

India's Engagement With South Asia: A Feminist Perspective On Foreign Policy

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INTRODUCTION

India's diplomatic interactions with South Asian nations, viewed through a gendered lens, provide valuable insights into power dynamics, representation, and inclusivity in international relations. South Asia exhibits a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.685 (Forum IAS, 2025) and a Gender Development Index (GDI) value of 0.872, significantly lower than the average for developing countries (United Nations, 2025). This disparity is exacerbated by unequal food distribution, lower wage rates, and the absence of inheritance rights for women.

South Asian countries, including India, continue to grapple with persistent challenges related to women's rights, despite ratifying international conventions like the Convention for Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and adopting National Plans of Action for Women's Development and gender equality. A striking manifestation of gender inequality is the staggering number of "missing" women in South Asia, exceeding 79 million, attributed to familial neglect, sex-selective abortions, cultural practices like dowry-related violence, property disputes leading to murders, "honour killings", acid attacks, and human trafficking (Haq, 2000).

India's commitment to gender equality in foreign policy is evident through its ratification of the CEDAW in 1993, its adoption of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, and its response to the UN call for gender-responsive budgeting in 2005. India has also supported UN peacekeeping efforts, deploying an all-women peacekeeping contingent to Liberia in 2007 and three women police units to UN missions in Africa in 2015. India's adoption of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality in 2015 and its membership in the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2020 further demonstrates its commitments. However, gaps remain in achieving gender equality in foreign service and diplomatic positions. India's ratification of CEDAW is partial, as it has not ratified the "optional protocol" that allows direct access to the CEDAW committee if national redressal systems are ineffective. Moreover, the roles of Indian women in peacekeeping missions have predominantly involved caregiving and support rather than decision-making (Patel, 2023).

The first-ever Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) summit in April 2022 in Lund, Sweden, echoed the sentiment that "Women's Rights are Human Rights", highlighting issues such as gender-based violence, trafficking, and the refugee crisis. The summit underscored the need for a proactive approach to feminist perspectives in international relations, emphasising the deconstruction of hegemonic power

Abstract: *The study aims to uncover the ways through which gender influences and moulds India's engagements within the South Asian context. It explores India's diplomatic engagements, trade pacts, cultural exchanges, and developmental endeavours with South Asian countries. By integrating feminist international relations theory and employing qualitative content analysis of policies, narratives, and power dynamics, the study highlights the impact of gender norms, disparities, and empowerment strategies on India's ties with its neighbouring countries. The research outcomes contribute significantly to a deeper understanding of the complexities within regional diplomacy in South Asia and underscore the importance of incorporating gender perspectives in shaping international relations. Additionally, this research examines how gendered power structures and societal expectations influence decision-making processes and the allocation of resources in India's foreign policy. By focusing on India's role in promoting gender equality in South Asia, the study provides a nuanced view of how gender considerations can enhance or hinder diplomatic efforts. The study proposes policy recommendations directed towards the adoption of a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) framework within the Indian context. The findings advocate for more inclusive and equitable foreign policy frameworks that recognise and address gender-based challenges, ultimately promoting more effective and just international relations in the South Asian region.*

Keywords: Feminist foreign policy, Gender, India, South Asia, women's empowerment.

structures that favour a minority. By adopting an FFP, aligned with national interests such as security in South Asia, prosperity, and sustainable development, India has the potential to withstand global upheavals while remaining steadfast in its commitment to feminist values (Patel, 2023).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Researchers have underscored India's notably low female labour force participation rate globally, standing at 35 per cent, with substantial potential for growth if women had equitable access to employment opportunities. Moreover, women's representation in research and scientific roles remains scant, with only 15 per cent occupying such positions (Suresh, 2015). However, there are promising signs of progress, with the gender gap narrowing in senior positions within countries like India and Sri Lanka.

While previous studies have focused on domestic imperatives, bilateral relations, and liberal peacebuilding, the objective of this study is to explore how gender dynamics influence diplomatic choices, trade affiliations, and regional collaboration, adding a new dimension to India's position in South Asia.

The endeavour for women's empowerment is crucial for economic and societal advancement, to achieve gender equality by 2030. Bag and Barman (2022) have emphasised women's pivotal roles in healthcare, education, workforce participation, and socioeconomic empowerment in South Asian countries like India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan. This study highlights a complex scenario with challenges like low female labour force participation, alongside progress in reducing gender gaps in senior roles and efforts promoting women's empowerment and gender equality.

