

Birds in a larger cage

ATIUR RAHMAN¹

ISMAIL HOSSAIN²



Women's participation in society and the economy lags far behind the rest of the population. Traditional social and cultural practices and the country's archaic laws and customs limit their achievements and perpetuate their subjugation. They cannot vote or own land, they are underrepresented, less educated, more ill, worse paid, more poor and their security is under permanent threat. Women are like birds in a cage.

Women cannot exercise their voting rights

Adult women enjoy the franchise in Bangladesh, but they cannot always exercise their voting rights in many cases because of strict religious prohibitions (*fatwa*), long distances to polling centres and a poor transportation system. Despite these impediments there was higher voter turnout in the national elections of 1996 and 2001 suggesting greater participation by women. However, there are only six directly elected women members in the 300-member Parliament. This is even lower than the earlier parliament, which had eight such women members.

The government took a significant step towards female empowerment by reserving one-third of the seats in local government for women. But this opportunity could not be translated into real political power because of the poverty and insecurity of many of the women members, the burden of their household chores, the short-sighted policy of committee chairmen and impediments created by unsympathetic male colleagues such as circulating malicious rumours about women members.

The socio-economic gap

Education

There are major differences between men and women in many areas. The adult literacy rate of women is only 49.5% as against 67% for men. Various governmental and non-governmental education programmes focused on women have facilitated the progress in women's education observed in recent years. Still the difference in education level between male and female remains wide.

Student enrolment at various levels of education has a pyramidal structure as the number of students falls as the level of education rises. This tendency is even more pronounced in the case of women; very few are college-educated.

Health

Although there has been some improvement in women's health and nutrition in recent years, the suffering and deprivation in these areas are still glaring. The average life expectancy of women is marginally lower than that of men as 60.5 years compared with 60.7 years. The incidence of sickness is much higher as 148/1,000 for women as against 136/1,000 for men.

Landless

Women are at a major disadvantage in terms of access to and control over resources. In rural areas the most important asset is land, but the laws of inheritance treat men and women differently in terms of land distribution. The Muslim law of inheritance allows a daughter only half the property of that of a son. Women under Hindu law of inheritance are always deprived of property. Women who own little or no land cannot get access to other types of resources. For example, they are less able to borrow from the formal credit market, as borrowing requires collateral.

Less employment, lower wages, worse jobs

The labour force participation rate of women is much lower than that of men – 50% in the case of females compared with 77% in the case of males. The types of employment of women are also different from those of men. Most women (77%) are engaged in household work while most men (43%) are self-employed. While 8.7% of women work as paid employees, the corresponding number for men is 14.4%. The differences are caused, to some extent, by the special problems faced by women in taking outside employment. It has been observed that women suffer from discrimination in wages and promotion, lack of adequate transportation and lack of access to appropriate health care and childcare facilities. Overtime work, which often involves travelling at night, can be dangerous; there have been several attacks on women who were on their way to or from work. Sexual abuse at the workplace by supervisors or bosses is another problem. These factors discourage women from seeking paid employment and cause those who do get jobs to leave them prematurely.

Under the threat of acid

Violent crime is a growing problem in Bangladesh and women are more often than men its victims. Rape, murder, prostitution, attacks by hijackers and purse-snatchers, incidents of teasing, demanding sexual favours and even acid-throwing in the streets make women's lives insecure both in and outside their homes. This insecurity limits their freedom of movement and thus their life and occupational choices. Rape seems to be the most frequent type of violence against women; victims suffer long-lasting physical and mental trauma or even permanent disability. While married women are more often the victims of murder, acid attacks, physical assault, dowry-related crimes, religious restraints and suicide, unmarried women suffer mostly from rape, kidnapping, trafficking and prostitution.

1 Senior Research Fellow, BIDS, and Chairman, *Shamunnay*.

2 Professor, Department of Economics, Jahangir Nagar University, and consultant, *Shamunnay*.

In a good number of cases the perpetrators of these crimes are acquainted with their victims. In the case of murder and dowry-related violence, the perpetrator is often the victim's own husband, presumably the person with whom she is most intimate.

Feminisation of poverty

The incidence of poverty is greater among women than men, as shown by several socio-economic indicators. There has been an increase in the country of the number of households headed by women. Female-headed households are, in general, poorer than male-headed households. The average income of female-headed households is only 55% of the average income of poor households as a whole. Women are as a group the poorest of the poor.

The increased feminisation of poverty poses a great challenge to policy-makers because poverty-alleviation measures have failed to improve women's economic standing despite having a strong focus on women's issues. Women's lack of access to assets and resources and their general social and economic backwardness have been responsible for this worrisome situation. Moreover, some benefits of poverty-alleviation measures intended for women have flowed to other members of their families. In some cases, the micro-credits given to women are in fact used by men to repay other debts or pay a dowry. In a credit-starved economy where females have greater access to micro-credit than male family members such misdirection is probably inevitable.

Low funding for women's programmes

Funding for women's programmes in the national budget is disappointingly low. Development projects that have direct bearing on women have received lower allocations. For example, in the 2000-2001 budget, the agriculture sector, where most women are engaged, has only 44 out of 186 projects that benefit women directly. Together, these projects claim only 31.6% of the funding allocated to agriculture. The allocation in other sectors is similarly biased against women.

No right to have rights

Women are discouraged or prevented from exercising their legal or natural rights. They often are not given *moharana* (an agreement in every Muslim marriage to pay the bride a sum of money either in cash or kind) or alimony. Women are strongly discouraged from joining any organisation, including NGOs, or working outside their homes. These restrictions indicate that men still want women to stay in the confines of their homes performing traditional roles. However, there is a brighter side of the story as well. Myriads of women groups and organisations have been formed that are making substantial efforts at reducing their un-freedoms.

Nevertheless, women in Bangladesh are like birds confined in a larger cage! ■

References

Pratima Paul-Majumdar. *Jatiya Budget Nareer Angsha (The Share of Women in the National Budget)*. Bangladesh Naree Progoti Sangstha, Dhaka, 2001.

Atiur Rahman and M. Ismail Hossain. *Social Watch "Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh and Unnayan Shamannay"*, Dhaka, 2001.

Unnayan Shamannay
<shamunnay@sdnbd.org>