

Gender, Social Justice and Sustainable Development

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An Asian Perspective

Edited by

Tania Haque and Jamila A Chowdhury

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Dedicated to-
All women who sacrificed their lives and chastity
during our War of Independence in 1971

CONTENTS

List of Figures.....	ix
List of Tables.....	x
Note from the Editors	xi
Contributors.....	xiv
Chapter 1	1
Gender Mainstreaming: Gender, Social Justice and Sustainable Development—The Asian Perspective Ratna Ghosh	
Chapter 2	23
Sexual Harassment: A Glass Ceiling Barrier to Gender Inclusive Sustainable Development in Bangladesh Tania Haque and Jamila A. Chowdhury	
Chapter 3	50
Upholding Human Dignity, Empowerment, and Equality: A Case of Dalit Adolescent Women in Nepal Ravi Shankar Rajaratnam and Mokbul Morshed Ahmad	
Chapter 4	78
Women’s Political Empowerment and Economic Growth: Evidence from South Asia Shabnaz Amin and Ashad Ull Haque Akash	
Chapter 5	104
Impact of Patriarchy on Left Behind Wives of Rural Migrants: A Case of Bangladesh Kazi Shek Farid and Mohammad Jasim Uddin	

Chapter 6	130
The Role of Male Editors in Advancing the Educational Cause of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)	
Pratiti Shirin	
Chapter 7	151
Shaming Punishment for Rape: Rethinking Deterrent Punishment from a Societal Perspective	
Shrabanti Dutta	
Chapter 8	173
Compensation Before, During and After Rape Trails in Bangladesh: Loopholes in the Existing Practices and Future Trajectories	
Ali Mashraf and Farhana Helal Mehtab	

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Global Gender Gap ranking of Bangladesh	7
Figure 2.1: Teenage women- the most vulnerable to experiencing Sexual Harassment.....	38
Figure 2.2: Poor response to Sexual Harassment in tertiary educational institutions of Bangladesh.....	40
Figure 3.1: Levels of empowerment from a dignity perspective	71
Figure 4.1: Conceptual Framework	89
Figure 4.2: Women's Political Empowerment of Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, and India	96
Figure 4.3: Women's Political Empowerment of Afghanistan, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka.....	97
Figure 5.1: Thematic map based on reflexive thematic analysis	115
Figure 7.1: Reported rape incidences for the last 10 years (2015-24)	153

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1: Gender-based reasons for treating girls differently	62
Table 4.1: Notations and descriptions of variables	88
Table 4.2: Hausman Test	90
Table 4.3: Summary of fixed effect and FGLS	91
Table 4.4: Summary of diagnostic tests.....	92
Table 4.5: Robustness checking results	93
Table 4.6: Women’s power index score of South Asian Countries- 2023	94
Table 5.1: Brief socio-demographic profile of the participants	117
Table 6.1: The number of girls’ schools and number of students by region in 1882	138
Table 8.1: Penalty against rape offences under special law.....	176
Table 8.2: Minimum and maximum compensations prescribed under NALSA’s Compensation Scheme for Women Victims/Survivors of Sexual Assault/other Crimes, 2018.....	185

NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

This edited collection offers valuable contributions to the discourse on gender and social justice in the context of sustainable development in Asia, with a special reference to the South Asian context. The eight chapters of the book address specific emerging issues to highlight missing elements in current literature, offering opportunities to enhance existing knowledge. Topics include gender mainstreaming, sexual harassment, human rights, political empowerment of women, and the role of positive masculinity and patriarchy, in facilitating or hindering gender inclusion in marginalized societies. This collection of conference papers also sheds light on cross-cutting criminological approaches to fight violence against women. Each chapter aims to highlight gaps in contemporary literature and provide new insights for advancing gender parity and social justice on various critical issues.

