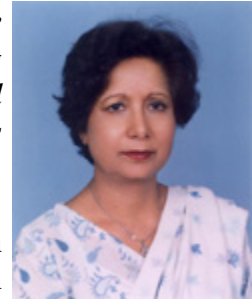


# Khadija Haq on Women's Political and Economic Empowerment in South Asia

Interviewed by Abby Jenkins, WLP Communications Associate

*Khadija Haq is President of the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre in Islamabad, Pakistan and Chair of the North-South Roundtable. A leading development economist, she has written several books on people-centered economic and social development. Ms. Haq is a member of the Women's Learning Partnership's Board of Directors.*



WLP spoke with Ms. Haq after her return from the latest North-South Roundtable in Cairo, where she participated in multi-regional dialogues on poverty and global economic justice. She discussed with us the priorities for achieving sustainable development in South Asia through women's political and economic empowerment.

**Abby Jenkins: How are projects at the Mahbub ul Haq Human Development Centre addressing the issue of gender inequality in South Asia?**

*Khadija Haq:* The Centre is a policy research institute and think tank that seeks to inform policies for sustainable and gender-equitable development through research papers, policy studies, and seminars on economic and social development issues. Our research work is presented annually in a report entitled Human Development in South Asia. The 2000 edition of this report – the first of its kind – focuses specifically on the gender question and provides a comprehensive examination of the extreme gender-divide in economic, social, and political spheres in the South Asia region. Prepared with the collaboration of distinguished scholars and policy-makers, the report explores how the culture of patriarchy permeates overall development in the region, leaving women behind in nearly all human development measures. Women remain severely underrepresented in government, civil service, and other public bodies and large gaps persist in education and job opportunities. Much of women's work remains invisible, as the bulk of their labor in the household and informal sector goes unaccounted for in the larger economy. At the same time, women face legal constraints that prevent them from obtaining equal access to property and inheritance. Through providing extensive data and concrete plans of action, the Centre seeks to challenge policy-makers and multi-lateral agencies to achieve gender equality by promoting women's political and economic empowerment.

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**Abby Jenkins: What are the primary challenges to women's leadership in South Asia?**

*Khadija Haq:* South Asia has had many women Prime Ministers including Benazir Bhutto (Pakistan), Indira Gandhi (India), Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia (Bangladesh), and Sirimavo Bandaranaike and Chandrika Kumaratunga (Sri Lanka). However, these leadership gains do not reflect the reality that women's overall representation in national governments is extremely poor. Women comprise a mere 7% of parliamentary seats in the South Asian region, which is half the world average of 14%. South Asian governments are beginning to take steps to increase women's political participation through the establishment of quota systems at national and local levels. For example, in India and Pakistan gains have been made in increasing women's participation at the local level. One-third of the seats in local government structures are reserved and held by women. The one-third quota, however, needs to be instituted in all legislative, judiciary, and executive bodies at all levels, starting at the national level. This has yet to happen. Without a critical mass of women in national decision-making positions, South Asian women's concerns will remain marginalized. Instituting quota systems is nevertheless only one step towards female political empowerment. We are still facing deep-rooted patriarchal traditions and attitudes that limit opportunities for women's participation in public life. Rising communalism, religious fundamentalism, and conservatism are major limiting factors for women's security and freedom.

*Abby Jenkins:* **How have processes of globalization affected women's economic empowerment?**

*Khadija Haq:* Globalization has had mixed effects on women's economic situation in South Asia. On the upside, new industry has created job opportunities and increased pay for women, especially in the manufacture of garments and textiles. Women provide about 90% of the industry's labor pool. Although the garment industry has increased the number of jobs for rural women, their work continues to be exploited. They continue to work longer hours and with less pay than their male counterparts. Furthermore, the recent trend of men leaving rural areas to find jobs in other countries or urban areas leaves women behind with the double burden of domestic work. Women's work in the informal sector remains economically invisible. These trends devalue women's labor and are a major obstacle to women's economic empowerment. Computer and information technology has provided some hope for the future of women's economic empowerment. The more technical training available to women, the more likely they are to get higher paying jobs. Computer training has allowed women to get jobs at call centers and computer companies in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka.

*Abby Jenkins:* **What steps would you recommend for addressing the cultural and social constraints women face in order to advance their full and equitable participation in civil society in South Asia?**

*Khadija Haq:* Achieving equality means that women must first gain equality under the law, but this must be implemented and enforced. Women's empowerment necessarily involves legal equality, equal access to education and technical training, women's leadership at the national level, affirmative action for jobs with equal pay, and a gender-sensitive justice system.

*Abby Jenkins:* **What steps are being taken to achieve women's equality in South Asia? How is your organization involved?**

*Khadija Haq:* In June 2000, the UN Special session on Women (Beijing plus Five) adopted a follow-up document to accelerate progress towards women's equality with men in legal, social, economic and political spheres by establishing targets and timetables for specific areas. In South Asia, discriminating laws against women are being reviewed. Violence against women, though continuing, is getting more media and policy attention. The highest courts in the region are ruling in favor of women. Institutional machinery, such as the permanent commission on the status of women, has been put in place in most South Asian countries, including Pakistan. Most countries have also prepared national policies and plans for women's advancement in education, health, job and other income-earning opportunities. NGOs and other independent research and academic institutions, such as the Human Development Centre, have been very active in preparing policy papers, raising public awareness and advocating for gender-sensitive policies and actions at all levels in order to advance women's empowerment in South Asia. All the activities of this Centre are focused on promoting an equal and equitable world for women.

( categories: [Pakistan](#) | [Issue 2 \(January\)](#) )