

# Empowering Women and Unpacking Gender Disparities in SAARC Countries: A Critical Analysis

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## Abstract

*This article examines gender equality and progress patterns of South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member countries, focusing on the impact of inclusiveness on sustainable social growth and economic development. The South Asian region ranks the highest in the global gender gap index (GGI), with only 62.3% of the gender gap closed in 2022, according to the World Economic Forum. Thus, there is a dire need to understand and address the gender disparity and marginalization of women. This lack of progress extends the wait to close the gender gap to 197 years due to a broad stagnation in gender gap scores across most regional countries. This study critically examines the existing research, policies, and practices of gender equality in SAARC countries and summarizes significant challenges in the implementation. The findings indicate a slow but growing outlook regarding the increasing attention towards bridging the gender gap. However, achieving gender equality in these economies remains a significant challenge that requires further efforts. This study not only focuses on analyzing theoretical aspects of gender equality in the region but also highlights prospects of gender equality for SAARC. Lastly, the study recommends practical and realistic execution steps for policymakers to implement to foster an inclusive and prosperous social and economic environment in the region.*

**Keywords:** Gender Equality, SAARC, Gender Inclusiveness, Women Empowerment

## Introduction

The establishment of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) occurred in 1985, with the primary objective of fostering economic and social growth within the South Asian area. The organization's member countries encompass Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Women's empowerment is a prominent focal point within the SAARC, as the organization acknowledges the substantial contributions made by women towards the region's progress and the imperative to rectify prevailing gender inequities in South Asia (Mondal, 2020; Islam et al., 2020; Verma et al., 2022).

Women residing in South Asia encounter many obstacles, encompassing but not limited to impoverished conditions, limited access to education and employment prospects, and instances of discrimination (Das & Firdaush, 2022). The obstacles are compounded by cultural and societal norms that restrict women's engagement in professional settings and their involvement in decision-making procedures (Islam et al., 2020). In light of the imperative to tackle these concerns, the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has prioritized

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women's empowerment as a critical component of its endeavors to foster regional development (Rashid & Ratten, 2020).

Women have a crucial role in society and communities' functioning and overall welfare. According to Kavitha (2020), South Asian women often experience marginalization and are relegated to a secondary status. Nevertheless, there has been a growing participation of women in development initiatives, positioning them as pivotal figures within society (World Economic Forum, 2019). In order to promote the empowerment of women and foster societal progress, it is imperative to prioritize providing social, political, and economic opportunities. Women's societal standing and role in many cultures are contingent upon their level of empowerment, which grants individuals the capacity to accomplish objectives (Mishra & Mishra, 2017). Empowerment entails endowing individuals with the capacity to exercise control over public policy and their circumstances. Promoting women's empowerment is associated with advancing social and political development rather than being considered its ultimate goal (Abbas & Muneer, 2019; Prakash et al., 2019). The promotion of women's empowerment facilitates the realization of their full potential.

The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has adopted various initiatives, including policies and implementation programs, to eliminate gender inequality and promote women's empowerment (Rashid & Ratten, 2020). The 2004 SAARC Social Charter stresses gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment. The Charter requires member countries to abolish gender discrimination and violence (SAARC, 2004). SAARC Development Fund (SDF), established in 2005, assists in programs specifically tailored to address gender-related issues and facilitate women's empowerment. Additionally, the organization has implemented a Women's Desk dedicated to advancing gender equality and empowering women. It is achieved through various initiatives, including capacity building, networking, and advocacy efforts (Corrêa et al., 2022; Das & Firdaush, 2022). The SAARC Regional Convention on Women's and Children's Rights was enacted by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in 2002. The principal aim of this declaration is to protect and promote the rights of women and children in the specified geographical area. Notwithstanding these endeavors, more work is required to attain gender parity in South Asia. Practical cooperation among member countries is crucial in addressing the challenges associated with the execution of policies and programs. Addressing the cultural and societal conventions that restrict women's engagement in the workforce and their involvement in decision-making processes is imperative.