In the first chapter the Distinguished Professor Emeritus Ratna Ghosh at McGill University, Canada indicated a lack of gender mainstreaming as a major barrier to women empowerment in Bangladesh. Although Bangladesh attained remarkable success through a sharp decline in child mortality, gender parity in primary and secondary education, and reduced child marriages, still pockets of inefficiencies exist in gender mainstreaming due to insufficient laws, a lack of awareness among women, and other civil society activists working for women empowerment in Bangladesh. As a practical example, Dr Tania Haque and Dr Jamila A. Chowdhury in their well-written second chapter demonstrated how an incomplete legal structure is perpetuating sexual harassment against women at workplaces, educational institutions, and other physical or virtual public and private spaces to create a glass ceiling barrier to their progress and contributions towards sustainable development. Interestingly, depicting a survey result the authors indicated that women who vibrantly protest against sexual harassment such as slapping or scold loudly to perpetrators get more support from their surroundings. Hence, women have to raise their voices to get empowered.

Analyzing a case study on underprivileged Dalit adolescent girls in Nepal the author of the third chapter Mr. Ravi Shankar Rajaratnam explained

how the dignity of women is often overlooked in the empowerment discourse. A lack of dignity through adverse social discourses may create a feeling of self-helplessness to hinder women's progress. Emphasizing dignity as a precondition for the empowerment of Dalit women the author proposes a three-tier model of empowerment based on dignity: the stage of understanding dignity, the stage of recognizing dignity, and the stage of upholding dignity. These three stages will improve the self-esteem of women, aware them of their rights, and grow their agency for empowerment and progress. In the next Chapter Professor Shabnaz Amin applied a rigorous quantitative analysis of published data from 1980 to 2021 to establish a positive correlation between women's empowerment and economic progress in the South Asian context. Hence after having a micro perspective on women empowerment in a particular community in Chapter 3, in Chapter 4 Professor Shabnaz along with her co-author urges a macro policy response to promote women's empowerment for long-run sustainable development in the South Asia region.

Following the notion of intersectionality raised by Professor Ranta Ghosh in Chapter 1, Professor Kazi Shek Farid and his colleague in Chapter 5 have explained a practical social setting in rural Bangladesh to demonstrate how leftover wives of foreign migrant husbands remain more vulnerable in their in-laws' families. Since, in Bangladesh, husbands are considered the highest authority for women, leftover wives of rural migrants may remain more powerless and less empowered in comparison with women with equal socio-economic status but living together with their husbands. While Chapter 1 to Chapter 5 of this book demonstrated how masculinity in a society restrains women's empowerment, in Chapter 6 Ms. Pratiti Shirin, an associate professor at the Department of English of Dhaka University professed an interesting perspective on how the legendary woman Begum Rokeya succeed in promoting women's education in a predominantly conservative Muslim society of British Bengal. Analyzing the contemporary socio-political scenarios and cause for promoting Rokeya's writing by male publishers in British India Ms Pratiti nicely demonstrated that the rise of Rokeya was not because of a benevolent positive masculinity to promote Rokeya's writings by the male publishers, but because of the indomitable agency of Begum Rokeya to establish her cause and consequential financial support from the leftover inheritance by her deceased husband. The hidden agenda to promote Bengali Renaissance by the then ruling class coincidentally reinforced this empowerment process.

Moving apart from women's agency as a tool to fight against masculinity in a patriarchic society, Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 of this book delve into two alternative pathways where an indirect agency of society may expel aggressive masculinity and stimulate women's dignity to promote women's empowerment. In Chapter 7 a young academician Ms Shrabanti Dutta has come up with an innovative and radical solution of imposing shaming punishment on perpetrators of rape, and a consequent social cost on the name and fame of their close allies that may create an indirect yet positive social deterrence against rape. In Chapter 8, another young law lecturer Mr Ali Mashraf along with his co-author proposed a tort-like financial payment to rape victims as compensation for their sufferings and psychological plight borne by them and their family members. Together these two approaches may create an effective social agency to fight against rape and other forms of violence hindering women's advancement in our society.

The bottom line is that the promotion of women's sense of dignity and agency for protecting their rights remains the key to accelerating the snail's pace in removing sexual harassment and other forms of violence and discrimination against women. It may be promoted through positive masculinity as a win-win solution for the patriarchic social hegemony to approve women's empowerment. Further, shifting the burden of pain to the perpetrators and their close allies through shaming and other pecuniary punishment could be another auxiliary force to fuel this process. Last but not least, intersectionality in society may demand special programs to empower certain groups of women facing special circumstances.

