human dignity and social progress.

Several CEDAW articles address rights pertinent to children, including equality (articles 2 and 15), protecting maternity (article 4), adequate health care (article 12), and shared parental responsibility (article 16). The CRC calls for equal access for girls and boys to education and health care. Both conventions articulate freedom from violence and abuse as fundamental rights and are based on the principles of universality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability.

The treaties are not perfectly harmonious: There are areas of tension between them. For instance,
some supporters of gender equality believe that the CRC stereotypes women as mothers, limiting their life options. Some child rights advocates think that CEDAW focuses too much on a woman’s right to self-actualization and may unintentionally subvert the importance of motherhood. Despite these differences, the two conventions hold more in common than in opposition. They set the standards for an equitable world where the rights of every human being – female and male, old and young – are respected.

Although all South Asian governments have ratified CEDAW, four of them – Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Pakistan – have tempered their ratifications with reservations. All countries in the region have ratified the CRC. Support for both conventions has been stronger in theory than in practice, however. Despite progress in some areas in recent decades, notably in access to education for girls and boys and women’s involvement in local politics, neither convention has been fully implemented and gender discrimination remains deeply embedded within South Asian society.

Discrimination on the basis of gender can occur even before birth through sex-selective foeticide, or shortly after birth by way of infanticide or neglect. Its pernicious effects on an individual’s health, education, protection and participation can persist throughout the life cycle. Moreover, its impact also tends to be intergenerational, as girls who are denied their rights to health, education and protection are less able to ensure that these rights are fulfilled for their own children on becoming mothers.

Discrimination through the life cycle

Gender discrimination is pervasive. While the degrees and forms of inequality may vary, women and girls throughout South Asia are deprived of equal access to resources, opportunities and social, economic and political participation.

Early childhood

Gender discrimination often begins at an early age in South Asia. Foeticide and infanticide directed against females, neglect of female children’s health and gender-biased feeding practices are symptoms of a preference for male children and patriarchal structures. South Asia, one of the few regions in the world where men outnumber women, displays a sex ratio of only 96 girls for every 100 boys.

Discrimination before birth

Modern diagnostic techniques for monitoring the health of a foetus, such as amniocentesis and ultrasound, have made it possible to ascertain sex in the earliest phase of gestation. In countries where there is a strong preference for sons, these newer, sophisticated technologies can be misused, facilitating female foeticide.

For instance, the 2001 Indian National Census revealed a national child sex ratio of 927 girls for every 1,000 boys in children aged 0–6 years, even less than the regional average. Since 1991, statistics reveal drastic declines in the number of girl children in the most prosperous states and districts – as much as 50–100 fewer girls per 1,000 boys than elsewhere. In 2001, the lowest ratios of girls to boys were reported in prosperous states in northwestern India (Punjab, Haryana, Delhi) and western India (Gujarat and significant parts of Maharashtra). The disparity in the ratio of girls to boys is greater in urban areas than in rural areas, mostly because of increased access to and misuse of medical services. Urban slums often have more girl children than better-off areas in cities, where foetal sex determination is a common practice. In rural areas, the decline is less notable partly because mothers with no education have on average more than one child. Data also suggest that smaller urban family sizes may come at the cost of girl children.

Despite positive initiatives – including advocacy led by UN agencies in cooperation with international non-governmental organizations and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and a new law passed by the government in 2002 that prohibits the determination and disclosure of the sex of the foetus – there is still a long way to go to eliminate the practices of sex-selective foeticide and infanticide in India. Similar processes are observed in other countries of the region, resulting in unbalanced sex ratios in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan as well.
The middle years

A principal focus of the middle years of childhood is ensuring access to, and completion of, quality primary education. The decision to send girls to school is influenced by the value parents place on such an investment. Son preference is still a dominant constraint on girls' education in some countries in the region, particularly India, Nepal and Pakistan.14

Primary education

Children's participation in primary education remains low in South Asia. The region accounts for more than one third (42 million) of the world's 115 million children of primary school age who are out of school.15 ‘Girls’ primary school enrolment and attendance ratios remain lower than boys’ in the region. However, some progress has been achieved in recent decades. According to UNICEF estimates, Bangladesh, Maldives and Sri Lanka are on course to meet the goal of gender parity in primary education. The countries with the widest gender gaps in the region in 2001 were Afghanistan, Nepal and Pakistan.16

Poverty remains a major factor in the non-enrolment of both boys and girls in school, although the effects of poverty are more pronounced for girls.17 Within the region, the pockets of resistance to sending girls to school are confined to specific groups that include socially excluded classes and castes (India and Nepal), sections of society that adhere to traditional religions beliefs (Pakistan), and groups that are hard to reach either because of their geographic location (Bhutan) or because of their economic status (Bangladesh).18

Girls’ school attendance is also discouraged by other factors, including lack of adequate school infrastructure and facilities, poor quality teaching, teacher absenteeism and lack of female teachers particularly in rural areas, and lack of protection for girls going to school.19

Adolescence

Adolescence is a time of great change in children's lives, when they seek to establish emotional and psychological independence, come to terms with their sexuality and begin to define a role in society and community. Among the greatest challenges that many adolescents in the region face are acquiring a secondary education, protection from abuse, exploitation and violence, and obtaining vital knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, including AIDS.

Adolescents made up about one fifth of South Asia's population in 2000. Within the region, Bangladesh and Pakistan have the greatest proportions of adolescents as a share of the total population, while India has the greatest absolute numbers of adolescents.20

Discrimination against adolescent girls in South Asia takes many forms. Girls are sometimes given less food than boys, have less access to health care and are less likely to attend school. They work more and are allowed less time for rest and recreation. They are vulnerable to trafficking, sexual abuse and child labour.21 Many adolescent girls are deprived of the opportunity to enjoy childhood and adolescence which, in turn, can hamper their mental and physical development.

Girls’ health in the early years

Half of the world’s underweight children under five live in South Asia, the only region in the world in which girls are more likely to be underweight than boys. Research shows that girls can experience discriminatory feeding practices in the early years. Boys are breastfed more frequently and for longer periods than girls. Throughout the region – with the exception of Maldives and Sri Lanka – girls usually receive less food than boys when breastfeeding ends. Inequitable feeding practices continue into adulthood and result in chronic rates of undernutrition in girls and women.

This regional pattern of gender discrimination in nutrition is repeated in health care. In India, the under-five mortality rate is higher among girls than boys. Data from Pakistan’s Integrated Household Survey indicate that boys aged five or under are more likely to be immunized than girls of the same age and have greater access to health care.
Secondary education

Over the past two decades, literacy and school enrolment rates among adolescents have risen in all South Asian countries. In Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, the proportion of women aged 20–24 with seven or more years of education is markedly higher than for the cohort of women aged 40–44.22 Despite these gains, however, secondary school attendance ratios remain lower for girls in most countries with available data – Bangladesh and Sri Lanka are the exception – and large numbers of adolescent girls and young women aged 15–24 remain illiterate (see Figure 1.1 below).

Child marriage and premature parenthood

Despite laws prohibiting child marriage – defined as formal marriages or customary and statutory unions recognized as marriage, where one or both partners are under the age of 18 – research shows that marriage of young girls is very common in South Asia.23 Many marriages in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan involve adolescent girls. In contrast, boys rarely marry as adolescents.24 Sri Lanka represents an exception in the region to this trend of child marriage, with an average age of first marriage for women of 25. This dramatic shift was led by legislative reforms that require that all marriages are registered and the consent of both marriage partners is recorded.25

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**Figure 1.1** Young men are more literate than young women in most countries in South Asia

*Data on youth literacy rate are not available for Bangladesh.*

The harmful consequences of child marriage can include reduced opportunities for education and exclusion from social activities and interaction. Child marriage can also result in premature adoption of adult roles – particularly parenthood – commercial sexual exploitation and domestic violence. Women also have less opportunity to work if they marry at an early age.