### **Significance of the Research**

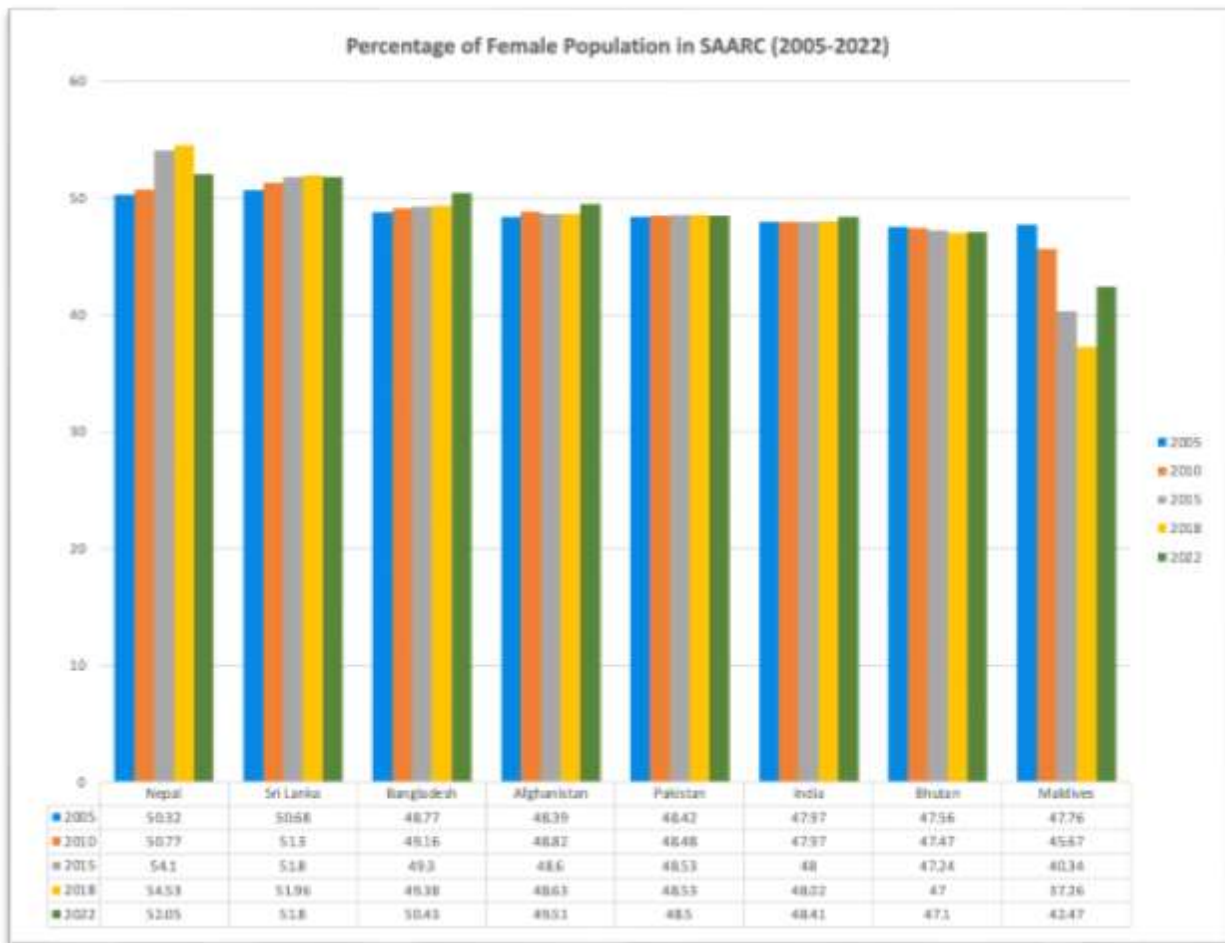
Studies show that SAARC's gender equality commitments are not being implemented nationally. Lack of resources, political will, and inconsistent legal enforcement have hindered gender equality promotion (SAARC Gender Policy, 2015; Sun et al., 2019). This article primarily examines the role of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) in facilitating the advancement of women's empowerment within the area. This study will analyze the policies, programs, and initiatives SAARC has adopted to address gender inequality and promote women's empowerment. Furthermore, this study will assess the advancements made by SAARC in this domain and the persisting obstacles that must be confronted to attain gender parity in South Asia. The recommendations will also encompass the future potential of SAARC in women's empowerment and explore collaborative efforts among member nations to foster sustainable development in the region.