Editors,

Professor Tania Haque
Professor Jamila A Chowdhury
April 2025

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Pratiti Shirin is an Associate Professor of the Department of English at Dhaka University. She completed her MA in Education and International Development from the UCL Institute of Education, UK in 2015 as a Commonwealth Scholar. Her thesis was titled: 'Rokeya's Dream: The Purpose of Women's Education in Bengal Renaissance and Beyond'. She published her London-based memoir 'Under European Skies' and was interviewed for her book launch by Ekattor TV in 2016. She is a co-author of the book chapter 'LGBTQ Rights and Related Issues in Bangladesh and India' published in India in 2021. In 2009, her article titled 'The Position of Women in Kauilya's Arthashastra' was published by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh. Pratiti is passionate about gender and human rights issues and worked as a freelance contributor for various dailies and weeklies including *The Daily Star*, (formerly weekly) *Jajjaidin*, *Bdnews24*, and *Daily Our Time* from her childhood until the present. She spent her childhood in Germany due to her journalist father's work with the *Deutsche Welle* radio and possesses mother-tongue-like fluency in the language. She also taught German for some time at the *Goethe Institut Bangladesh*.

Ratna Ghosh is a Distinguished James McGill Professor Emeritus at McGill University in Montréal, Canada where she was Dean of Education. Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, she is also an elected Fellow of UNESCO-The World Academy of Sciences (TWAS)- for the advancement of science in developing countries based in Trieste, Italy.

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Shrabanti Dutta is currently serving as an Assistant Professor of Law at Noakhali Science and Technology University. She is serving as an acting Chairman in the Department of Law at the same institution. She started her journey for legal education at the University of Chittagong and completed her LL.B. and LL.M. Immediately after completing the LL.M Ms. Shrabanti started her career as a Lecturer at BGC Trust University, Chittagong in 2014 and served for 4 years with dignity and hard work. Later, in 2019 she joined Noakhali Science and Technology University. Beyond her teaching responsibilities, she always tries to remain engaged in research and publication activities. Eventually, she acquired a strong research background in gender justice, the criminal justice system, and human rights. Apart from teaching and research, she has participated in the following training programs to enhance her skills to serve her students.

Tania Haque is a Professor of Women and Gender Studies, at the University of Dhaka. She has completed her PhD on unpaid care work by women, one of the most critical yet unresolved social norms that drag women's progress in many folds by restraining their participation in paid economic activities. Earlier, Professor Tania completed her masters in Public Administration from the University of Dhaka and a second master's in Development Studies from the Institute of Social Studies, Hague the Netherlands in 2008. Dr. Tania is extensively engaged in research and publications and has so far published four research books and more than twenty articles in various national and international journals. During her decade-long professional journey, she taught at various universities including Bangladesh University of Professionals, East West University, North South University, and the Gender Studies Department at, University of Dhaka. During this time, she was also extensively involved with policy and action research with reputed national, international, and super-national institutions including ADB, DFID, UNFPA, Action Aid, World Vision Bangladesh, Plan International Bangladesh, Centre for Policy Dialogue, Department of Information and Communication Technology, Government of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh.

CHAPTER 1

GENDER MAINSTREAMING: GENDER, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT— THE ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

RATNA GHOSH*

Abstract

Bangladesh is trying to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality. Despite remarkable progress in several areas including women's position, and in the crucial area of parity of sex ratio at birth, several areas need improvement. Although Bangladesh has the highest ranking in South Asia in the 2022 Global Gender Gap (GGG) index, the region has the lowest ranking globally. This chapter analyzes the position of the GGG data vis-à-vis areas that need further investigation. It concludes that patriarchal worldviews influence societal norms, behaviour and even interpretation of international and national legislation, as well as religious texts. Education is an area that needs urgent attention where children develop their worldviews and are socialized through interactions with peers, the curriculum and school culture over several years. Ideas from Southern theories are suggested for re-visioning education to transform societal attitudes, not merely reform them.

