

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH.

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© Ontario International Development Agency. ISSN 1923-6654 (print)
ISSN 1923-6662 (online). Available at <http://www.ssrn.com/link/OIDA-Intl-Journal-Sustainable-Dev.html>

Abstract: Women's empowerment has been pointed out as an indispensable condition to reduce poverty in developing countries of the world. Also, it has been closely related to democratization of those countries, in providing women with rights and opportunities equal to those which men have enjoyed so far. Despite its significance, the issue cannot be said to be solved easily, because there are many factors that prevent its progress.

In this regard, this paper aims to consider the multi-layered actuality of the issue of women's empowerment in Bangladesh, especially for sustainable development. For this purpose, it examines the present situation, with women's empowerment in Bangladesh, assesses the factors that influence the situation, and comments on the strategies and tactics necessary to help women in Bangladesh become empowered. Through the above analysis, the paper clarifies the structure and tasks, as a whole, in the issue of women's empowerment in contemporary Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Women, Development, Education, Empowerment, Political Initiative.

I. INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a country located in South Asia, almost completely surrounded by India. Until the mid-20th century, Bangladesh was part of India under British rule. It became an independent state in 1971 after a liberation war against Pakistan which had ruled Bengali region since 1947. The population of Bangladesh is entirely religious, consisting mostly of Muslims (90%), Hindus (1%) and other religions minorities. The main sector of Bangladeshi economy is agriculture, where 80% of the population are employed. The agricultural sector contributes about 25% of the country's gross domestic product. Bangladesh has struggled to come out from serious poverty situation. It ranks 72nd in the list of developing countries, according to the Human Poverty Index (HPI). The index takes into consideration such factors as education opportunity, livelihood level, education and knowledge of the population and social exclusions and deprivations.

Also, the population of Bangladesh is about 150 millions, and it is the most densely populated country

in the world. Population density is more than 900 people per square kilometre. About 1/3rd of total population is relatively young (10-24), and a rapid growth in population is, therefore, estimated during the following decades.

In spite of the fact that women constitute about 50% of Bangladeshi population, their social status still remains very low, especially, in rural areas. The women still face adverse conditions resulting in economic inequality and social oppressions, which make them one of the most deprived groups of the society.

The overall development of a country, first of all, depends on maximum utilization of its human resources. It has been recognized that no national development can be achieved without proper conditions for women development. It is true of Bangladesh, too. Because the national development of the country is being hampered, the government and many NGOs have made efforts in order to enable empower women's participation in the development process and to promote their empowerment.

II. BACKGROUND

The women of Bangladesh contribute significantly to their households and to the country's sustainable development. Most of the women workers are mainly involved in the informal sector of the economy. Within the formal sector, a large number of women work in export-oriented industries (e.g., garments), the source of 70 percent of Bangladesh's foreign exchange. A significant number of women also work as teachers, government employees, lawyers, journalists, and for nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Also, in the rural area huge number of women are also involved in postharvest activities, cow fattening and milking, goat farming, backyard poultry rearing, pisciculture, agriculture, horticulture, food processing, cane and bamboo works, silk reeling, handloom, garment making, fishnet making and handicrafts. Their activities, in turn, contribute to the transformation of the traditional values and gender roles of Bangladeshi women.

In spite of their above socio-economic contributions, it is difficult to say that gender equality has been realized in Bangladesh. They are still suppressed in all spheres of life. Due to patriarchal beliefs and male chauvinism in the country, Bangladeshi women continue to remain totally dependent on their male partners or parents. This situation is a direct result of historically produced beliefs, social norms, and values. There is a widespread gender discrimination, which causes the situation that women's contribution to socio-economic life has become ignored. Men in Bangladesh grasp sovereign power to control not only family but also society as a whole.

On the other hand, the majority of women are isolated and alienated in their homes. The work performed by women is not evaluated as highly as work by men, although very often the former is much harder and more time-consuming. Certainly a woman rarely earns money on her own. Therefore, she is often financially dependent: first on her father, then on her husband after she gets married, and then on her son, to assure economic security (Hartman, Boyce, 1983).

