

Research Article

Progress and Pitfalls of Women in Bangladesh: Structural Rigidities and Embedded Institutions

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made some progress in the status of women. This study suggests that progress in the status of women are largely due to the make ends meet and not the outcomes of policy reforms as claimed by the government. In the context of growing need and decline of familial support, women are pressured to engage in income generating activities. The options for women to make choices and to claim rights to decent employment have remained elusive and hence have been subjected to violence, injustices and dispossession. Despite government initiatives to reduce gender disparity and improve women's status, the inequality between men and women persists and challenges continue to evolve. The results of this study should contribute to the creation of policies and programs that can improve the status of women in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Progress in various social indicators related to women is mainly due to their economic empowerment accelerated by personal and family needs. Due to persistent poverty and the gradual erosion of extended family support, the roles, responsibilities and mobility of women are changing. Poverty is rooted in the lack of support mechanisms to meet the needs of the poor especially poor women. The rights of women will only be fully realized when institutional structures of society facilitate their economic empowerment (Kawewe, 2001). However, even when provided with some institutional assistance towards economic success, structural factors within families and society discourage such empowerment of women. The life of a woman in Bangladesh is dominated by a system of patriarchal social customs. The approach towards women has been opportunistic and contradictory (White, 1992). Institutions perpetuate male-female disparities. Despite the progress in the last few decades regarding women's health, education, nutrition and economic opportunities, women in Bangladesh are still far behind men (Tornqvist and Schmitz, 2009).

The prospects for women are limited by their traditional role imposed by society. Bangladesh has been on a growth track, as evinced by the increasing gross domestic product (GDP) to a decadal average of six per cent. The country has also advanced in the area of social indicators, despite one in every three people living below the poverty line. However, the socio-cultural perception towards women has delayed the process of such advancement as they represent approximately half the population of the country. There is no doubt that the incidences of poverty have decreased over the years but the rate of such reduction is slowing (Unnayan Onneshan, 2012). Moreover, poverty rates are the highest among women who are less prepared for the challenges they face, due to their limited access to education, jobs, health services and the like (Kabeer, 1991). Additionally, violence against women is a major barrier to their advancement in the country. Women's safety are not guaranteed and thus feel insecure everywhere (inside or outside of home). As a result, women are restricted in terms of educational institutions, labour force participation, and social activities.

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The institutional barriers rooted in the patriarchal social system have been maintained, partially, through increased violence against women (Hossain, 2007). Additionally the attempts at social resistance and efforts of women's movements have to a great extent been muted by the politico-power project of neoliberalism. The long established ideology amongst a so-called "civil society" has encouraged maintaining the status quo. The rhetoric of mainstreaming a women's agenda has achieved little while eliminating many women's organizations and creating new ones to implement controlled projects serving a set of agenda. As a result, the transformative agenda that took centre stage with the anti-colonialists, nationalists and feminist movements has been shelved and the women's agency and resistance have been disenfranchised. Thus, violence against women remains unabated and continues to rise, driven by imbalances of power and tolerated by existing social structure despite otherwise observed progress.

In most societies, powers wielded in the domains of politics, economy and religion are created through institutions. Institutions can be formal such as written laws, or informal such as norms, values and beliefs. These institutions simultaneously give control over resources and social functions to individuals and by doing so impact the quality of life available to women (Kabeer, 1998).

The progress in the status of women is a dynamic process, underlined by the structure, history, interventions and institutions, to name a few. Historically women have been more vulnerable as they have less power to control socio-economic, cultural and environmental trajectories (Kabeer, 2008; Reilly 2009; McMillan 2007). Their efforts to improve their status can be impeded by political processes. Against these backdrops, an attempt is made in this study to sketch the current status of women and provide insights that can be used for the advancement of women in Bangladesh.

Due to a variety of social, economic, religious and other factors women's status are lower than the status of men in Bangladesh. The status of women is very difficult to measure. Status of women is a multidimensional approach and can be described in terms of their political rights, health, education, economic independency, employment, security, and so forth. While there are many institutional and structural barriers that impede status of women in Bangladesh, the authors of this article has made an attempt to describe some of these indicators and compare them with the status of men.

Health Status of Women

Like many other parts of the world, women in Bangladesh are a disadvantaged group in terms of their health conditions. Millions of women still suffer from ill health as well as various forms of malnutrition. Although men and women in Bangladesh have some similar challenges with regard to health facilities, women and children in Bangladesh have greater needs. .

Health status of women (including infant mortality, child mortality, maternal mortality ratio) has improved moderately over the years due to the measures taken by the authority like strengthening national health systems, ensuring the survival and improved health of mothers, expanding immunization programmes, investing in improved reproductive health, making infrastructure investments etc. but, progress is not satisfactory due to the barriers imposed by the structure. Silence surroundings a reproductive right for women in this patriarchal society, change is needed so that the voices of women are heard (Sawalha, 1999).

