

Measuring Gender Inequality through Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI): Situating an Individual Case from an Islamicⁱ Society

Bijaya Kumar Mohanty

Assistant Professor in Political Science, Ramjas College, University of Delhi

“One is not born, but becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society: it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between, male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” Simone De Beauvoir (1949)ⁱⁱ.

Introduction

The choice of using the above line of argument is discretionary; as it is quite often being observed or heard off by the gathered folks at the birth of a child in our society, whether the baby “is a boy or girl?” And the answer remains of crucial importance throughout the child’s life. In every known society, gender differences structure human identity and social relationships. But the roles and characteristics that we associate with males and females vary considerably across time and culture. And over the years of one’s life time, such socio-cultural forces recognize certain life-orientations as female or male specific roles. Having such common understanding about one’s life-time gendering processes, this paper uses a methodological tool to understand Muslim women’s less empowered socio-political status vis-à-vis the role of Islamic social practices, which furthers to frame the low-level socio-political status of women in most of the South Asian Muslim populated society. To do so, this paper uses Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) methodology to understand how women in a given social order like Islamic Society seeks their socio-political advancement or extinguish certain way of life forms (particularly due to certain Islamic cultural beliefs) which usually do not permit women’s advancement or empowerment in every spheres.

In the first section of the paper, it starts with a discussion of how SIGI as a methodological tool can be used to assess women empowerment in any traditional social set-ups and in the second section, this paper takes up an individual case from Pakistani society to substantiate the major arguments of SIGI methodology.

SIGI as a Research Method Tool to Measure Gender-inequality

In the entire discourse of development debate paradigm, “gender equity *is being considered* as an intrinsic dimension of human development. If girls and women are systematically denied freedoms and opportunities, this is not consistent with human development.”ⁱⁱⁱ The very denial process of something has its own deeper root to certain social-cultural processes^{iv}, in other words to find or seek any sort of gender-specific imbalance in a given social arrangements, the initial squinting process need to be directed towards the very basis of any such unfavorable or undesirable outcomes.

In order to measure the status and track the progress of gender equality, the Social Institutions and Development Index (SIGI)^v “focuses on the socially constructed basis of differences between men and women and puts emphasis on the need to challenge existing gender roles and relations”(Reeves and Baden 2000).^{vi} In addition, the SIGI also “measures social institutions as mirrored by societal practices and legal norms – that produce inequalities between women and men in non-OECD countries. The added value of the SIGI is that it presents a wide range of new dimensions and variables that are not considered by other indices” (Branisa and others 2009, 1).

The Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), published in 2009 focuses on critical societal norms and institutions which affect how women fare, to asses these, it uses “five dimensions of social institutions related to gender inequality that are combined by the SIGI are Family code, Civil liberties, Physical integrity, Son Preference, and Ownership rights. It offers a new way of aggregating gender inequality in several dimensions, penalizing high inequality in each dimension. And these social dimensions are conceived as long-lasting codes of conduct, norms, traditions or informal and formal laws that might contribute to gender inequalities in all spheres of life (Ibid). In order to build a linking-point for the section to follow, allow me to elaborate these multi-dimensional ‘social codes’ in detail^{vii}:

- a) The **Family code** dimension refers to institutions that influence the decision-making power of women in the household. The following variables are included. Parental authority measures whether women have the right to be a legal guardian of a child during a marriage, and whether women have custody rights over a child after divorce. Inheritance is based on formal inheritance rights of spouses. Early marriage measures the percentage of girls between 15 and 19 years of age who are/were ever married. Polygamy measures the acceptance of polygamy in the population.
- b) The **Civil liberties** dimension captures the freedom of social participation of women and includes the following variables. Freedom of movement indicates the freedom of women to move outside the home. Freedom of dress is based on the obligation of women to use a veil or burqa to cover parts of their body in the public.
- c) The **Physical integrity** dimension comprises different indicators on violence against women. Violence against women indicates the existence of laws against domestic violence, sexual assault or rape, and sexual harassment. Female genital mutilation is the percentage of women who have undergone female genital mutilation. Missing women measures gender bias in mortality.

- d) **Son preference** reflects the economic valuation of women, based on the variable **missing women**^{viii}, which measures gender bias in mortality due to sex selective abortions or insufficient care given to baby girls. This indicator is inspired by the work of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen.
- e) The **Ownership rights** dimension covers the access of women to several types of property. Women's access to land indicates whether women are allowed to own land. Women's access to bank loans measures whether women are allowed to access credits. Women's access to property other than land covers mainly access to real property such as houses, but also any other property.

A critical analysis of these 'social codes' opens up the debate to understand certain social and cultural beliefs and relational contexts, which are usually considered to play significant roles in the process of gendering practices. If gender is a social process for constituting difference and organizing inequality on the very basis of such differentiation, then the widely held socio-cultural beliefs which define the distinguishing characteristics between men and women and how each one of them are expected to behave in an particular fashion or in a particular context. Then defining such socio-cultural beliefs can be referred as "gendering process at work". Taking such insights into consideration, one particular case with reference to Islamic Republic of Pakistan has been taken for discussion in the section to follow.