Studies conducted by the World Bank demonstrate that rural women in Bangladesh have limited access to household decision making, physical and financial assets. While having very low level of individual assets, they are heavily loaded with work, and are restricted in terms of mobility. They possess inadequate level of skills and knowledge, thus being very vulnerable to male dominance in any social sphere (Sebstad and Cohen, 2000: 44). In spite of the fact that the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights between men and women, women still suffer from violence and discrimination.

In recent decades the issue of women's empowerment has become very acute, especially, in developing countries like Bangladesh. Women's empowerment is of great importance, because it is a major precondition for elimination of world poverty and enhancement of human rights (DFID, 2000: 8). Moreover, on individual level, empowerment is significant for building a basis for social progress. The term of empowerment is used mainly in relation to improvements in women's condition. But it should be applied to any disadvantaged group of society.

Women's empowerment may be generally defined as a process for them to acquire equal rights including decision making that will enhance their worthy living. A broader definition of the term would be control over material assets, economic resources, and ideology. In the case of Bangladesh, it should be a long, multi-dimensional process that should encourage women to realize their own identity and rights in various spheres of life. But the most appropriate definition of empowerment would be the process of challenging the existing power relations and of gaining greater control over the resources of power

(Batiwala, 1996:23-24). Considering these facts, this research will investigate the present situation, with women's empowerment in Bangladesh, assesses the factors that influence the situation, and comments on the strategies and tactics necessary to help women in Bangladesh become empowered. Through the above analysis, the paper clarifies the structure and tasks, as a whole, in the issue of women's empowerment in contemporary Bangladesh.

III. SOCIO- CULTURAL FACTORS

By custom, Bangladesh is existing patriarchal society. The life of a woman in Bangladesh is, therefore, dominated by this social system. Such a system upholds a strict division of labor that controls women mobility, roles and responsibilities, and sexuality. Also, in Bangladesh where she traditionally derives her status from her family, her role contains the maintenance of her family as a social institution and as an economic entity. Accordingly, they must ensure childbearing and childrearing, and thereby the existence of succeeding generations. However, there roles, responsibilities, and mobility are increasingly changing due to the persistent poverty and gradual erosion of the family support.

It is necessary to note here that women in Bangladesh are neither free nor empowered. There are many factors that determine such status of women that may sound rather illogical and even sick to westerners, especially, their women. Indeed, it may be surprising to find out that many women in Bangladesh follow the traditional norms and do not really feel oppressed, discriminated, repressed and humiliated by their subservient status. And due to their religion, customs, traditions and historical experiences, these women naturally accept the situation that males are in charge of everything, accounting for most things and making most decisions.

However, all of the women in Bangladesh are not completely isolated and removed from the decision-making power. In fact, they are allowed and encouraged to make decisions, if they do not have family or husbands. Particularly, it is the case that their decisions determine their survival. Yet, the women, in all other cases, are supposed to ask their male relatives or husbands for taking decisions. For example, one study shows that "a women marital status is the most significant predictor of her empowerment. Unmarried women are much more likely to spend the income on their own" (Kamal & Zunaid, 2010). In such a case, the women who choose to act differently are typically viewed as weird and somewhat abnormal to the point of being obscene.

Although it is never said anywhere, one can infer that those women (who are empowered and emancipated to the point of making independent decisions) are viewed by their society as those capable

of independently picking a male for sex. While in most western countries a woman with a promiscuous lifestyle can be called a 'slut' at the maximum, in Bangladesh and other Muslim nations, woman with such reputation is doomed to rejection, mockery, and contempt even if she is suspected to lead somewhat immoral lifestyle. It appears that emancipated and empowered women in Bangladesh, just like in most other Muslim nations, are considered as direct competitors to males, namely as equal to males, and thus they are viewed as active sex seekers. It is something that a female, according to the laws, religion, customs, and traditions, is not supposed to be. Taking into account the fact that because of preferred arranged marriages in Bangladesh, women have little choice in picking their life partners, a women's 'value' is in her innocence, humbleness, shyness and meekness.

For example, if a woman is expected to be liked by everyone, she has to pretend to be an innocent and meek, and an underpowered little girl capable of doing only menial work.

