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**WOMEN’S STATUS AND THE CHANGING NATURE OF
RURAL LIVELIHOODS IN ASIA**

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Half the Sky?

The situation of women in Asia is as diverse as its many cultures, making it difficult to generalize across the continent. In an attempt to capture the nature of the gender gap across countries and regions, the Gender Gap Index 2006 examines the gap between men and women in 115 countries, representing over 5 billion of the world's population, in four fundamental categories: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment (Hausman, Tyson, and Zahidi 2007). While one Asian country (the Philippines) is among the top 10 countries in terms of closing the gender gap, the region as a whole fares poorly with respect to gender equality. Out of 8 regions, Asia ranks third from the bottom overall, with the lowest performance on the health and survival subindex, second to the lowest in the economic opportunity and participation subindex, and third from the lowest in the educational attainment subindex. The low rankings in Asia are driven by large, highly populated nations. China ranks 114 out of the 115 countries on the Health and Survival Subindex, largely because of a disproportionate sex ratio at birth, which contributes to China's well-documented "missing women" phenomenon, while Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan exhibit large disparities between men and women in all four areas of the Index (Hausman et al. 2007: 17). Women may be holding up "half the sky," but get less than their equal share of the household's—and society's--resources.

Why does closing the gender gap in Asia matter for hunger and malnutrition? Evidence worldwide has shown that equalizing resources controlled by women and men—giving women more control over resources, and improving women's status, especially in Asia—is important in reducing hunger and malnutrition and increasing investments in the next generation (see the review in Quisumbing 2003). Countries which have most successfully promoted equal education for men and women—East Asia, Southeast Asia, and Latin America—have also experienced the most economic and social progress in the past decades (Schultz 2002). In contrast, countries that have lagged behind in growth—South and West Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa—have lagged in relative investments in women's schooling.

The Asian Enigma

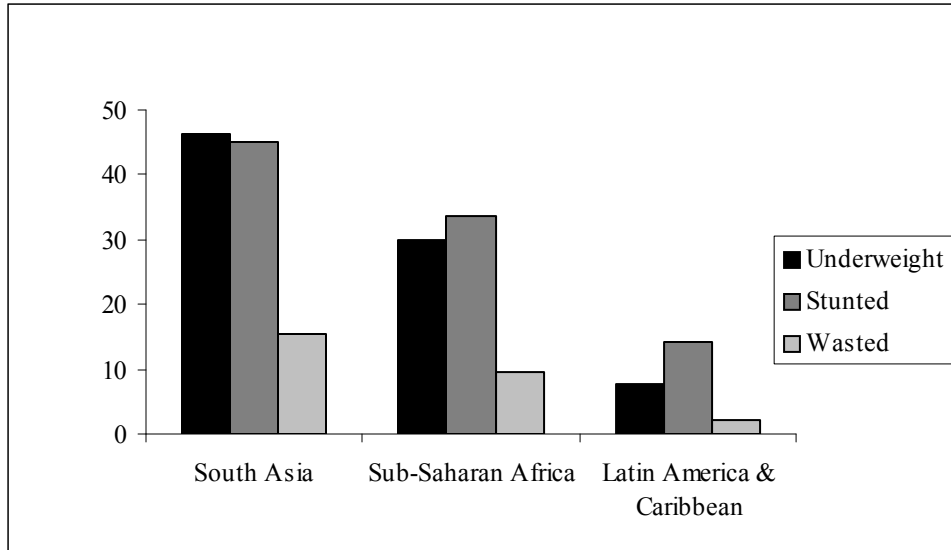
A study by Lisa Smith and coauthors (2003) investigated the links between women's status and child nutrition in developing countries using data on 117,242 children under three years old from 36 developing countries, collected under the auspices of the Demographic and Health Surveys. The study sought to answer three main questions: First, is women's status an important determinant of child nutritional status in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean? Second, if yes, what

are the pathways through which improved status operates? Third, why is South Asia's child malnutrition rate so much higher than Sub-Saharan Africa's, when it does so much better with respect to many of the long-accepted determinants of child nutritional status, such as national income, democracy, food supplies, health services, and education? Ramalingaswami et al. (1996) attempt to explain this "Asian enigma" by suggesting that the extremely low status of women in South Asia compared with Sub-Saharan Africa is at the root of the regions' nutritional status gap.