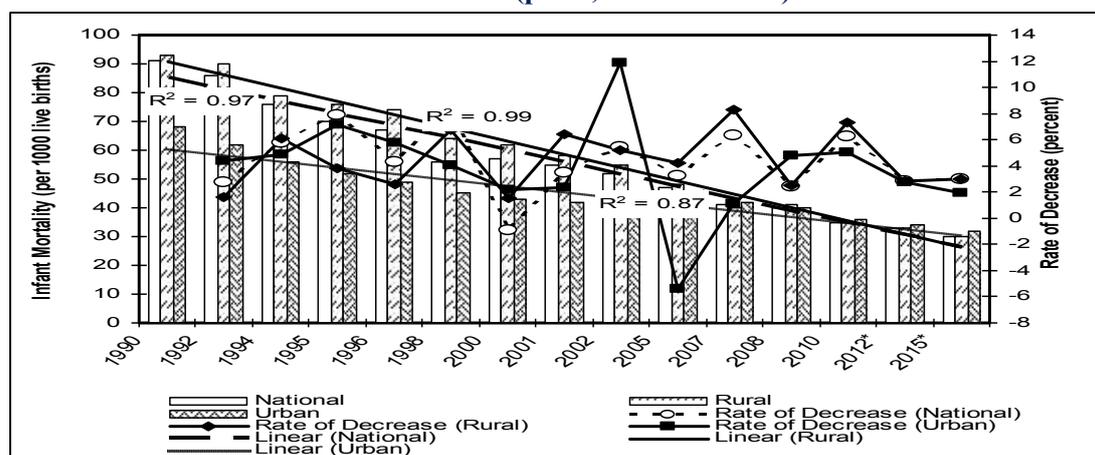
Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) for Females

Infant mortality rate (IMR) is an indication of the level in life security to infants under one year of age. There is, however, some progress in reducing infant mortality rate over the last few decades in Bangladesh but it still remains high, which is a concerning matter. Structural values remained a significant limitation on the extent and features of the infant mortality for females. Female children get less attention than the male children from the family as well as from society. It

is believed that male children will assume responsibilities to support the family in the future and they need better care than the female child. These patriarchal ideologies pull down the progress in reducing infant mortality for females to a desired level. The infant mortality rate in Bangladesh for females has been reduced from 91 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 35 per 1,000 live births in 2010 at a rate of decrease of 3.1 per cent per annum. Based on the historical track record, the infant mortality for females might stand at 30 per 1,000 live births in 2015, which indicates that the country is well on track to achieve the millennium development goal (MDG) of 31 per 1,000 live births. It is apparent that the infant mortality rate for females in the rural areas remains higher than that in the urban areas. In the case of rural areas, the infant mortality was 93 per 1,000 live births in 1990 which has been reduced to 35 per 1,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of decrease of 3.1 per cent. Continuation of this rate indicates that the infant mortality would be 30 per 1,000 live births by 2015. On the other hand, infant mortality in urban areas was 68 per 1,000 live births in 1990 that has reduced to 36 per 1,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of decrease of 2.4 per cent. Based upon the historical track record, the infant mortality might stand at 32 per 1,000 live births by 2015 (Figure 1).

An interesting finding here is that the rate of reduction in infant mortality for female is higher in rural areas than that of the urban areas. The effect of accelerated socio-economic change in the rural areas might be the reason behind it. Rural poverty has also decreased due to multiple effects. For example, there is an increased trend of flow of remittance (both internal and external) over the years which have resulted in increased consumption. Export has also increased; Bangladesh has become the second largest exporter of ready-made garments in the world, creating a huge impact on the employment situation, particularly for rural females. The agriculture sector has witnessed a significant change in practices, with changes associated with improved seed-water-fertilizer technology and multiple cropping in the same piece of land in the recent years. All of these factors, amongst others have created positive impacts in reducing poverty which resulted in such changes.

Figure 1: Current Situation and Future Projection of Infant Mortality for Female (per 1,000 live births)



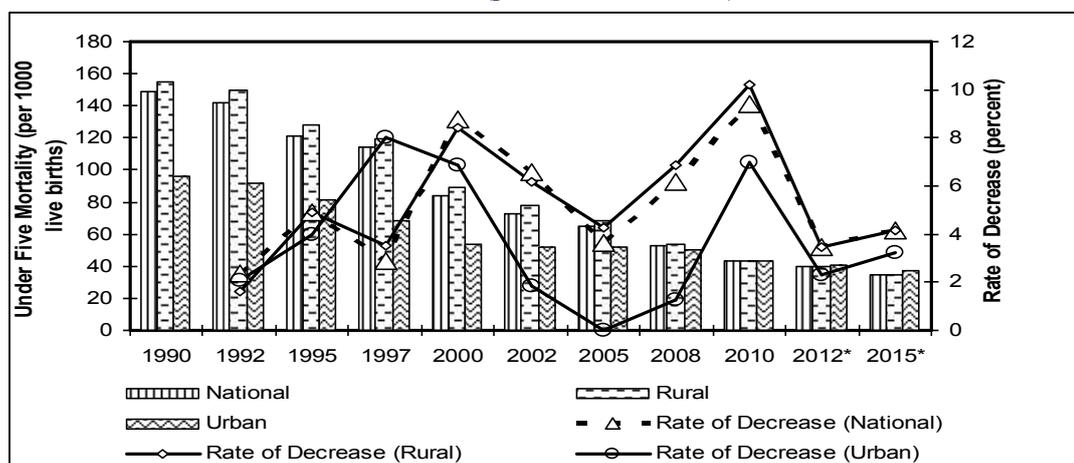
Source: Authors' calculation based on the *Report on Sample Vital Registration System* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011a.

Child Mortality Rate for Females

The child mortality rate is the number of deaths of children under five years per 1,000 live births in the concerned year. Despite considerable progress over the past two decades, child mortality in Bangladesh especially for female is still high. Structural barriers and taboos have played negative roles in providing female children access to health facilities since they are less valued than male children. Child mortality rate for females was 149 per 1,000 live births in 1990 which has decreased to 43 per 1,000 live births in 2010 at a rate of 3.6 per cent per annum. According to historical trends, if this rate of reduction remains the same, the child mortality might reach at 35 per 1,000 live births by

2015. This indicates that Bangladesh has already achieved the MDG targets for child mortality rate of 48 per 1,000 live births before the deadline of 2015. It is evident that, the child mortality rate for females in the rural areas is comparatively higher than that of the urban areas. On the other hand, this rate in rural areas has reduced from 155 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 43 per 1,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of 3.6 per cent. According to historical trend, if this rate continues the child mortality for females would stand at 35 per 1,000 live births by 2015. However, in urban areas child mortality has decreased from 96 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 43 per 1,000 live births in 2010 at a rate of 2.8 per cent per year. Continuation of this rate indicates that, child mortality might stand at 37 per 1,000 live births by 2015 (Figure 2). Like infant mortality, child mortality has also reduced at a more accelerated pace in the rural areas than in urban areas. The recent socio-economic development in the rural areas has made a positive impact on such improvements.

