



THE GENDER REALITY IN BANGLADESH: ISSUES AND POSSIBILITIES

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Bangladesh has made marked strides in many social development indicators such as: structural, economic, cultural, education, healthcare, and political policies. Experience reveals that the influence of patriarchy has not stood in the way of the country's progress and has not hindered women's development or minimization of the gender gap. The country now ranks 50 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) covering 153 countries leaving India, China, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan far behind. The present paper is a modest endeavor to make sense of the country's trajectory of women's development: its attainments and initiatives, problems, and possibilities.

Introduction

Women's progress in the domains of education, health, livelihood, and political participation is often considered as one of the indicators of a country's overall development. This paper seeks to evaluate the progress made by Bangladesh in its efforts for better gender equality. Bangladesh makes an interesting case study for this topic due to the fact that it has now earned the distinction of being the topmost gender-neutral country in South Asia. Moreover, it stands far ahead of India in Global Gender Gap index. Its rank is 50 in the Global Gender Gap Report 2020 released by the World Economic Forum (WEF) covering 153 countries and it is the only country among the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) nations that takes a place within the top 50 nations of the world.¹

This is a significant milestone and a phenomenal leap forward considering the fact that Bangladesh was placed 91 in WEF's 2006 report. The Global Gender Gap (GGG) index was first introduced by the WEF in 2006. The index benchmarks national gender gaps in four areas: economic participation and opportunity; educational attainment; health and survival; political empowerment. India's rank is 112. Sri Lanka is located at 102. China stands at 106 and Pakistan's rank is 151.²

WEF's GGP index ranks countries in terms of the gender gap in four primary areas: health, economy, education and politics. Iceland tops the list (as the most gender-neutral country) followed by Norway (2nd) and Finland (3rd). The report comes with the following key findings. The representation of women in key and senior roles is growing steadily.

Some countries are approaching gender parity whilst others are falling far behind the official targets. Gender disparity exists in leadership positions, the labor market, wages, access to credit and land ownership. Only 35 countries have attained gender parity in education and over 10 percent of young women (between the ages of 15-24) globally are illiterate, with a high concentration in developing countries. It goes without saying, investment in women's education is insufficient in some countries.

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Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country with a diverse cultural presence. In terms of women's political presence, it stands ahead of India in the sense that it has succeeded in ensuring 30 percent reservation of seats for women in parliament. This has increased women's visibility, social legitimacy and allowed them to “get their foot in the door”.³ Evidently, Bangladeshi women lacking family credentials have not failed to make a mark in politics nor has Bangladesh been insensitive to the issue of gender justice in the political arena. With little ambiguity one may argue, inclusiveness and equal participation of both men and women in all decision-making structures may possibly render the project decentralization of democratized from within.

Challenges Ahead

The stories behind the statistics, however, can be starkly different. Political participation does not necessarily imply that women representatives exercise an effective voice. Many of them still experience male resistance and express experience of being ignored. Confronting gender bias and patriarchy constitutes an everyday struggle and numerical representation does not in itself mean participation. Studies expose the prevalence of proxy representation in Union

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Parishads (UP) – the lowest administrative unit of the local government:⁴ male family members represent female UP members. Many women still seek support from their male relatives to run affairs as UP members. It appears, the socio-cultural milieu in Bangladesh is yet to fully accept women calling the shots in decision making processes or playing leadership roles. They are first seen as women, then as political functionaries. WEF's GGP Report 2020 states that only 8 percent of cabinet members are women and that women account for only 20 percent of parliamentary representatives.⁵ The proportion of women's presence in leadership roles is yet to cross the one-tenth mark. For greater participation, the country must bolster the basic rights of women so as to expand their economic and political prospects.

The scenario in Bangladesh Civil Service is no exception. The “Glass Ceiling” barrier still exists in Bangladesh Civil Service. The environment is yet to be conducive to a woman's growth and be gender friendly. Men's negative perceptions and stereotypes about women's professional capabilities and commitments exist as inherent barriers.⁶ Despite women's increased participation in politics and paid employment, patriarchal gender biases still dominate Bangladeshi society. The scenario will possibly alter and take on a more sustained drive when women in large number enter public employment and when attitudes on women's physical and intellectual capabilities begin to be seen as equal to men and that volition becomes the cultural norm.

The country needs substantial reform to alter the gender inequality in the domain of education. A poor literacy rate along with a growing proportion of female drop-outs in the domain of education is still a major concern. In 2010, male literacy was 61.12 percent compared to 54.8 percent for women. Moreover, the degree of increase in female enrolment in the primary level does not correspond to an equivalent increase in higher education.⁷ The country needs to ensure that the right to education is enforced and operationalized as a fundamental right for all.