Premature pregnancy and motherhood pose significant risks for adolescent girls both within and outside marriage. Girls under 15 are five times more likely to die during pregnancy and childbirth than women in their twenties. Children of adolescent mothers are also less likely to survive. Evidence from India and Nepal indicates that many young girls enter marriage undernourished. In India, one out of every three adult women is underweight and therefore at risk of delivering babies with low birthweight.

**Sexual and reproductive health**

Given highly conservative attitudes towards sex in South Asia, few studies have successfully collected information on adolescent sexual behaviour. Traditionally, South Asian societies have placed a high value on protecting the chastity of young women before marriage; this has important repercussions on their education, age at marriage, autonomy and mobility. Many girls are secluded on the onset of puberty; as a result, adolescent girls in many settings – including those living in high-caste, economically affluent families – are unlikely to have much exposure or access to the world outside the household. Few services cater to their needs for health care, nutrition, vocational skills, economic opportunities and comprehensive knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. Furthermore, young women may jeopardize their health by refraining from visiting the few available health clinics out of concern that they will be examined by male health workers.

These realities necessitate that adolescents, both girls and boys, have sufficient knowledge of sexual and reproductive health. Ensuring that adolescents have knowledge about their bodies is essential if explanations about how diseases can be prevented are to be understood.

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**Figure 1.2 A large proportion of women in the region marry and give birth while in their teenage years**

- Proportion of married women aged 20-24 who gave birth by age 20, national surveys in the 1990s
- Proportion of women aged 20-24 who were married or in union before age 18, 1987-2009

*Data refer to the most recent year available during the period specified.*

Motherhood and old age

The challenges faced by women and girls in South Asia are discussed in the three subsequent chapters. Disparities exist not just between women and men, girls and boys, but also among them. Poverty remains a pivotal factor in determining whether girls and women survive birth and early childhood, complete primary education, go to secondary school, or are engaged in informal or precarious forms of labour. Two key periods in many women’s lives when the pernicious effects of these disparities are often brought into sharp focus are motherhood and old age.

Maternal mortality

In South Asia, 1 in every 43 women is at risk of maternal death, the highest risk of maternal death in the world after sub-Saharan Africa. An estimated 208,000 women in the region die each year due to pregnancy and birth-related complications. South Asia has the lowest levels among developing regions of antenatal care coverage (53 per cent) and presence of a skilled attendant at birth (37 per cent). Due to lack of professional pre- and post-natal health care, levels of sickness among new or expectant mothers also remain high in the region.

When a complication arises during childbirth, the decision to go to a hospital is often made by a woman’s mother-in-law or husband. In Nepal, for example, a study revealed that in 82 per cent of cases, the husband decides whether to seek medical care. Maternal mortality can be reduced if women have a say in such decisions. In addition, birth spacing – by at least two years – is an important strategy to reduce the risk of adverse maternal, perinatal and infant outcomes. Increasing the birth spacing between their children would allow parents more time to dedicate to each child and to themselves, while also helping to lower maternal mortality rates.

HIV/AIDS in South Asia

Although sub-Saharan Africa is the region worst affected by AIDS, the pandemic is beginning to take hold across the countries of South Asia. At the end of 2005, 5.9 million adults and children in the region were estimated to be HIV-positive. Of those, the vast majority reside in India, where an estimated 5.2 million people aged 15 or older were living with HIV in 2005. HIV is also a threat in other South Asian countries. In Pakistan, for example, about 85,000 adults and children were HIV-positive in 2005. The corresponding figure for Nepal is 75,000.

More than 80 per cent of HIV infections in India are caused by unprotected heterosexual intercourse, and a significant proportion of infections occur in women. Young people, girls in particular, are more vulnerable to HIV infection for a variety of reasons, including lack of knowledge, lack of access to services, and social norms that force them into early marriage.

The response to the pandemic, slow at first, has accelerated in recent years. Between 2003 and 2005, the number of people receiving antiretroviral therapy in Asia more than doubled, with coverage levels reaching 16 per cent at the end of 2005. However, in the same year only 4 per cent of those receiving antiretroviral therapy in India were children.

See References, page 36.
Women in old age

The rights of elderly women should not be overlooked by governments and development agencies engaged in advancing the rights of women and children. Yet, women in old age, grandmothers in particular, have a great deal of knowledge of maternal health and childcare and are often primary or secondary caregivers for children throughout the region.

Elderly people are at risk of becoming marginalized in their communities, dependent on sons or other relatives and powerless. But the problem is even more pronounced for elderly women, as they face double discrimination on the basis of both gender and age. Widows, in particular, risk being abandoned by their families after the deaths of their husbands.

Economic surveys indicate that the loss of a husband often also leads to a sharp decline in household income. Many widows suffer from social marginalization and psychological hardship and are especially vulnerable to poverty. They are often expected to remain in their husband's village, but they are unlikely to receive support from in-laws. Owing to conflict over property rights, relations between a widow and her in-laws are often tense.

The deprivations of widows are rarely addressed in public debates, in the media or even in research, except in sensational cases such as sati – the practice of forcibly burning widows alive on their husbands' funeral pyres – a practice that is illegal and very rare.

The double dividend of gender equality

World leaders spoke as one when the UN pledged to make the world fit for children at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children in May 2002. The status of women is a crucial measurement by which to accurately gauge the state of the world's children. To maximize gender equality's impact on poverty relief and sustainable development, women's equal access to power must be achieved in three distinct arenas: the household and community, the workplace and the political sphere. A change for the better in any one of these realms, as the subsequent chapters of this report argue, enhances women's equality in the others. Moreover, equality will not only enable women to fulfil their own rights; it will also empower them to improve the lives of their children.

Countries reap double dividends when gender equality is promoted and ultimately attained. Women are healthy, educated and productive, and children survive and thrive. These benefits are bequeathed to future generations. The following chapters will analyse quantitative and qualitative information about the status of women and its relationship to child survival and development. Only when gender equality is attained will women be empowered and they and their children thrive.
For children, the most important actors in the world are not world leaders or heads of government but the parents and caregivers that make crucial household decisions on a daily basis. How members of the household decide to use their collective resources determines the levels of nutrition, health care, education and protection that each family member receives.

Demographic and Health Surveys conducted in two countries in South Asia, Bangladesh and Nepal, have revealed that in many households, women have little influence over decisions that affect their own health and well-being. In addition, their control over household expenditures is often limited. Gender discrimination in household decisions is rooted in patriarchal attitudes that value the social contributions of men over those of women.

Key determinants of influence in household decisions include:

**Control of land and assets:** In much of South Asia, because of patriarchal property ownership practices, land and property are passed down from father to son or, in the absence of a son, to another close male relative. Land, in particular, is tied to kinship and lineage, so women’s exercise of property rights, which are often guaranteed by the constitution, is contingent on their relationship to men.¹

**Age gaps:** The distribution of household bargaining power is also influenced by a woman’s age at marriage and the age difference between husbands and wives. In South Asia, husbands are usually about five years older than their wives.² In cases of child marriage, where the age gap is most extreme, the burden of heavy domestic work and childcare severely constrains the life choices available to girls and mothers.³
This, in turn, affects the power that women have over household decisions.

**Levels of education:** On average, men in developing regions spend more time in education than women. The gap is widest in South Asia, where men spend on average 2.5 years more in school than women. Throughout the region, disparate levels of education between men and women may reinforce household gender inequalities, ensuring that women remain disadvantaged. The literacy rate for South Asian women is considerably lower than that of their male counterparts: 46 per cent compared to 72 per cent for men.

**Domestic violence against women and children**

Household gender inequalities foster a permissive context for abusive relationships. Although still a largely taboo subject, domestic violence against women and children is a serious concern in South Asia. Research indicates that half the women in the region have experienced violence, affecting their socio-economic well-being, their sexual and reproductive health rights and economic contributions to society.

In some parts of South Asia, women are victims of a particularly brutal kind of violence related to courtship, dowry and property disputes. In Bangladesh, for example, acid attacks – suffered mostly by women, half of whom are under 18 – remain a common practice. The reasons for the attacks include rejection of marriage proposals, domestic violence over dowry demands, revenge, jealousy, land and property disputes and political rivalry.

