

The Empowerment of Women in Bangladesh: Not Just Rhetoric

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Summary

Successive governments in Bangladesh have formulated gender-sensitive policies and programmes to empower the women in the country. While these have yielded positive results, the country cannot rest on its laurels, as empowerment is a process as much as a goal.

Introduction

Women's empowerment is a core issue of contemporary development. It underscores the notion that women are active agents, not passive recipients of development outcomes. Indeed, without empowering women – half the world's population – national emancipation and development remain a far cry. Empowerment facilitates women's full and effective participation in political, economic, social and cultural life, making them stronger and more confident to take control of their actions and lives. It emboldens women to demand equality in their relationships with men within their families and the society. Evidence shows that the empowerment of women helps to create inclusive, open and prosperous societies.

International action in the 1990s provided opportunities to transform global opinion and forge a consensus in favour of the empowerment of women. In particular, the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) remains the most comprehensive documented global commitment to gender equality, women's rights and development. Furthermore, gender equality and women's empowerment are a standalone goal in the 2030 agenda and a cross-cutting issue amongst all of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Today, we recognise it as a necessary condition to the realisation of sustainable development for all.

Empowerment as a Concept

Indeed, empowerment is a complex concept that encompasses social, economic and political aspects of life. According to the World Bank lexicon (2009), empowerment is the process of increasing the capacity of individuals to make choices as well as transforming those choices into actions.¹ In a more material sense, D Narayan (2002) defines empowerment as the expansion of assets and capabilities to participate in, negotiate with, influence and control institutions that affect their lives.² N Kabeer (2005) has a general yet comprehensive definition. In her words, empowerment is the expansion in the abilities of

¹ See World Bank publication, 'What Is Empowerment?' 2009. <http://go.worldbank.org/V45HD4P100>.

² Narayan, D, 'Empowerment and Poverty Reduction: A Sourcebook', World Bank, Washington, 2002, p. 14. See also Batliwala, S, 'The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concept from Action', Population Policies Reconsidered: Health Empowerment and Rights, Harvard University Press, 1994, pp. 127-138.

individuals to make strategic life choices in a context in which this ability was previously denied.³

The Status of Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

Successive Bangladeshi governments have formulated policies regarding women's empowerment, integrating it into their overall priorities and respecting their commitments to global development goals. Since 1995, Bangladesh has been making strides in translating lofty promises into actions, having shaped its original women's development policies and plans of action in line with the BPA. To move forward, we must take stock of the progress and shortfalls in realising the goals that Bangladesh set for women's empowerment.

Socio-Cultural Context

Culturally and traditionally, two sets of social norms influence the position of Bangladeshi women: patriarchy and *purdah*. In a male-dominated, patriarchal social system in Bangladesh, men dominate women and dictate the terms of relationships through family, marriage and inheritance.⁴ Traditionally, Bangladeshi women stay within the confines of a family home, their activities limited to domestic work and childcare. In contrast, men work outside, support the family financially and control capital. This stereotypical role deprives the women of enjoying equal status vis-à-vis men. Contradictory to legislative norms, such practices are socially condoned as cultural norms, which lead to their perpetuation.

Women's empowerment in Bangladesh, a Muslim-majority country, is also constrained by the observance of *purdah*, which is the custom of veiling and segregating women. *Purdah* is long-practiced in Bangladesh and follows Islamic values and cultural norms. This tradition has far-reaching consequences on women's freedom, mobility, education, healthcare and societal participation. Many women find it difficult to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to lead a life of dignity while still maintaining *purdah*.

Apart from these two overriding social norms, others, such as early marriage, dowry and Shariah law, also affect women's development in Bangladesh. The Shariah-based personal laws that determine important matters of life, like marriage, divorce, custody of children, inheritance and the like, are widely seen as gender-biased.⁵ Early marriage contributes to a lower level of literacy among women, as well as a lower level of participation in economic activities. Furthermore, the dowry-based marriage system still victimises rural Bangladeshi women.⁶ In this practice, the family of the bride often has to pay a hefty amount of money and goods at the time of the wedding and, in many cases, even after marriage.

³ Kabeer, N, 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of the Third Millennium Development Goal', Gender and Development, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2005, pp. 13-14.

⁴ Parveen, S, 'Gender Awareness of Rural Women in Bangladesh', Journal of International Women's Studies, Vol. 9, 2007, pp. 253-254.

⁵ Concluding Observations of CEDAW: Bangladesh, 2011, UN document: CEDAW/C/BGD/CO/7, p. 3.

⁶ Parveen, Set Leonhäuser, I, 'Empowerment of Rural Women in Bangladesh: A Household Level Analysis', p. 8. <http://www.tropentag.de/2004/abstracts/full/382.pdf>.