### **Literature Review**

Reviewing existing literature offered valuable and exciting findings regarding SAARC's role in advancing inclusivity. Firstly, the South Asian region holds a pivotal position within the

Asian continent, encompassing approximately 3.3% of the global land surface area and 10% of Asia's landmass (Khalid et al., 2021). Furthermore, it is characterized by a high population density, constituting approximately one-fifth of the global population (Abbas & Muneer, 2019; Mondal, 2020). The designation "South Asia" commonly pertains to a group of eight nations, primarily characterized as developing countries, with Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh occupying central positions within this regional framework. The northern segment of the South Asian region is distinguished by its hilly topography, and the southern section is occupied by the countries of Sri Lanka and Maldives with seaside (Sun et al., 2019). The details of the female population density of the South Asian Region, gathered from World Bank statistics, can be seen in Figure 1 below.

**Figure 1: Percentage of Women in Population for SAARC Countries**



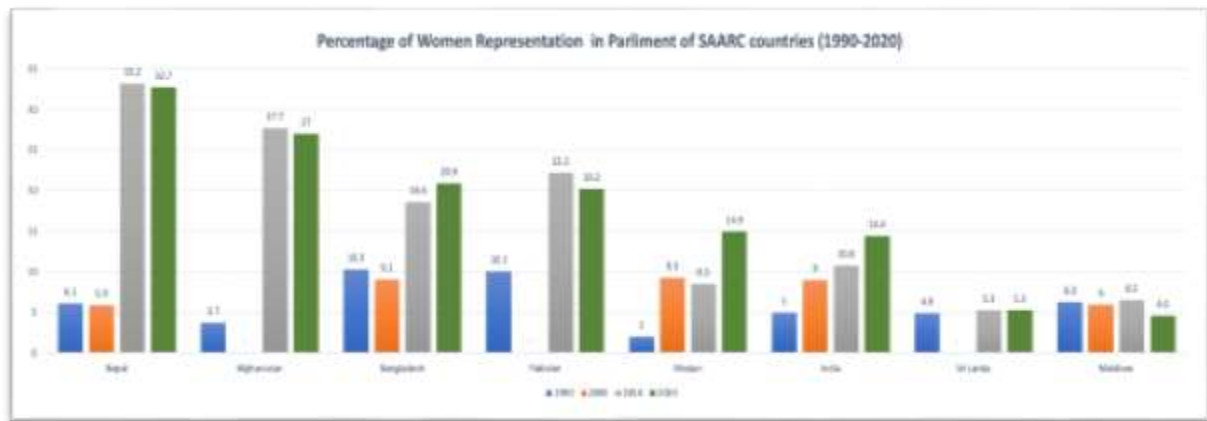
The South Asian region stands out for its exceptional diversity, encompassing many cultures, faiths, and languages (Rashid & Ratten, 2020). The diverse results show differences in lifestyle and ethical values across national borders and within individual countries (SAARC, 2007). A study conducted by Abbas and Muneer (2019) indicates that approximately 45.47% of South Asia consists of women, as reported by the World Bank (2018). The details of the women population in the region are given in Table 1 below. It is imperative to acknowledge that the societal institutions, culture, and social values in South Asia exert significant influence and control over the status and position of women in the region (Das et al., 2022; Rashid & Ratten, 2020). These factors frequently impose limitations on the ability of women to move freely

across society, encompassing several aspects such as economic, social, and political mobility (Khalid et al., 2021). The prevailing patriarchal society in South Asia frequently subjects women to oppression and systematic injustice (Kavitha, 2020; Mondal, 2020). They also face the intergenerational strains of abusive marriages and domestic violence. Additionally, the adversity women face in South Asia includes issues such as economic reliance, lack of autonomy, healthcare concerns, and limited access to education (Audi & Ali, 2018; Das et al., 2022). These social values contributing to these malpractices are deeply ingrained in the social and policy-making levels.

One of the aspects that is vital to understand here is that intra-household gender disparity in South Asia is integral in causing inter and intra-generational inequalities in the region (Mondal, 2020). Similarly, at the policy level, it could be seen in the mortality rates of women, health services, employment opportunities, and literacy (Elten et al., 2017; Ramshi, 2016). This aspect is visible when studied through the lenses of the informal and formal economies (Rashid & Ratten, 2020). Similarly, liberalization and free market doctrines also negatively impact working and job-seeking women (Banu, 2016). In efforts to curb the negative implications of this socio-cultural dynamic on women, SAARC has been very active in holding conventions, seminars, and fact-finding missions. Despite their efforts, the desired goals still need to be realized (Elten et al., 2017; Das & Firdaush, 2022).

Similarly, a report by Gender Global Gap in 2020 portrayed a worrying image of women's position in South Asia (Sharma et al., 2021). For example, South Asia stands 7th in the gender disparity index, just ahead of North Africa and the Middle East. By only achieving 66.1% of mitigating the gender gap, WEF predicts that by the given forecast, it will take around 71 years to close in and achieve the desired gender parity indexes (World Economic Forum, 2020).