Without legal recourse or economic resources to prosecute abusive spouses, or an independent source of financial security, many women and children remain trapped in devastatingly harmful situations that can have intergenerational repercussions. Research conducted in the region indicates that boys who are abused or who have witnessed violence in the family are more likely to beat their wives than other children.

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**Where women have a fair say, children benefit**

The consequences of women’s exclusion from household decisions can be dire for children. In families in which women play an important role in decision-making, the proportion of resources devoted to children is far greater than in families in which women play a less decisive role. This is because women generally place a higher premium than men on welfare-related goals and are more likely to use their influence and the resources they control to promote the needs of children and the family. In South Asia, increasing women’s decision-making power within households and eradicating

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**The Acid Survivors Foundation: Working to protect women and girls from harm**

Established in 1992, the Acid Survivors Foundation (ASF) works with men and boys to end acid attacks on women and girls in Bangladesh. ASF addresses acid throwing through different channels – community mobilization, working with young men to prevent future attacks, empowering those who have been attacked, and collaborating with journalists. ASF regularly conducts campaigns and awareness-raising meetings targeting the main perpetrators of acid attacks – men and boys between 17 and 25 years old. The organization also engages in group discussions with those who use acid in their work, such as goldsmiths, battery shop workers and owners, tanneries and bicycle shops. ASF warns against the misuse of the substance, and raises awareness of gender-based violence and the consequences of acid throwing. The organization also trains journalists on how to report acid attacks, encouraging them to focus on the physical and mental trauma of victims and the need for justice.

*See References, page 37.*
gender discrimination at the community level have positive effects on the nutritional status of children one to three years old.8

**Women prioritize nutrition**

According to a study conducted by the International Food Policy Research Institute (a leading global research organization on hunger and nutrition) there is a clear link between regional differences in children’s nutrition and women’s decision-making power. Where women have low status and are denied a voice in household decisions, they are more likely to be undernourished and less likely to have access to resources that they can direct towards children’s nutrition.9 In South Asia, approximately 45 per cent of children under the age of five are underweight – the highest prevalence of underweight children in the world.

The same study concluded that if men and women had equal influence in decision-making,10 the incidence of underweight children under three years old in South Asia could fall by approximately 13 percentage points, resulting in 13.4 million fewer undernourished children.11 While this projection is conjectural and illustrative rather than conclusive, it nonetheless points towards the clear benefits that eliminating gender discrimination and empowering women might have for children’s health and well being.

**Women prioritize family health care**

Women’s influence on household decisions is also important for the overall quality of children’s health. Sex disparities in health are higher in South Asia than elsewhere in the world. A girl in India is more than 40 per cent more likely than a boy to die between ages one and five.12 In households marked by severe gender inequalities, the husband – or his mother if the family resides with the husband’s parents – often decides when and how to seek health care for family members. One study, from Gujarat in western India, reports that approximately 50 per cent of women interviewed felt unable to take a sick child to the doctor without the approval of their husband or parent-in-law.13

**Figure 2.1 Underweight prevalence among children under five in the developing regions, 1996-2005**

* Data refer to the latest year available during the period specified.

When women have influence in decision-making in the household, health-care practices and nutritional outcomes for the family improve. Evidence from both India and Nepal shows that, even after accounting for differences in education and wealth among the households surveyed, women’s participation in household decisions decreases stunting in children and reduces child mortality.\footnote{14}

Even when women can influence household decisions on medical care, they may still need the help of family members, particularly husbands or mothers-in-laws, to carry out their decisions. A cross-country study shows that in Bangladesh and India, social norms often discourage or restrict women’s mobility outside the home. Restrictions on women’s movement can compromise children's access to emergency health care by preventing women from travelling independently to shops, pharmacies or hospitals, and limiting their direct contact with unrelated males, including doctors.\footnote{15}

\textbf{Women prioritize education}

Empirical research on the links between women’s household decision-making power and children's education is in its infancy. Yet, the evidence available indicates that women’s empowerment within the household increases the likelihood that their children, particularly girls, will attend school. Women prioritize girls’ education, and this choice generates positive outcomes that span generations. A recent UNICEF study found that South Asian children with uneducated mothers are more than two-and-a-half times less likely to be in primary school than children whose mothers have had some education.\footnote{16}

\begin{quotation}
\vspace*{0.5cm}
\textbf{Violence against children in South Asia}

In South Asia, many children, regardless of their social class, religion and ethnic origin are abused and exploited. The recently released Report of the Independent Expert to the United Nations Study on Violence against Children shows that in South Asia, as in other regions, the greatest numbers of child victims of violence suffer at the hands of parents and close relatives. Often this violence is in the guise of ‘discipline’. Children also report that they experience violence from teachers and other educators. In 2005, only one country in the region, Sri Lanka, had laws banning corporal punishment in schools.

Premature entry into adult roles such as labour and marriage, and the exploitation of children who are forced to work in the worst forms of child labour, undermine children's rights, leaving them at greater risk of violence and abuse. Domestic workers are a particularly high-risk group.

Living behind closed doors and away from parental protection, these children are deprived of their rights and at risk of the worst forms of exploitation and violence. Girls are at greater risk of sexual abuse and exploitation, although boys, too, are abused. In some parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, sex with boys is considered less of an offence than sex with girls. In general, across the region, sexual abuse and exploitation go unreported because of the associated shame. Because of the stigma attached to the victim, both women and children are often afraid to report abuses.

During adolescence and adulthood, forms of violence against women and girls may include courtship violence (for example, acid throwing); economically coerced sex (for example, schoolgirls having sex with ‘sugar daddies’ in return for gifts); incest; sexual and psychological abuse; rape; forced prostitution and pornography; trafficking; abuse of women with disabilities; and forced pregnancies.

\begin{flushleft}
\textit{See References, page 37.}
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Men play a key role in challenging gender stereotypes

In promoting egalitarian decision-making, the involvement of men is crucial. From the decisions they make about resource allocation to the care and support they give to women and children, men can confront gender discrimination in their families and communities. The absence of fathers from the lives of their children can affect children’s emotional, physical and intellectual development. In two separate studies conducted in India, interventions that focused on men were associated with increased use of antenatal care services by their wives.

Households and children thrive when both parents are engaged in their children’s lives and when the decision-making process is cooperative. Achieving equality and partnership within the family is crucial for combating gender discrimination in society.

In South Asia, however, knowledge of men’s behaviour patterns is still deficient. A nuanced understanding of the diversity of South Asian men’s experiences, attitudes, beliefs, practices, and institutions is imperative to challenging the social dominance of men over women.

Women’s participation in the community

Social attitudes towards gender can and do change. The most important catalysts for change are women themselves. By publicly denouncing discrimination and motivating other women to claim their social, economic and political rights, women’s groups can set in motion a process of broad social change that promotes the rights of girls and women for generations to come.

South Asia provides numerous examples of such efforts. One such initiative is BRAC, which provides group credit and employment opportunities for women. Participation in BRAC has strengthened women’s bargaining power in their household and communities. Through collective action, for example, women have successfully persuaded community elders to refrain from criticizing and ridiculing women who work outside the home. This initiative has contributed to new norms of gender relations. According to the women
who participated in the initiative, respect no longer depends on being in seclusion but instead depends on earning an income, working outside the home and being mobile.21

Another important model is the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a trade union of poor women workers from the informal sector that has been in operation since 1972. Based in India, SEWA works in both urban and rural areas. It organizes urban self-employed women from a number of trades, including home-based workers, labourers, service providers and street vendors.22 The organization has also initiated campaigns to educate agricultural workers, providing skills training, assistance with costing and pricing and linking women to technical, research and marketing organizations to help strengthen their productivity, yields and income.23

Including women in decision-making

When women have a greater voice in household and community decisions, they exercise their rights on behalf of children as well as themselves. While international agencies, governments, civil society organizations and individual women have made significant progress in promoting equality, much remains to be done. Some key areas – explored in greater detail in Chapter 5 – that urgently require attention include:

Increasing women’s employment and income opportunities: Ownership or control of household assets and income is an important indicator of household bargaining power. Expanding women’s opportunities to earn an income and acquire land, a house and other property can help strengthen women’s bargaining power and influence in household decisions.