Smith et al. (2003) define women's status as women's power relative to men. Compared with their higher-status counterparts, women with low status tend to have weaker control over resources in their households, tighter constraints on their time, more restricted access to information and health services, and poorer mental health, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Yet these factors are thought to be closely tied with women's own nutritional status and the quality of care they receive and, in turn, children's birth weights and the quality of care provided to children. Two measures of women's status were employed. The first, measured at the household level, is women's decision-making power relative to their male partners, usually their husbands. This measure is based on four underlying indicators: whether a woman works for cash, her age at first marriage, the age difference between her and her husband, and the education difference between her and her husband. The second, measured at the community level, is societal gender equality. It is based on girl-boy differences in nutritional status and preventive health care, as well as gender differences in adult education. This additional measure was included to capture the effects of gender discrimination that women may face outside the home. Both women's status measures were constructed by combining the underlying indicators into an index ranging from 0 (lowest status) to 100 (highest) using factor analysis. Country fixed-effects multivariate regression, with controls for child, woman, and household characteristics, was the main empirical technique. Separate analyses were carried out for each region.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of underweight, stunted, and wasted children by region. By all measures malnutrition is worst in South Asia, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean.

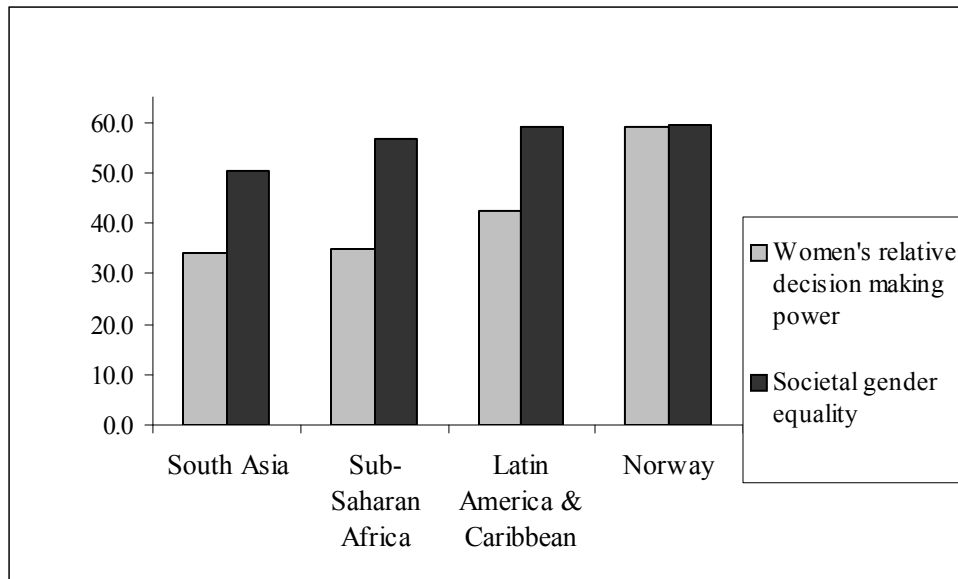
Figure 1: Percentage of Underweight, Stunted, and Wasted Children, by Region



Source: Smith et al. 2003.

Figure 2 compares women’s status across the three regions. Both measures show that South Asian women have the worst status relative to men, followed by Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean. Women’s status is very low in both South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa compared with women’s status in Norway, the country where women are considered to be most equal to men.

Figure 2: Women's Status Indexes, by Region



Source: Smith et al. 2003.