Figure 2: Current Situation and Future Projection of Child Mortality for Female (per 1,000 live births)

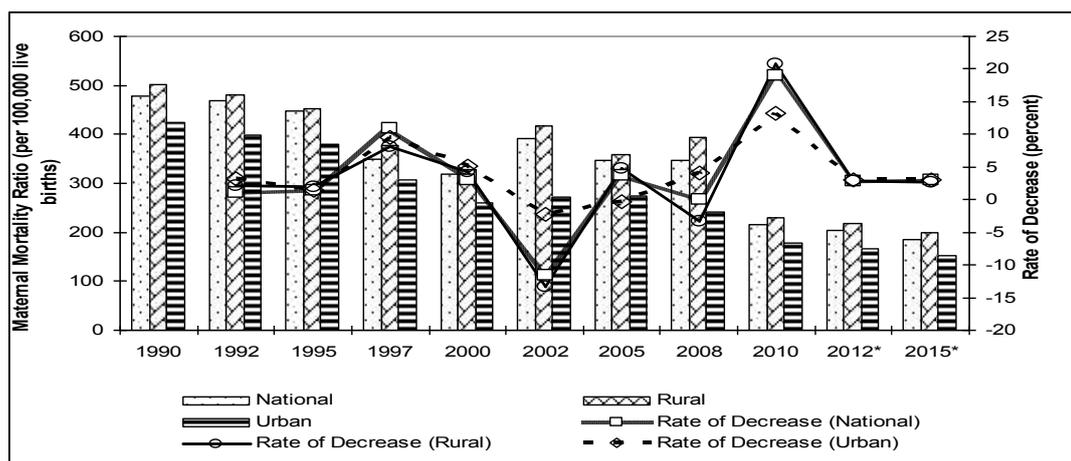


Source: Authors' calculation based on the *Report on Sample Vital Registration System* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011a.

Maternal Mortality Ratio

Maternal mortality ratio (MMR) is a very important mortality index for mothers who are exposed to the risk of death during pregnancy or within 42 days of termination of pregnancy (WHO, 1977). It is generally expressed as the ratio of maternal deaths during a given year per 100,000 live births during the same time period. Despite some progress, the maternal mortality ratio remains high. The achievements of desired targets are still elusive due to the mind set imposed by the patriarchal society. Women still face difficulties in seeking health services, and taking required food, during pregnancy due to the power of male dominated society. Maternal mortality ratio in Bangladesh has reduced from 478 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 216 live births per 100,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of 2.7 per cent. According to this historical trend, if this rate continues, the maternal mortality ratio might stand at 186 per 100,000 live births by 2015. This indicates that the achievement of the MDG (or MMR) target of 143 per 100,000 live births might not be possible by the deadline in 2015. Maternal mortality ratio is comparatively higher in the rural areas than that of the urban areas. The maternal mortality ratio in the rural areas has reduced from 502 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 230 per 100,000 live births in 2010 at a rate of 2.7 per cent per year. Continuation of this rate signifies that maternal mortality ratio would be 199 per 100,000 live births by 2015. In the case of urban areas, maternal mortality ratio was 178 per 100,000 live births in 2010 which was reduced from 425 per 100,000 live births in 1990 with the rate of reduction of 2.9 per cent per year during 1990-2010. If this rate of reduction remains the same, the maternal mortality ratio in the urban areas might stand at 152 per 100,000 live births by 2015 (Figure 3). Socio-economic development, effective application of modern medical care, women's empowerment have contributed to such reductions in maternal mortality ratio.

Figure 3: Current Situation and Future Projection of Maternal Mortality Ratio (per 100,000 live births)



Source: Authors' calculation based on the *Report on Sample Vital Registration System* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011a.

Educational Status of Women

Despite considerable progress in women education, women are far behind compared to their male counterparts. Socio-economic and cultural factors as well as institutional factors are largely responsible for such inequality towards the education of women. The improvement in female education is mostly due to income assistance programmes such as the government's budgetary allocation for girl's education, free primary education, massive stipend programmes and the food for education programme. Although national educational policy does not discriminate between men and women in extending educational opportunities, social norms and traditional values hinder the maximum use of these educational opportunities by women, especially those in rural areas in Bangladesh. Institutional and structural barriers have largely restricted women's education. The patriarchal mind set believed that, when women began to enter academies in large numbers, they began to challenge both the knowledge and social structures produced and perpetuated by men. Improvement in women's education status are discouraged and discriminated by processes that are designed by men.