South Asia also has around one-fifth of the world's female population (Sharma et al., 2021). Fewer as they might be, but the region has seen several influential women playing a role in the political arena. The summary of women's participation in parliament in the region is given in Figure 2 below. The data shows that countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, and Nepal are being led by Women political figures or have been in the past (Magsi & Wajidi, 2016). However, according to SAARC, women's participation in politics in general numbers is record low (Pisano, 2016). Of 2424 MPs in single chambers of SAARC member states, only 472 MPs are female. World average women participation in SAARC stands at 23 percent. In 1999, the Lok Sabha, which serves as the lower chamber of the Indian Parliament, had a female representation of approximately 17.2 percent. However, this figure experienced a decline to 11 percent by 2014 (Prakash et al., 2019). In Pakistan, the numbers are even more alarming, with only three percent of female representatives elected through unreserved seats (Hque, 2017). It is again a decline in numbers because 12.8 percent were elected in 2008 (Manchanda, 2014). In the South Asian context, only around 6 to 8 percent of women are members and part of South Asian political parties (Pisano, 2016).

**Figure 2: Percentage of Women in Parliament for SAARC countries**

Therefore, considering all these factors, it is undeniable that gender discrimination exists and women are unjustly limited in their assumed positions within the SAARC states. From the given evidence, it is apparent that achieving gender equality and acknowledging the social, economic, and political contributions of women in the region remains a significant challenge (Kavitha, 2020; Mondal, 2020). It is essential to mention here that SAARC is a regional organization that can provide a roadmap towards strengthening the cooperation between its member states and offer policies for human development, but it holds limited power over the implementation of those policies (Elten et al., 2017; Das et al., 2022). The actual enactment of the offered programs is in the hands of member states on their own. Nevertheless, SAARC has consistently promoted the advancement of women's social, economic, and political engagement at all levels in South Asia, and they have achieved a certain degree of success in pursuing their objectives (Kelkar, 2005; Sharma et al., 2021). However, existing research arguments (Rashid & Ratten, 2020; Das & Firdaush, 2022) establish that the prospect of better outcomes is strictly dependent on the member states only when they show strong determination, political will, and rigor towards the implementation of the SAARC's identified agenda and projects the socio-economic and human development prospect of the region will prosper.

## Research Methodology

### Critical Analysis of SAARC's Attempts to Promote Gender Equality

Since its establishment, SAARC has placed significant emphasis on addressing gender equality and addressing women's issues (Hque, 2017; Mondal, 2020). The organization has implemented numerous measures to advance gender equality within the region and actively opposes gender-based discrimination (Khalid et al., 2021). The establishment of a women and development committee was included in SAARC's inaugural regional action plan in 1986. The group's primary objective was to execute, synchronize, and assess programs about gender discrimination and human development. In addition, the committee facilitated government-level discussions to harmonize member nations' policies (Magsi & Wajidi, 2016).

SAARC adopts multiple approaches to address the issues associated with gender diversity and inclusion. The Declaration on the Advancement of Women was formally adopted at the Seventh SAARC Summit in 1991, which recognized the need to attain gender equality and advance women's empowerment in the South Asian region (Kelkar, 2005; Das & Firdaush, 2022). The 2002 SAARC Regional Convention on Women's and Children's Rights aims to protect and advance the rights of women and children in the SAARC region. The conference served as a manifestation of the organization's commitment to the advancement and safeguarding of the rights of women and children within the region (SAARC, 2002). This

initiative facilitates the progress of nations involved in promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women and children (Tariq & Sultan, 2006).

The SAARC Development Fund (SDF) was formed in the year 2007 with the primary objective of providing financial support for women's empowerment projects that specifically target gender-related issues (Sharma et al., 2021). The SDF offers financial assistance to member nations to facilitate the empowerment of women and the mitigation of gender-based violence. The fund has provided financial support for establishing secure locations for women, implemented educational initiatives targeting female entrepreneurs, and facilitated campaigns to raise awareness about gender-based violence (Rashid & Ratten, 2020).