In this regard, we can see some cases in which most of women are refuse to run business. One research reports as follows the case (when given the opportunity to be business owners operating VPP phone business) most women refused to run the business: "The women owners in this sample had many reasons to hand over the responsibility to operate the VPP to a male relative. The most frequently given reason was seclusion as a result of Purdah. As they are not allowed to stride outside their home, go to the market or invite unknown men to their house, they cannot operate the VPP. If they break these norms they would gain a bad reputation among other people in the village. Two women also say that it is unsafe for women to go outside after dusk. One woman, Dipti Roy, believes that women in general do not wish to operate the VPP because their families do not want the wives to work outside home. Male members put up such restrictions because they do not want a bad reputation among other people about their family members." (Linda Hultberg, 2008: 20).

The same research also illustrated that the women who did not have husbands/families gladly agreed to be in the VPP phone business and were well-capable of running and maintaining it. This example is not a rare case. In fact, it illustrates that women in Bangladesh are knowledgeable, capable, smart and talented enough to run the business and to make many other decisions on their own. Still, they engage in a form of 'downshifting' in which they have to pretend to be meek, shy, not being confident and feminine in order to get approval not only from their husbands, but also from their communities.

In short, it is the communities and husbands influenced by customs, traditions and religion that

think that the main duties of women are to raise kids and take care of the house. They prevent these women from being empowered. In order to ensure empowerment, therefore, it is necessary to take some drastic steps. For example, Abdin explains as follows: the process of empowerment requires transformation of structures of sub ordinance, control over material and intellectual resources, gaining decisions, making authority and reduction of gender inequality. This requires that women must recognize their strategic needs, their social position and understand how coercive it is. The women's strategic needs are here defined as to increase the women's bargaining capacity, reduce violence against women and make them gain more influence over decision-making. (Abdin, 2008).

IV. EDUCATIONAL FACTORS

In addition, it is worth notice that most uneducated males exhibit rather patriarchal, macho-like and male-centered views. Women are expected to spend most of their time at home taking care of males, children and the house. Highly educated males, on the other hand, have totally different views and generally support women's empowerment. Indeed, it must be partially explained by the fact that a well-educated male has enough resources to hire a housemaid, so he needs his wife not to be a house-keeper but an intelligent, smart and intellectual life partner. Dislike more empowered women who lead active lives. That is something a woman who spends all her time at home lacks.

As for the uneducated or poorly educated males, one can say that since they lack education to equip them with the tools of effective decision making and problem solving, they have to rely on dominant traditions, customs, rituals, religions and social norms in order to discipline their lives and to determine what is right or wrong (Proctor, 2007:136). It is the lack of education that causes them to doubt themselves to the point of not being able to determine whether it is good for women to make decisions, to take independent actions or to make money. Although many studies have not focused on this area, it is said that illiterate or poorly-educated males who naturally have fewer opportunities to succeed in life may feel rather uncompetitive in the society. Therefore, it is natural for them to act in such a way that a woman surrounded by them is put in an environment where her choices are limited and where she cannot really pick any possibly a future husband.

If a woman is permitted to work, to run her own business or to participate in politics, she will naturally meet more people, more males and thus may abandon her poorly educated or illiterate husband. Therefore, it is in the best interests of the illiterate to support any tradition that tells women to remain only at home, not

meet or communicate with other males and not even appear on the street without an escort. In these cases the illiterate and poorly educated face no competition from other (more successful, more educated) males. So they do not need to change anything about themselves.

Poorly educated women also lack the tools necessary for independent decision-making and problem solving. As a result, they naturally may be hesitant to take risks and exercise their right to empowerment or actively pursue equality with males. Lack of education means lack of confidence for women. Therefore, the illiterate or poorly educated woman tends to shift her responsibility on the male and assume a 'traditional women's position. An educated female naturally will have various decision-making and problem-solving skills she gained at an educational institution. And she will want to use those to benefit herself and her family members. Naturally, she will seek employment outside her house, if it brings more money, which can be considered as representation of women empowerment.

