

A Critique of the Report Human Development in South Asia 2000: The Gender Question

MS Received February 01, 2013; Reviewed August 26, 2013; Accepted September 26, 2013

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Abstract

The report under review argues that women should have nothing less than equality with men in both developing and developed societies. This essay critiques this stance of the report using an uneducated woman as an instrument for questioning this stance. The author stresses the importance of cultural, political and historical context while discussing gender and women's issues in the background of South Asia and which the report does not pay attention to.

Keywords: Women's Studies, illiterate woman, educated women, civil societies, South Asia, development, gender

Human Development Report in South Asia 2000: The Gender Question, the fourth annual report of Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre, highlights the extremely poor condition and position of South Asian women. To address this problem, the report also recommends policies and strategies to provide women economic, political and educational opportunities.

Since Women's Studies is the perspective of the underprivileged, in this paper, I am constructing responses of an imaginary illiterate woman in order to critique the above report. Response of such a woman to a report of Human Development in South Asia with specific reference to gender question is in itself a critique. Her translucent deliberations of common sense merging with my vague negation of development policies made without her participation in the report give shape to this essay.

In the Report Mahbub ul Haq is quoted - 'What is needed is nothing less than a revolution for gender equality. Development must be engendered. Societies cannot succeed while suppressing the talents of half of their members.' (p167). The imaginary illiterate woman has no understanding of revolution and little of engendering. Getting into her shoes means nothing less than a revolution to me and attempting to express her views is an endeavour to reach gender equality. She is puzzled by the following

statement in the report, 'Mainstreaming also recognises that achieving gender equality is not only about providing assistance to women and incorporating women into existing structures, but also requires transformative change (UN Sec Gen 2000) (p.27)'. Even though she understands helping women, 'mainstreaming' and 'incorporating' are concepts beyond her. I can hardly assure her in this respect. Even if a part of gender equality is achieved by 'assisting and incorporating women into existing structures' without providing space for women to grow, the report does not acknowledge that this would also mean making women participants of their own disempowerment!

'Despite the very rich history of South Asian women's effort (p.170)', what women like her get to know about our neighbouring countries is so disgustingly far from truth and thoroughly misrepresented to create hate so as to justify the military expenditure against social development. So much for South Asian history and what of their women! The respective countries' history as we know needs reconstruction in favour of women. The Report rightly states that 'we need to raise collective consciousness of the region' and 'put structures and finances in place for proper implementation' but this 'proper' cannot be according to 'global and national commitments' (p.170) if these commitments are not people oriented.

The imaginary woman agrees with some of the observations about education in the Report such as: 'To a large extent, higher education is the preserve of the social, economic and political elite (p.112)'. I consider most education, lower and higher, pre-decided by gatekeepers of the patriarchal system. Why should these same gatekeepers view women's education in favour of women? 'Educated women are less fearful of modern procedures (p.110).' "Ha! Ha!" The woman has a hearty laugh on this statement in the report and wonders if people have any idea of uneducated women. She might not accept certain procedures, but why would she be scared of it? Educated women are quite scared to venture out into unknown territories as they get systematized by education in a particular manner without realizing. Will anyone accept a statement like this from her? The way educated women are traumatized with the age-old process of child-birth is amusing – she hopes her educated sisters across the world will forgive her. I feel that she is not having a laugh on women but the system, which formulates them.

Thankfully this Report does not give credit to education as a source of women's empowerment only finds lacuna in education of girls in South Asian sphere. 'By increasing women's ability to earn independent income,

education increases women's status in the community and leads to greater input in family and community decision-making (p.110)'. As it is my imaginary illiterate woman thinks the education given is fit only for so-called economic growth. I am amazed at her confidence that without having ever stepped into a school she comments without much ado about education as a whole! Suggestion of the report that, 'Female education also leads to greater ability on the part of females to communicate with their spouses on birth control (p.109)' is not acceptable to the illiterate woman. Her questions seem unending. Why should women have the responsibility of communicating? If men with all their education have not been able to take responsibility of birth control what will women do with communication after getting educated? And should communication on birth control be one of the reasons for women's education? Even when I agree that education gives greater ability to women I am at a loss to justify education for purpose of communicating for birth control.

