
Gender Dimensions of Policies and Programs

Government Development Policy and Plans for Women

The integration of women's concerns and needs into development planning has both socioeconomic and political considerations. The Constitution of Bangladesh upholds the necessity of equal opportunities between women and men. It sanctions positive measures for disadvantaged groups, particularly women. The Government has already undertaken several noteworthy efforts toward integrating the women's agenda into the broader policy and plan framework. These include (i) formulation of the Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2001) adopting the mainstreaming of a women's development approach; (ii) declaration of the National Policy for Advancement of Women; and (iii) adoption of the National Action Plan (NAP) for Advancement of Women: Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA).

Beijing `95: Preparation and Follow-Up

The Fourth World Conference on Women at Beijing in 1995 mobilized the women of Bangladesh including the Government and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA). As a preparatory activity, the Government organized local level meetings with NGOs, women's organizations, and other members of civil society, and prepared a status report and PFA on women. The Government adopted the Beijing PFA without any reservation and took initiatives for preparing a follow-up action plan for its implementation. MOWCA was designated as the nodal ministry in behalf of the Government. It took the following actions:

- (i) The entire PFA and its summary was translated into Bengali and was made available to relevant persons and organizations. MOWCA also held a national level debriefing of the secretaries of all government ministries in May 1996, where the participants joined the panel discussions on various chapters of the PFA and reviewed its relevance to their sectors. The ministries also reviewed the current planned budget allocation to identify existing policies, programs, and projects that need modification based on gender perspectives. This review facilitated the incorporation of the strategic objectives and suggested actions in the PFA, recommended measures to minimize the gaps in existing policy measures, and identified the revisions in terms of resource, personnel, and time frame for implementation. The sectoral ministries also

recommended required changes in the existing mandate and structure of the institutions, and a review of the monitoring mechanisms for establishing interministerial linkage and coordination for implementing the PFA.

- (ii) A high-powered interministerial task force was set up in the MOWCA in December 1995 with representations of members from outside the Government for the preparation of a participatory and representative action plan.
- (iii) A core group was established in January 1996 by the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) to assist the Task Force. The Core Group consisted of women and gender specialists who helped in the preparation of the action plan based on the directives given by the Beijing PFA. The Core Group consisted of nine persons—two from the Government and seven from outside the Government, and most of them were closely related to the whole Beijing process. The Core Group worked closely with MOWCA to formulate a process for broad-based participatory planning based on the PFA.
- (iv) For the preparation of the Bangladesh Action Plan, a needs assessment of different sectors was undertaken in August 1996. Twelve sectoral ministries were selected to assess the gender gaps and needs of the sectors and 12 sectoral needs assessment (SNA) teams consisting of government officials and non-government experts were set up to review these sectors. The team for each ministry consisted of 2-3 consultants, one member each from DWA, and the women-in-development (WID) focal point of the relevant ministries. Each team was supported by a Core Group member. The 14 sectoral ministries were Women and Children Affairs; Planning; Social Welfare; Education; Home; Law, Justice, and Parliamentary Affairs; Industry; Agriculture; Environment and Forestry; Fisheries and Livestock; Labor and Employment; Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives; Health and Family Planning; and Information.

The objective of the SNA was to determine the present status of WID gaps and the interventions needed to incorporate the PFA in the NAP. The SNA teams used a combination of methods including document survey, interviews, consultations, and workshops, with particular emphasis on the participatory and consultative approach. These teams helped the ministries assess their own programs, identify gaps, and prepare action plans based on the PFA. The SNA teams had consultations with various resource persons in the government and NGO sectors with at least one joint consultative meeting where the key findings and issues and recommendations were presented.

The exercise facilitated the review and needs assessment of government policies, programs, and projects. The integrated work reinforced the role of MOWCA as the focal ministry for the advancement of women. It facilitated greater involvement of the sectoral ministries, and greater accountability of the focal ministry for proper implementation of the Beijing PFA follow-up and implementation.

National Policy for Advancement of Women

The National Policy for Advancement of Women and the NAP were formulated by MOWCA, based on SNA and other reports. They were approved at the first meeting of the National Council for Women Development (NCWD) held in February 1997. The National Policy was declared on International Women's Day on 8 March 1997. Its main goals are to eradicate gender disparities from the society and to provide better options to women to ensure their participation in private and public life. However, the major challenge still remains in formulating sector-specific operational strategies with program interventions in the light of the National Policy.

