

# Exploring Human, Gender, Poverty, Prosperity and Social Progress Indicators in SAARC Countries

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*"The real wealth of a nation is its people and the purpose of development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. This simple but powerful truth is too often forgotten in the pursuit of material and financial wealth."*

The late Dr. Mahbub ul Haq, a Pakistani economist who inaugurated the Human Development Reports for the United Nations Development Programme, wrote these lines in the first of those reports published in 1990. His words highlight the ongoing challenges Pakistan has faced since its creation, which continue even during times of economic growth. Dr. Haq believed that development economics needs a new approach to address people's most urgent problems.

To address these deep-rooted issues, Pakistan must prioritize the enhancement of human and social capital, which includes education, healthcare and skill development, as well as fostering networks, cooperation and mutual trust within communities. Without such investments, the pursuit of sustainable economic growth will remain out of reach. Achieving upper-middle-income status by 2047 will depend on Pakistan's ability to transform its human capital through improved education and healthcare services while simultaneously strengthening social capital, especially in rural areas. Promoting cooperation and trust within communities is essential for fostering inclusive development

## The State of Human Capital in Pakistan

According to the World Bank's Human Capital Review, Pakistan's Human Development Index (HDI) stands at a mere 0.540, ranking 164th, indicating low human development, an unstable government, widespread poverty, lack of access to healthcare and poor education. This figure also places Pakistan below the South Asian average of 0.641, Sri Lanka's 0.78, the Maldives' 0.762, Bhutan's 0.681, Bangladesh's 0.67, India's 0.644, and Nepal's 0.601. Another facet of Pakistan's human development crisis is due to persistent social, economic and political pressures, including macroeconomic challenges along with the lingering effects of the floods in 2022. Key statistics highlight the crisis:

- Over 25.3 million (60%) children aged 5 to 16 are out of school.
- High child malnutrition affects health and productivity.
- Female labor force participation is low, limiting economic contributions.
- Without investment in human capital, Pakistan's growth potential is constrained.

## Human Development Index (HDI)

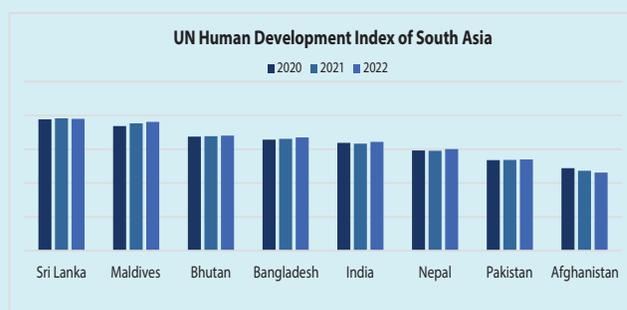
The data for Pakistan's Human Development Index (HDI) from 2020 to 2022 reveals minimal progress, with the HDI rising from 0.536 in 2020 to 0.540 in 2022 [see Table 1]. This stagnation highlights several systemic challenges that have hampered the country's human capital development.

Compared to other South Asian countries, Pakistan's performance remains subpar, trailing behind nations like India (0.644), Bangladesh (0.670), and even Bhutan (0.681), all of which have demonstrated more consistent improvements.

**Table-1: UN Human Development Index-Value of South Asia**

UN Human Development Index (HDI)			
	2020	2021	2022
Sri Lanka	0.777	0.783	0.78
Maldives	0.737	0.753	0.762
Bhutan	0.675	0.677	0.681
Bangladesh	0.657	0.662	0.67
India	0.638	0.633	0.644
Nepal	0.593	0.591	0.601
Pakistan	0.536	0.537	0.54
Afghanistan	0.488	0.473	0.462

[Source: Human Development Reports]



**Figure 1: Snapshot of UN Human Development Index of South Asia from 2020-2022**

## Gender Development Index (GDI)

The Gender Development Index (GDI) data from 2020 to 2022 reveals significant disparities in gender equality across South Asia [see Table 2]. Pakistan shows only marginal improvement, increasing from 0.831 to 0.834, indicating persistent barriers in education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. In contrast, India improved from 0.838 to 0.852, despite ongoing challenges like gender-based violence. Sri Lanka experienced a decline from 0.960 to 0.947, likely due to recent political and economic crises affecting women's access to services. Bangladesh steadily rose from 0.907 to 0.914, benefiting from initiatives in girls' education and women's workforce participation.