The report further continues, 'A person who has completed a secondary education is more than capable of learning the basic operation of a computer, and financial and infra-structural constraints notwithstanding, of imparting such skills to primary or secondary school students (p.114)'. The woman feels that for learning basic operation of computer or any skill any educational qualification is hardly needed. Children learn at the feet of adults how to fill bobbin and slowly learning the intricacies of weaving become master weavers. I wonder that how is one to overcome 'financial and infra-structural constraints'? The details of children being able to complete secondary education can be had from this Report itself (p.208). Is this a gender, educational or economic issue?

In response to this statement 'Keeping women illiterate clearly retards economic growth (p.108)' in report, she asks about this literacy - women can sign, have been through primary schooling, secondary/technical, philosophy studies or doctorate etc? She believes in education of women not literacy. She prays that farmers, weavers or masons, be they men or women should not get addicted to this education business! Who will feed, clothe, build houses - are these not development requirements? And are these not part of the economic growth? I have no answers for her. Also when 'education' is mentioned, if it is State/Religion controlled then it is anybody's guess what kind it would be but whatever education is available if that too is withdrawn then, where would it lead women and the society to? Education is never made out to be fun in any of the South Asian countries nor does it create respect for work - definitely not women's work!

The report refers to one of the remaining challenges in the Beijing Plus Balance Sheet of South Asia is 'the severe under-representation of women in the security forces (p.43)'. Would gender educating/sensitization of the existing force be more effective or just women being there for namesake is relevant? The respective Balance Sheet on India gives 'the % fall out of formal and non-formal governmental education budgets, (p.46)' but the decline in comparison to defense or other such expenditures and simultaneously women's education as part of adult literacy programmes being taken up by NGOs, would give the complete picture. The one on Pakistan states, 'Increasing female enrolment and decreasing gender gap in primary education, due to positive discrimination in SAP (p.49)!' Is this SAP South Asian Partnership or Structural Adjustment Programme? Whatever it is, stress on primary education as a programme is being passed on to India as has been going on in Pakistan. What happens to girls and boys too, who cannot get further educated after primary education, because of lack of schools? I suppose citizens of the so-called developing world do not need to get further educated unless they can pay for it!

'Education increases women's knowledge about controlling fertility (p.109)'. If education of women is about increasing knowledge about controlling fertility then educated men ought to use family planning measures! 'Women 35 years and over, and those with education had greater decision making opportunity than younger and less educated women (p.131)'. The woman exasperatedly comments that this is another way of giving importance to education and paid work, at the cost of reinforcing discrimination and hierarchy between women! 'At the global level we are advocating the establishment of strong UN agency for women, which should have political power equivalent to the economic power of the Britton Woods Institution (p.177)'. Excellent advocacy, but who will inform the uneducated women like her and educated people (women?) of the world about these Britton Woods Institutions and UN Agency for women? And where from will they acquire guts to challenge the systems presently prevalent due to these institutions, education being a major one?

The report states in reference to Sri Lanka's Muslim community 'Gender differentials in age at marriage help maintain concepts of women as both legal children and male property, passed on from the guardianship of fathers to that of husbands, and as people with homemaking as their sole economic role' (p.81), but acknowledges 'child marriages are accepted as valid' in 'Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Nepal'. The imaginary woman does not comprehend why such obvious things about women need stated.

Her unquestioning acceptance perturbs me. Even though Census of India records women's unpaid work it is not acknowledged as having economic value. 'Women themselves consider themselves as non-workers because they tend to regard their labour as 'domestic responsibilities', 'therefore 'the male head usually identifying the woman in the same way (pp.54-57)' and not the other way round. Does any country have gender sight to accurately gauge women's contribution to economy? Whether it is altering attitudes about recruiting and retaining women or female professionals, I think when it comes to paid jobs in a capitalistic world, women are recruited and sacked to meet the requirement of the system. Who wants to account for unpaid jobs? (p.112 Box 6.2 & p.115 Box 6.6).