Involving men: Persuading individuals to change their attitudes and behaviour is a slow and complex process. Through simple but direct and effective strategies, such as sharing domestic chores, men are partnering with women to combat gender discrimination in households and communities.24 By creating roles specifically for men in advocacy programmes, governments and development agencies can also promote men’s involvement in child-friendly initiatives in schools, communities, the workplace and government and politics.

Supporting women’s organizations: The dynamic of cooperation among women is one of the most important and effective avenues for women’s empowerment. Informal women’s collectives that organize around issues such as nutrition, food distribution, education and shelter help improve the standard of living for women, their families and communities.25
Ensuring that women and men have equal opportunities to generate and manage income is an important step towards realizing women’s rights under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and enhancing their self-esteem and influence both within the household and in society. Furthermore, children’s rights are more likely to be realized when women fully enjoy their social and economic rights.

Policymakers are becoming attuned to the reality that women have an important economic role in addressing the poverty experienced by children; an increasing number of countries are focusing their provisions for realizing children’s rights — such as cash transfers contingent on sending children to school — directly at mothers. In South Asia, several initiatives by both governments and non-governmental organizations provide credit directly to women.1 However, throughout the region, women still face discrimination in the economic sphere.

Women work more but earn and own less

The majority of economically active South Asian women work in the informal sector. Those in formal sector employment are concentrated at the lower levels, with little job security and few benefits. In general, women work longer hours than men, but since much of their work entails nurturing and household maintenance, they receive little or no compensation for their labours.2

In rural areas in Nepal, for example, while women and men spend about the same number of hours working in the market, women spend more time on home production (5 hours per day compared with 2 hours per day for men) and additional hours on such activities as childcare.3 Time use surveys in six states in India reveal that women spend on average 35 hours each week on
household tasks and caring for children, the sick and the elderly, against 4 hours per week for men (see Figure 3.1 below).

South Asian women’s involvement in agriculture is extensive both in terms of labour input and farm management decisions, which also often involve labour-intensive tasks. However, due to patriarchal social structures, men control women’s labour. Without a legal share in ownership of the means of production, women remain excluded from making decisions about the allocation of material and economic resources. In Nepal, the proportion of women engaged in agricultural activities has increased in recent decades – from 37 per cent in 1981 to 49 per cent in 2001 – as they replace men who take up other income-earning activities. This trend, combined with the recent political conflict, has contributed to greater vulnerability among women in the farming sector.

The wage gap

There are large differentials in earnings between men and women in this region, particularly in rural settings. Estimates based on wage differentials and participation in the labour force suggest that South Asian women’s estimated earned income is around 40 per cent of men’s. Outside of agriculture, women hold only 17 per cent of paying jobs – the lowest share in the world (see Figure 3.3, page 18) – and remain concentrated in a few sectors such as poorly paid manufacturing work.

Figure 3.1 In India, men spend far less time engaged in housework than women

Figure 3.2 Agriculture is the main employer of women working outside the household

In Pakistan, women’s share of wage employment in the non-agricultural sector was around 9 per cent in 2004 and has remained virtually unchanged for the last decade. The corresponding rate for Sri Lanka was 43.2 per cent, the highest in the region among countries that have data. In India, the figure was 17 per cent for the same year. Nepalese women held 17 per cent of non-agricultural jobs in 2001, the latest year for which data are available.

Despite labour laws that stipulate wage equity, gender-based wage disparities exist across all sectors and in all occupations. Bangladesh provides an example of the sharp disparities between men and women in average wages and employment opportunities. According to a labour force survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, between 1999 and 2000 41.7 per cent of women earned salaries of less than 750 taka per month (about US$11 at August 2006 exchange rates); the corresponding ratio for men was 7.3 per cent. Raising the threshold of comparison underlines the breadth of the disparity, with 71.5 per cent of women earning less than 1,500 taka per month (about US$22) compared with only 26.4 per cent of men.

The gap in wages between men and women partly reflects the types of work in which they are engaged. Women’s employment in Bangladesh, for example, is concentrated in sectors with low returns on labour and is often temporary, due to women’s low skill levels and discriminatory attitudes regarding ‘suitable’ work for women. Other reasons for women’s lower wages in South Asia include lack of access to job training, the gender gap in education, and time constraints involved in looking after the household, children and sick or elderly relatives. Existing discriminatory wage practices contribute to the low percentage of women in the South Asian labour force.

**Figure 3.3 South Asia has the lowest proportion of women working outside agriculture**

* Except where indicated, regional groupings for this figure are based on United Nations geographical regions, with some modifications. The regional composition is available at <http://mdgs.un.org> under ‘Data’.

** Southern Asia comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The asset gap

South Asian women not only earn less than men; they also tend to own fewer assets. In South Asia, land is acquired through inheritance, which in most places is passed on only to male descendants. In many South Asian countries, legislation has codified male privilege, leaving women unable to gain equal access to inheritance or property. Gender biases in property and inheritance laws and in other channels of acquiring assets – even state land distribution programmes – leave women and children at greater risk of poverty.

In Pakistan, research in 65 villages revealed that women owned less than 3 per cent of plots, despite having the right to inherit land in most villages. In Bangladesh, Islamic law (Hanafi) allows daughters to inherit a share of parental land; in practice, however, the land is rarely acquired by women but is generally retained within the patrilineage. Women who attempt to secure their legal inheritance can face familial and social pressures.

Recent surveys carried out in northern India reveal that a strong tradition of patrilineal ownership makes it hard for many widows to defend their legal rights to a share of their husband’s property, although circumstances vary between different regions, communities, classes and age groups. Widows’ legal rights are often violated, resulting in loss of a possible source of independent income and a decrease in their bargaining power with respect to their in-laws, sons and other relatives. Evidence from the Indian state of Kerala suggests that land reforms enacted in the 1970s failed to consider the vulnerability of women who were small landowners. Research in the Palghat district shows that women had previously owned much of the land lost part of their holding as a result of the land reform. In some of the villages surveyed, more than one quarter of the women affected were widows.

Women who own assets have more control over household decision-making. For example, a study in rural Bangladeshi households found that when women’s share of pre-wedding assets is higher than their husbands, their influence in household decisions is greater, and levels of sickness among their daughters decrease substantially. Therefore, denying women the right to own and manage land and property has negative consequences for women and their families.

Where women work matters for children

Female participation in the labour force can be beneficial to children, as it often results in women gaining economic resources. But paid employment for women does not automatically lead to better outcomes for children. Factors such as the amount
of time women spend working outside the household, the conditions under which they are employed and who controls the income they generate all determine how the work they undertake affects their own well-being and that of their children.

Women working in the informal sector often face difficult working conditions, long hours and unscheduled overtime. The lack of job security and benefits, such as paid sick leave and childcare, can leave women and children at risk of poverty. When mothers are poor, work in time-intensive, poorly remunerated and inflexible informal jobs, and have little control over their earnings and few alternative caregivers, infants are at significantly greater risk of poor growth and health. One reason for this trend in South Asia in particular is that a high proportion of working women are unpaid family labourers who receive virtually no income for their work. The overall quality of their employment is poor, and work relations are highly informal.

Poor working conditions are prevalent in both informal employment and low-income work in the formal sector. In the Indian state of Kerala, for example, it is estimated that more than 75 per cent of female workers in manufacturing are in the informal sector. Similarly, in the bidi (cigarette) manufacturing sector in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, women’s work is characterized by low wages and irregular employment. In addition, the widespread use of child labour within this industry forces school-age children to miss or drop out of school.