METHODOLOGY

In terms of the methodology, the study applies qualitative analysis of diplomatic records, trade agreements, and policy statements with a gender-centric approach. This approach was chosen to analyse gendered dimensions and lived experiences that quantitative methods may overlook. The study applies conceptual analysis, utilising data gathered from secondary sources, including books, journals, articles, working papers and internet sites.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF GENDER IN DIPLOMACY

Gender studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines gender identity and representation, focusing on power imbalances and socially constructed differences between men and women. It views gender as a social construct influenced by cultural, racial, economic and political contexts, which shape societal norms and institutional practices. Historically, the exclusion of women from institutional processes has constrained their ability to influence operations and policy-making.

This research is based on the principles of Feminist International Relations Theory (FIRT), which critically examines global power structures shaped by patriarchy, racism, nationalism, imperialism, and militarism, leading to systemic vulnerabilities and marginalisation. It emphasises the promotion of gender equality and women's rights in diplomatic interactions, particularly in post-colonial contexts. FIRT extends its analysis beyond women's issues, exploring gender power relations that influence global politics. By centering women in International Relations (IR), feminist theories challenge traditional IR paradigms and advocate for

a comprehensive gender-inclusive perspective. FIRT critiques dominant IR frameworks that prioritise state actors, highlighting the importance of addressing women's experiences and viewpoints (Nanda, n.d.).

A feminist foreign policy framework critically challenges dominant global power dynamics characterised by patriarchy, racism, cultural nationalism, imperialism, and militarism, contributing to the vulnerability of marginalised communities. Emphasising gender equality and women's rights, particularly in post-colonial contexts, becomes central to a nation's diplomatic efforts. Incorporating intersectionality into feminism ensures the movement's inclusivity, allowing the voices of women from diverse racial, economic, religious, identity, and orientation backgrounds to be heard. Intersectional feminism recognises the unique ways in which each woman experiences discrimination (Tripathi, 2023).

Central to FFP is the belief that gender equality ensures that women and girls enjoy fundamental human rights, which the global community must uphold as a prerequisite to achieving broader foreign policy goals of peacebuilding, security, and sustainable development (Patel, 2023). Feminist foreign policy, as practiced by nations such as Canada, France and Mexico, centers on incorporating a gender perspective in foreign policy to advance gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment in global affairs. Embracing these principles could bolster India's diplomatic endeavours in South Asia by emphasising gender equality, representation, and resource allocation in interactions with neighboring nations and global allies.

Gendered power dynamics influence international relations, shaping diplomatic decisions and policies while reflecting deep-rooted gender imbalances. Addressing these dynamics is crucial for establishing inclusive global frameworks that promote gender equality in diplomacy. In India, although women's movements have a long history, the term "feminism" is relatively modern, encompassing various movements and theories aimed at achieving gender equality. A feminist perspective in international relations (IR) highlights the importance of transnational solidarity and feminist networks in addressing shared challenges and promoting social justice. Unified, cross-border collaboration remains essential for advancing gender equality globally.

ANALYSIS OF GENDER DYNAMICS IN SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRIES

The Global Gender Gap Report 2023 showed South Asia's gender parity at 63.4 per cent the second-lowest among eight surveyed regions. This was up by 1.1 per cent from the previous report, driven by India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. India improved to 64.3 per cent, ranking 127th out of 146 countries, with educational parity but 36.7 per cent economic participation. Pakistan reached 57.5 per cent parity, ranking 142nd, its best since 2006. Top performers were Bangladesh, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka; lagging were Pakistan, Iran, and Afghanistan. No country had full parity. The top nine countries closed 80 per cent of the gap, with Iceland leading for 14 years. The report highlighted South Asia's progress and challenges, emphasising the need for global gender equality efforts (The Hindu, 2023). India's overall score did improve in 2023 by 1.4 percentage points and eight positions compared to the 2022 report; however, the 2024 Global Gender Gap Index reveals that India has regressed two positions to occupy the 129th spot among 146 countries assessed (Baiju, 2024).

Indian society's conservative gender roles are entrenched in traditional family structures, portraying men as primary providers and women as caregivers. This is reflected in the significant preference for men in job opportunities during scarcity. Gender discrimination persists in social institutions across South Asia due to rigid gender roles, division of labour, and societal norms, leading to unequal outcomes for girls and boys in countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan. In South Asia, gender disparities in labour force participation and income pose significant challenges. The region's gender pay gap, standing at 33 per cent, exceeds the global average, especially impacting urban women who earn considerably less than men. Additionally, women shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid caregiving responsibilities, limiting their economic prospects (UN Women, 2015).

Climate change has worsened the food security crisis, affecting children, the elderly, and pregnant women due to malnutrition. The climatic hazards, driven by migration, inequality, and urbanisation, are increasing globally. Women face heightened vulnerabilities, with climate hazards linked to increased violence against women and girls, and gendered experiences in armed conflicts. Overcrowded, unsafe shelters due to climate-induced displacement lead to increased violence and limited reproductive health services (Patel, 2023).