In response to the following statement in the report 'Unemployment in Japan and East Asian countries has remained consistently low because their populations possess employable technical skills and because of the high economic growth rates that these skilled populations engineered (p.111)', she innocently asks me why population and employable skills of small countries are referred in this report. What would I answer her if she chooses to ask that whose responsibility is to implement so-called 'employable technical skills' to the huge diverse population of South Asia? Or even to make the skills translate into economic growth? The report has not touched upon the ratio of global consumption between developed and developing countries in comparison to their population growth. 'Globalisation is not only skewed towards elite minority South Asian women in information technology as benefits of competitive markets (p.67)', but is bent backwards towards this direction in all respects. The woman points out with irony that through micro-credits via government agencies and NGOs, the rural and urban lower class women are being utilized in favour of the 'benefits' of the markets by providing this underprivileged women buying capacity or 'some economic independence!' I have no option but to accept her know-how. 'The experiences of other countries have shown that women are capable as their male counterparts in both traditional and non- traditional fields (p.113)'. The woman cannot understand why other countries are mentioned in a report of South Asia. If she cannot decide parameters for me she fails to comprehend how gender parity factors can be decided for any country by others.

To the report's statement, 'Unequal economic opportunities for women are manifested most clearly in their limited access to credit. Even though in South Asia, numerous initiatives by both governments and NGOs have

been able to provide credit to women (p.65), 'the woman counters that these credits do not necessarily provide even little measure of economic independence if women do not have options to decide. I accept much stress is being given to micro-credits for women because as the report says 'women are more trustworthy borrowers (pp.66-67)'. Moreover in a market oriented economy buyers are needed, who better than women. It is another form of commercialisation and commodification of women and so much for their economic independence!

I give credit to the report makers for their acute judgement that, 'Polyandry is rarely a straight forward indicator of a woman's status or empowerment, however. It is often the case that one woman is married off to several brothers, such that family property is not divided' (p.87). She wonders if economics, as the root of relationships and actions, was ever 'taught' to women. I enrich her knowledge that whenever women were given this privilege they excelled in managing not only homes, but states, be it Razia Sultana or Rani Laxmibai. Both part of South Asian history, negated and promoted respectively for wrong set of reasons of womanhood! Razia Sultana was given kingdom by her father and not her brothers. Laxmibai adopt a son and not a daughter to keep Jhansi. Relevant gender issues! Taj Mahal, the epitome of love architecture was built for a woman who was the third wife and died giving birth to 14th child! Patriarchy personified!

Development and modernisation are not from the perspective of women, so the question of comparison, with 'men and women of the world about literacy, access to health services, enjoy civil, political and legal equality of women with men, enjoy economic and social security on the basis of work (p.30)' stated in the report, does not arise. Why are issues of empowerment of women raised in a system of elimination, where development is planned for those who can buy it, not knowing what development they are heading for? The woman pigheadedly raises a point that why so called empowered 'men and women of the world' do not take care of this 'acute poverty and gender discrimination in' so that 'South Asian women and girls', do not 'become increasingly vulnerable to economic and/or sexual exploitation' (p.38 Box3.3). I add to her view that women are weighed down by the socio-cultural myth that prostitutes are a necessity for social balance! How else will the social structure discriminate between women, good and bad, and simultaneously control both? 'Debates regarding the best approach to non-forced prostitution continue (p.97)'. The woman blew her top on this statement in the Report. Can prostitution ever be non-forced? I agree that if it is not direct then it is indirect force, what with monogamy been made the

rule for marriage! Erasing prostitution would be as unthinkable as erasing the institution of marriage! And of course why forget prostitution is big business. Who thinks of mere prostitutes' development? They are after all mostly women!