Keywords: *Gender disparity, South Asian women, Societal norm, Education*

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Introduction

This chapter will briefly discuss the concept of gender mainstreaming in Bangladesh, and why it is an issue. Like all countries, Bangladesh is trying to meet the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially Goal #5 on gender equality. The country has made remarkable progress in several areas including women's position, and in the crucial area of parity of sex ratio at birth. Although Bangladesh has the highest ranking in the 2022 Global Gender Gap (GGG) index in the South Asian region¹, since this region has the lowest ranking among all the world's regions, several areas need improvement.

The chapter will briefly touch on international and national frameworks related to gender equality, and some reasons why gender inequalities exist. It will analyze the position of the Global Gender Gap data and point to some areas that need further investigation. It is seen that all areas that require improvement have the underlying problem of traditional perspectives about gender, gender roles, boy preference, and perceived disadvantages of having a girl child. These patriarchal worldviews influence societal norms, behaviour, and even interpretation of international and national legislation as well as religious texts in all religions. Education is suggested as an area that needs urgent attention because the school is an important place where children develop their worldviews and are socialized through interactions with peers, the curriculum, and school culture over several years. Ideas from a few Southern educational philosophies are mentioned leading to some suggestions for re-visioning education to develop perspectives in students that make them resilient, confident, and motivated to transform societal attitudes, not merely reform them.

What is Gender Mainstreaming?

It is a strategy to level the playing field so that each person gets a fair opportunity to succeed in whatever they want to do irrespective of their sex. It can be defined as having “a gender equality perspective (outlook, world view) in all areas” such as design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies and programmes.² Cultures shape how we view the

¹ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report* (World Economic Forum, 2022), 24, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2022/>.

² Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Women and Men in Bangladesh; Facts and Figures 2022* (Ministry of Planning, 2022), 7, https://bbs.portal.gov.bd/sites/default/files/files/bbs.portal.gov.bd/page/b343a8b4_

world and since gender is socially constructed local attitudes and beliefs lead to global variations in women's position.

While no country in the world has achieved equality for men and women, women's status in a society depends on where the country is in the continuum from being almost totally excluded from participating in society to having equitable representation in most social institutions. The word 'mainstream' is used because inequality in gender has been sidelined for too long and therefore, needs to be front and center.

What is often overlooked is that women are not a homogenous group. In gender mainstreaming GENDER is the main focus, but other differences intersect with gender and make women's and men's experiences very different vis-à-vis each other but also within each group. This intersectionality makes gender mainstreaming a challenge.

Why is Gender Mainstreaming an Issue?

When women are not included in societal activities and excluded from employment, educational, and other activities, considerable brain power is lost, and this is detrimental to all. With the realization that there are economic benefits to equality, efforts to reduce inequality in all spheres have been stepped up. In Bangladesh, a good example is the hugely successful ready-made garments industry where women constitute the bulk of workers. "Inequality is not only a pressing moral and social issue but also a critical economic challenge... All types of inequality have economic consequences..."³. Not only is women's exclusion a human rights and social justice issue but women's contribution to a country's economy is lost when they are not given the opportunity to work. Gender equality is not a "women's" problem but rather a society's problem globally. Gender inequality is an imbalance in power and because men have more power and they have to share the power, it is important to have a partnership with them. Their cooperation is essential for a more equal society.

956b_45ca_872f_4cf9b2f1a6e0/2022-06-13-04-42-f063cb30c78ea58d75bd29f0056aff636.pdf.

³ McKinsey Global Institute, *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth* (McKinsey & Company, 2015), 1, https://www.mckinsey.com/~media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/How%20advancing%20womens%20equality%20can%20add%2012%20trillion%20to%20global%20growth/MGI%20Power%20of%20parity_Executive%20summary_September%202015.pdf.

International Legislation

The recognition of human rights after World War II led to the development of legislation at the global level to reduce the discrepancies of opportunities and conditions between men and women. Although it should be a given that women's rights are human rights, it is only recently that equality has been interpreted to include equality for the sexes at the international level. It was not until 1967 that the UN passed a legally binding proclamation: The Declaration of the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (DEDAW). Twelve years later, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) was acceded to or ratified by 189 states, which means they are binding agreements between nations and become international law. Although Bangladesh ratified CEDAW in 1984 it has reservations on certain articles due to conflict with Sharia law based on the Holy Koran⁴. The US has signed but not ratified it (that is, it needs the approval of the Senate). There are several other programs, policies, and standards in the UN to uphold the status of women, but it was not until the 1990s that violence against women (public and private spheres) was on the international agenda⁵.

