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### Women Of SAARC

Throughout the countries which make up the forum of SAARC the expected life span of women is infinitely shorter than men indicating the neglect meted out to women in this region. For a shorter life span shows, in no uncertain terms, that women generally get the 'short end of the stick' when it comes to food, health care and education, and this despite the constitutional guarantee of equality, with the exception of the Maldives.

From birth to the grave the girl child, future women, wives and mothers, learn all too well their position in both society and the family hierarchy long before they can truly walk. Those who dare to venture outside the confines of the house to take up a job are faced with hostility from male counterparts despite the exhortation of the government to participate in nation building. And, in the realm of politics, although there are, and have been, women leaders of repute, women are still to find a position of their own, which means a platform on which they can stand alongside men.

Although governments of the region have enacted legislation to prevent the marriage of under-age girls, the truth is no law can go against common practice until and unless social change takes place. The tragedy of youthful marriage is that these girls, denied their youth, become mothers far too soon endangering their lives and the lives of their babies. And within this region all too few mothers are attended by registered physicians during delivery even when facilities are close at hand except in the case of Sri Lanka where 87% of deliveries are conducted by trained personnel.

Opportunity for education has, in general, improved in the region but not to the extent that it has made any substantial inroad into levels of illiteracy for, again with the exception of Sri Lankan women, the majority remain deprived of any schooling although it is believed this is beginning to change, albeit slowly. With the SAARC Decade of the Girl Child in force, more, far more must be done to increase awareness among people that, by keeping women backward they harm not only themselves but their countries too. SAARC nations must, therefore, be well in the forefront of the fight for emancipation of women but it is the women themselves who must lead the fight.