Currently, there are some positive changes in Bangladesh with respect to education, however. In brief, Bangladesh is gradually moving towards country-wide empowerment. In this relation, Kamal and Zunaid said: "In Bangladesh, educational levels have also increased among women. From a mere 25.8 percent in 1991, the current literacy rate is 43.4 (BBS, 2002). It is expected that as educational levels are enhanced, women will have increased agency as well as negotiating powers both at home and at the work place. Other covariates of empowerment for example socio- economic status, regional variations, religious affiliation may also have an effect on the empowerment status of women." (Kamal & Zunaid, 2010: 4).

One of the most important steps and initiatives to increase the women's empowerment in Bangladesh is to improve education among both men and women. Particularly, the effect of secondary education is highly significant for empowering women. Since 1993, there has been an increase in the enrollment rate among school-age. Upon reaching the adolescent age when girls tend to get married, their school attendance rate drops. Accordingly, the government has been taking serious steps aimed at the raise of marriage age for girls. Furthermore, the government started policies such as the creation of additional employment opportunities, social movement against the dowry system, enhancing the value of the female children in the society, and the creation of valuable incentives for girls who complete secondary education.

What is more, the government introduced a policy for free education at the secondary school level in 2005. Although it will take some more time until visible results may be seen, this may lead to many women with secondary education, a change in their

marital ages, and yield many women for the employment sector.

Clearly, the above examples indicate that education is vitally important for assuring empowerment among women's in a sense that education affects both males and females.

V. ECONOMIC FACTORS

The overall economic changes that have taken place in Bangladesh are expected to drastically affect the Bangladesh people, traditions, customs, and the dominant religion. In other words, money has certainly turned into the people more independent from their culture and religion. It is for this reason that one can expect some drastic social changes, when the economy of Bangladesh is improved and when the business owners in search for greater profits want to hire more employees including women. It can be said that a similar situation seen in Western nations like the USA is taking place in Bangladesh.

Prior to the World War II, American women seldom worked, and the society generally supported the 'tradition' of a male being the main bread-winner. During the WWII, however, many male workers became unavailable because they left for European front. At that time most of companies offered works for women. Indeed, instead of increasing the salaries of workers and thus increasing the cost of the products, women were employed. Labour provided by women was cheap, and it was more practical and easy to persuade the society that women's labour is great for American societies as well as the industries. As a result, the companies were willing to employ them with the consent of society. Even after the WWII, few companies were going to fire them, as women proved to be as capable and effective workers as males (Mohini Giri, 2005: 212).

In the recent years participation of women in the workforce of Bangladesh has significantly increased. In particular, the garment sector is a field where the majority of women are employed. Women workforce in this sector constitutes about 90% of all employees, which is equal to about 10 million people.

One of the most significant steps the government has taken in order to enhance women's empowerment is to increase their participation in the labor force. Except for the garment sector, the government has tried to introduce jobs that would be applicable only for women. These may be exemplified by propositions from Ministry of Agriculture. It introduced positions of poultry farmers and vegetable croppers to be reserved for women only. In both private and public sectors, the posts of primary and secondary school teachers were distributed among women. Other examples are presented by the National Health and Welfare Ministry, which employed women as family planning educators. Creditable work of various

non-governmental organizations (NGOs) made it possible for women to occupy workplaces such as road building, micro-credit loans, and guarding tree plantations that have never been applied to women before.

VI. POLITICAL FACTORS

Women's role in decision making process is one of the most important points of attention in the movement for their empowerment. Among all, women participation in political life of the country plays one of the central roles in their advancement. Without active participation of women in the political life of the country, and introduction of women perspective in issues regarding equality, role of women in the society, it must be difficult to achieve the desired result for them.

In this regard, political initiatives are also very important for women empowerment in Bangladesh, because they provide a centralized initiative aimed at some nation-wide changes. In this case the government might use different tools that will contribute to the women's empowerment. For instance, it may support the socialist-communist methods that were originally used in the USSR and throughout the former Eastern Block, thereby enabling to have empowered women earlier than the Western world. In addition to the governments initiative to increase basic education (even at present the former Soviet Union nations have among the world's highest literacy rates), the principle, "those who do not work, shall not eat" must be important, because it implies that all men and women are supposed and expected to go to work. Those who could work but who did not work subsequently were openly criticized in the local newspapers and other government controlled media. Briefly speaking, a sort of authoritarian method may be rather effective in bringing women's in the workplace. And the males must be persuaded to believe that their wives would make the household richer. At the same time, the women must be conscious that working outside home would make them more emancipated, empowered and free. Although the government in Bangladesh is not communist, it may need to take some, perhaps initially unpopular and counter-religious, steps to make spread the idea that "women working outside of their houses are normal". The government needs to carry on propaganda which depicts working women as a faithful, loving and caring mother of her children, and a trustworthy wife who earns a living. As a matter of fact, such an initiative by the government has already been witnessed in recent Bangladesh.