Literacy Rate of Population (7 years and above)

Bangladesh has shown some positive signs in the area of literacy (*Literacy refers to the abilities to read and write text. Literacy is explicitly defined as the four strands of language- reading, writing, speaking and listening. A literate man can derive and convey meaning, and use his knowledge to achieve or a derive purpose that requires the use of language skills, either spoken or written*), especially for females, over the past decade. Due to some active initiatives and awareness, the rate of female literacy has increased at a more accelerated rate than the male literacy rate. Female literacy has increased from 40.8 per cent in 2001 to 53.9 per cent in 2010 at an annual rate of 3.57 per cent, while, for males, the rate of increase was 2.28 per cent per year during the same period at national level (Table 1). Additionally, the rate of increase in the percentage of literacy was 2.85 per cent for male and 4.0 per cent for females in the rural areas during the same period. On the other hand, in urban areas, it was 1.23 and 2.27 per cent for male and female during the same period, respectively. These high rates of increase for female literacy compared to their male counterparts have resulted in gender parity. If such improvement in female literacy continues, the gender parity at national level might be achieved by 2020, although this goal might be realised by the year of 2025 and 2018 in rural and urban areas, respectively. On the other hand, if these rates remain the same there, might be a gap

of 38.40, 42.12 and 28.01 per cent from the target of 100 per cent in National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) by 2014 at national, rural and urban areas, respectively for the female population.

Table 1: Literacy Rate of Population (7 years and above) by Sex and Locality

Year	National			Rural			Urban		
	Male	Female	GPI = Female/Male	Male	Female	GPI = Female/Male	Male	Female	GPI = Female/Male
2001	49.6	40.8	0.82	44.4	36.7	0.83	64.9	54.8	0.84
2002	52.8	44.5	0.84	49.3	41	0.83	67.3	58.8	0.87
2003	53.1	44.9	0.85	49.7	41.4	0.83	67.4	58.9	0.87
2004	53.7	46.2	0.86	50.2	42.9	0.85	68.1	60.2	0.88
2005	55.4	48.8	0.88	51.6	45	0.87	67	60	0.90
2006	55.8	49.1	0.88	51.9	45.3	0.87	67.5	60.5	0.90
2007	59.4	52.7	0.89	55.5	48.7	0.88	71.1	64.5	0.91
2008	60.8	52.7	0.87	54.5	48.4	0.89	71.8	65.4	0.91
2009	59.6	53.8	0.90	55.7	49.7	0.89	71.9	65.4	0.91
2010	59.8	53.9	0.90	55.8	49.9	0.89	72.1	66	0.92

Source: Authors' calculation based on *Sample Vital Registration System* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011

Adult Literacy Rate of Population (15 years and above) by Sex and Locality

The adult literacy rate (*Adult Literacy program offers not only instruction in reading, writing, and calculation but also provides information and skills to assist participants in obtaining employment, improving their productivity and reaching a better quality of life. These skills help participants to adapt to new workplace environments*) of women has increased with an accelerated pace compared to that of men. This higher rate of increase in women adult literacy over men has resulted in reducing the gender gap and increasing gender parity. Based upon historical trends, the rate of increase in adult literacy for women was 3.98, 4.30 and 3.58 per cent at national, rural and urban areas, respectively, from 2001 to 2010. If these rates remain the same, the rate of adult literacy in women might stand at 66.41, 60.51 and 89.02 per cent by 2015 indicating a huge shortfall of 33.59, 39.49 and 10.98 per cent from the millennium development goals (MDGs) target of 100 per cent for national, rural and urban levels. In order to achieve the target of adult literacy of 100 per cent for women by 2015, an increase in the adult literacy of 16.1, 20.16 and 6.49 per cent is required from 2010 for the national, rural and urban levels, respectively. Additionally, it is also evident that the gender parity has already been achieved in 2010 in urban areas. However, achievements of gender parity at national and rural levels demand more time. Based on historical trends, gender parity might be gained by 2018 and 2022 for the national and rural areas, respectively.

Table 2: Adult Literacy Rate of Population (15 years and above) by Sex and Locality

Year	National			Rural			Urban		
	Men	Women	GPI = Women/Men	Men	Women	GPI = Women/Men	Men	Women	GPI = Women/Men
2001	53.9	40.8	0.76	47.9	35.9	0.75	70.3	57.1	0.81
2002	55.5	43.4	0.78	51.4	39.1	0.76	72.2	60.7	0.84
2003	56.3	44.2	0.79	52.2	39.9	0.76	72.7	61.2	0.84
2004	57.2	45.8	0.80	53	41.6	0.78	73.8	62.7	0.85
2005	58.3	48.6	0.83	53.6	43.8	0.82	72	62.3	0.87

2006	58.5	48.8	0.83	53.8	44	0.82	72.3	62.5	0.86
2007	63.1	53.5	0.85	58.6	48.8	0.83	76	67.1	0.88
2008	61.3	52.6	0.86	56.6	47.9	0.85	75.2	66.6	0.89
2009	62.6	54.3	0.87	58.2	49.6	0.85	75.4	67.6	0.90
2010	62.9	55.4	0.88	58.4	49.8	0.85	71.6	75.5	1.05

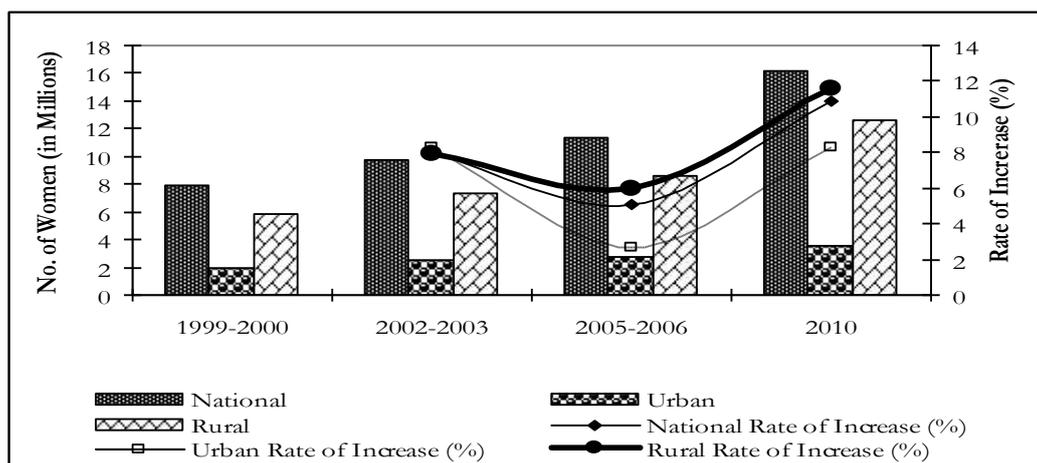
Source: Authors' calculation based on *Sample Vital Registration System* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011