National Action Plan for Advancement of Women

Following the Beijing PFA, the NAP was prepared and approved by the Government in 1997. A mainstreaming approach was adopted in formulating the NAP. The NAP includes the recommendations of 15 line ministries/divisions specifying objectives, indicators, resources, time limit, and activities to be undertaken. There is also one general matrix applicable for all other ministries in the NAP.

The NAP emphasizes the strategy of mainstreaming women's development in all government policies and programs by sectoral ministries and agencies. As the national machinery MOWCA is responsible for facilitating the mainstreaming of gender equality perspective in all policy areas. In addition, MOWCA will also work for advocacy, policy leadership, communication, coordination, follow-up, and implementation of the NAP by all other sectoral ministries.

The responsibilities for the implementation of the NAP was envisaged as coordinated efforts of all 15 ministries/divisions. The goals of the NAP are given below:

- (i) to make women's development an integral part of the national development program;
- (ii) to establish women as equal partners in development with equal roles in policy and decision making in the family, community, and the nation at large;
- (iii) to remove legal, economic, political, or cultural barriers that prevent the exercise of equal rights by undertaking policy reforms and strong affirmative actions; and
- (iv) to raise/create public awareness about women's different needs, interests, and priorities and increase commitment to bring about improvements in women's position and condition.

Fifth Five-Year Plan (1997-2002)

The Macro Chapter on Women's Development in the Fifth Five-Year Plan has endorsed mainstreaming as the strategy for women's development. The Plan recognized the roles of all sectors in mainstreaming women's development and emphasized the policy and advocacy roles of MOWCA. The Macro and Micro Chapters on Women's Development of the Plan stressed the importance of implementing the National Policy and the NAP for Advancement of Women.

The following are the broad objectives of women's development, as mentioned in the Micro Chapter on Women's Development of the Fifth Five-Year Plan:

- (i) Undertaking necessary steps for implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW);
- (ii) Promoting of all sorts of rights for women—human, socioeconomic, legal, and political;
- (iii) Reducing the increasing burden of poverty on women;
- (iv) Increasing women's participation/representation in every stage of development;
- (v) Promoting capacity development;
- (vi) Strengthening institutional development to increase women's development accountability;
- (vii) Changing negative cultural values against women; and
- (viii) Eliminating violence against women and girl children.

Strategic concerns envisaged in the Plan include poverty reduction, public expenditure, public employment, education, health, legal protection, security, institutional and infrastructure capacity building, support services for women's employment, research, and database development. However, no clear mechanism is laid down to achieve those goals. Nor are there set targets and funding to implement those concerns into reality.

For implementation, monitoring, and evaluation the Plan mainly emphasized the role of the Implementation Monitoring and Evaluation Department (IMED), reviewed its strengths and weaknesses, and recommended mechanisms to improve its performance. However, it did not discuss the role of WID focal points in the existing ministries or review their capabilities, or suggest any mechanism to improve the performance of and coordination between WID focal points. Thus the macro-sectoral WID policies remained rhetoric. Except for the crop sector, where 0.24 percent of the total sectoral allocation is set aside for women in agricultural development, no other multi-sectoral program set aside allocation for WID activities. Even social sectors like education and health do not provide gender-disaggregated allocation.

In the chapter on poverty reduction, poor and disadvantaged women and female-headed households were identified as one of the focus groups in the objective. No specific targets or strategies were set to target these women. However, insufficient coverage is given to the problems of the urban poor, particularly women, who like their rural counterparts are also susceptible to marital instability, physical violence, natural calamities, and environmental hazards.

National Women's Machinery

National Council for Women Development

At the national level, the NCWD was established in March 1995. It has 44⁸ members, including the Prime Minister (chairperson) to implement and review socioeconomic development policies to reduce existing gender gaps, and enhance women's status. Since the establishment of NCWD two meetings have been held. At the first meeting (1997) the National Policy for Advancement of Women and the NAP were approved. In order to make the NCWD effective, a monitoring and evaluation committee has been set up headed by the Minister of MOWCA. Its function is to monitor the implementation progress of sectoral WID plans and submit quarterly reports to the NCWD. This is a working committee composed of high government officials from line ministries including the IMED, the Planning Commission, and members of the civil society.