The South Asian garment industry provides an example of the exploitative nature of women’s work. The vast majority of women working in the sector, whether as skilled tailors or unskilled assistants, earn less than the legal minimum wage. Women are frequently required to work overtime but are not paid for the additional hours worked. Harsh production targets, sexual and verbal abuse, the lack of maternity and other paid leave, the lack of accident insurance or other safeguards and the absence of toilet and childcare facilities are frequently reported features of female employment in garment manufacturing.

Challenging attitudes towards women and work

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women guarantees women’s equality before the law, and establishes specific measures to eradicate discrimination against women in all areas of their lives, including education, health, employment, marriage and the family. While all South Asian governments have ratified the convention, four of them – Bangladesh, India, Maldives and Pakistan – have tempered their ratifications with reservations. Much more can be done to ensure that discrimination does not bar women from opportunities to work productively.

- **Transforming the workplace**: The workplace must be transformed to recognize the role that both parents play in raising and caring for children, as required by article 18 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Social policies and programmes should be promoted to enable women and men to reconcile their work and family responsibilities and to encourage men to share housework and childcare responsibilities. It is also important to implement policies to alter gender bias towards women at work and address underlying problems, such as sectoral and occupational segregation and lack of education and training.

At the local level, an example of a successful grassroots movement for women’s economic empowerment is the Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad, based in Mumbai, India. The organization was started in 1959 by seven lower-middle-class women. Its main goal is to promote self-employment, the dignity of labour and the earning capacity of women working from home. Women 18 years or older, irrespective of caste or religion, can become members. Collective ownership is the central premise of the organization, with net returns shared among members. By promoting self-confidence and self-reliance, the organization has affected the lives of more than 40,000 women who have become advocates for education for themselves and their children, especially their daughters.
• **Education:** Ensuring that girls and boys will have equal income-earning opportunities as adults requires such measures as encouraging local school authorities and teachers to adopt flexible scheduling; allowing married adolescents and mothers to attend classes; making school facilities safe; ensuring that schools have separate latrines for girls; building schools close to girls’ homes; recruiting more female teachers; and encouraging parents and community leaders to take an active involvement in school management. In addition, the school curriculum itself must impress upon students the importance of gender equality.

• **Eliminating gender disparities in legislation:** Critical measures to eliminate gender discrimination in women’s land and property rights must include, but should not be limited to, bringing national legislation in line with international human rights standards; reforming land and property rights; and involving international agencies and non-governmental organizations in tracking and exposing violations of women’s property rights, and in monitoring government compliance with international human rights treaties. In addition to legal reform, effective implementation of new laws designed to eliminate gender bias is essential to advance gender equality in South Asia.

• **The role of government in supporting working families:** Governments should undertake administrative, financial and legislative measures to create a strong and enabling environment for women’s entrepreneurship and participation in the labour market, including improved employment conditions, career development opportunities, maternity and other paid leave, elimination of pay gaps based solely on gender, and safe and high-quality childcare arrangements.

• **Gender-responsive budgets:** The introduction of gender-responsive budgets is a further step towards securing women’s rights, greater public transparency and economic efficiency. This mechanism introduces the gender perspective by analysing the impact of government expenditure and revenue on women and girls compared with men and boys. The process does not require separate budgets for women nor does it aim solely to increase spending on women-specific programmes. Instead, it helps governments determine policy adjustments and resource allocations to address poverty and gender inequalities (see Chapter 5, page 32).

• **Better data and analysis:** Although there are sufficient data to show that women tend to work more and earn less than men, and to illustrate the consequent negative impact on societies, a lack of sex-disaggregated statistics precludes a more detailed analysis of work disparities. Better data on employment and income disaggregated by sex could significantly improve the analysis of policies and programmes – with benefits to women, children, families and communities.

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**Do girls risk missing out on an education when women work?**

Although women are entering the workforce in greater numbers, their increased participation is not always matched by an improvement in children’s welfare. The need for substitute caregivers while mothers are at work means that many children, most often girls, are at risk of being kept out (or dropping out) of school in order to care for younger siblings, or perform household work, or both.

In South Asian countries, as more mothers work outside the home, the need for extra-family childcare is met often by older female children who become the primary caregivers for young children. A recent survey conducted in Nepal shows that the eldest daughters tend to be at greatest risk of being withdrawn from school to help their working mothers take care of younger siblings and perform household tasks. In rural India, evidence shows that when mothers are employed outside the home, girls are less likely to go to school and significantly more likely to undertake household chores.

*See References, page 38.*
Children are powerfully affected by political outcomes, but they have little power to shape them. Unable to vote or directly represent their interests in governing bodies, their ability to influence policy is limited. Whether there is anyone to speak on their behalf, and who those people might be, can make a vast difference to the fulfilment of their rights to survival, development and protection.

The equal participation of women and men in government and politics can transform the political environment of a country by making it more receptive to the concerns of all of its citizens, including children. Although evidence is limited, the few studies available indicate that in one critical area – community distribution of resources – women leaders are making a difference in the lives of women and children in South Asia.

In developing countries, research on the impact of women in local government is an emerging area of enquiry. The most comprehensive findings currently available come from India, where in 1998 one third of all leadership positions in village councils were reserved for women. An extensive research project examining the impact of the reservation policy initially surveyed 165 village councils in the state of West Bengal. The six-month survey examined the level of public goods provision in councils that had reservation policies and those without such quotas.

The study found that in villages with reservation policies, investment in drinking-water facilities was double that of villages without quotas. The roads in villages with quotas were almost twice as likely to be in good condition. Furthermore, major roadways were 20 per cent more likely to have been recently repaired; new biogas (a substitute for cooking fuel and electricity) projects were introduced in 26 per cent of villages with reservation policies compared with 6 per cent in the villages without quotas; and, due to active
monitoring, the number of visits by health workers was significantly higher. These improvements were highly beneficial to women and girls, who bear the primary responsibility for collecting fuel and water and looking after family health-care needs, particularly those of children.

Building on these initial successes, the research project was expanded to examine the impact of reservation policies on child immunization and schooling. In a project covering 100 villages in Rajasthan, immunization surveys were administered to 30 households in each village. The immunization records of every child under the age of five were analysed. The findings indicate that a child aged between one and five residing in a village reserved for a woman pradhan (leader) has a slightly higher probability of having completed all the recommended course of vaccinations. The impact of women pradhans on the school attendance of girls is even more significant: The study revealed that the presence of a woman pradhan reduces the gender gap in school attendance by 13 percentage points.2

Several countries in South Asia have made significant progress in creating a favourable environment for women’s participation in politics. The majority of national governments have created institutional ministries for women.3 India has perhaps gone the furthest in its efforts to enhance women’s participation in politics, adopting two amendments to the Constitution in 1992, which introduced a quota for women members of urban and rural local governments. The panchayats (village councils) have direct elections and must reserve no less than one third of seats for women (and specific proportions for other marginalized social groups). It is estimated that since their introduction, these reservations have allowed more than 1 million women to participate in decision-making at the local level.4

However, many of the elected women lacked the ability to perform their constitutionally mandated roles. In west and south India, representatives’ networks were formed to help build the capacity of the women representatives. The networks have proved successful in promoting solidarity among elected women representatives who may be otherwise divided by caste, religion and geographical boundaries.5

Similarly, in Bangladesh, there is a provision that 25 per cent of seats in union councils (village level), and up to one third in municipalities, are reserved for women. Progress has been made in adopting local government ordinances about the rights and
obligations of elected women, thus making their contributions more effective. In the union council elections of 1997, 13,000 women were elected.

Other countries in the region have adopted similar initiatives aimed at increasing women’s participation in politics. In Pakistan, the Devolution of Power Plan in 2000 guaranteed a 33 per cent quota for women at all three levels of local government – zila councils (district level), tehsil councils (subdistrict level) and union councils (village level). In reality, however, the women account for only 29 per cent of local councillors, as no quotas were instituted for the nazims (minority seats) in the union councils. The local government elections of 2000–2001 brought around 42,000 women into local government positions.