UN identifies Sustainable Development Goal #5 on Gender Equality as one important means to end poverty and inequality in the world. Poverty is closely linked to gender inequality. SDG #5 aims to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" and addresses the following challenges: "Women suffer from lack of access to decent work and face occupational segregation and gender wage gaps. In many situations, they are denied access to basic education and health care and are victims of violence and discrimination. They are under-represented in political and economic decision-making processes"⁶.

⁴ "Bangladesh's Reservation on CEDAW and Human Rights Protection: Causes, Justifications and Prospects," London College of Legal Studies (South), accessed January 20, 2024, <https://lcls-south.com/bangladeshs-reservation-in-cedaw-causes-justifications-and-prospects/>.

⁵ "Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. General Assembly resolution 48/104," United Nations, February 23, 1994, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-elimination-violence-against-women>.

⁶ "Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment," United Nations, accessed 22 January 2024, <https://sdgs.un.org/topics/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment>.

National Legislation

At the national level, a legal framework is essential but not sufficient to bring about justice because legislation does not change the minds of people. In Bangladesh, Constitutional Law provides equality of opportunity and participation in all spheres to all citizens. There are laws against child marriage (Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017), the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, and Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection Act 2010). In 2009, a landmark Supreme Court judgement directed the government to formulate laws against sexual harassment which led to a proactive role by the judiciary and women's organizations in strengthening the framework for gender justice. Specific legislation on abortion in Bangladesh under the penal code of 1860 and the Legality of Menstrual Regulation in Bangladesh (introduced by the government in 1974 and incorporated in the National Family Planning Programme in 1979) further strengthen laws for women. Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking Act 2012 is especially important since there is large-scale trafficking of women to neighbouring countries and the Middle East. More recently, the Women & Children Repression Prevention Act (2020) criminalizes and introduces harsh punishments for various forms of violence against women such as rape, sexual assault, acid crimes, and dowry-related offences.

In the 7th 5-year plan (2016-2020), violence against women was made a key focus of local justice institutions. Several other policies have been developed such as the multifaceted National Women Development Policy (2011), the National Action Plan on Violence against Women, 2013–2025 which was a blueprint for action, and a Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence against Women (with Denmark) on rehabilitation and counselling which ended in 2021.

Bangladesh has a strong legal and policy framework guaranteeing women's rights overall, for equal rights of women and men, and against discrimination. However, implementation of policies and monitoring are challenges. Importantly, gender inequality remains in inheritance and property laws which need reform if there is to be social justice.

The Ranking of Bangladesh in the Global Gender Gap Reports

At the international level, the Human Development Index (HDI) is accepted by many countries as a statistical measure of a composite index of key

dimensions of human development (health, knowledge, and standard of living) which ranks countries. Although it has gradually been incorporating several indicators it is limited because the HDI does not consider gender inequality and income inequality, political freedom, or even sustainability. Bangladesh performs in the medium range along with other South Asian countries in the Human Development Index (HDI). Its rank is 129 out of 191 countries⁷, but this masks the stark gender and economic inequalities in this entire geographical region. However, when adjusted for inequality in the Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI), the ranking falls.

The need to measure global progress to close the gender gap has focused on the Global Gender Gap (GGG) Reports⁸. This too is inadequate because it hides many aspects that cannot be easily measured, but it gives us some measures to compare countries. Most countries are attempting to close the gap through legislation and a variety of measures. The Global Gender Gap Report was developed to measure and monitor global progress towards gender equality among countries and acts as a catalyst for greater awareness and effort to achieve social justice. Much of the data here is taken from the 2022 report⁹.