The NCWD is no doubt an effective institutional mechanism to provide policy directives on critical women's concerns. However, it has built-in strengths as well as weaknesses. Its strength lies in the profile, prestige, and credibility of its members, which, in fact, also generates weakness because the members have difficulty in allocating enough time to the NCWD. As the highest policy-making body for women's development, the NCWD provides policy guidance to all sectors and monitors implementation of critical policy decisions relating to women's issues and development.

Ministry of Women and Children Affairs

Bangladesh is one of the few countries to have a separate Ministry of Women's Affairs, established in 1978. The Ministry has gone through various stages and structures.⁹ At present it consists of the Ministry itself and three implementing agencies: the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA), Jatiya Mohila Sangstha (National Women's Council), and Shishu (Children's) Academy.

As part of the National Women Machinery, MOWCA was mandated to act as the central motivating factor on issues of women's equality and development and to promote a broader and more consistent response by all government agencies to the needs and priorities of women (p.13, IR-WID Study, Vol.1).

The strengths of MOWCA, as identified in a government WID capability study, are that (i) it is generally regarded as the lead government agency for women's interests and in realizing the country's WID objectives and goals; (ii) its momentum was provided by the

⁸ It consists of 14 ministers, secretaries of 13 ministries, a member of the Planning Commission, 5 members of Parliament, and 10 prominent women, nominated by the Government.

⁹ Soon after independence, the Bangladesh Women's Welfare Foundation (BWFF) was created by the Government for the rehabilitation of war-affected women. In 1976, the Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha (National Women's Council) was established as a network of committees from the national to grassroots level for mobilization of women. However, in 1991 it was converted as a statutory body and implementing agency within MOWCA. In 1984 the Department of Women's Affairs was created as an operational wing of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Women's Affairs. A decade later the Ministry of Women's Affairs was given an independent status and its jurisdiction was also expanded to include children's affairs and was renamed as MOWCA.

Beijing conference and the PFA; (iii) it is acknowledged by others as having a sincere and honest staff dedicated to women's development; (iv) a WID focal point has been established at the national level; (v) there are DWA district and *thana* officers in the field; (vi) many government organizations can be important partners in the different initiatives to mainstream women's development into the government planning process; and (vii) many women's organizations exist that have both knowledge and experience that can be major resources for MOWCA. Overall, the initiatives launched to develop a Bangladesh Plan of Action through the SNA and Beijing PFA follow-up seem promising.

The major weaknesses and constraints of MOWCA are (i) a lack of clarity in responsibilities assigned by allocation of business; (ii) absence of an explicit mandate and authority for intersectoral leadership and coordination; (iii) different perceptions both inside and outside MOWCA on what its role and activities should be; (iv) continued addition of new responsibilities; (v) absence of internal effort to specify a clear role for MOWCA; (vi) slow provision of support and assistance to WID focal points to enhance their effectiveness; (vii) lack of coordination and monitoring in field level operations; (viii) lack of initiatives to develop alliances with either government agencies or NGOs; and (ix) reliance on project resources.

Institutional mechanisms set out to implement programs remain weak and ineffective. MOWCA and DWA have weak planning, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation units that hamper their role in coordinating and monitoring programs affecting women. Intersectoral cooperation and coordination on WID programs are also inadequate. There are insufficient linkages between government agencies and NGOs, women's organizations, and research institutions for the exchange of information and sharing of experiences.

Other Institutional Mechanisms for Women's Development

In order to fulfill its commitment of mainstreaming women in the development process and ensure their full participation, the Government has set up certain institutional mechanisms to implement and monitor its programs. These are the following:

WID Focal Points

Since the Fourth Five-Year Plan, all sectors and ministries have been responsible for incorporating WID concerns into their programs. The WID focal point is a unique mechanism to ensure that gender concerns are included in the policies, plans, and programs of all line ministries. For this purpose, an officer with the rank of joint secretary/joint chief has been designated as the WID focal point in all line ministries. They are also responsible for the follow-up to the NAP within their ministries. An associate sub-WID focal point, at the rank of deputy chief/secretary working in different ministries and divisions, assists them. WID focal points also exist at the rank of assistant secretary/assistant chief, who are working in directorates, departments, and different wings of a ministry. They can play effective roles since they are involved in developing project concept papers, initiating sectoral plans, etc. It is possible to develop a team consisting of a WID focal point, an associate WID focal point, and a sub-WID focal point. At present, the total number of WID and associate focal points is 96. For coordinating sectoral activities and monitoring implementation of the NAP, MOWCA organizes regular coordination meetings with WID focal points.