**Table-2: Gender Development Index of South Asia**

Gender Development Index (GDI)			
	2020	2021	2022
Bhutan	0.98	0.983	0.97
Maldives	0.973	0.975	0.976
Sri Lanka	0.96	0.943	0.947
Bangladesh	0.907	0.908	0.914
Nepal	0.884	0.884	0.885
India	0.838	0.843	0.852
Pakistan	0.831	0.834	0.834
Afghanistan	0.695	0.717	0.622

[Source: Human Development Reports]


**Figure 2: Snapshot of Gender Development Index of South Asia from 2020-2022**

Afghanistan faces a severe drop in its GDI, falling from 0.695 to 0.622, largely due to restrictive policies by the Taliban. Meanwhile, Nepal remains stable at 0.884, Bhutan slightly declines from 0.980 to 0.970, and the Maldives shows consistent improvement from 0.973 to 0.976. To enhance its GDI, Pakistan should focus on educational reforms to expand access to quality education for girls, improve healthcare access, increase female labor force participation through skill development, strengthen protections against gender-based violence, and promote public awareness to challenge harmful norms. Implementing these strategies can help Pakistan accelerate gender development and improve its GDI ranking.

### Gender Inequality Index (GII)

The Gender Inequality Index (GII) data from 2020 to 2022 [see Table 3] highlights a slight improvement for Pakistan, with its GII decreasing from 0.527 to 0.522. While this indicates progress, Pakistan still grapples with substantial gender disparities, particularly in education, health and economic opportunities for women. Compared to its regional counterparts, Pakistan has a higher GII than countries like Sri Lanka (0.376) and the Maldives (0.328), signifying a pressing need for more effective gender equity initiatives. In contrast, India has shown more significant improvement, reducing its GII from 0.453 to 0.437. To truly elevate women's status and achieve sustainable development, Pakistan must prioritize targeted interventions that empower women in education, health and the workforce, addressing these inequalities head-on to foster a more equitable society.

**Table-3: Gender Inequality Index of South Asia**

Gender Inequality Index (GII)			
	2020	2021	2022
Afghanistan	0.674	0.653	0.665
Pakistan	0.527	0.524	0.522
Bangladesh	0.502	0.5	0.498
Nepal	0.497	0.496	0.495
India	0.453	0.45	0.437
Sri Lanka	0.37	0.377	0.376
Maldives	0.338	0.333	0.328
Bhutan	0.326	0.318	0.334

[Source: Human Development Reports]


**Figure 3: Snapshot of Gender Inequality Index in South Asia from 2020-2022**

### Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI)

As per Table 4, Pakistan's Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) score of 99.89% reveals a stark reality: deeply ingrained gender biases continue to shape societal attitudes, limiting opportunities for women and reinforcing traditional roles. This high score underscores the significant challenges women face, as cultural norms still favor inequality despite progress in policy and advocacy for gender rights. While countries like India (99.22%) and Bangladesh (99.37%) show similarly high levels of bias, Pakistan stands out, signaling an urgent need for change. To truly empower women, we must go beyond policy reforms and work towards shifting societal mindsets that hinder real equality.

**Table-4: Gender Social Norms Index of South Asia**

Gender Social Norms Index-GSNI	
	GSNI Index
Pakistan (2017-2022)	99.89%
India (2010-2014)	99.22%
Bangladesh (2017-2022)	99.37%
Maldives (2017-2022)	94.69%

\* Afghanistan, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka are excluded from the analysis due to the unavailability of relevant data.

Source: UNDP

### Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)

The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) captures a broader view of poverty by measuring various deprivations beyond income, such as education, healthcare and living standards. Pakistan's MPI value of 0.198, indicating substantial poverty levels compared to its South Asian counterparts. This figure points to widespread deprivations in health, education and living standards, especially in rural areas, where poverty is more concentrated. Despite various

poverty alleviation programs, Pakistan lags behind regional neighbors like India (0.069) and Bangladesh (0.104), reflecting the need for more targeted and effective policies to address its socioeconomic inequalities. Afghanistan's extremely high MPI (0.360) exacerbates regional challenges, while Sri Lanka (0.011), Bhutan (0.039), and Maldives (0.003) showcase near elimination of multidimensional poverty. Pakistan must focus on structural reforms, improved governance, and social protection programs to catch up with these countries and reduce poverty sustainably. The stark differences in MPI values between Pakistan and its neighbors underscore the urgency for stronger interventions and long-term strategies to uplift millions still living in multidimensional poverty.