Disasters exacerbate sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), with social norms perpetuating gender inequality by limiting women's access to economic opportunities, decision-making, and assets. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened these disparities, underscoring the need to address social norms' impact on women's empowerment. In South Asia, entrenched disparities and barriers hinder gender parity, requiring socio-economic plans focused on violence reduction and gender equality. Promoting female participation in green jobs through awareness, skilling, and support for women-led Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), is vital. Establishing a gender-responsive international development cooperation agency would enhance India's climate diplomacy efforts (Patel, 2023).

Over 75 years, South Asian Feminist Foreign Policy (SAFFP) has advanced transnational solidarity to combat SGBV, promote education, achieve women's economic emancipation, and enhance their leadership in politics and decision-making. Women's inclusion in peace negotiations has been a priority. Since the UN International Women's Decade (1975-1985), South Asian feminists have pushed for diplomatic practices ensuring gender equality and women's rights. SAFFP has also contributed to grassroots peacebuilding in conflict-affected nations like Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, and Myanmar (Patel, 2023).

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The study offers crucial recommendations for India's interaction with South Asian nations in light of the changing dynamics of global diplomacy and the need for inclusive gender strategies. India should prioritise increasing women's presence in diplomatic roles, particularly in South Asian engagements, by setting benchmarks for their inclusion in delegations and leadership positions. Essential measures include training programs, mentorship initiatives, and gender-inclusive policies within the Ministry of External Affairs to enhance women diplomats' skills and ensure equal opportunities in decision-making roles. It is crucial to

acknowledge and address the intersecting forms of discrimination that women face, including those based on caste, religion, ethnicity, and economic status, to formulate policies that promote social inclusion and equality for all women in South Asia.

Promotion of women-led businesses and start-ups in South Asia through financial support, mentorship, and networking opportunities, is needed. It is essential to facilitate cross-border collaboration among female entrepreneurs to foster creativity and regional economic growth. Enhance women's involvement in regional economic activities, trade agreements, and commercial forums. It is crucial to address the gender-specific impacts of climate change by integrating women's perspectives into regional environmental policies. Due support must be provided to initiatives and collaborations in South Asian countries to empower women in climate resilience and sustainable development efforts. Gender-responsive laws and institutions, more financing for female-led projects, capacity building, addressing climate vulnerabilities that affect marginalised communities like Dalits and Adivasis through inclusive representation and climate justice advocacy are a few reforms that should be implemented (Sharma et al., 2024b).

Gender perspectives must be incorporated into security frameworks and peacebuilding activities to improve India's foreign and security policy and ensure that the particular needs of women living in conflict-affected areas are met. It is important to promote a gender-sensitive approach to conflict resolution that includes safeguards for women's rights, their meaningful involvement in peace negotiations, and their ability to stop gender-based violence (Sharma et al., 2024a). To ensure that women are included in the decision-making process for security, peace, and conflict resolution policies, it is imperative to fortify regional cooperation with South Asian countries.

India should formulate an official FFP to direct its diplomatic endeavours, emphasising inclusivity, women's rights, and gender equality. To ensure that India's global stance advances a more just and equitable world, this strategy should take gender perspectives into account in all spheres of foreign relations, including peacebuilding, economic cooperation, and humanitarian assistance (Sharma et al., 2024a). Implementing these policy recommendations would make India a prominent advocate for gender equality, women's empowerment, and inclusive regional cooperation in South Asia, boosting India's diplomatic influence and contributing to sustainable development and stability in the region.

INDIA'S ROLE IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY IN SOUTH ASIA

The 2023 Global Gender Gap Report projected that South Asia requires 149 years to address gender disparities, especially in labour force participation, leadership roles, and digital inclusion. The region has over 300 million people in poverty, hindering gender parity. South Asia faces gender equality challenges, with women's labour force participation at 25.6 per cent compared to men's at 74.7 per cent. This disparity, seen in India and neighbouring countries, highlights the need for initiatives to enhance women's economic opportunities (International Finance Corporation, n.d.). Social norms in South Asia, notably in India, heavily impact gender equality by restricting women's economic access, assets, and decision-making power. India's efforts to challenge these norms are crucial for enhancing women's

rights and opportunities across the region.