They are considered as active agents of mainstreaming women's development in each sectoral ministry. This mechanism has been introduced from the realization that looking after women's interest and progress is the responsibility of all development sectors. However, there is still scope for strengthening networking and linkages and capacity development of WID focal points. WID focal points require more resources, motivation, and a conducive environment to discharge their responsibilities in mainstreaming women's issues in the country's development efforts.

Parliamentary Standing Committee on MOWCA

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on MOWCA is composed of Members of Parliament who are responsible for raising and discussing all issues concerning MOWCA. MOWCA is responsible for making regular reports to this committee on the progress made on women's advancement and the steps taken in this direction.

Women's Development Implementation and Evaluation Committee

This committee was formed to monitor implementation of the NAP by different sectors. This committee is headed by the minister of the MOWCA. The members of the committee are the joint secretary/joint chief of different ministries, heads of implementing agencies of the MOWCA, and representatives of civil society groups.

NGOs, Bilateral and Multilateral Agencies, and GAD

Nongovernment Organizations

One of the important visible changes occurring in the public arena in Bangladesh in the last two decades is the increasing participation of women in public life. The diversity and proliferation of organized activities undertaken by women needs to be viewed in the wider context of sociocultural, economic, and political scenario prevailing in the country. The initial impetus arose from the need to rehabilitate the thousands of women who were the victims of the 1971 war of independence. Shorn of traditional male support through widowhood, desertion, rape, and/or loss of land and home, these women desperately needed support and income. Private citizens, both men and women, joined in the effort of nation-building by organizing the rural poor, especially the women, who were the hardest hit, at the local level. This massive organization of the rural poor women is significantly different from the mainly urban-based social welfare services undertaken by educated upper and middle class women's organizations during the previous period.

Objectives, Activities, and Strategies for Organizing

The initial thrust of relief and rehabilitation soon turned towards development. However, the conceptualization of the term has been varied for different groups and has changed over time. The emphasis of some NGOs has been mainly on poverty reduction and economic self-reliance through provision of services and means of income generation, e.g., provision of credit, skill training necessary to meet the basic survival needs of the rural poor women. However, many NGOs, through their experience of close and continued work with women at the rural levels, realized that women's development needs to address both poverty and patriarchy, which marginalizes women and excludes them from channels of socioeconomic power and decision making. They therefore focus on sociocultural empowerment of women through conscientization, and other support services along with skill training and other income-generating activities. Still other organizations have emphasized the need for attitudinal change in the society and focused on social consciousness-raising and gender sensitization through extensive information generation, dissemination, and media campaigns.

Focus on Information Generation and Dissemination

Research on women's role, situation, and position in society is being recognized as an “intellectual instrument” for social change. By critiquing the growth-oriented development model, which has exacerbated class and gender inequality through polarization and impoverishment in rural areas, women researchers illuminated the adverse gender impact of several development strategies such as the mechanization of agriculture, structural adjustment policies, and the indiscriminate use of obsolete contraceptive methods. By holding seminars, conferences, special press conferences, and releasing publications they have publicized these findings. Through interaction and networking with activist groups, they have helped in putting pressure on policymakers to reformulate policies. Through active advocacy and dialogue with relevant government agencies, they try to bring about desirable changes in policy environment at the national level.

Broadening the Agenda

As the concept of development is changing both globally and at the national level and becoming more holistic, the agenda of the organizations is also broadening in scope. Women's organizations now recognize that “all issues are women's issues.” Therefore, they are coming up and agitating issues such as dumping of toxic waste, urban slum upgrading debt crisis, and deforestation, along with the more traditional concerns such as legal reform, women's access to education, employment, and health services.