Results from the regression analysis show that women’s status has a significant, positive effect on children’s nutritional status in all three regions. The results provide proof that women’s status improves child nutrition because women with greater status have better

nutritional status, are better cared for themselves, and provide higher-quality care to their children. The strength of the influence of women's status, however, differs widely across the regions. Women's status has the most influence where it is lowest. The strongest effect is found in South Asia followed by Sub-Saharan Africa, and it is weakest in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Women's status, nutritional status, and agricultural productivity in Asia

The evidence has shown that improving women's status can improve children's and women's health and nutrition in South Asia. What are the pathways by which this takes place? In South Asia increases in women's status have a strong influence on both long-term and short-term nutritional status, leading to reductions in both stunting and wasting. The study estimates that if the status of men and women were equalized, the underweight rate among children under three years would drop by approximately 13 percentage points, a reduction of 13.4 million malnourished children. As women's status improves in the region, improvements also take place in women's nutritional status (as measured by body mass index [BMI]), prenatal and birthing care for women, complementary feeding practices for children, treatment of illness and immunization of children, and the quality of substitute child caretakers.

But are there other pathways through which women's empowerment may operate, such as through improvements in agricultural productivity and improving household incomes and well-being?

Much of the existing evidence that suggests that increasing resources controlled by women—or equalizing women's control of resources to be equal to those of men's—comes from Sub-Saharan Africa, where men and women farm separate plots. Similar evidence from Asia is scarce, owing to the lack of gender-disaggregated data on women's agricultural output in Asia. Much of this is due to the assumptions that men and women farm jointly in Asia, and that most labor input into Asian agriculture is male. In actuality, women farm small plots—usually homestead plots—independently, are engaged in livestock raising, and may take over agricultural decisionmaking, as men migrate to urban areas or abroad in search of work.

The little direct evidence that we have on agriculture is encouraging. A recent IFPRI assessment of the impact of vegetable and fishpond technologies on poverty in rural Bangladesh found that untargeted technology dissemination was more likely to benefit men and better-off households (Hallman, Lewis, and Begum 2007). Efforts designed to reach women within poor households—such as through NGO provision of training and credit for vegetable improvement—achieved greater impacts on poverty. Successfully reaching women with these technologies gave them greater mobility, more control over resources, and political awareness, and resulted in fewer incidents of domestic violence. The NGO vegetable program was successful because vegetables could be grown on homestead land, allowing even women from very poor households with no agricultural land to participate. Because the women had less need to seek employment outside the

homestead, they felt less vulnerable to harassment. Also, NGOs have been successful in reaching poor women in Bangladesh, where status issues make it difficult for these women to access government extension services.

Targeting credit to women also has beneficial effects on the household. A study based on data collected during 1991–92 from 87 villages in Bangladesh (Pitt and Khandker 1998) found that welfare impacts on the household were significantly better when borrowers were women. For every Bangladeshi taka lent to women, the increase in household consumption was 0.18 taka, compared with 0.11 taka when borrowers were men. Only when women borrowed was there a large and important effect on the nutritional status of *both* sons and daughters. Assets other than land also increased substantially when women borrowed—but not when men borrowed. Similarly, it was only when women borrowed that education of girls (rather than just boys) increased. Men, on the other hand, tended to take more leisure as a result of borrowing.

An example from China, where the distribution of resources between men and women tends to be more egalitarian than in South Asia provides additional support for the argument that providing women equal access to resources benefits agricultural productivity (de Brauw et al, forthcoming). In contrast with other parts of the world, women-managed households in China have equal access to many of the key inputs required for farming—whether family labor, quantity and quality of land, access to irrigation, and credit. Using a variety of measures of female farm management, the authors find no evidence that female farm management is negatively associated with plot-level crop revenues, holding household and plot characteristics constant—indicating that women are at least as good as farming as men. In fact, the point estimates even suggest that women may even be better farm managers than men in China. Despite women’s significant non-formal employment responsibilities and contribution to farm labor, plot level earnings for farms women manage are at least equivalent to earnings on plots that men manage. De Brauw and coauthors argue that policies that ensure equal access to land, regulations that dictate open access to credit, and economic development strategies that encourage competitive and efficient markets have all contributed to an environment in which women farmers can and appear to succeed. China has also begun to promote agricultural extension agents that are women. Although less than 30 percent of extension agents in China are women overall, nearly 40 percent of young ones are. When women have access to inputs and information and new technologies, there is no reason that they cannot produce at levels equally efficient to men.