The 2022 Gender Development Index ranking for Bangladesh is 71 among 146 countries globally¹⁰. This is better than other South Asian countries, but among the eight regions covered in the Global Gender Gap (GGG) Index of 2022, South Asia ranks the lowest in gender gap¹¹. As a region, South Asia is also among the lowest in the economic participation, educational attainment, and health and survival categories. We need to point out that the group ranking may be partially due to the very low status of women in every sphere in Afghanistan. But individually, the South Asian countries are not doing well although there are country variations and Bangladesh is among the high performers. To its credit, Bangladesh ranks 7th globally in Political Empowerment, and highest in the world in length of time with female leadership. So, its ranking in political empowerment is based mostly due to the fact that it has had women heads

⁷ Pedro Conceição, *Human Development Report 2021- 2022* (United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2022), 274, [https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22reportenglish_0 .pdf](https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2021-22reportenglish_0.pdf).

⁸ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, 9.

⁹ World Economic Forum, 9.

¹⁰ World Economic Forum, 10.

¹¹ World Economic Forum, 6.

of state. We will return to this point later.

Despite significant progress towards equality and especially its high performance in the South Asian region, the country is far behind other countries in several parts of the world. The two outstanding positive data points about Bangladesh are first, that it is the only country in the region that has recently reached near parity in the sex ratio at birth. However, discrepancy still exists due to continuing preference for boys often due to economic reasons. Secondly, overall, Bangladesh has the highest gender parity in the South Asia region mostly due to its ranking in political empowerment.

Figure 1.1: Global Gender Gap Ranking of Bangladesh



Source: Adopted from World Economic Forum

A Brief Analysis of the Ranking

Bangladesh has the best performance in the South Asia region in the GGG 2022 index. This is very commendable, but the region is the worst performer among all regions due to its common traditional and cultural inequalities. An analysis of the four measures used in Bangladesh’s ranking in gender parity indicates a high score in one factor, that of Political Empowerment. The country is ranked highest in the world because it has had women as head of state for the longest time. Bangladesh has the longest-serving female head of state in history (as of Nov. 2023).

Sheikh Hasina has served a combined total of 19 years although Khaleda Zia was the first woman prime minister of the country and served for three terms. She remains the leader of the opposition party so the top leadership of Bangladesh has been in the hands of these two women for 29 years. As Najma Chowdhury (2008) pointed out both women came from politically powerful families and “owed their ascent to men”¹² because Hasina took over after the assassination of her father Sheikh Mujibur Rahaman, known as the Father of the Nation. Similarly, Khaleda Zia took over the leadership after her husband president Ziaur Rahman’s death. According to Chowdhury (2008), they both mirrored “the gendered distribution of power in Bangladesh more generally...and accept(ed) male hegemony in defining the values and boundaries of political space”¹³.

However, to their credit “they secured patriarchal society’s acceptance of women’s leadership”¹⁴ but she questions if they succeeded in “shedding patriarchal values long entrenched in Bangladeshi society?”¹⁵. Now, 15 years after she asked this question, we need to look at Bangladesh’s success in women’s performance within its social, economic, and political institutions.

Political empowerment: Is Bangladesh a model in women’s empowerment in politics? Despite the fact that in addition to the women Prime Ministers, women have held positions as Speaker and Deputy Speaker of Parliament, Supreme Court Judge, and have top administrative positions in the civil service, data indicates that women are politically marginalized and underrepresented in parliament. At present, of the 350 seats in the Bangladeshi parliament, only 22 are held by elected women parliamentarians. The Constitution reserves 50 seats for women who are not directly elected and therefore are not responsible to constituencies. Although the number of women in parliament is rising and there are reserved seats for women in local councils, female politicians feel excluded from decision-making and discriminated against male politicians¹⁶.

¹² Najma Chowdhury, “Lessons on Women’s Political Leadership from Bangladesh,” *Signs: Journal of women in Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (2008): 8-9, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/toc/signs/2008/34/1>.

¹³ Chowdhury, “Lessons on Women’s Political Leadership,” 9.

¹⁴ Chowdhury, 14.

¹⁵ Chowdhury, 8.

¹⁶ Zobaer Ahmed, “Why Bangladeshi Politics is a Man’s Domain,” Deutsche Welle, last modified December 12, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/why-bangladeshi-politics-is-mans-domain/a-46696907>.