SAARC also proclaimed 1990 the "Year of the Girl Child" (SAARC, 2007). This proclamation raised awareness of women's rights and addressed local issues. The 1991 SAARC meeting formalized gender equality in development. SAARC and UNICEF declared 1991–2000 the "Decade of the Girl Child". This collaborative endeavor stressed women's empowerment and rights. According to Srivastava and Dubey (2017), the groups created a National Plan of Action to advance women's rights in member states.

While SAARC has been actively focused on gender-related issues and presented a development-centric approach during this time, it has also faced criticism, particularly from female groups, for not adequately addressing the gender gap in the region (Elten et al., 2017). The deep-rooted power hierarchies of patriarchal societies and the stereotyping of women with social and political restrictions were still prevalent issues in the region, requiring more robust efforts to change (Tariq & Sultan, 2006; Mondal, 2020). SAARC presented a positive approach towards gender development and made valid efforts to integrate women into economic and political frameworks to reduce poverty. However, it could have been more successful in providing clear policies at the national level to offer equality and an inclusive social structure for women (Tuladhar, 2013; Hque, 2017).

In 2002, SAARC held a convention on preventing and opposing women and child trafficking for prostitution. The resolution presented a policy to prevent trafficking for prostitution. It emphasized the need to strengthen liaisons to prevent heinous crimes that violate fundamental human rights (SAARC, 2002). SAARC continued to prioritize gender issues and, in 2008 introduced a new system called the SAARC Gender Information Base (SGIB). This database collects quantitative and qualitative data on gender issues, women's empowerment, and related areas from the South Asian region (Elten et al., 2017; Rashid & Ratten, 2020). The main focus areas of this system include addressing issues of female violence, particularly domestic violence against women, economic dependence, and female health issues. Recognizing the shortcomings of coordination with government hierarchies in the past, SGIB is designed to work directly with each member country at the ministerial level to be more prompt in addressing these issues (Ramshi, 2016; Bhadra, 2009).

SAARC has undertaken several operational programs to promote women's empowerment and gender equality within the region and other regional institutions. In 2014, (SAARC) and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) entered into a formal agreement known as a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), with the primary objective of advancing the principles of gender equality, gender justice, and the empowerment of women among member nations. The collaboration between UN Women and SAARC aims to foster regional cooperation in addressing several issues, including trafficking, economic empowerment, political leadership, violence against women, and safe movement (Elten et al., 2017). Considering the statistics provided by the World Economic Forum in the Global Gender Index (GGI) for 2022, the slow but rising trend of addressing gender parity issues in the South Asian region can be observed, presented in the table below.

**Table 1: Percentage of Gender Gap closed in 2022 for SAARC countries**

Global Rank (Out of 146 Countries)	Country Name	% of Gender Gap Closed in 2022
71	Bangladesh	71.4 %
96	Nepal	69.2 %
110	Sri Lanka	67.0 %
117	Maldives	64.8 %
126	Bhutan	63.7 %
135	India	62.9 %
145	Pakistan	56.4 %
146	Afghanistan	43.5 %

Thus, with the contemporary political and economic trends shifting into more inclusive and diverse environments worldwide, the South Asian region is also impacted by it. Among the key priorities on the agenda of the SAARC, the significant areas in terms of gender equality in recent times have been women in leadership and decision-making, the economic empowerment of women, violence against women and girls, and women's health issues (Abbas & Muneer, 2019).

### Challenges Faced by SAARC

*Gender equality* is a comprehensive concept that encompasses economic, social, and political empowerment. SAARC encounters numerous obstacles in fostering cooperation and collaboration among its constituent nations. According to statistics issued by the World Economic Forum (WEF) in their Global Gender Gap report for 2022, the gender disparity figures for SAARC countries were the lowest among the other regions. The data is presented in the GGI report (2022) figure below.

**Figure 3: Gender gap closed to date, by region (Global Gender Index 2022, World Economic Forum)**

After analyzing the data and carefully assessing the existing policies, practices, and research, the article summarizes the following significant challenges for SAARC:

1. The SAARC member nations have a well-documented record of political difficulties, mainly between India and Pakistan, which have consistently impeded the organization's capacity to accomplish its objectives.
2. The execution of SAARC's programs and initiatives has encountered challenges stemming from insufficient political will and resources, notwithstanding the agreements and pledges made by member nations.
3. Limited economic integration has been observed within the SAARC since the organization has endeavored to foster regional economic integration. However, trade obstacles and inadequate infrastructure have hindered the advancement in this area.
4. Inadequate involvement is observed among certain member states of SAARC, as they have displayed reluctance to engage with the organization's efforts and have not made optimal use of its available resources.
5. Little cooperation: Despite its status as a regional organization, SAARC has faced criticism for its insufficient cooperation among member states across various areas.
6. SAARC needs more resources, which has hindered the organization's ability to execute its programs and activities successfully. This limitation stems from inadequate financial support and a need for more technical assistance.
7. One of the criticisms of SAARC is its insufficient inclusion of civil society and the business sector in its decision-making procedures, resulting in limited representation.
8. The jurisdiction of SAARC is restricted to regional cooperation, and it needs more authority to engage in the internal affairs of its member states.

