Women in Bangladesh
An Analysis of their Present Status

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AN ANALYSIS ON PRESENT STATUS OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH

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Authors’ Introduction

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Setting the Context

This national status paper provides an insight into women’s overall situation in Bangladesh. It highlights some ‘key areas’ to consider in order to improve women’s rights situation in Bangladesh. In doing so, first the paper will showcase women’s socio-economic and political involvement in the national sphere, both in terms of productive and care work. Then it will investigate to unmask the challenges that hinder women to move forward.

Bangladesh has made it to the World Economic Forum’s news for its remarkable economic achievement – shifting from once Henry Kissinger’s ‘bottomless basket’ to ‘one of Asia’s most remarkable and unexpected success stories’ (Basu, 2018). Since 2006, Bangladesh’s annual GDP growth has exceeded Pakistan’s by roughly 2.5% per year. In 2018, Bangladesh’s growth rate is likely to surpass India’s. Bangladesh has reduced its infant mortality rate from 92 per 1000 live births in 1990 to 46 in 2017. In terms of education, the country has achieved nearly hundred percent enrollments in primary schools (www.equitybd.net: 1-2). It attained gender parity with more girls than boys in primary and secondary schools. It has met the targets of preventing malarial deaths and of raising the share of people using an improved drinking water source as well (ibid.). While there is no single cause for such an economic boom, skilled use of ‘manpower’, creating skilled workers, rapid digitalisation of rural as well as urban sphere, women’s gigantic inclusion in the formal and informal economy and social changes for example, women’s empowerment and spread of education are some of the causes which have accelerated the economic transformation (ibid; Kabeer, 2004: 6; Sen, 2015: 305-307). However, the question is – to what extent the benefit of such economic development reaches to women, they being one of the key agents of such economic boom? In Bangladesh almost 50% of the total population are women. Hence, at the advent of SDGs there is a need to identify areas where women need special consideration to reduce gender gaps.

Women’s Sub-ordination is Socio-culturally Constructed

Bangladesh is one of those patriarchal countries which, in order to protect ‘cultural purity’, consider women as responsible to bear different cultural traditions. Such traditional views, coupled with those of patriarchal norms and discourses, construct as well as reinforce a subjugated status for women. Significantly, several studies observe that the emblem of ‘Bangladeshi woman’ has been shaped by socially constructed norms and culturally embedded notions. Indeed, a woman’s body is associated with the discourse of honour – for a family, a society and the whole nation – such that multiple actors attempt to control and determine women’s behaviour in order to protect this honour. Restraining a woman’s mobility and visibility are the most prominent of these control attempts, with the custom of purdah or seclusion (Chowdhury, 2010: 37; Duza, 1989: 127; Lewis, 2011: 15; White, 1992: 22-23) legitimising a woman’s restricted access or exclusion from public sphere. Consequently, this poses a myriad of

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barriers against her efforts to participate in education, competitive job markets and other social
activities, and often means that a woman lives under the threat of economic and social insecurity.

As part of this process, women’s household role and contribution to subsistence agricultural
production have been taken for granted and remained unrecognised for many years. Although
women highly contribute to pre as well as post-harvesting agricultural tasks, most of the women
in Bangladesh are landless. The Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh has
guaranteed equal rights for all men and women; however in reality men own 96% of the total
agricultural land, leaving only 4% for women’s ownership.2 Thus a silent tactic has been retained
which enhances a woman’s inferior status and dependency on a man, and in turn bolsters
patriarchy. Several studies (Duza, 1989; Kabeer, 2001; White, 1992: 35) observe that poor women
are privileged compared to the middle class and upper class women in terms of maintaining less
purdah. Nonetheless, the value of purdah still continues, and there are numerous accounts
indicating that when a woman is raped or sexually harassed Bangladeshi society blames her, on
the grounds of not wearing ‘proper dress’ and being in the public sphere at an ‘improper time’.
Thus society always reminds a woman of her boundaries. In addition, religious
(mis)interpretations, along with religious extremism, legitimise patriarchal attitudes and the
‘torture’ of women. Several religious fundamentalist groups are against women’s progress, in
fact Chowdhury (2010) mentions that the women’s movement in Bangladesh has repeatedly
been challenged and obstructed by these extremist groups. Thus, gendered contradictions in
women’s issues has become a bitter reality in Bangladesh. It is against this backdrop we are
discussing how women in Bangladesh are still moving forward and making numerous progress.