Employment Status of Women

Employment of women has increased mainly due to the necessity to provide for themselves and their family. Women are pushed to engage in labour markets due to economic conditions. The participation of women in employment has grown with the increase of total population in Bangladesh. The total number of employed women has increased from 7.9 million in 1999-2000 to 9.8 million in 2002-2003 with an annual rate of 8.02 per cent per annum whereas this rate of increase was 5.1 per cent between 2002-2003 and 2005-2006. Additionally, this rate was 11.3 per cent between the year 2005-2006 and 2010 at the national level. Augmentation of the garment industry, improvement in women's education, advancement of micro-credit, higher inflation and poverty result in the growth of women in the workforce. The traditional structure of society is negative toward these improvements of the women in labour force.

The number of employed women in the rural areas has doubled compared to urban areas in 1999-2000. After a decade, in 2010, the rate of increase for rural women reached at 11.36 per cent per annum, whereas their urban counterparts have increased at 8.0 per cent. In urban areas, the annual rate of growth in women's employment has increased to 8.33, 2.67 and 8.33 per cent in 2002-2003, 2005-2006 and 2010, respectively, and 7.92, 5.94 and 11.63 per cent, respectively, for the rural areas. It may be due to the fact that the labour force participation rate for rural areas were very low compared to the urban areas.

Figure 4: Employment Situation of Women (15+ years)



Source: Authors' calculation based on various Report of the Labour Force Surveys of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2002, 2004, 2007, 2008 and 2011b.

Women and Poverty

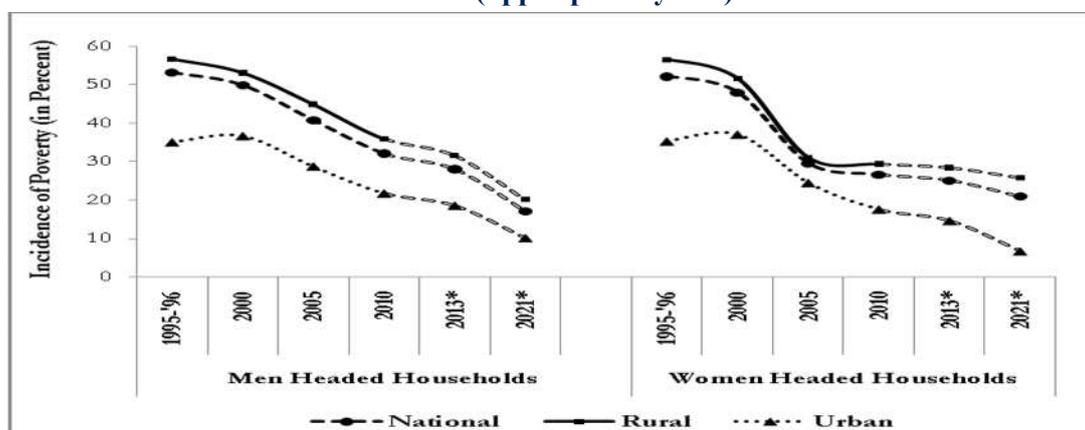
In spite of substantial progresses in the reduction of poverty in Bangladesh, a number of women are still living in poor conditions. A large number of women suffer from the imprecation of poverty. Their access to assistance is largely affected by the traditional socio-cultural and religious system. Evidence suggests that women's access to employment and education opportunities reduce the likelihood of household poverty but also the availability of resources in women's hands have a range of positive outcomes for human capital and capabilities within the household (for instance,

overview of this evidence in Quisumbing, 2003; Kabeer, 2003; Dwyer and Bruce, 1988). The situation is changing now and women are able to improve their socioeconomic conditions. However, while the state is functioning in a positive way, achievements are not enough due to the negative mindset of the patriarchal society on the empowerment of women.

The incidence of poverty, among female headed households has dropped from 29.5 per cent in 2005 to 26.6 per cent in 2010 with an annual rate of 1.97 per cent. Whereas, the incidence of poverty for male headed households has fallen from 40.8 per cent in 2005 to 32.1 per cent in 2010 with an annual rate of 4.26 per cent during the same time. The rate of reduction in the percentage of incidence of poverty was 3.27 per cent and 2.64 per cent per annum, respectively, for female headed households and male headed households between 1995-96 and 2010. The incidence of poverty in female headed households has decreased to 26.6 per cent in 2010 at the national level with an annual rate of 1.97 per cent from 2005. If this rate of decrease continues, the incidence of poverty in female headed households might decrease to 25.03 per cent and 20.85 per cent by 2013 and 2021, which is higher by 0.03 per cent and 5.85 per cent, respectively, than those of the targets of the present government (i.e. 25 and 15 per cent by 2013 and 2021, respectively). To achieve the targets of poverty reduction for female headed households within the established time frame (i.e. by 2013 and 2021), reducing the rate of poverty by 2.00 per cent in 2013 and 3.96 per cent in 2021 from 2010, respectively, at the national level might be required. On the other hand, if the decrease trend of poverty for male headed households (4.26 per cent per annum at national level) continues, then their contribution to the incidence of poverty might slide down to 27.22 per cent and 17.04 per cent by 2013 and 2021, which is higher by 2.22 per cent and 2.04 per cent, respectively, than the targets level of the current government. To achieve the targets of poverty reduction in female headed households within 2013 and 2021, reducing the rate of poverty by 7.37 per cent in 2013 and 4.84 per cent is required in 2021 from 2010.