Mukhtar Mai's Case in Islamic Republic of Pakistan

Pakistani society is characterized by tremendous linguistic, ethnic and cultural diversity. There are also considerable economic disparities between different sections of society, as well as divisions of caste, tribe, clan and class. It is dominated by a feudal and tribal value system, with strong patriarchal trends which permeate attitudes and behavior even where the actual social structure has changed. The overwhelming majority in Pakistan is Muslim, but while Islam and related state policies have affected social patterns to some extent, Pakistani society is so entrenched in culture, that customary and traditional laws and practices usually override both statutory and Islamic laws, which are only used selectively or adapted in accordance with cultural traditions.

Pakistan's political history includes several constitutional crises, frequent periods of political turmoil, economic instability, martial laws, wars and internal strife on sectarian, ethnic, language and provincial autonomy issues. All these social, cultural, economic and historical factors have directly and indirectly affected the status and rights of women at every level and in all sectors, and have negatively impacted on their integration in development or their real participation in the processes of decision-making.^{ix}

But of late a lot of independent human rights activism and one of the most highlighted figure's work in such directions by none other than Mukhtaran Bibi's^x effort has not only gone the direction of questioning certain traditional or excessive socialization of some *age-old type* gender specific roles but also drew the international community's attention and eventually she is being looked as the sole

leading woman to lead or inspire the lost causes for Pakistani society in general and women's cause in particular.

Constitutionally, there has been enough space for women as like men, which guarantees them equal rights through the Fundamental Rights. Further, the fundamental rights in the constitution guarantee the equality of all citizens before the law and forbid discrimination on the basis of sex alone, which allows a kind of space for affirmative action by the state in the context of women. The principles of policy further state that steps will be taken to ensure the full participation of women in all spheres of national life.

But in most of the South-Asian Societies, the term participation is yet to become a political culture, particularly with subaltern mass in general and women in particular. While discussing such issue, though in a different context, Georgina Ashworth delineated that “women permeate societies, and because they physically and socially reproduce the next generation, they do participate in society, and actively. What they do not necessarily participate in are the cultural, economic or political institutions and associations of that society and more especially within the policy-determining or evaluating levels within those institutions”^{xi}. If somebody takes up the plunge of undoing such social odds, then it draws the social-sanctions through the forms of neighborhood gossips^{xii} to sometimes even in the form of direct physical violence. And it is no surprise in a society like that of Pakistan such case of social conditioning or ‘social codes’ are more rampant than any free modern-democratic society.

Conclusion

In order to understand such social deficit in a given society; or, to squint the status-quoits element – which are usually believed to be the leading factors behind the existing unequal gender parameters, SIGI model ought to help the researchers as an important methodological tool to find certain region-wise or religion/ritual based unequal gender balance in most of the developing society, like that of ours. And, if this methodological tool as a social-cultural squinting process is applied in the future applied social science research and in public policy inputs; it has got the potential to assist public policy experts, and technocrats while undertaking any under-class, under-represented or community based social welfare measures to curb the gender imbalances. It could be summed up with a positive note that such innovative way of decoding the ‘social codes’ or the gender-imbalance in a given society likely to further women's all-round development in general and may contribute in correcting or improving their low status in ‘Gender-Development Indexing System’, a parameter which helps to assess the overall ‘Human Development Index’ in a given country.

Endnotes

- i Without acknowledging the encouragement of Prof. Satyajit Singh during the PHD coursework, this paper never would have completed. Any errors committed in the text are solely mine. For substantiating the major arguments of SIGI gender-inequality measurement as a methodological tool, a particular case from Pakistani society has been used in this paper. I wish that this short academic essay would encourage social science researchers to unpack the ‘social institutional deficit’ which hinders the progress/empowerment of women in a given society.
- ii Translated and interpreted by Simons (1995).
- iii Emphasis added, quoted in Amie Gaye et al., “Human Development Research Paper 2010/46: Measuring Key Disparities in Human Development: The Gender Inequality Index”, (UNDP, Dec. 2010), 5. http://hdr.undp.org/fr/rapports/mondial/rdh2010/documents/HDRP_2010_46.pdf (accessed Dec. 8, 2010).
- iv A space, where an individual learns certain basic nuances of life-orientations; possibly at some point of time in one’s life, those indoctrination processes happens to turn out as male or female specific roles.
- v This gender-inequality measurement tool’s initial introduction credit goes to Foster-Greer-Thorbecke poverty measures work (Foster, Greer, and Thorbecke, 1984), quoted in Boris Branisa et al., “Background Paper: The Construction of the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). Submitted to University of Goettingen, Department of Economics (March 6, 2009).
- vi Quoted in Wendy Harcourt, “Literature Review on Gender and Fragility”, 2 <http://erd.eui.eu/media/review-by-w-harcourt.pdf> (accessed Dec. 7, 2010).
- vii The detailing of these ‘social code’ has been adapted from Boris Branisa et al., “Background Paper: The Construction of the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). Submitted to University of Goettingen, Department of Economics (March 6, 2009), <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/49/19/42295804.pdf> (accessed Dec. 10, 2010) and Social Institutions and Gender Index website: <http://genderindex.org/content/social-institutions-variables> (accessed Dec. 8, 2010).
- viii For detailed conceptual history and debates on ‘Missing Women’ See: Amartya, Sen. “More than 100 million Women are Missing”, *New York Review of Books*, 20 December, (1990: 61–66) and Stephan Klasen and Claudia Wink, “Missing Women”: Revisiting the Debate”, *Feminist Economics* 9, no. 2–3, (2003: 263–299).
- ix The background history of Pakistan Society has been mainly influenced by the works i.e. Christophe Jaffrelot, ed, *A History of Pakistan and its Origins*, (London: Anthem Press, 2000) and Iqbal Afzal, *Islamization of Pakistan*, (Lahore: Vanguard Books Press, 1986).
- x Mukhtaran Bibi born c. 1972, now known as Mukhtar Mai is a Pakistani woman from the village of Meerwala, in the rural tehsil (an administrative set