The report states that 'In South Asia the diseases are exacerbated by lack of information, poor health, sanitation facilities and lack of safe drinking water' (p.118). The illiterate woman is surprised that in an area, where there are ample rivers and rains, lack of safe drinking water as one of the major issues of health is not given and still not given top priority. I wonder why the report does not question - who is supposed to be responsible for such negligence? Where everything is commercialized drinking water also gets affected. More than half the population could die of thirst because they do not have the capacity to buy it. 'In India the decline in female labour was about 90% after the green revolution (p.56).' She asks what should be the concern of gender studies - about minimal decline in male labour or 90% decline in female labour or should we just cover the different declines with the economic increase and shove the land degradation under the carpet. Both women and land health and exploitation needs to be looked into, if and when development is to be considered. Historians need to enlarge why waterways were bypassed and train tracks built to rape the landscape.

When a report like this suggests, 'While this 'reproductive' role is perhaps one of the most valuable contributions that women make to their households, communities, and world, it is seriously under-appreciated (p.56)', the illiterate woman's common sense states that the over-exploitation of women's reproductive role is because it is over-rated for its valuable contributions rather than taken as a natural process! I am surprised that she does not emphasize that the patriarchal society discriminates between who can and who cannot reproduce in various cultural norms. The Report writes, 'If a pregnancy goes wrong, lack of obstetrical care can be fatal. These deaths represent an important indicator of the social and economic inequalities between women in industrialised and developing countries. In areas where health facilities are not easily available and/or cultural tradition limit women's mobility and freedom to access health services, rates of maternal mortality are much higher (p.127).'

She would like this lack of obstetrical care defined. Women in South Asia have a support system, where mothers/mothers-in-law and various other women give required care, where in the First World the women are supposed to leave the hospital in a day and a half and start doing everything - including getting a glass of water! Yes medical care is good but

only for those who can pay for it! The best of that is available in South Asia and as much care is given by illiterate women like her.

The report refers that, 'The victims of violence often need both immediate and long-term assistance. In the South Asian, context there is a serious need to spend more resources on the mental health aspect of violence (p.119).' The woman thinks of her neighbour being beaten black and blue by her husband and barely manages to comment that maybe women will start considering the need to be healthy on a regular basis and not when they are hardly in state to even think of being healthy! I optimistically presume that if more resources are allotted for health in South Asian countries, there is scope of it trickling down for mental health! The report argues that 'women's issues continue to be primarily located within the social sector, with health – especially reproductive and child health – and girls' education as the centre of attention (p.25)'. The woman asks whether access to drinking water is part of the education planned as women's health issues.

Listening to this assertion in the report that, 'Women who are stunted are more likely to experience obstructed labour and face a greater risk of dying during child birth (p.126)', her spirits revive. She rebukes that how come so many short women have normal deliveries? I reflect if this is racial discrimination of women who are naturally short or is this creating a hierarchy of taller women?

The uneducated woman is not aware of 'Role of civil society in women's development (pp.161-2)'. It is beyond me to explain to her that even though organisation mentioned in the report like SEWA and Lok Jumbish in India, Orangi Pilot project in Pakistan or Gramin in Bangladesh have done commendable work towards development of women these cannot be called civil societies. NGOs are apolitical per se and thus unaccountable therefore cannot be credited for 'The establishment of a separate Ministry for Women's Affairs (p.161)'. '65 % of all the NGOs currently active in Sri Lanka were established after 1977(p.161)'. Why did all these NGOs crop up in South Asian countries in 70 s? Was it to undermine the people's participation in development? Or was it again to create another form of dependency? 'Women's development needs to address both poverty and patriarchy, which excludes them from channels of socio-economic power and decision-making (p.161)'. Illiteracy does not limit the woman to comment on this familiar sphere. She says that not just poverty, economic understanding in public sphere and distribution of resources need to be addressed.

The Report has conveyed the status of women in political power structure very well. 'The tragedy of female parliamentarians or cabinet minister is that even women in influential positions have tended to focus on "national" rather than women-specific issues (p.141)'. 'Political equality is as yet an illusive ideal in most South Asian countries (p.144)'. 'Is there any equality in any arena? She points out that not having equality everywhere is not better than having equality in some places but it is irritating to be degraded by comparison via status of women. Men and women together need to look into their past and changing status to achieve equality and not follow someone else's dictates.