**Women’s Participation in the Labour Market: Formal and Informal Sector**

In Bangladesh changes in agricultural opportunities and a growth in urban industrial employment
opportunities led to an urban migration of many rural households or at least of some members
of households (Feldman, 2009: 275-276; Hoek, 2008: 25). During 1991 at the demise of the
military regime, the democratic governments continued with the liberalised economic policy, and
a foreign policy, that further integrated Bangladesh in the global capitalist system. ‘Globalisation’
became a fashionable buzz word from the mid-1990s onward, and a substantial growth in
international migration resulted in increased revenue which exceeded the income earned from
international aid (Lewis, 2011: 32-33).

However, much arguably, foreign aid dependency after independence resulted in a strong
emphasis on a population control agenda, also involving women in income-generating activities.
Integrating women into paid work and development activities were set as primary conditions for
receiving foreign aid by many donors (Duza, 1989: 144; Hoek, 2008: 25). Due to the patriarchal
mindset of the policy makers, women’s involvement in development projects remained limited
for a long time. For instance, in state policies women were primarily considered as wives and

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2 *Krishi te Narir Srom Ke Shikshir Dabi*, 27 October, 2016; Available online
mothers, and so, until the early 1980s, development initiatives for women meant increasing women's awareness of fertility control, and a commitment to reduce population growth (Feldman, 2009: 273; Kabeer, 1991: 44-46). During this time, involving women with paid work largely meant – recruiting them into different family planning programmes (Kabeer, 1991: 47).

Since the 1980s under global pressure Bangladesh adopted structural adjustment policies and liberalized its economy. This along with massive industrialization, increased use of technology in agriculture as well as urbanization resulted in women’s increased opportunity to enter into the employment sector. UN statistics (United Nations, 2000) and studies (Feldman, 2009; Kabeer, 2004) have shown that the informal sector is a larger source of employment for women than for men (United Nations, 2000). Informal sector comprises the major share of female employment which is about 89%. Nevertheless, gender pay gap exists at an alarming rate in the informal sector. According to the National Labour Force Survey (2017) all of the 0.8 million female labours in Bangladesh are subject to wage discrimination; for an equal amount of work whereas a male labour receives BDTK 184 on an average, a female labour’s average cost is BDTK 170.4 Poor women’s considerable and cheap availability as labourer, docility and devotion towards work make them easy target of the informal sector. Readymade garment Industry (RMG), shrimp processing zone and overseas employment as bonded labour are some of the main export oriented informal jobs where women continuously face low payment or pay gap compared to fellow male workers, insecurity and no/short term contracts (BRIDGE, 2001; Dey and Basak, 2017; Feldman, 2009). The rise of female participation in low return, urban, informal sector activities is considered evidence of the feminisation of poverty. The greater insecurity and lower earning capacity in the informal sector is therefore seen as another reason for the feminisation of poverty (BRIDGE, 2001). Moreover, these workplaces, informal in type, are often places for various violence and sexual assaults conducted against female workers; who, in order to save job, often stay quiet against such ill conducts. In a recent study (March-April, 2018) by the Christian Aid Bangladesh, 83% (out of 382 surveyed respondents) of the female garment workers working in different RMG factories mentioned about different sorts of transgressions done towards them at the workplace; and most of these harassments are done by men in the managerial roles. Thus, beside low payment and job insecurity, violence against female workers in the informal sector remain one of the key challenges that needs serious attention of policy makers and the state body (ibid; Dey and Basak, 2017; Feldman, 2009).

In addition to informal sector, a good number of women are also entering formal job sector – highly paid, competitive and free of insecurity. Starting from the local government, women are working in different governmental administrative positions, law enforcing agencies, military and armed forces, education institute, private farms and in different managerial and business roles.

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For example, in 1980s women occupied less than 1% of government services, which has now reached to 10 -15% (Halim, 2016: 15). Currently, women hold important positions in the country’s law enforcing agency. Of the total women police, two are now deputy inspector general (DIG), four additional DIG, 37 police supers, 93 additional police supers, 126 assistant police supers, 110 inspectors (unarmed), 646 sub inspectors, 55 police sergeants, 928 assistant sub inspectors, 28 nayeks and 9338 are constables.5 Recently, Bangladesh has gotten its first female Major General, which is a commendable achievement no doubt. The election commission of Bangladesh was devoid of any female members for a very long time. At last, on 6 February of 2017 Bangladesh got its first female EC. However, we would like to see more women participating in the election commission.