up) of Jatoi of the Muzaffargarh district of Pakistan. Mukhtar Mai suffered a gang rape as a form of honour revenge, on the demands of tribesmen or by some accounts, on the orders of a panchayat (tribal council), of a local Mastoi Baloch clan that was richer and more powerful than Mukhtaran's clan, the Gujjar Tatla. In most of the cases, (by customs or traditional beliefs), Pakistani rural women in particular are tend to commit suicide after any such untoward incidents. It happens because society as a whole including their own family tend to strip off their individual entity, a state of helplessness from the part of victims lead to suicide or in some cases, they were publicly stoned or beaten till the death.

xi Georgina Ashworth, "Gendered Governance: An Agenda for Change", <http://nird.ap.nic.in/clic/rrd1100.html> (accessed on 28/03/2010).

xii In a local post-office, Maulvi Saheb saw a packet with monthly *Ismat* (a magazine name) printed on it. Beneath it, in red ink, the packet was addressed to Sheikh Irfan ul Haq's adult daughter. Maulvi Mehrban Ali could not believe his eyes. He forgot his own money order work and returned home with a sensational story to tell. He relayed that a magazine bearing the name of Irfan ul Haq's daughter is lying at the post office to some of the more mature individuals in the neighborhood. But such news cannot be kept from people for long. Soon the news of magazine arriving for Irfan ul Haq's virgin daughter spread like wildfire. Magazine coming for an unmarried daughter itself was embarrassing enough; furthermore, it had the daughter's name on the envelope. Delhi is far away; who knows how many and what kind of men had read her name? - Intezar Hussein, Ehsan Manzil

References

1. Afzal, Iqbal. 1986. *Islamization of Pakistan*, Lahore: Vanguard Books Press.
2. Ali, Kamran Asdar (2004). "Pulp Fictions" Reading Pakistani Domesticity. *Social Text* 22(1): 123-145.
3. Ashworth, Georgina. 1996. Gendered Governance: An Agenda for Change, <http://nird.ap.nic.in/clic/rrd1100.html> (accessed on 28/03/2010).
4. Branisa, Boris, Stephan Klasen, Maria Ziegler. 2009. Background Paper: The Construction of the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI). Submitted to University of Goettingen, Department of Economics (March 6, 2009), <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/49/19/42295804.pdf> (accessed Dec. 10, 2010).
5. Foster, J. E., J. Greer, and E. Thorbecke (1984). A class of decomposable poverty measures. *Econometrica* 52, 761-766.
6. Gaye, Amie and Others. 2010. Human Development Research Paper 2010/46: Measuring Key Disparities in Human Development: The Gender Inequality Index. *UNDP*, 1-41. http://hdr.undp.org/fr/rapports/mondial/rdh2010/documents/HDRP_2010_46.pdf (accessed Dec. 8, 2010).

-
7. Harcourt, Wendy. Literature Review on Gender and Fragility, <http://erd.eui.eu/media/review-by-w-harcourt.pdf> (accessed Dec. 7, 2010).
 8. Jaffrelot, Christophe. Ed. 2000. *A History of Pakistan and its Origins*, London: Anthem Press.
 9. Klasen, Stephan and Claudia Wink (2003). “Missing Women”: Revisting the Debate. *Feminist Economics* 9(2–3): 263–299.
 10. Sen, Amartya (1990). More than 100 million Women are Missing. *New York Review of Books* 20 December, 61-66.
 11. Simons, M. (1995). *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*. Pennsylvania State University Press.
 12. Social Institutions and Gender Index Website: <http://genderindex.org/content/social-institutions-variables> (accessed Dec. 8, 2010).