In Nepal, the Local Self Government Act of 1999 provides women with access to local government. Despite having low rates of child marriage, high level of girls’ education and a record of elected women leaders in the highest seats of political power, Sri Lanka continues to have very few women in its national legislature, the proportion of women never having been higher than 5 per cent. Following the fall of the Taliban, Afghani women accounted for 27 per cent of parliamentarians in 2005.

Challenges faced by women in politics

Despite these positive developments across the region, the path into politics for women remains challenging. The experience of women in the political arena is often affected by gender and class norms, types of local institutions, formal and informal networks and customary laws. Their participation is also influenced by low levels of education, dependence on male members of the household and lack of access to economic resources.

Figure 4.1  There is wide variation in women’s participation in national politics across the region

* The latest available data for Nepal are from 2004.

**Southern Asia** comprises Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Islamic Republic of Iran, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

In India, for example, the structure of political parties remains the main obstacle to women’s entry into politics. In recent years, women legislators have, on average, held a small percentage of parliamentary seats (8.3 per cent of seats in the lower house and 11.2 per cent of seats in the Senate). A key impediment is that male-dominated parties are often reluctant to nominate women. Their reluctance is in sharp contrast to public opinion: In all surveys since 1996, a majority of respondents approve of women’s active involvement in politics and favour quotas to reserve seats for women in legislatures.

In Bhutan, the under-representation of women is attributed to their lower levels of education and literacy. However, a promising trend has been an increase in the number of women in the legislature and civil service. In Sri Lanka, women’s lack of political participation is due to such factors as the norm of male leadership, a climate of political violence, women’s time constraints related to domestic and childcare responsibilities and their lack of adequate financial resources.

Although quotas can guarantee women’s political participation, they work only as long as they are upheld. In the national assembly of Bangladesh, for example, only six women were directly elected in 2001, representing only 2 per cent of the total numbers of parliamentarians. A provision for the nomination of 30 additional women by sitting members of Parliament lapsed in the same year and has not been renewed.

Being elected does not protect women from gender discrimination. They may face tokenism and exclusion from certain portfolios such as finance, defence and foreign affairs. Furthermore, the continuing dominance of the middle and upper classes in local politics means that poor, low-caste and minority women face additional difficulties in representing their own communities or the interests of women.
Empowering women to participate in politics

Increasing women’s participation in politics is vital to promoting gender equality and empowering women, the two tenets of Millennium Development Goal 3. Key measures to help ensure that women participate fully and effectively in politics include:

- **Education**: A girl who is denied the right to go to school loses much more than the knowledge she would have gained in the classroom. She is deprived of the opportunity to develop to her full potential in every area of life, including the right to political participation.

- **Men’s involvement and support**: While women’s presence and active participation in politics is critical to advancing gender equality, no gender initiative can succeed without the involvement and support of men, especially male parliamentarians and political leaders.

- **Quotas**: The introduction of quotas has led to dramatic changes in women’s political participation throughout the world. In South Asia, although quotas have been successful at the local level, they have yet to achieve widespread acceptance as a means of ensuring women’s involvement at the highest levels of national government.

- **Party politics**: Political parties remain the gatekeepers to the advancement of women in politics. In party politics, however, rules and sanctions for non-compliance are particularly important. While it may seem impressive for a party to commit to a 40 per cent quota of women representatives, for example, that commitment can be rendered meaningless if women’s candidacies are not actively promoted.

- **Creating an environment where women can make a difference**: The presence of women in politics is a necessary but not sufficient condition for women’s political empowerment. Women’s ministries, other political forums for women and government commitments are equally important factors in advancing gender equality.
In South Asia, exclusion in all its dimensions – social, economic and political – cuts across gender, caste, ethnicity and religion. For women and girls in particular, exclusion and discrimination are exacerbated by unequal societal relations. In an environment that so often denies them equal access to essential basic services and fails to protect them from abuse, violence and exploitation, promoting gender equality will require concerted, focused initiatives and the participation of all sectors of society.

Donors and international organizations must fully integrate the gender perspective into their activities in order to create an enabling environment with equitable policies on aid, development and trade and to realize the human rights of all people. Governments – the primary duty-bearers in realizing the rights of women and children – perform a vital function when they mainstream the gender perspective into the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes, as emphasized in the Beijing Platform for Action, and when they take specific action to eliminate gender inequality (see Panel, page 29). But achieving Millennium Development Goal 3, which seeks to promote gender equality and empower women, also requires that societies – including men and boys, husbands and fathers, voters, teachers, religious and civic leaders, the media, the private sector and indeed women and girls themselves – examine gender discrimination openly and honestly and commit to eliminating it in their attitudes, behaviours and practices.

This final chapter recommends critical actions to address this challenge, make an unprecedented difference in the lives of women and children and help accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.


Gender mainstreaming and women’s empowerment

Achieving equal rights for women and girls requires mainstreaming the gender perspective into development work. The international community endorsed gender mainstreaming as a strategy for the promotion of gender equality in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was unanimously adopted by UN Member States at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Gender mainstreaming is defined as “the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic, and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.”

The Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes the importance of mainstreaming the gender perspective in all spheres of society and in emergency situations. Policies and programmes should not be assumed to be gender neutral. Governments are charged with ensuring that the interests of both sexes are equally represented in policymaking, planning and decision-making processes. Gender mainstreaming is an essential strategy to accelerate progress towards Millennium Development Goal 3 and realize the universal human rights of women and girls.

See References, page 39.

Education

Ensuring that girls and boys have equal opportunities to receive an education is a crucial step towards combating gender discrimination and advancing children’s rights. Abolishing school fees is an effective policy measure for accelerating progress in this area. In principle, there are no tuition fees in most South Asian countries,1 but other fees that deter school attendance among poor children may still be charged for books, supplies and uniforms.2 In India, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan is a flagship government programme designed to get all children into school, especially girls disadvantaged by caste, tribe or disability. The programme relies on community participation and monitoring, placing particular emphasis on the recruitment of women and members of disadvantaged groups.3

Girl-friendly schools: Safe and unbiased

A major challenge to achieving gender parity in education in South Asian countries is to ensure that quality schools that are child-friendly and promote learning are located near children’s homes. A The Government of Nepal has taken a progressive stance towards this goal by increasing the presence of women teachers in primary schools.5 The policy was revised in 2004 to require the presence of at least two women teachers in each primary school. Currently, about 24 per cent of primary school teachers in the country are women.6 In Bhutan, the introduction of community schools in 1986 has helped reach students in remote areas. These schools give girls an opportunity for a primary education close to their homes. The government provides teachers and learning material, but the management and supervision
Investing in education

Income-support schemes provide effective incentives for both girls’ and boys’ education. Bangladesh, for example, is implementing stipend programmes in both primary and secondary education. The new Primary Education Stipend Programme provides monthly cash transfers to poor primary school pupils and their families throughout rural Bangladesh. In order to qualify for the stipend, pupils must maintain an 85 per cent monthly school attendance rate and score a minimum of 50 per cent on yearly exams. To continue to participate in the programme, a school must prove it has at least 60 per cent student attendance, and 10 per cent of its grade five students must sit for the Primary School Scholarship Exam. All young women at the secondary level residing outside a metropolitan area are eligible to enrol in the Female Secondary School Stipend Programme, provided they remain unmarried, maintain an attendance rate of 75 per cent and score a minimum of 45 per cent on examinations. Despite difficulties in reaching the poorest girls, the programme has been successful in increasing enrolment rates.

Research

Understanding gender differences and assessing the specific vulnerabilities and needs of each gender is the first step in formulating appropriate responses to realize the rights of women and children. To gain a more complete understanding of poverty, exclusion and discrimination, data disaggregated by economic status, area of residence, ethnicity, race, age and level of education, as well as gender, are required. Disaggregated data are useful for advocacy and policy purposes and for monitoring progress towards the MDGs and the fulfilment of women’s and children’s rights.