Economic participation and opportunity: There is a need to greatly improve economic participation & opportunity which is now among the lowest globally. The 2021 Global Gender Gap (GGG) Report shows a gap of 88%. According to the GGG Index (World Economic Forum, 2022), South Asia has the widest gender gap of all the regions in the world in the category of Economic Participation and Opportunity¹⁷. Although Bangladesh has moved from being on the list of Least Developing countries in 2015 to a lower Middle-Income country, and the total labour force participation has risen to 73.69 million in the first quarter of 2023, women's labour force participation is low. The Labour Force Survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics shows that 25.44 million (41,95%) women are in the labour force while men constitute 48.25 million (81%). During the same period among the unemployed, 11.19 million are men and 35.20 million are women (Dhaka Tribune, 2023). Of the women who are in the labour force, 92% are in the informal sector (60% in agriculture). Being in the informal sector means low income, no security, and no benefits.

Bangladesh has earned a name for its ready-made garment (RMG) factories which have contracts with major European and North American brands. Most workers in these factories are women, raising the female labour force participation rate in the country as well as contributing significantly to the economic growth of the country. The garment industry was the first to provide formal employment opportunities to women with low skills who traditionally did not work outside the home. Most of the women RMG workers are from impoverished backgrounds and have no or low levels of education and are concentrated in low-level positions while more men than women are in higher-level positions in the production sector. The garment industry accounted for 9.3% of GDP and made up 82% of the total exports of the country making it a significant contributor to the overall economy¹⁸. However, a significant upheaval was caused due to several major fires and deaths in those factories, particularly since 2005 (the worst being in 2013 and the last one to date being in 2021), drawing global scrutiny to the unsafe working conditions and poor infrastructure.

Not only were several factories closed but some foreign contractors boycotted or restricted garment exports from Bangladesh for a period. The resulting

¹⁷ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*, 18.

¹⁸ Ankur Shukla, "Garment Industry Showdown is Key to 2023 Risk for Bangladesh," RMG Bangladesh, last modified February 11, 2023, <https://rmgbd.net/2023/02/garments-industry-slowdown-is-key-2023-risk-for-bangladesh/>.

global attention incited improvement in working conditions, safety measures, and salaries of garment workers. However, a recent International Labour Organization Study indicates that women represent a significant but decreasing proportion of RMG workers¹⁹. ActionAid (2019) reports that 80% of garment workers in Bangladesh have experienced or witnessed sexual violence and harassment at work²⁰.

A paper from the Brookings Institute suggests that labour force participation in Bangladesh (as in India) remains far below the global average due to the “Patrilineal Trap”²¹. Evans points out that families in Bangladesh “make strong efforts to restrict female sexuality, autonomy, and mobility”: family honour, early marriages, domestic violence, and men’s control of women’s earnings are some factors that prevent women from joining the labour force.

Educational Attainment: Bangladesh needs to boost its low position in education as it ranks 129 compared to India 29, due to a persistent gap in literacy rate and tertiary level enrolment. However, it has done remarkably well in primary school enrolment of children and in reaching gender parity at that level. Several gender-focused programs such as food for education, stipends, and scholarships for girls have made this possible. Some NGOs such as BRAC have helped innovative government programs with their institutions and non-formal education. Yet, at the primary level dropout rates are still at 20% and repetition of classes at about 7%, and studies have shown that the quality of education is very low.²² Gender parity has been good at the lower secondary level and vastly improved at the upper

¹⁹ Aya Matsuura and Carly Teng, “Understanding the Gender Composition and Experience of Ready-Made Garment (RMG) Workers in Bangladesh,” International Labour Organization (ILO), last modified September 3, 2020, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/understanding-gender-composition-and-experience-ready-made-garment-rmg>.

²⁰ “Sexual Harassment and Violence against Garment Workers in Bangladesh,” Actionaid, last modified July 25, 2019, <https://actionaid.org/sites/default/files/publications/ActionAid%20briefing%20paper%20on%20Bangladesh%20garment%20workers%20FINAL.pdf>.

²¹ Alice Evans, “Why has Female Participation Risen in Bangladesh but Fallen in India?” Brookings, last modified October 14, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-has-female-labor-force-participation-risen-in-bangladesh-but-fallen-in-india/>.