The incidence of upper poverty line in rural areas has raised the overall poverty in the country. In rural areas, the incidence of poverty, in female headed households, has decreased from 56.6 per cent in 1995-96 to 29.3 per cent in 2010 with an annual rate of decrease of 3.22 per cent. In male headed households, the poverty has decreased from 56.7 per cent in 1995-96 to 35.9 per cent in 2010 with an annual rate of 2.45 per cent. On the other hand, in the urban areas the incidence of poverty has decreased from 35.0 per cent in 1995-96 to 21.7 per cent in 2010 with a rate of 2.5 per cent per annum in male headed households. Again, in the female headed households, at an annual rate of decrease at 3.4 per cent, poverty has decreased to 17.5 per cent in 2010 from 35.2 per cent in 1995-96.

Figure 5: Current Situation and Future Projection of Women Poverty by Household Head (upper poverty line)



Source: Authors' calculation based on various *Report on Household Income & Expenditure Survey* of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1998 2003, 2007, and 2011c.

According to the historical trends (rate of decrement 4.01 per cent for male headed and 1.1 per cent for female headed family between 2005 and 2010), with the current rate of decrease, the

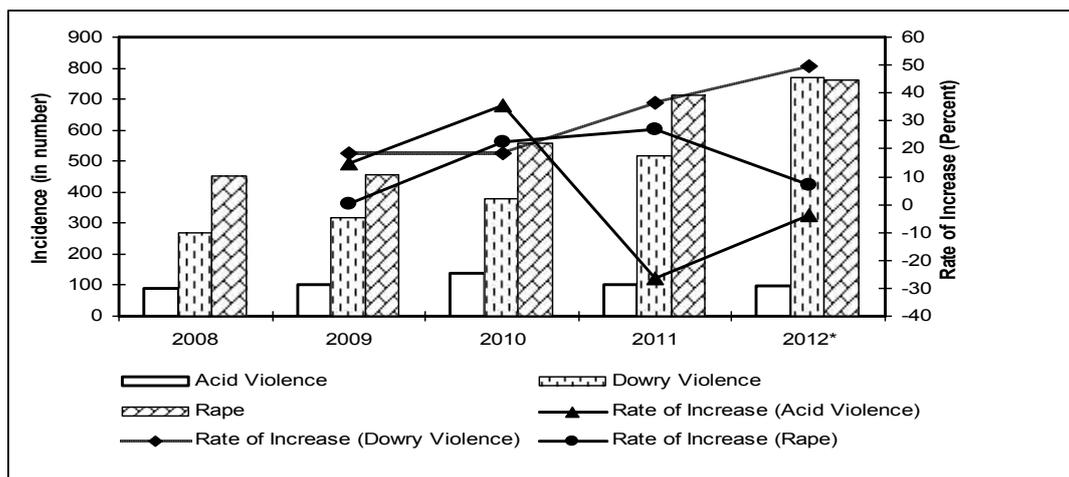
incidence of poverty might be 31.58 per cent and 20.07 per cent among male headed families and 28.34 per cent and 25.77 per cent among female headed families in rural areas by 2013 and 2021, respectively. On the other hand, it might be 18.5 per cent and 10.1 per cent for male headed family with the rate of decrement of 2.53 per cent during 2005 to 2010, and 14.5 per cent and 6.61 per cent with the rate of decrement of 3.35 per cent during 2005 to 2010, respectively, for female headed family at the urban areas during the same time period. It is evident that the incidence of poverty is higher in rural areas than that of the urban areas and the rate of decrease in poverty is also lower in the rural areas than that of the urban areas (Figure 5). Rural-urban migration is very much responsible for this trend. Such movements indicate either general improvements in the division, or outflow of labour, primarily from the poor households, to a distant growth centre e.g. Dhaka (Zohir, 2011). More specifically, rural poverty is the consequences of not having property, limited employment opportunities, poor literacy and lack of skills, along with the disadvantages rooted in social inequalities and political unrest. The incidence of poverty among female headed households is decreasing, but the rate of decrease requires more time, to achieve the targets at the national level as determined by the present government in its election manifesto (Figure 5).

Violence against Women

Violence against women has increased despite considerable progress in education, health, employment, poverty etc. along with awareness. Women remain vulnerable and insecure both in domestic and public situations. Violence is one of the major problems that present a threat to the security of girls and women and it is not a phenomenon peculiar to Bangladesh (SIDA, 2007). Women come out from their home to participate in a productive economy, but they are not protected from violence against them due to existing institutional and patriarchal systems. Violence is a product of social, cultural, religious and traditional values which perpetuate patriarchal attitudes at different levels of society and hampers the progress of women. Tolerance of violent acts is a major problem in Bangladesh that severely threatens the security of girls and women. More than half of the ever-married women aged 15-49 are reported to experience different forms of physical and/or sexual violence from their husbands, and one quarter of them have experienced it in the past year (National Institute of Population Research and Training (NIPORT), *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey 2007*, March 2009). Additionally, the practice of dowry, marriage at a lower age, and poverty all are associated with the higher likelihood of women experiencing and condoning violence (World Bank, *Whispers to Voices: Gender and Social Transformation in Bangladesh*, 2007).