Global initiatives like the “Women of the World Festival” and “Creating Heroines” provide platforms for women and girls to share their stories, challenge gender norms, and empower them for societal and economic contributions. These programs celebrate women’s achievements, fostering a sense of value and contribution. India acknowledges the economic potential of heritage in fostering empowerment and social inclusion. At the domestic level, India has launched initiatives like *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao*, Stand-Up India, and *Mahila E-Haat* to foster socio-economic growth among women and other marginalised sections of the society. India supports Nepal in women-focused healthcare and education by contributing to the construction of a gynecological hospital in Bhadrapur, maternity hospitals in Sriaaha and Sagarmatha, and by funding schools for girls in Biratnagar and Kanchanpur, along with vocational training for women. The economic benefits for gender equality in South Asia are strong, with estimated economic gains in the billions of dollars for countries like India and Bangladesh. India’s efforts to narrow gender gaps in economic participation, leadership roles, and access to financial resources are crucial for driving regional economic growth and promoting gender equality (International Finance Corporation, n.d.).

Established in 1985, the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has provided a platform for feminists from its seven member countries—Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives, India, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan—to exchange ideas, support human rights defenders, combat misogynistic legislation, amplify the women’s movement’s voices, and advocate for gender-just family laws. During the SAARC Decade for Girls (1990–2000), numerous opportunities for conferences, seminars, and exposure trips were provided to girls from member countries, many of whom are now in their forties and continue to contribute to the feminist movement. India plays a pivotal role in promoting women’s empowerment within SAARC through policies like the “SAARC Gender Policy” and the “Gender-Responsive Budgeting”. Initiatives like the “SAARC Gender Information Base” and the “SAARC Gender Equality Award” further highlight India’s commitment to advancing gender inclusivity in the region.

The pursuit of feminist foreign policy underscores that peace cannot be achieved without economic, social, environmental, gender, and distributive justice. FFP aims to foster transnational solidarity against gender-based violence, trafficking, and the mistreatment of migrants and political refugees, while promoting education and economic empowerment for women and girls, endorsing women’s leadership, and involving women in peace negotiations. India has implemented measures to enhance women’s roles in key diplomatic decisions to integrate gender perspectives into foreign policy, fostering inclusive development and empowerment. Adopting an FFP in South Asia, including India, holds the potential to advance gender equality, peace, and global diplomacy by expanding security horizons, empowering women in leadership, and prioritising human security and gender concerns (Khullar, 2021).

SAFFP strives for gender parity in diplomacy by increasing women’s representation in ambassadorial roles. South Asian feminists advocate for FFP to adopt an intersectional lens, addressing post-colonial socio-cultural realities, hierarchical international relations, local political

dynamics, and diverse lived experiences. Over the past 45 years, they have united to address the vulnerabilities of marginalised groups, including ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities, oppressed castes, and nationalities, often excluded from development interventions. Their efforts have influenced international development aid to become gender-responsive, prioritising education, healthcare, employment, decision-making power, and addressing gender-based violence. They have also participated in UN Women-led capacity-building workshops on gender-responsive participatory budgeting (Patel, 2023).

SAFFP calls on international relations experts to adopt an intersectional gendered perspective to better understand gender-differentiated impacts and responses. It challenges the global division of labour relegating women to low-paid jobs and combats gender stereotypes portraying men as protectors and women as victims. India’s foreign policy reflects a commitment to addressing gender disparities through diplomatic representation, advocacy for FFP, and economic empowerment initiatives. Despite challenges, India has advanced women’s empowerment and gender equality, fostering inclusive growth, peace, and sustainable development in South Asia.

CONCLUSION

India’s engagement with South Asian nations from a gendered perspective necessitates a comprehensive regional cooperation strategy. Addressing gender disparities and challenges faced by women across South Asia is crucial for India’s future interactions and regional integration. India needs gender-aware policies and actions in its South Asian engagements, ensuring trade agreements and regional integration benefit women and reduce gender imbalance to prevent women from bearing disproportionate burdens in economic projects and infrastructure development.

India’s inclusion in the CSWin 2020, its G20 presidency in 2022, and its commitments to gender equality have intensified dialogue about its potential to advance FFP. The terminology of “gender equality”, “gender-responsive”, and “gender-sensitive” approaches in official discourses highlights efforts to incorporate FFP in India’s international relations. Post-pandemic, several think tanks and diplomatic institutions have initiated roundtables with consulates from countries like Sweden, France, Mexico, Germany, and Canada to explore how adopting an FFP framework in India can contribute to global understanding and support gender transformative nation-building (Patel, 2023).

Fostering women’s economic empowerment, ensuring financial inclusion, addressing gender-based violence, providing gender-responsive infrastructure, and supporting women entrepreneurs are crucial steps for holistic growth and progress. India’s engagement with South Asian nations should prioritise integrating gender perspectives into trade agreements, policies, and initiatives to create fair opportunities for women and enhance their participation in economic activities. In conclusion, there is a need for deeper exploration and action towards gender-inclusive regional collaboration in India’s forthcoming engagements with South Asian nations. By advocating for women’s rights and addressing gender disparities, India can contribute to comprehensive and sustainable development in the region.

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