**Table-5: Multidimensional Poverty Index of South Asia**

Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI)	
	MPI Value
Pakistan (2017-2018)	0.198
India (2019-2021)	0.069
Sri Lanka (2016)	0.011
Bangladesh (2019)	0.104
Afghanistan (2022-2023)	0.360
Nepal (2022)	0.085
Maldives (2016-2017)	0.003
Bhutan (2022)	0.039

[Source: UNDP]

### Planetary Pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI)

The Planetary Pressures-Adjusted Human Development Index (PHDI) highlights a country's efforts to balance human development with environmental sustainability. Pakistan's PHDI showed minimal improvement, rising slightly from 0.525 in 2020 to 0.528 in 2022, lagging behind regional peers like India (0.625) and Bangladesh (0.656).

As evident from Table 6, Sri Lanka leads the region with a consistent score above 0.76, reflecting strong environmental management. In contrast, Afghanistan's PHDI has declined, while Nepal and Bhutan show fluctuating progress. Pakistan's stagnant performance emphasizes the need for stronger policies to address environmental challenges and improve sustainable development.

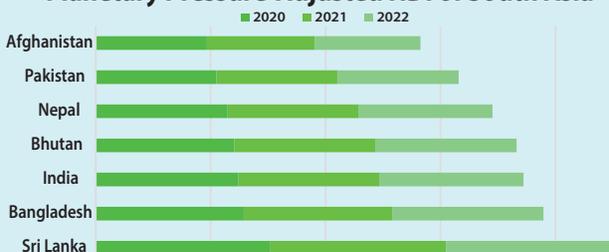
**Table-6: Planetary Pressure-Adjusted HDI of South Asia**

Planetary Pressures-adjusted HDI (PHDI)			
	2020	2021	2022
Sri Lanka	0.76	0.764	0.762
Bangladesh	0.644	0.648	0.656
India	0.621	0.615	0.625
Bhutan	0.603	0.613	0.615
Nepal	0.574	0.571	0.581
Pakistan	0.525	0.526	0.528
Afghanistan	0.484	0.47	0.459

\* Maldives has been excluded from the analysis due to the unavailability of relevant data.

[Source: UNDP]

### Planetary Pressure-Adjusted HDI of South Asia



**Figure 4: Snapshot of Planetary Pressure-Adjusted HDI of South Asia from 2020-2022**

### Social Progress Index (SPI)

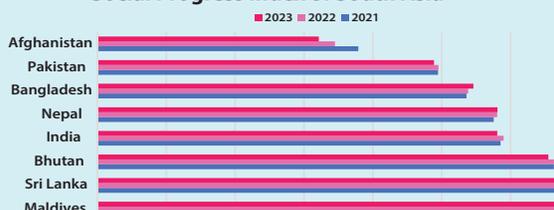
The Social Progress Index (SPI) is a comprehensive measure of a country's social well-being, focusing on factors such as healthcare, education, personal safety and environmental quality, rather than economic indicators like GDP. It assesses basic human needs, foundations of well-being and opportunities for individuals to gauge a country's overall development. According to Table 7, In 2023, Pakistan's SPI stood at 48.87, marking a decline from 49.52 in 2022 and 49.47 in 2021. This downward trend underscores a lack of substantial progress in key areas like access to basic needs, healthcare, education and opportunities for its citizens. In contrast, other South Asian countries such as Bangladesh (54.6) and Nepal (58.1) have managed to improve their scores during the same period, while Pakistan continues to fall behind. Countries like the Maldives (67.75), Sri Lanka (66.67), and Bhutan (65.49) maintain significantly higher scores, reflecting better social development outcomes. Pakistan's failure to improve its SPI over the years highlights systemic issues in social infrastructure, governance and resource allocation, which have hindered the country's ability to address critical social needs. This persistent underperformance calls for urgent policy interventions and investment in social sectors to reverse the decline and ensure that Pakistan can keep pace with regional development.

**Table-7: Social Progress Index of South Asia**

Social Progress Index (SPI)			
	2021	2022	2023
Maldives	67.93	67.94	67.75
Sri Lanka	67.8	67.65	66.67
Bhutan	66.29	66.52	65.49
India	58.54	58.98	58.06
Nepal	57.55	58.05	58.1
Bangladesh	53.6	53.84	54.6
Pakistan	49.47	49.52	48.87
Afghanistan	37.88	34.49	32.15

[Source: Social Progress Imperative]