Despite women taking part in formal sector, the glass ceiling persists everywhere – only a very few women are actually at the managerial or senior positions of these different jobs. The proportion of successful women candidates has declined significantly in the past five Bangladesh Civil Service examinations (32nd to 37th BCS examinations; Public Service Commission (PSC) report. The recent quota amendment movement and Government’s response to it – “There will be no quota for class one and class two jobs. Appointment for these jobs will be made directly on the basis of merit” (Cabinet Secretary M Shafiul Alam), is surely a retrograde step to women’s empowerment in Bangladesh. Such step will also negatively influence Adivasi women in their struggle towards moving forward. There is a rise in the self-employment sector; although, women occupy only 16% of total 66% self-employed citizens (Huq, 2013: 42). Socio-cultural barriers resulting in limited access to market, lack of knowledge of the female entrepreneurs, inadequacy of finance, taxation complexities and lack of skilled training are some of the major hindrances that self-employed women are facing on a daily basis. The Government has set up Joyeeta Foundation which provides small loans, trainings and a platform for business to female entrepreneurs. More such initiatives are needed to attract women in entrepreneurship.

**Laws and Policies**

At the inception of the independent Bangladesh, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) created laws and policies to advance the status of women (with some contradictions), starting with the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh (1972). The Constitution of Bangladesh gives considerable emphasis to gender equality. For instance, Article 19 (3) of the Constitution elucidates, ‘The State Shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity and participation of women in all spheres of national life’. Article 27 enunciates ‘All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law’. Again, Articles 28 (1) and 28 (2) denote respectively ‘The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth’, and ‘Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life’. Accordingly, the constitution grants women’s visibility and mobility in the public

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sphere as well as their involvement in all spheres of national life. It gives emphasis to the state’s
deavour to ensure equality of opportunity towards all citizens. However, as noted by
Chowdhury (2010: 91), in defining the state’s obligations as well as citizen’s rights and duties the
Constitution preserves patriarchal language. For example, linguistic norms use the pronoun ‘him’
or noun ‘man’ to refer to citizens. Article 19 (1) in the official English version of the Constitution
states: ‘The State shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens’. It further
explains in Article 19(2): ‘The State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic
inequality between man and man […].’ In the same Article of the Bangla version of the
Constitution the term ‘man’ appears as manush (human being). Hence, the linguistic bias was
introduced during the English translation of the Bangla version. Again, Article 20(1) illustrates
‘Work is a right, a duty and a matter of honour for every citizen who is capable of working, and
everyone shall be paid for his work on the basis of the principle from each according to his
abilities to each according to his work’. The pronoun ‘his’ has been used throughout article 20(1)
to refer to the citizen.

The government of Bangladesh devotes serious concern in reducing violence against women.
Bangladesh is one of the few countries that has established a separate ministry for women. The
‘Ministry of Women and Children Affairs’ was established in 1978, and since its inception it has
remained very active in paying special attention to women and children’s issues. It has started
providing a ‘national emergency service’ through ‘999’ and people have gathered very positive
experience from this service. Moreover, the National Women Development Policy (2011) gives
emphasis to eliminating all forms of oppression and violence against women and adolescent girls.
Bangladesh is also a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and Child Rights
Convention, and has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination
against Women. The GoB has amended and promulgated many Acts and Ordinances in an effort
to safeguard the legal rights of the female population. These include, the penal Code 1860
(second Amendment 1984), the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 (Amendment 1984, and 1986), the
Child Marriage Restraint Act (Amended Ordinance 1984), the Acid Control Act 2000 (Amended
2010) and the Acid Attack Crime Repression Act (2002), the Suppression of Immoral Trafficking
Act (1993), and the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act 2000 (Amendment 2010).
These laws demonstrate a significant concern towards ensuring women’s rights. With a view to
achieving goal 5 (‘Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls’) of the Sustainable
Development Goals (SDGs), the GoB has set up its national gender goal which promises to
increase the ratio of literate female to male for age group 20-24 to be raised to 100% from the
current 86%. In addition, it also aims to work towards an increase in the share of female officers
(Grade-9 and above) in the public sector to 25% by 2020. Despite such efforts, with a tradition of
patriarchal domination the degree of implementation of policies and laws remains limited

**Women’s Political Involvement in Bangladesh**

Women’s participation in politics and political decision making is an important indicator for
understanding women’s status in any country. Women and men have different values, attitudes
and even conflicting interests. As long as women are a minority in decision making bodies, a positive progress towards achieving gender equality is hardly possible (ibid.). In a democracy, women’s active involvement in party politics, voting, contesting for election or choosing their preferred state actors, may contribute towards changing women’s subjugated status (Chowdhury, 2010). Certainly, the emergence of female political leaders is likely to consolidate women’s place in the public arena, creating a necessary power base. In addition, socially acceptable, female political role models may lessen rigidity in relation to women’s visibility in the public sphere and enable feminist issues to be placed on a wider political agenda, whilst at the same time such formal power should negotiate bringing forward such issues (ibid.).