Many countries in South Asia need to improve their capacity to regularly collect disaggregated data, particularly in such areas as informal employment and time use, where data collection presents a challenge. This is an essential step towards greater visibility and wider recognition of the social and economic contributions of women and girls.
Legislation

Legislative reform can be an effective strategy for empowering women and children and for safeguarding their rights. Although equality with men is constitutionally guaranteed throughout South Asia, in many cases these guarantees are obstructed by traditions, and by ignorance and non-enforcement of the law. Women’s lack of education, low social status and limited mobility and income restrict their access to the legal system.

Where women do not have equal access to justice and legal protection, and where legal obstacles undermine their rights, legislation must be reformed to address gender discrimination. Governments should fulfill their commitments under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by promoting an active and visible policy of gender mainstreaming in the legislative process. This would enable policymakers to consider the effects of any proposed legislation on both women and men.

Legislation is, however, only a beginning, and it must be accompanied by effective monitoring and enforcement in order to produce the desired effects.

Domestic and gender-based violence

Combating violence against women and children requires specific legislation as well as a strong commitment by policymakers, the judiciary, law enforcement and, in some cases, the international community to develop comprehensive safeguards and bring perpetrators to justice. India’s legislation to combat sexual harassment, Bangladesh’s special provisions against cruelty to women and children and the efforts by Pakistan to treat ‘honour killings’ as murder all represent positive legal steps towards addressing gender-based violence and abuse.

But the gap between the laws on the books and their implementation often remains wide. As a result, domestic and gender-based violence often goes unpunished. Reports from non-governmental organizations reveal that women litigants in the Indian state of West Bengal, for instance, complain of expensive and confusing procedures, exploitation by lawyers and a general feeling of helplessness when dealing with the legal system.

With the support of the UN Development Programme, in 2001 the Central Women Legal Aid Committee was created in Nepal under the
Property and inheritance rights

Women often experience the most severe discrimination in countries and regions where equal land and property rights would make the biggest difference to them and their children. For legal reform to have an impact on the lives of women and children, national laws based on human rights principles must be upheld over male-biased customary laws and traditional practices. A study conducted in the Indian state of Kerala found that when women owned property (land and housing), physical and psychological violence against them decreased. Even though customary law and religious codes are important, efforts to harmonize these codes with statutory law should not be conducted at the expense of the rights and well-being of women and girls.

Financing

In addition to sound legislation, robust research and bold policies, achieving gender equality and fulfilling women's and children's rights also requires resources. Without financing to implement and incorporate new laws and policies, stronger legislation and better research will mean little. Equitable and efficient social investment aimed at eliminating gender discrimination is key to empowering women.

Gender-responsive budgets

Gender-responsive budget analysis provides a clear picture of how the distribution, use and generation of public resources can have a different impact on men and women. It offers a tool for making visible the links between social investment and women's rights and for holding governments accountable for their political commitments to gender equality. Gender-responsive budgets are being implemented in several South Asian countries. In Nepal, for example, gender is considered in spending decisions, and some ministries, such as agriculture, labour, education and population and the environment, are now

UNIFEM: Promoting gender-responsive budgets in South Asia

The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) has played a crucial role in the promotion of gender-responsive budgets throughout the world. UNIFEM defines gender-responsive budgeting as “the analysis of the impact of actual government expenditure and revenue on women and girls as compared to men and boys.” Gender-responsive budget analysis does not aim to increase spending just on woman-specific programmes. Rather, it seeks to indicate governments’ commitments to gender issues and help governments adjust policies and allocate resources in a more equal manner. UNIFEM seeks to promote equality, accountability, efficiency and transparency in budgets.

In South Asia, UNIFEM, in cooperation with governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), has supported gender-responsive budget initiatives in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. Successful outcomes included: women’s participation in budget formulation and monitoring; strengthening the interaction between government, NGOs and women’s groups to identify vulnerable groups; and greater awareness and interest in gender budgets among different stakeholders.

See References, page 39.
allocating funds for women’s programmes. Nevertheless, budget allocations to woman-specific programmes are still marginal, and there is still a long way to go to effectively mainstream gender concerns (see Panel, page 32).

**Promoting women’s economic rights**

Governments recognized the detrimental effect of gender inequalities on women’s employment, economic and professional opportunities when they adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. Nevertheless, barriers to women’s equal participation in employment remain. Achieving gender equality in the economic sphere requires investment in programmes to address such issues as discrimination in education and training, hiring and remuneration, inflexible working conditions, inadequate sharing of family responsibilities and insufficient or non-existent services such as childcare. One example of how to reach working mothers with children is the Self Employed Women’s Association in India. In 2002, the organization had built 128 childcare centres and was serving 6,300 children.

Governments should facilitate women’s entrepreneurship and participation in the labour market by improving and regulating employment conditions, maternity leave and career development and eliminating pay gaps based solely on gender. They should also ratify and fund implementation and monitoring of international conventions that protect and promote the rights of women and children. These include the International Labour Organization’s conventions aimed at eliminating the worst forms of child labour (ILO No. 182), enforcing minimum age (ILO No. 138), giving equal remuneration (ILO No. 100) and improving the situation of home workers (ILO No. C177).

**Women empowering women**

Women’s groups need to be recognized as important agents of empowerment and development. Governments and development agencies must involve them in poverty-reduction strategies and nurture long-term partnerships. By working with women’s organizations at the community level and channelling resources through such groups, international development agencies can increase the likelihood that resources will reach the most vulnerable members of poor communities – women and children.

Community initiatives that encourage women to participate in their design and implementation have visible and long-lasting benefits for women and children. The Working Women’s Forum in India provides a positive example. The forum – whose membership exceeds 500,000 – works to reduce poverty and strengthen the economic, social and cultural status of poor working women by making them responsible for its administration and daily operations. The women also gain access to resources such as micro-finance loans, identify their own problems and find solutions. Members can become leaders and advocates for change in their own communities.

**Engaging men and boys**

Men can make a crucial contribution to ending gender discrimination. By making child-friendly choices and supporting women in their capacities as decision-makers, men can be powerful allies. Through deliberate, well-designed strategies, policymakers can encourage men to play an even greater role in promoting the rights and well-being of women and children.

Advocacy efforts are already under way. In 2004, a three-day workshop organized by Save the Children was held in Kathmandu, Nepal. Entitled ‘Strengthening partnership with men and boys to promote gender equality and end violence against girls and boys’, the event brought together experts from the region who shared their experience working with men and boys and developed strategies for addressing the issue of violence and promoting gender equality.

Training programmes that sensitize boys and men on issues related to gender and masculinity can also yield positive results. In Pakistan, for example, after a series of training programmes were offered to male police officers, they reported being better able to handle their emotions and could identify gender discriminatory aspects of the curriculum.
The time is now

Despite ingrained and pernicious gender inequality, efforts to fight gender discrimination in South Asia are encouraging. Nevertheless, several barriers to gender equality remain. Far too many women and girls face entrenched discrimination and exploitation in the household and the workplace, and remain voiceless and powerless. Women are disproportionately affected by poverty and violence, and the consequences of discrimination affect every area of their lives. Gains in education are still modest, and girls struggle to attend primary and secondary school. In adolescence, child marriage, premature motherhood and lack of knowledge about sexual and reproductive health are commonplace. South Asia’s women have a high risk of dying from complications in pregnancy and childbirth. Owing to discriminatory property laws, the loss of a spouse often brings economic hardship. Discrimination on the basis of gender still permeates South Asian society and carries gender inequality and disempowerment from generation to generation.

Eliminating gender discrimination will produce a double dividend, fulfilling the rights of women and going a long way towards realizing those of children as well. With concerted efforts, real progress can be made in transforming patriarchal attitudes and institutions in South Asian society and promoting universal human rights and equal opportunities for women and men. Effective partnerships involving governments, donors and international agencies can support this process through the design and implementation of development strategies based on human rights.

Bold initiatives and unflinching determination are required to put an end to individual and institutional gender discrimination. Anything less than unqualified support for gender equality will sabotage meaningful progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals. Attitudes, customs and values that are detrimental to women and girls must be confronted. All obstacles to gender equality, regardless of origin, must be dismantled so that development can move forward. If poverty is to become history, then gender inequality must become history. If sustainable development is to become a reality, then equal rights must become a reality.