### Social Progress Index of South Asia



**Figure 5: Snapshot of Social Progress Index in South Asia from 2021-2023**

## Legatum Prosperity Index

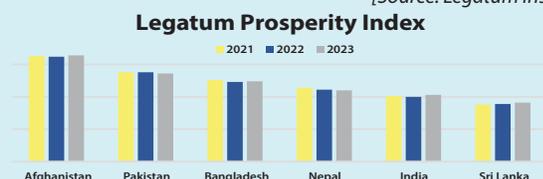
The Legatum Prosperity Index assesses nations' prosperity based on factors such as economic quality, governance, education, health and social capital. According to Table 8, Pakistan, ranked 136 in 2023, shows slight improvement from 138 (2021-2022) but remains behind regional peers. This reflects the country's ongoing challenges in developing human and social capital. Investments in education, healthcare and governance are key to improving prosperity. In contrast, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh show steadier progress, while Afghanistan, ranked 164, highlights the severe impact of instability. For Pakistan to rise in the index, a stronger focus on social services and community engagement is crucial.

**Table-8: Legatum Prosperity Index of South Asia**

Legatum Prosperity Index			
	2021	2022	2023
Afghanistan	163	162	164
Pakistan	138	138	136
Bangladesh	126	123	124
Nepal	114	111	110
India	101	100	103
Sri Lanka	88	89	91

\* Bhutan and Maldives are excluded from the analysis due to the unavailability of relevant data.

[Source: Legatum Institute]



**Figure 6: Snapshot of Legatum Prosperity Index of South Asia from 2021-2023**

## Some Recommendations for Human and Social Development in Pakistan

### Digital Learning Initiatives

- **Mobile Units** - Set up mobile schools with digital tools in remote areas to improve education access and offer vocational training. This empowers individuals and fosters community collaboration.
- **AI Learning** - Use AI to create personalized learning plans for students. This enhances outcomes, promotes lifelong learning, and boosts community engagement.

### Sustainable Livelihood Programs

- **Green Skills** - Train individuals in sustainable practices like organic farming and renewable energy. Provide microloans for eco-friendly businesses to create jobs and support the environment.
- **Impact Bonds** - Use social impact bonds to fund employment programs for marginalized communities. Investors can back training initiatives and earn returns based on successful job placements.

### Inclusive Gender Policies

- **Gender-Responsive Procurement** - Require that a percentage of government contracts be awarded to women-led businesses. This initiative will enhance female entrepreneurship, create job opportunities and

stimulate economic growth by ensuring women are active participants in the market.

- **Support Workforce Participation** - Introduce policies that offer childcare support and flexible work arrangements. This will help women balance work and family responsibilities, encouraging greater participation in the workforce and contributing to a more inclusive economy.

### Holistic Social Welfare Programs

- **Universal Basic Services** - Ensure access to healthcare, education and housing for all. This helps individuals meet their basic needs and promotes social equity.
- **Community Resilience Funds** - Establish community-managed funds to support local needs during crises. This strengthens community ties and fosters cooperation.

### Data-Driven Governance

- **Real-Time Data Collection** - Implement a system for citizens to report on public services. This promotes transparency and accountability, strengthening trust in government and encouraging civic engagement.
- **Citizen Advisory Panels** - Create diverse panels for citizens to provide feedback on policies. This inclusive approach ensures that policies meet public needs and enhances community involvement in governance.

### Cultural and Arts Engagement

- **Local Arts and Culture Initiatives** - Invest in community arts programs to strengthen identity and encourage participation. Events like arts festivals and public art projects can bridge social divides and enhance social cohesion.
- **Creative Learning Environments** - Incorporate arts, music and theater into school curriculums for a holistic education. This approach fosters creativity, critical thinking and emotional intelligence, while reinforcing social bonds through shared cultural experiences.

### Cross-Generational Learning Initiatives

- **Intergenerational Mentorship** - Connect younger individuals with older generations to share valuable skills and knowledge, such as traditional crafts and entrepreneurship. This strengthens social capital by fostering collaboration and preserving cultural heritage.
- **Family Learning Centers** - Create family learning centers that promote joint learning experiences. These centers enhance educational engagement across generations and support continuous learning and intergenerational cooperation.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, these initiatives provide a clear plan for improving education access, supporting sustainable livelihoods, and fostering inclusivity in communities. By using digital learning tools, promoting eco-friendly practices and implementing gender-responsive policies, this would empower individuals and strengthen community ties. Data-driven governance and cultural engagement encourage transparency and social connection, while cross-generational learning helps share valuable knowledge. Together, these efforts can help to create a more equitable and resilient society where everyone can thrive and contribute to a sustainable future.