Massive sensitization campaigns especially among people hailing from low socio-economic backgrounds - including within the slums, along with incentives such as free reading materials, free admission and the like may be considered to universalize education for all in letter and spirit. In order to minimize the gender gap in domains of education and employment, to educate and make women financially independent, there must be an emphasis placed on encouraging this change from the grassroots level – for instance to motivate parents to send their daughters to school with a special focus on the enrolment of poorer children. This will undoubtedly be a long-term process as currently the perceived demand for quality education is different for boys and girls. Parents invest unequally along gender lines. Boys are typically sent to higher and more expensive schools; they are given more educational resources (higher tuition fees and better private tutors) compared to girls.⁸ This clearly points to the assumption that boys are seen as more valuable investments than girls in terms of material returns.

Causes of Gender Disparity

There is always a tendency to perpetuate the so-called ideology of sexual division of labour that seeks to treat women as the homemaker and men as workers in the public domain. The public sphere is seen as a taboo for millions of women. Not surprisingly, the gender reality in many other countries is not dissimilar.⁹

There exists a great deal of inadequacy at the policy

level in ensuring women's security at home, in educational institutions, public transports, at the workplace and so forth. Fear of being a victim of "violence" constrains many women to stay indoors and prevents them from participating actively in public domains such as: education, employment and politics. A strong focus on gender-specific legislations and their effective implementation could be an effective mechanism in rendering the public domain a secure and violence-free space for women.¹⁰

Cases of suicide and homicide are found more among unmarried, divorced, and widowed women than those who are married.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is another concern that prevails in the name of cultural ideology that tends to reinforce and perpetuate claiming it to be normal. As Schuler (2012) reports, domestic abuse and other violence against women appear justified to many men and women in Bangladesh. Abject poverty, patriarchy, systematic discrimination since birth, illiteracy, early marriage and unequal power relations render women vulnerable to such occurrences.¹¹ There is a strong tendency to treat it as something normal. Further, it is also argued, there is a link between women's death rate and violence. Cases of suicide and homicide are found more among unmarried, divorced, and widowed women than those who are married. Married women without children are far more vulnerable to suicide/homicide than married women with children.¹² Early marriage of girls is another limiting force that tends to jeopardize women's active presence in education and employment of any such public sphere activity.

In a traditional society like Bangladesh, women are identified with the following five attributes: the sexual division of labor is in line with the natural difference between men and women; women's identity is relational in nature (they are identified in relation to their male counterparts); women's sense

of fulfillment lies in wifehood and motherhood; they are childlike; they are apolitical.¹³

The country needs to pay attention to the issue of the digital divide in the domain of gender. Technology is today, more than ever before, an integral factor of social change and progress. The findings of Saha and Zaman (2017) are a stark reminder of the inherent gender disparity in communication technology. Based on their study in Bangladesh, they argue that women tend to use ICT less than men. For instance, they argue that 62 percent of male students in the domain of higher education possess personal laptop/desktop computer whereas only 30 percent of the females use personal computers; men are more efficient in using ICTs in various ways whereas women tend to use ICTs more for networking and entertainment purposes. In most Asian countries, though the number of internet users is growing fast, women are still lagging behind in terms of access and usage.¹⁴

Nothing is more important for development today than the economic, political, and social participation of women.

The Path Ahead

The biggest challenge before Bangladesh is to prevent reversals of the gains achieved so far. The pioneering role of NGOs is one of the most important paths towards social development in Bangladesh, as they are involved in almost every aspect of social engineering in the country: poverty alleviation, healthcare, education, environmental protection, relief and rehabilitation.¹⁵ The fast development taking place in Bangladesh points to the fact that it is possible to attain development amidst seemingly impassible obstructions.

The GGG Report 2020 of WEF is indicative of Bangladesh's relative success story in promoting

the cause of women, gender parity and women's participation in public domains (education, employment and polity) amidst all odds. As the Nobel laureate Amartya Sen aptly states, "nothing is more important for development today than the economic, political and social participation of women".¹⁶ National economies can reach full efficiency and productivity when they pay judicious attention to the needs of all: men and women alike.

An economy grows when both men and women flourish and attain self-reliance and realization of their potential in almost equal degree. Empowerment need not remain a male notion only. A renewed focus on gender-specific laws concerning atrocities on women, domestic violence, sexual harassment at the workplace along with need-specific protective policy legislations promoting women's education, economic and political empowerment will help Bangladesh in minimizing disparity and maximizing parity in the domain of gender. Keeping in mind the fact that education, social status and financial independence play a crucial role in shaping women's identity, autonomy, career chances and living conditions, a greater focus on social, educational, economic and political dimensions will certainly bolster the country's image and help diminish the prevailing gender gap to a significant extent and engineer a gender-inclusive environment with a social order based on equal foundations. ■

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Endnotes

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