Challenges to Overcome

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable success in advancing the cause of women under Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's leadership. Her actions on women's empowerment and equality are often seen as a model for other national governments. However, women are still far from enjoying their full autonomy and equality of treatment in their lives. The patriarchal and discriminatory attitude towards women emanating from social norms and religious practices still pervades.

Due to a lack of proper education and skills, Bangladeshi women only minimally participate in gainful economic activities or engage in political movements.⁷ Despite commendable advances in female education and gender parity in primary and secondary schools, high dropout rates and poor quality of education remain major concerns.⁸ Additionally, women and girls continue to suffer from various healthcare deficiencies, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, reports reveal disparities in wage structures between women and men in some sectors, even though such is prohibited by law.⁹ Plus, government initiatives to improve the situation of vulnerable women through various social safety net programmes have been found to be insufficient in actually meeting their needs. These issues perpetuate and continue to exist because of the women's traditionally low level of participation in political activities.¹⁰ Though the situation is steadily improving, as reflected in the increase in successful female electoral candidates, it remains a daunting task to ensure adequate and equitable participation. It appears that a lot remains to be done to empower women and bring them into the mainstream of developmental activities.

Affirmative Action by the Government

In the early 1990s, the Bangladesh government started a concerted effort to improve the status of women throughout the nation.¹¹ It understood that without the active women participation in all walks of life, the development aspirations of the nation, including the creation of a democratic and inclusive society, could simply not be achieved. In line with the provisions of the Constitution,¹² the government enacted and amended various laws to safeguard the interests of women, establish necessary institutions and formulate targeted policies for their advancement. It initiated specific gender-sensitive policies and programmes to empower women, and provide for them a rightful place in society with the ultimate objective of enabling them to become active agents of development.¹³

Policies and Programmes

Successive governments have continued to make gender responsiveness an essential element in long-term national development schemes. Women's issues were mainstreamed

⁷ See *Report on Monitoring of Employment Survey, 2009*, p 3. <http://www.bbs.gov.bd/Home.aspx>.

⁸ Concluding observations of CEDAW: Bangladesh, 2011, UN document: CEDAW/C/BGD/CO/7, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁰ Rashid, A T, 'Women and local government', *The Daily Star*, April 25, 2008.

¹¹ Bellessa, M, 'The Effects of Microlending on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh', p. 4. <http://marriottschool.byu.edu/emp/WPW/Small%20Part%202.pdf>.

¹² Articles 10, 28.

¹³ Bellessa, M, 'The Effects of Microlending on Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh', op. cit.

into key development strategies, such as the Five-Year Plans, Vision-2021 and Vision-2041. In the aftermath of the historic Beijing conference, the government formulated the National Women's Development Policy and the National Plan of Action, keeping with the spirit of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The policy and plan were both subsequently enriched, reflecting on the outcomes of the Fourth World Conference on Women, the Twenty-Third Special Session of the General Assembly, the 2030 Agenda for Development and SDG 5. Consistent with these strategies and policies, the government also strove to tackle challenges like child marriage, violence against women, trafficking and other crimes by enacting appropriate laws. Apart from enacting and enforcing laws, the government, in partnership with the civil society, has worked to generate social awareness about these vices.

Political Inclusion

Affirmative policy decisions played a large role in efforts to guarantee the political inclusion of women. These included the introduction of quotas in parliament and other constitutional bodies, and reservation of seats for women in local institutions and other decision-making bodies. Such measures have resulted in a considerable increase in the number of elected women in the political arena and local bodies.¹⁴ Apart from directly taking part in the elections, there are 50 reserved seats for women in the 350-member national parliament. Bangladesh today is perhaps one of the few countries in the world that has a female Prime Minister, a female Leader of the Opposition, a female Speaker, and a female Leader and Deputy Leader of the House. Women are currently serving as cabinet ministers and other high-ranking government officials, as well as in the police, armed forces, and as elected representatives in local government.¹⁵ The country can take pride in attaining this level of political empowerment of women.

Economic Outcomes

The government has invested significantly in building women-friendly infrastructure, providing skill-based education and training, and facilitating their access to information and communications technology and the job market. These efforts have resulted in the increase of female workforce in the domestic market from 26 per cent 2003 to about 36 per cent now.¹⁶ Bangladesh has not only increased female employment in the last two decades, but also cut the wage gap between men and women significantly. Almost half of the working women currently pursue unskilled and semi-skilled jobs in the agriculture, fisheries and livestock sectors. Only one-third of them are unpaid instead of the 70 per cent two decades ago.¹⁷ Women constitute most of the four million workers engaged in the garments sector. The rate of female entrepreneurship has also shown progress, especially in small and boutique-type sectors.

¹⁴ Bangladesh national report for UPR, UN document: A/HRC/WG.6/4/BGD/1, p. 6.

¹⁵ See Bangladesh National Report for CEDAW; UN document: CEDAW/C/BGD/8, 2015, p. 18.