Over the past three decades, the numbers of studies examining violence against women have increased dramatically as research into all forms of violence has slowly become a public health priority (Yuksel-Kaptanoglu *et al.*, 2012). A review of population based surveys around the world found that 10 per cent to 69 per cent of women in various settings have been physically assaulted at least once by an intimate male partner (Heise *et al.*, 1999). Domestic violence is a significant social problem in Bangladesh, receiving the attention of many national and international researchers (Hadi, 2009). The government of Bangladesh has made strides in aligning national legislation with international commitments to protect the rights of women and eliminate violence against women (Johnston and Naved, 2008). Women are, however, more prone to be victims of violence.

It is apparent that, violence against women has increased at a concerning pace over the last few years. Acid attacks against women have increased from eighty eight in 2008 to ninety seven in 2012 (January-November) with a rate of 2.56 per cent per year. On the other hand, dowry violence has increased from 269 in 2008 to 771 in 2012 (January-November) at an annual rate of 46.65 per cent while rape violence has increased at an annual rate of 16.85 per cent. It is evident that, among these violence acts, dowry violence is still increasing with an accelerated pace. These statistics are however, the tip of the iceberg; the reality of violence is far more widespread, as the ratio of reported cases to those that never enter the formal justice system is still very low. Due to the cultural attitudes and social taboos, few crimes are reported or investigated. This result indicates that there remains an enormous lack of awareness among people. This problem will continue to exist as long as it is tolerated by society, especially in poor and rural areas.

Figure 6: Violence against Women by Major Types

Source: Authors' calculation based on various Human Rights Reports of Bangladesh (Odhikar 2009, 2010, 2011, and 2012).

Impact of Social Institutions on the Status of Women

Feminist studies argued that social institutions played major role for gender inequality. They argued that patriarchal structures perpetuate gender inequality (Jutting and Morrison, 2005). According to Jutting and Morrison, social institutions can exert their influence in two ways (i.e., directly and indirectly). Traditions, customs and social norms can constrain women's activities directly – by not allowing them to start their own business, by refusing them jobs that involve contact with or managing men, or by simply not allowing them to leave the home alone. All these factors lead to an exclusion of women from entrepreneurial activities that are often the first step towards independence, self-esteem and liberty of choices. Social institutions can also impact of the status of women indirectly. Traditional institutions can hinder female's access to resources (land, credit and capital) and constrain the building of human and social capital. For example, in Bangladesh where girls are married between the ages of 15 and 18, parents may simply be unwilling to invest in the education of their daughters because the girls will leave parental households early, making the return on such invest very low or none.

A World Bank study on gender equality also emphasize priority on the need to reform institutions to establish equal rights and opportunities for women and men. According to the study social norms, laws, traditions and codes of conduct are the main cause of persisting discrimination against women in developing countries (2001), such as, Bangladesh.

Religion and the Status of Women

Religion significantly affects the status of women since it seeks to regulate the role of women in certain aspects of social and political life in a given society. The status of the women in most of the society is influenced by institutional norms, as well as culture and tradition, which are both largely determined by religion. Although, all religions agree on the respect for women and their crucial role in family life, especially with emphasis on women as mothers and wives. However, they do not advocate emancipation in the sense of total equality with men. In Islam, women cannot touch Quran during their periods of menstruation and Hindu women cannot enter the temple (Holm (1994). In Bangladesh, the voice of women is rarely heard due to religious beliefs. In Islam, women are prevented from playing a full and equal role to the man. The Quran stipulates that a woman shall inherit half than a man, and that a woman's testimony counts for a man's testimony. Although, Islam started out as socially progressive for women – banning female infanticide and limiting polygamy –

but it did not continue to advance. Few religious leader interpret religious text in a manner resulting harm to women.

According to Bangladesh Population Census (2011), 90.39 percent of the population are Mulsim, 8.54 percent are Hindu, 0.31 percent are Christian, 0.62 percent are Buddhist, and 0.14 are Others. Although Bangladesh is a secular country, Hindu women suffer from double oppression: as part of a patriarchal community in which women are discriminated against and as part of a minority community subjected to discrimination by Muslim fundamentalist. Bangladesh must not tolerate acts committed in the name of religion that harm a woman, regardless of their faith.

Women and Politics in Bangladesh

Having two prominent women, Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, as prime ministers of Bangladesh alternating between two political parties since 1991, one would expect women's participation in politics extremely high. In reality women's participation in politics is very low due to the fact that gender discriminations and violence against women are very high. Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia gained the political power through family connections. Sheik Muzibur Rahman (Father of the nation) was the father of Sheikh Hasina and late president Ziaur Rahman was the husband of Khaleda Zia. Ms. Rowhsan Ershad also served as leader of the opposition in parliament. Her husband was president General Ershad. Their high position in politics do not reflect the actual scenario of women's position in Bangladesh politics. Women's overall presence in the country's decision-making institution, the parliament, has never crossed more than 6.0 percent. As a result, a reserve seats system was introduce and currently, there are 50 reserve seats for women in the Parliament. These 50 seats are not filled through direct elections but through nomination of the major political parties that represent in the parliament. These selected women do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities with their male counterpart. It has been observed that the women occupying the reserved seats could only play a limited role with respect to the wishes of the ruling party. Therefore, the effectiveness of their participation in Parliament is very weak. Women's representation in the Parliament should be democratic so that their reputation and honour will rise and they will be able to take decisions according their wish instead of dependent on male members of their party (Rahman and Siddika, 2010).

Understanding the Problems

Women constitute approximately half the total population of the country. However, their participation in nation building activities remain constrained. This is not because of their disinterest or apathy, but because of the restrictions imposed upon them. The process is so pervasive that competent women are suppressed by men in power and not provided equal access to the political system. Due to institutional barriers in a male dominated society, women are not able to optimise their potentials and are stereotyped to be 'incompetent' in performing activities outside their traditional role in the households. As members of the family, society or country, their positions are suppressed behind males. When women start to play a role in decision-making, there is a shift in the power dynamics, which the perpetrators of violence perceive as a threat to their own status and as a result, act against women in a violent and degrading manner.