Returns to empowering women may even be greater outside agriculture. The decision to earn additional income—whether at home or outside the home—and to enter the labor force is one of the components of the women’s status index described above. In Korea, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and the Philippines, the most important determinants of women’s labor force participation are schooling attainment and gender roles (Cameron, Dowling, and Worswick 2001). Women in the Philippines have the highest labor market participation among the five countries. Indeed, in the rural Philippines, where girls have higher educational attainment than their brothers, they are more likely to enter nonagricultural occupations and earn higher incomes from nonagriculture than from

farming (Quisumbing, Estudillo, and Otsuka 2004). Females account for the bulk of rural-urban migrants in the Philippines and are more likely to be employed in better-paying occupations than men, owing to their higher educational attainment (Quisumbing and McNiven 2007). In Korea and Sri Lanka, countries that are characterized by rigid gender roles, increase in women's schooling attainment is less likely to increase women's labor market participation rates due perhaps to the traditionally low bargaining position of women at home. And in countries where women's mobility is limited, women may not be able to realize economic returns to their human capital. In rural Pakistan, for example, women's education and nutrition have insignificant effects on economic productivity (Fafchamps and Quisumbing 1999).

Enabling women to realize returns to investment in human capital and in asset ownership is part of a virtuous cycle that promotes both empowerment and productivity. In Indonesia, women are acquiring secondary and tertiary education in relatively larger numbers than men, in response to the greater relative returns to female higher education (Behrman and Deolalikar 1995). Because parents realize returns to investing in daughters, they are encouraged to send girls to school. Improvements in women's economic productivity may also improve their status at home and in the marriage market. A recent paper on India (Mbiti 2007) finds that increases in female labor productivity are associated with decreases in the marriage rate of prime age females and lower dowries paid by the bride's family, indicating a rise in the bargaining power of the bride's family during dowry negotiations.

Alternative pathways out of poverty: the changing nature of rural livelihoods and women's status

The most effective ways of empowering rural women and enabling them and their families to move out of poverty will depend on local economic, cultural, and political conditions and the relative importance of the agriculture and nonagricultural sectors in rural livelihoods. The process of rural transformation is dynamic, and one should expect that relationships between men and women will change as well. In areas where feminization of agriculture may be taking place, because of male migration to urban areas or abroad, giving women equal access to land, credit, and extension services will be important both for agricultural productivity and the family's well-being. In areas where agriculture may be declining in importance, owing to a growing nonfarm sector, the way out of poverty may lie in women's increasing involvement in nonagricultural occupations, even in rural areas. In other areas, the pathway out of poverty may mean moving away from rural areas themselves. In a number of countries, such as Thailand and the Philippines, the rural-urban migration stream is composed mainly of women. Does outmigration from rural areas thus constitute a "brain drain" that needs to be stopped, or at the very least regulated? Not necessarily. A study from the Philippines suggests that remittances back to parents in rural areas have a positive and significant effect on livestock holdings, total consumption, and on educational expenditures per adult equivalent (Quisumbing and McNiven 2007).

Empowering both men and women to take advantage of new opportunities goes hand-in-hand with policies to improve income-earning abilities and opportunities for

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women. These include policies: (1) to extend and strengthen schooling systems in rural areas; (2) to promote competition in non-farm labor markets so as to eliminate discrimination against women; (3) to reform property rights systems, in general, to be more equitable towards women; and (4) to develop agricultural technologies which increase the returns to female labor, whether through increased demand or increased labor productivity. Many studies have shown that gender equity is not incompatible with productive efficiency. Increasing women's educational attainment, strengthening women's rights to property, removing barriers to women's participation in the labor market, and developing technologies that increase the returns to women's labor all work together to raise women's economic and social status either by improving women's opportunities outside the home or by increasing their bargaining power within the family.

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