Indeed, women’s experiences over the last few decades have put this issue on the agenda. As documented by many researchers (Chowdhury, 2010; Duza, 1989:135; Feldman, 2003; Kabeer, 1991; Lewis, 2011) women’s political engagement in Bangladesh operates in a context of abject poverty, religious fundamentalism, and a culture of female subordination, as well as weak political institutions prejudiced by hegemonic masculine attitudes. Since the parliamentary election in the 1990s, the two main political parties in Bangladesh, the ruling party and the opposition party, have been led by women, but neither the state nor civil society in Bangladesh is structured in a gender neutral way (Chowdhury, 2010: 39; Sobhan, 1994:76). Not surprisingly then, women’s leadership has made little difference. To win elections, political parties use the gender agenda, forwarding women’s issues in their manifestos, but these are hardly addressed when these parties are in ruling power (Chowdhury, 2010: 39; Sobhan, 1994:76). Therefore, women’s issues remain hidden or overlooked behind what are presented as the more critical issues of poverty and overall underdevelopment of the country. In addition the age old prejudices which hold ‘politics’ as a ‘man’s arena’, create patriarchal political institutions and a working environment such that many women who enter politics soon leave (Chowdhury, 2010). Therefore, even though it has been more than forty years since Bangladesh achieved its independence, in terms of improving women’s status, the achievements so far are severely limited.

**Recommendations**

In line with the above discussion and also, keeping in mind a broader picture of women’s advancement and different potential barriers against such progress, following are a set of recommendations to be considered by the SAAPE:

To increase and accelerate women’s entry into paid employment, Government needs to undertake a set of measures to improve work environment for women. Ending pay gap/wage discrimination, complete elimination of violence against women from work space, strict monitoring of work environment for exporting female labourers outside Bangladesh and ending child labour as well as fostering education opportunities for them are some of the steps that should be considered immediately. 

Non implementation of High Court Directives (2009 & 2011) is increasing incidents of sexual harassment. People need to be made aware of these laws and strong monitoring of
implementation of these directives can reduce sexual harassment from education institute and workplace.

Female workers need to be encouraged to bring complaints about violence and sexual harassment occurred in public sphere; and their confidentiality should be strictly maintained. Nationwide media campaigns can be used to spread out a message that violence done towards women is a crime and not heroism. Media can also aware women about available prevention and redress measures against violence.

Media need to be used, as such, that it play a positive role by creating positive images of women. Media in Bangladesh have been presenting stereotyped images of women; not only that but also, it sexually objectify women to a large extent. Such imageries encourage violent and negative attitude towards women.

To encourage and maintain a stable national economy, the Government of Bangladesh (GoB) needs to introduce and increase parenting services wherever necessary. An increase in crèche facilities, proper implementation of maternity leave and introducing compulsory paternity leave policies could be some of the essential parenting measures undertaken by the GoB.

Civil society is the key to progress in any country. To maintain a vibrant civil society freedom of expression need to be encouraged.

Bangladesh is one of the pioneer countries to ratify CEDAW and the GoB has been reasonably regular in submitting its periodic reports to the CEDAW committee. Nonetheless, the GoB has still retained its reservation on two articles (articles 2 and 16 (1c)) of the Convention. As discussed above, the present GoB has already adopted many gender friendly laws and policies, has paid particular attention to improve women’s marital and also parental rights, and there have been measures to establish gender equality. In this context it can be argued that the aforesaid reservations are no longer necessary, as government has already started working on the issues that are mentioned in the reserved articles. Therefore, steps should be taken to withdraw reservation from the articles.

Now-a-day, religious fundamentalism is a big challenge towards the development of any country in the world. Hence, strategies need to be developed to handle the rise of Islamic fundamentalism as well as Islamic extremists in Bangladesh who view any sort of women’s progress as well as public visibility as anti-Islamic.

Finally, there needs to be a fair distribution of development benefits and material resources. The same community should not get all the benefits again and again.
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(Halim, 2016: 15) [Will add later]


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