Despite certain improvements, women are held back by violence against them, which has increased in the recent years. Structural failures and patriarchal attitudes are the main reasons for such violence against women. Additionally, women are encouraged to be more active outside of the home because of personal and financial need, but the institutional mechanisms are not effective in providing security for them. The roles and representations of women created in society have led to the commodification of women. Representations of women, for example in advertising, has tended to highlight so-called beauty, size, physique, sexuality, emotions and relationships, but there is hardly any realisation that there are terrible consequences when women become objects. The so-called concept of 'modernity' influenced by the western culture of capitalism has also accelerated the violence against women.

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically determined unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men. As a result, progress is hampered. Violence is a product of social, cultural, religious and traditional values, which perpetuate patriarchal attitudes at different levels of society and restricts women's empowerment. Unfavourable policies and legal frameworks, weak implementation of laws along with the deep-rooted social and individual attitudes and behaviour are responsible for slowing the progress of the status of women. The state has numerous pronouncements as regards empowerment, stated in many papers and documents, but the institutions as well as patriarchal mind-sets perpetuate the acceptance of violence against women and children.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Institutions along with the patriarchal structure of the society in Bangladesh have given high value to the male as potential providers as well as perpetrators of family names over the years. They receive better treatment and access to education, nutrition and health care. Women, on the other hand, are commonly viewed in their reproductive roles giving an auxiliary status as economically dependent. However, recently, an increasing awareness has been witnessed for women in financial and decision making productive roles, creating more mobility open contributions to development. This study reveals that, the status of women has gained some progresses in various social sectors like health, education, employment, and poverty over the years but remains lower than the desired level. Additionally, violence against women still remains a concerning matter. Existing institutions and traditional patriarchal society largely control women's progress in areas such as education, health, employment, and poverty. Institutional barriers along with patriarchal society have slowed the desired levels of progress for women. Economic needs have sent the women outside of the home while institutions and traditional culture are not able to ensure their security. As a result, violence against women has increased.

It might be difficult to achieve the targets unless the government finds ways and means to address the structural bottlenecks identified here. The rights of women are inextricably linked and can only be achieved through complementary and collaborative action (French, 2001). The study also makes the following recommendations on the basis of findings:

A Multi-faceted Approach

Reducing violence against women requires a multi-faceted approach engaging institutions in the realm of politics, economy and society, contrary to what has been practised historically and is continued by the current regime. The societal sub-system involves interactions between people, who influence each other in the political arena in order to retain control over productive resources in the economic sphere. The political sub-system is a reflection of societal sub-system as the leaders attempt to arrive at or impose a set of collective goals. In other words, the societal sub-system defines players, the political sub-system inscribes rules and economic sub-system actualises the system of accumulation. Thus concerted efforts need to be holistic.

From an enabler to a duty bearing state

The heart of empowerment embodies rights. Any rights based approach requires the core commitment to equality, liberty and fraternity for everyone within the society. Thus a rights based approach is understood as a duty bearing framework. Therefore, rights cannot be ascribed without a well functioning state. A well functioning state is contingent upon the political settlement. The structural rigidities are such that the state is prone to be captured. For example, the questions of how and why violence against women continues to occur and even increase, despite a plethora of laws, aptly demonstrates the deficit in politics that guides the apparatus of the state that enforce laws. Ensuring protection of women by addressing the issues in a systematic and collective manner depends on the nature of the state and the polity.

Shift from target-based to a society-based approach

There is need for a shift from target-based approach to that of a society-based one. A target-based approach remains inapt and cannot deliver, as it is a liberal-individualist approach. The priority is not social solidarity, not the need to belong. Effective strategies on gender, including mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence, must be communitarian, targeting each one of the members of the society for amelioration as opposed to current practice of subjugation.

From trickle down policies to equality and fairness

The rate of progress only shows the percentage change in the level of status of women by ignoring the changes in distribution. Progress may not bring the intended improvements unless it is supported by policies that would reduce the initial level of inequality. If reduction in gender gap is the fundamental objective of development strategies in a country, the goal of development should be balanced between growth and equity targets. All people, especially women, cannot benefit from the modest economic growth in the country due to sexual discrimination. Additionally, institutions remain a barrier for the development of women. Revamping the policies in an effective manner to ensure equitable distribution of income and wealth must accompany those initiatives. Accelerating the rate of improvement in women's issues can be accomplished only by reducing institutional barriers at the source.

From regional disparities to balanced rural and urban development

It must be stressed that any design and strategy to improve the urban condition must correspond with design and strategy to improve the rural areas in order to stamp out the prevalence of the rural-urban inequality. In other words, tackling the issues of sustainable development and infrastructural distributions are crucial in improving the rural drift. Without ensuring a balanced development between rural and urban areas, the improvement of women's status will remain unattainable.

From reduced space and manufacturing consent to vibrant resistance and movements

The "mainstreaming" of the women organisations and the creation of new outfits in the name of civil society resulted into fragmentations, and voices of the excluded find neither space nor organisations to reckon with as resistances, contentions and protests lost considerable ground. These have led to formation of institutions and patriarchy, which are more subtle, opaque and repressive as demonstrated by rise in numbers of violence against women. Therefore, burgeoning need for reconstitution of the social fabric and the reinventing of collective action, challenging the reformulated socio-economic and political landscape.

Limitations

There are some limitations of this study which must be acknowledge. This study is based on secondary sources and we may not have exhaust all the available sources. As a result, we may not cover all aspects on women's status, such as, regional disparities.

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