In addition, participation in local governments can be the first significant step to achieve the universal goal. Local governments are an intra-sovereign administrative unit within a sovereign state. They deal

mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan, 1997:92). In political dimensions the local governments are concerned with governance of a local area constituting a political unit.

The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh recognizes the basic and fundamental rights of all citizens irrespective of gender, creed, cast, religion and race. It also makes provisions for promoting causes of the backward sections of the population (Ahmed et al, 2003:14). The government has implemented a number of important articles that should pay a special attention to women representatives in democratic local governments. The nation puts no legislative barrier in the way of promoting gender equity in the sphere of social, political, and economic activities. The constitution gives guarantee of equal rights to women and also makes special provision for providing all necessary protections to backward sections of the society (Islam, 2000: 112). Thus, women have acquired a justifiable place in rural political institutions that can raise issues regarding their marginalized position.

In 1995 Bangladeshi government initiated the Local Government Second Amendment Act, which set a milestone towards equal participation of women in the political power structures. This amendment conditioned the distribution of seats to women in local level elections. This is an innovation in providing a new structural framework for women's participation in political decision making of the country, thus bringing women to the center of local development and setting new grassroots level leadership. There is a substantial need for women's representation in government, because governmental and NGO's measures do not sufficiently address all the need for women's empowerment in the country.

In this regard, the importance of government action primarily depends on the government's ability to quickly reach all parts of the country with clear messages. The government might post posters such as "Woman, your country needs your work!" Also, the government can run messages in the air (through radio and TV). It can spread the news through the print media, too, using different tools of influence in order to assure that not only women understand the need to work but also the men would feel fine with their women leaving the house on their own!

Indeed, "To ensure the participation of women in the said process they need to be empowered mentally, economically and politically. That is why modern social science termed women development as the Empowerment of Women. Empowerment of women is linked to the total human emancipation." (Abba, 2009). In other words, in order to overcome the current problems and to improve the status quo, it is necessary to assume that economic and political

changes as well as social changes should be achieved through various social programs under government's initiative which help Bangladesh families adjust to women's empowerment.

VII. CONCLUSION

It is worthwhile to note that women's empowerment is only in the embryonic stage in Bangladesh. In short, it cannot be said that women in Bangladesh are really empowered in comparison to women in the western world. The main barriers to empowerment appear to be social and cultural norms as well as the opposition from their husband's attitude and the influence of the norms on them.

The article noted that women's in the absence of their husbands can work on their own, make money, and plan their expenses to exert problem-solving abilities. And Education seems to play one of the most important roles for women's empowerment, as it has been observed that the more educated the couple, the more tolerant the husband is to her empowerment. In reverse, uneducated husbands are apt to reject women's empowerment, presumably because the former continuously wants to have severe control over the latter. If women are allowed to leave her house, they might meet more educated/richer males, which must damage male's status supported by traditional order.

The economic impact is another extremely important factor that can influence women's empowerment. In this sense, the increase of business through economic cooperation with foreign countries, and investments from abroad is likely to stimulate the women in Bangladesh to the extent that they, even if not all, effectively succeed in the world.

Finally, the political initiatives can certainly speed up various social programs aimed at providing women's empowerment in Bangladesh. It is already witnessed that the government has tackle such tasks.

The current situation over women's empowerment in Bangladesh may be bleak, but when approached from educational, economic and political improvements, the women's empowerment issue in Bangladesh will not remain unsolved. The women, then, may enjoy their lives to the fullest, exercising all their rights.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I want to thank all women who helped me understand the notion of women empowerment in Bangladesh better and more profoundly.

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