Enforcement of international conventions and national laws pertaining to women and children falls mainly to governments, and ultimately they must be held accountable for shortcomings. But resistance by individuals, families and communities has also waylaid gender equality and children’s rights. No amount of history, legacy, religious or cultural traditions can justify inequality and discrimination.

It has been nearly 30 years since, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was adopted by the United Nations. One can only imagine what the lives of girls born in 1979 would have been like had women’s rights been fully supported and implemented during the past three decades. A generation of empowered women would have made a world of difference. The next generation cannot wait another 30 years for its rights. For women and for children, the time to act is now.
Chapter 1

The call for gender equality evolved into a quest for equal rights when the distinction was made between gender and sex. Sex is biological. Gender, on the other hand, is a social construct that describes what is feminine and what is masculine. Recognizing that gender roles are not innate but rather cultivated, proponents of equality challenge the stereotypes and pervasive discrimination that keep women and girls socially and economically disadvantaged.


2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.


5 Caste in Pakistan is not the same as the Hindu caste system, although it retains many of the same features. See Hooper, Emma, and Agha Imran Hamid, Scoping Study on Social Exclusion in Pakistan: A summary of findings, commissioned by the Western Asia Department, Department for International Development, United Kingdom, October 2003, p. 5.

6 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., pp. 30-33; and information provided by the UNICEF South Asia Regional Office, Kathmandu, Nepal.


8 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., pp. 120-121.


16 Ibid.


18 Ibid., p. 63.


21 Malik, Bela, Lena Karlsson and Ravi Karkara, ‘Working with Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and to End Violence against Boys and Girls’, op. cit., p. 3.

22 Bott, Sarah, et al., Towards Adulthood: Exploring the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents in South Asia, op. cit., p. 5.


26 Ibid., p. 11.


30 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 5.


Chapter 1 Panels

Girls' health in the early years

Information derived from:


Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 125.

Ibid., p. 121.


HIV/AIDS in South Asia

Information derived from:


Ibid., pp. 25 and 511-512.


Chapter 2


4 Smith, Lisa C., et al., The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries, op. cit., p. 21.


6 Malik, Bela, Lena Karlsson and Ravi Karkara, 'Working with Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and to End Violence against Boys and Girls,' workshop report, Save the Children, Sweden-Denmark, Regional Programme for South and Central Asia, Kathmandu, March 2005, pp. 36-37.

7 Coomaraswamy, Radhika, 'The Varied Contours of Violence against Women in South Asia,' paper delivered at the Fifth South Asia Ministerial Conference Celebrating Beijing Plus Ten, Islamabad, 3-5 May 2005, p. 7.

8 Malik, Bela, Lena Karlsson and Ravi Karkara, 'Working with Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and to End Violence against Boys and Girls,' workshop report, Save the Children, Sweden-Denmark, Regional Programme for South and Central Asia, Kathmandu, March 2005, pp. 36-37.


10 Within the study, women's influence is measured by the differences between men's and women's ages, levels of education and control over assets and income. See Smith, Lisa C., et al., The Importance of Women's Status for Child Nutrition in Developing Countries, op. cit., pp. 15-34.

11 Ibid., p. 58.


14 Ibid., p. 66.

15 Ibid., p. 56.


19 Malik, Bela, Lena Karlsson and Ravi Karkara, 'Working with Men and Boys to Promote Gender Equality and to End Violence against Boys and Girls,' op. cit., p. 69.


Chapter 2 Panels

The Acid Survivors Foundation: Working to protect women and girls from harm

Information derived from:

Violence against children in South Asia

Information derived from:
Kane, June, Violence Against Children in the Countries of South Asia: The problem, actions taken and challenges outstanding, Secretariat, United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children, Geneva, 2005, p. 3.

Ibid., p. 4.

Ibid., p. 6.


Chapter 3


2 Ibid., p. 52.


4 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 59.


6 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 52.


8 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 57.


10 Figures are based on information from ‘Millennium Development Goals Indicators’, United Nations Statistics Division, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Data.aspx>. Due to definition differences for the percentage of women working in the non-agricultural sector, the available data are indicative.

11 Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, Human Development in South Asia, op. cit., p. 64.

12 Asian Development Bank, Bangladesh, Gender, Poverty and the MDGs, ADB Country Gender Strategy, ADB, Manila, August 2004, p. 3.

13 Ibid.
Chapter 3 Panels
Do girls risk missing out on an education when women work?
Information derived from:

Chapter 4

Chapter 5
REFERENCES
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### Demographic indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>WORLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total population (2005)</td>
<td>1,483,358,000</td>
<td>6,449,371,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population under 18 (2005)</td>
<td>587,319,000</td>
<td>2,183,143,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population under 5 (2005)</td>
<td>169,666,000</td>
<td>616,219,000</td>
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### Survival

<table>
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<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life expectancy at birth (2005)</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neonatal mortality rate (under 28 days), per 1,000 live births (2000)</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infant mortality rate (under 1), per 1,000 live births (2005)</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under-5 mortality rate, per 1,000 live births (2005)</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>76</td>
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<tr>
<td>Under-5 mortality rate, average annual rate of reduction (1990-2005)</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal mortality ratio, per 100,000 live births (2000, adjusted)</td>
<td>560</td>
<td>400</td>
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### Health and nutrition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>REGION</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of infants with low birthweight (1998-2005*)</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of under-5s who are moderately or severely underweight (1996-2005*)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population using improved drinking water sources (2004)</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population using adequate sanitation facilities (2004)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Education

- **Percentage of primary school entrants reaching grade 5 (administrative data; 2000-2004*)** | 76 | 83 |
- **Net primary school attendance ratio (1996-2005*)**
  - Male | 81 | 78 |
  - Female | 75 | 75 |
- **Net secondary school attendance ratio (1996-2005*)**
  - Male | 54 | **46** |
  - Female | 48 | **43** |
- **Adult literacy rate (2000-2004*)**
  - Male | 59 | 80 |
  - Female | 72 | 86 |
  - Female | 46 | 74 |

### Economic indicators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDICATOR</th>
<th>REGION</th>
<th>WORLD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GNI per capita (US$, 2005)</td>
<td>691</td>
<td>7,002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population living on less than $1 a day (1994-2004*)</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Percentage share of central government expenditure (1994-2004*) allocated to:
  - Health | 2 | 13 |
  - Education | 4 | 6 |
  - Defence | 14 | 12 |
  - Percentage share of household income (1994-2004*):
    - Lowest 40 per cent | 22 | 20 |
    - Highest 20 per cent | 41 | 42 |

### HIV/AIDS

- **Adult prevalence rate (15+ years, end 2005)** | 0.7 | 1.0 |
- **Estimated number of people (all ages) living with HIV (2005)** | 5,900,000 | 38,600,000 |
- **Estimated number of children (0-14 years) living with HIV (2005)** | 130,000 | 2,300,000 |
- **Estimated number of children (0-17 years) orphaned by AIDS (2005)** | - | 15,200,000 |

### Child protection

- **Birth registration (1999-2005*)** | 32 | - |
  - Urban | 47 | - |
  - Rural | 25 | - |
- **Child marriage (1987-2005*)** | 48 | - |
  - Urban | 28 | - |
  - Rural | 55 | - |
- **Child labour (5-14 years, 1999-2005*)** | 14 | - |
  - Male | 12 | - |
  - Female | 15 | - |

### Women

- **Adult literacy parity rate (females as a percentage of males, 2000-2004*)** | 64 | 86 |
- **Antenatal care coverage (percentage, 1997-2005*)** | 53 | 71 |
- **Skilled attendant at delivery (percentage, 1997-2005*)** | 37 | 63 |
- **Lifetime risk of maternal death (2000) 1 in...** | 43 | 74 |

**NOTES:**

* Data refer to the most recent years available during the period specified.
** Excludes China.