²² Hisaki Kono et al., “Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education in Bangladesh: Achievements and Challenges,” in *Economic and Social Development of Bangladesh: Miracle and Challenges*, ed. Y. Sawada, Minhaj Mahmud and Naohiro Kitano (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)

secondary level but Bangladesh Bureau of statistics data indicate that from 2020-2021 the completion rate of girls decreased while their dropout rate increased — both by almost 6 per cent — in secondary education.

While educational parity at the primary level and even at the secondary school level has been reached, measuring educational parity only through school enrolment hides the gap in quality education. An Asian Development Bank Report by Xu, Shonchoy, and Fujii warned that simply looking at gender parity through school enrolment may give the illusion of success when boy-preference (common to many Asian countries) distributes household allocation of resources in a biased manner for male and female education²³.

There is a gap in the enrolment of girls and boys at the secondary and tertiary levels due to several factors such as lack of gender-appropriate school curriculum, gender biases of teachers, and lack of physical facilities for girls (e.g. toilets) resulting in inferior educational outcomes for girls causing them to drop out of secondary school or repeat grades. Dropping out of female students is due to poverty, early marriages, lack of security for female students as well as employment opportunities in the garment factories.

Due to the success in the RMG manufacturing where many women with little or no education are employed, there has not been a strong association between education and employment. Kono and colleagues (2018) suggest that the seclusion of women and the practice of *purdah* may be another reason for female dropouts at the secondary level and low female enrolment at the tertiary level.²⁴ If they remain in high school, female students outperform their male peers in the Higher School Certificate at the end of high school, yet female enrolment in the tertiary sector is low²⁵. The unemployment rate for females with higher education is about three times higher than for males²⁶. Enrolment in tertiary education is well

²³ Sijia Xu et al., “Illusion of Gender Parity in Education: Intra-household Resource Allocation in Bangladesh,” Working Paper 1004, Asian Development Bank Institute, September 2019, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/526891/adbi-wp1004.pdf>.

²⁴ Kono et al., “Education in Bangladesh,”.

²⁵ Kono et al., 147

²⁶ Tashmina Rahman et al., *Bangladesh Tertiary Education Sector Review: Skills and Innovation for Growth* (The World Bank, 2019), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/303961553747212653/pdf/Bangladesh-Tertiary-Education-Sector-Review-Skills-and-Innovation-for-Growth.pdf>.

below that of the neighbouring countries, and not even up to the average of middle-income countries. Enrolment in STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) is 21% of higher education which is far lower than in other South Asian regions (India 40%)²⁷.

Gender gaps in technology in South Asia are higher than in sub-Saharan countries, and gender parity in ownership of mobile devices such as phones and access to the internet and laptops is a problem in Bangladesh. The deep gap in the use of technology indicates inequality and lack of inclusion in human capital²⁸. This problem was evident more acutely during COVID-19 when all the inequalities, including gender discrepancies, were exacerbated.

Health and survival: Bangladesh has made significant progress in equalizing the sex ratio and in declining maternal mortality rate by 66% over the last few years but several challenges remain such as adolescent pregnancies and there are still many maternal deaths at birth. Fertility rates have gone down due to successful family planning because of the education of women, access to mass media, increase in economic status, and success of family planning programmes²⁹. In terms of healthy life expectancy, this region (with the exception of Sri Lanka) is among the lowest-ranked performers³⁰.

Why is there a Need for Gender Mainstreaming?

So, why is gender mainstreaming necessary in Bangladesh even when it is doing better than other neighboring countries in South Asia in several aspects? It is because gender inequality persists. Despite progressive legislation and some remarkable positive changes for women in Bangladesh, the country faces several hurdles. Progress has been impressive and Bangladesh has surpassed other South Asian countries in many areas. Yet, injustice and violence remain a significant concern for women in the private and public spheres. There is a wide gulf between the intent of the

²⁷ Tashmina Rahman, et al.

²⁸ Sajitha Bashir et al., *The Converging Technology Revolution and Human Capital: Potentials and Implications for South Asia* (The World Bank, 2021), <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/903731631173685011/pdf/The-Converging-Technology-Revolution-and-Human-Capital-Potential-and-Implications-for-South-Asia.pdf>.

²⁹ Barkat-E-Khuda et al., "Family Planning and Fertility in Bangladesh," *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 15, no. 1 (2000): 41.

³⁰ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report*.