The report mentions that 'The government increasing development programmes on girls and women were result of Beijing process and pressure from donors and international agencies (p.39)'. Because of this outside impetus, the report has deduced correctly that, 'there has been no significant improvement in the political will to implement change. High-powered, well-funded agencies for women's empowerment are required (p.27)'. The woman asks with tiredness that what can these funded national and international agencies supposed to achieve that cannot be equally well accomplished by a Women's Ministry. I did not enlarge to her that such agencies create reports to suit themselves and their agendas to create a sense of insecurity within the already underprivileged women that they are not capable of their own development, even the government they elect is not capable; they require messiahs from across the seas with native faces to give them a hand and keep giving forever! Unless women are given separate privileges how are they supposed to be compiling in mainstreaming at institutional level?

The report endorses, 'Given the perception of women's roles and the degree of gender discrimination in the workplace, higher education in non-traditional fields is too rarely viewed as sound investment for women (p.112). Such biases make it very difficult for women to break through power structures (many of party office bearers feel that most women do not qualify on merit) (p.148)'. But the woman thinks it is more than 'illiteracy and lack of awareness about their fundamental rights that prevents many women from voting (p.149)'. The Report endorses her views - 'Many factors, including lack of finance and experience, prevent women from participating in election (p.148)'. 'Women in Development is political in nature (p.28)' but is this nature in favour of women and does it mean confrontation with existing system and initiate change?

On violence against women the report declares, 'Although the degree and form may vary according to class, region and culture, gender-specific violence against women occurs across all strata of South Asian society (p.91)'. 'Statistical agencies in South Asia suffer from serious gender blindness in terms of their ability to accurately depict women's contributions to economy. (p.53 Box 4.1)' The woman asks in amazement if there is any place in the world where gender specific violence does not exist? I refrain from even thinking an answer. The Report validates concepts relating to individual rape in this way - 'Rape is viewed first and foremost as an offence against the honour of the male members of the family, and only secondarily as an offence against the dignity of the woman (94). Rape must be treated as crime against humanity by courts (p.172)'. The woman whispers that men rape women to dishonour men in her surroundings too. Unwillingly I acknowledge in South Asian context raping women collectively is done to dishonour religion, castes, class and nations. Rape, sati prathaa, honour killing and all forms of violence against women are part of the patriarchal structure, historical-cultural reality and frustration arising out of economy of globalised world. Another factor raised in the report is that, 'South Asian cultures place a high value on the chastity of girls, and therefore parents are often reluctant to allow their daughters to be taught by male teachers and to enroll in schools without separate facilities for girls (p.106)'. The woman sadly acknowledges that few want to change this as obviously it is convenient for the patriarchal set-up and provides control over women's sexuality and mobility.

The woman thinks that the Report has certain truths very close to life, like, 'The trivialisation of violence against women in South Asian societies is often due to the fact that there is failure to recognise that it infringes the right to life (p.92)', though certain matters do need to be ascertained. 'Polygyny can (emphasis added) have negative effects on familial harmony, on women's economic and social security, and on their decision-making power (p.87)'. The woman has had enough of the report and feels that if reports such as this one still have doubts in this area, what else does one require for improving conditions and attitudes about women?

The more I share the perspective of Women's Studies the more my imaginary woman starts addressing the construction of development paradigms. She is fascinated by how much of South Asia, was similar, and so much of 'education' came under 'economics' and vice versa. I did not have the luxury of using reference, because my imaginary woman is illiterate so has not read any of it! The development condition of women and

men in the underprivileged section, or the lack of it, would be similar inspite of the created differences of countries in South Asia! All women's issues in the report come under the umbrella of development. The spectrums of questions I have raised in her guise are part of the same puzzle that I have tried to put together bit by bit.

Reference

Mahbub Ul Haq Human Development Centre, (2000). Human Development in South Asia 2000: The Gender Question. Karachi: Oxford University Press.