¹⁶ See Solotaroff, Jennifer L, et al, '*Voices to Choices: Bangladesh's Journey in Women's Economic Empowerment*', International Development in Focus, Washington, DC: World Bank, 2019, p. xvii.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. xix.

Education Incentives

To improve female literacy in Bangladesh, the government has introduced various programmes, including distribution of free books for all primary level schoolchildren, free education for girls up until university, and stipends for girls in rural secondary schools.¹⁸ The government also successfully ran a Food-for-Education programme and a Cash-Transfer programme for poor households in the rural areas to attract female students.¹⁹ It has also reserved 60 per cent of primary school teaching positions for women.²⁰ These programmes have been reasonably successful in raising the enrollment of girls in schools, increasing class attendance, reducing dropout rates and deterring early marriage.

Health Initiatives

The government has made strides, both at the structural and programme levels, to address the health needs of women. It has established community and mobile clinics designed to expand healthcare outreach, including maternal health care at the rural level. As a result of effective family planning programmes, the number of births per woman fell significantly in the last two decades.²¹ An increase in the number of trained birth attendants, antenatal vaccination and progress in other health services has resulted in a considerable decline in maternal mortality. Expanded immunisation programmes, improved sanitation and access to safe drinking water, use of oral rehydration saline and vitamin A supplement to children have also generated substantial health gains for rural women of all ages.²²

Effective Government-NGO Collaborations

The government has effectively partnered with the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on specific areas of women's development. The role of micro-credit in the reduction of poverty, particularly for rural women, is globally recognised. Both the government and NGOs are running micro-credit, girls' stipend, social security, health and nutrition programmes for women and girls.

The government has also undertaken various social safety-net programmes to address the multidimensional challenges faced by poor women as a particularly vulnerable group. These include the Vulnerable Group Development Programme, the Vulnerable Group Feeding Programme, the Allowances Programme for Widowed, Deserted and Destitute Women, the Allowances for Poor Lactating Mothers, the Maternal Health Voucher Scheme and the Community Nutrition Programme.²³ These programmes have made positive contributions to the social status of women, their freedom and confidence, decision-making ability and political participation.

¹⁸ See Bangladesh National Report for CEDAW, UN document: CEDAW/C/BGD/8, 2015, pp. 18-20.

¹⁹ Ahmed, M, and Chowdhury, R, '*Beyond Access: Partnership for Quality with Equity*', Gender, Education and Development: Beyond Access Seminar, Dhaka, 31 January – 1 February 2005, p. 5.

²⁰ See Bangladesh National Report for CEDAW, UN document: CEDAW/C/BGD/8, 2015, p. 35.

²¹ The use of contraceptives has reached to 62 per cent, with a rapid fall in total fertility rate to 2.3 in 2010 from 6.3 after independence in 1971. See *ibid*.

²² Miaji, A B, '*Rural Women in Bangladesh: The Legal Status of Women and the Relationship between NGOs and Religious Groups*', Lund Studies in History of Religions, Lund University, Vol. 26, 2010, p 95.

²³ Bangladesh National Report for UPR, UN document: A/HRC/WG.6/4/BGD/1, p. 15- 16.

Recognitions and Awards

Bangladesh has topped the South Asian countries in gender equality for the third consecutive year and excelled in women empowerment in the Muslim world, second only to Indonesia.²⁴ The Global Gender Gap Report 2018 shows Bangladesh standing in 48th position among 149 countries in the overall Global Gender Index and 5th position in the Political Empowerment of Women Index.²⁵ As recognition for her contributions in the advancement of women in Bangladesh, Prime Minister Hasina was awarded the title of “the Planet 50-50 Champion” by the United Nations Women and conferred the “Agent of Change Award” by the Global Partnership Forum. She was recognised by Forbes as the “9th most powerful women in politics in 2017” as an acknowledgement of her people-oriented development priorities.

Conclusion

Bangladesh has undergone a significant transformation, with the female space steadily expanding over the past few decades. Many factors have acted together to achieve transformative outcomes in women empowerment in the country. Evidently, pro-women policies and programmes of the government and its partnership with the civil society have been crucial in delivering targetted developmental interventions. The contributions of the NGOs cannot be understated for bringing about a silent revolution among the womenfolk of the country. The fact that two women have led this Muslim majority country for the last 20 years is itself remarkable. This is extraordinary by any standard, particularly if one considers where Bangladesh started three decades ago. However, we cannot rest on its laurels. The country has a lot of ground to cover. It is not a job to be accomplished in a day, and this may be true for all countries. As we have known, empowerment is a process as much as a goal to achieve.

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²⁴ Islam, M S and Dogra, S, ‘Women Empowerment in Bangladesh: The Rise of the Other Half’, ISAS Working Paper 119. www.isas.nus.edu.sg.

²⁵ See Bangladesh national report for UPR, UN document: A/HRC/WG.6/30/BGD/1; 2018, p. 12.