The declarations made by the SAARC are voluntary and do not entail any financial responsibilities for the governments of its member states. When formulating and executing programs and activities within SAARC, it is imperative to consider the organization's limited enforcement capabilities and the unlikelihood of significant change. The potential for SAARC and its allies to achieve tremendous success lies in implementing grassroots initiatives to foster civil society development and enhance understanding of women's political participation rather than relying solely on rigid policy measures. A grassroots strategy will likely yield greater efficacy in effecting societal change since it facilitates women's empowerment to engage in political and economic endeavors. Furthermore, SAARC and its constituent nations must effectively implement their policies and commitments inside their territories.

### **Future Prospects of Gender Equality for SAARC**

Although a degree of progress has been achieved, a substantial amount of work still needs to be done to attain significant gender equality within the region. The data analyzed for the last decade presents a slow but rising trend of addressing gender parity issues in the South Asian region, as shown in the figure below.

The following are probable prospects for gender equality within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC).

1. The promotion of enhanced regional collaboration among member nations of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) is of paramount importance. This collaboration assists in enabling best practices, sharing resources, and coordinating actions to address gender disparity.
2. In terms of capacity building, by investing in capacity-building initiatives, women can be equipped with the necessary tools to engage meaningfully in economic, political, and social domains. They encourage member countries to use gender-responsive budgeting to fund gender equality programs and policies. Funds towards women's empowerment can be utilized more effectively.



3. Legislative overhauls can be crucial in advancing gender equality by facilitating the harmonization of legal frameworks and the implementation of gender-responsive policies among member nations.
4. SAARC has the potential to assume the promotion of awareness and advocacy, which is a crucial position in enhancing knowledge and understanding of gender-related matters using campaigns, advocacy efforts, and activities aimed at engaging the public.
5. One strategy for promoting financially empowered women is to facilitate access to credit and financial resources, encourage women's entrepreneurship, and promote labor regulations that are sensitive to gender considerations.
6. Education and skill development for girls and women must be prioritized. High-quality education, especially in rural and neglected areas, can empower women and girls to break the cycle of poverty and participate more in society.
7. Technology and digital inclusion may give women information, education, and economic opportunity. Given the global technological landscape, bridging the digital gender gap can be a vital and efficient step towards empowering women.

### Conclusion & Recommendations

In conclusion, SAARC faces many challenges in promoting cooperation and collaboration among its member nations. Promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in SAARC requires a coordinated effort to address varied issues and capitalize on possibilities. The organization relies on voluntary member-state payments and has limited enforcement capabilities. To sum up, SAARC has undertaken endeavors to advance women's empowerment in the region through the implementation of policies, programs, and initiatives, including the SAARC Declaration on the Advancement of Women, SAARC Regional Convention on Women's and Children's Rights, SAARC Development Fund, and Women's Desk. Nevertheless, a substantial amount of work must be undertaken to confront the cultural and sociological conventions that impede women's ability to move freely within society. Additionally, it is imperative to guarantee the successful execution of the laws and initiatives that have already been put in place.

SAARC and its allies should prioritize grassroots measures to improve civil society and raise awareness of women's political participation to solve these restrictions. This technique stresses the grassroots level and fosters women's political and economic participation, which should help improve society. Member states must effectively implement organizational policies and commitments in their domains. Through regional cooperation, legislation changes, capability enhancement, and awareness initiatives, SAARC member countries can promote gender inclusion and contribute to the sustainable development of the South Asian region. SAARC's ability to support its member nations' efforts to empower women in the region makes it essential. However, the group must recognize its limitations and work within them to help women in the region make significant changes.

Lastly, despite the implementation of many measures, there remains a need for more significant efforts to address gender equality in South Asia. Implementing policies and programs poses significant challenges, necessitating enhanced collaboration among member countries. It is imperative to consider the cultural and societal norms restricting women's participation in the workforce and their decision-making ability.

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