Action for Legal Reform

Intense and broad-based campaign for removing gender-discrimination and gender-violence through legal redress has been undertaken by women's organizations both at the national and local levels. The NGO Mahila Parishad's mobilization for legal reforms, supported by others, have focused on the enactment of new and stringent laws providing deterrent punishments for gender-violence both at home and outside; enactment of a

uniform family code to supplant the various personal laws perpetuating gender-inequality within the family in the various religious communities; and full ratification of the UN CEDAW and implementation of the labor laws including the International Labour Organisation convention that would ensure women's rights in the society and at the workplace. To heighten women's legal awareness, legal literacy training along with legal aid and referral services to victims of gender-violence is given by many organizations. At present, shelters for battered women are also being run by the Mahila Parishad and the Government.

Alternative Use of Media and Communication

Besides protesting against the role of media in perpetuating gender stereo types, often visible in fundamentalist controlled newspapers, women's organizations have actively solicited the cooperation of the press and other mass media. Sustained contact with the press has resulted in publishing material related to violence against women, malpractice in health care and family planning services, etc. Realizing the limited outreach available through press in a country with very high illiteracy, other innovative modes, such as street theater, role-playing, posters, and videos have been used for getting the message across for social transformation to a wider audience.

Another avenue of networking currently being explored by organizations of women researchers and activists, especially on issues of urban poverty and wage-employment, is through main-line trade unions and labor unions. Habitually gender-blind, the unions are now being gender-sensitized by women's organizations. Recent protests by garment workers regarding the exploitative condition of this industry and the support given by labor unions, human rights organizations, and women's organizations illustrates some of the potentials of such networking.

Impact/Strength

The insistence on participatory process of development (planning, decision making, implementation, monitoring, evaluation) adopted by most of these NGOs and women's organizations also empowers women by dramatically highlighting their inclusion in all phases of a project. This also builds their capacity and skill in public participation and management.

At the national level, the efforts to sensitize policy planners through advocacy and mobilization on women's issues have led to some notable success in bringing about new legislation and changes in the policy-environment. Mahila Parishad's vigorous signature campaigns for laws prohibiting dowry resulted in the Dowry Prohibition Act (1980). The combined advocacy and sustained dialogue by Women for Women and Mahila Parishad with the Planning Commission, which started with the preparation of a position paper on *Mainstreaming Women in National Development* by Women For Women in 1989, brought about a major change in the Fourth Five-Year Plan document with the active support of other NGOs and women's groups. Mainstreaming women in development has been accepted in principle by the Government and various sectoral strategies are spelt out in the Plan document for the first time.

In recent years, the rather delicate and sometimes distant relationship between GOs and NGOs appears to have improved. NGOs acknowledge that their limited abilities would never permit them to be a substitute or alternative channel for development. The Government, on the other hand, recognizes that NGOs (including women's organizations) have certain strengths, e.g., innovativeness, flexibility, and close contact with the grassroots people through a participatory process, which are necessary for success in achieving development objectives. Both recognize the need for cooperation, but NGOs are rather apprehensive of losing their autonomy in the process. Mechanisms for ensuring full and democratic participation of NGOs and the people in all phases of development process both at the local and national levels have to be devised. External assistance has played a vital role in the development of Bangladesh. The country has received assistance from 40 bilateral and multilateral funding sources and several private organizations.

Bilateral and Multilateral Agencies and Women's Programs

In Bangladesh, almost all international development agencies have women's programs. Generally these agencies have either a bilateral or multilateral agreement with the Government of Bangladesh. They provide aid and assistance and also help in the formulation of policies in close cooperation and coordination with the Government, NGOs, civil society, research and women's groups, etc. They also have a donor consortium where the country's performance is reviewed and the major policy thrust is decided and the aid is sanctioned. Donors also liaise with each other and with their national partners in a donors' liaison committee. In addition to ADB, the major multilateral bodies include the UN System, the World Bank, and the European Community. Major bilateral aid agencies include the Canadian International Development Agency, Japan International Cooperation Agency, United States Agency for International Development, Danish International Development Assistance, Department for International Development UK, Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, etc. Overall, donor agencies have exerted a positive influence by helping to bring the gender issue closer to the top of Bangladesh's development agenda.

Bilateral and multilateral donors have contributed toward the implementation of gender and development (GAD) policies in different government and nongovernment programs by

- (i) preparing guidelines for inclusion of GAD policies in the education, health, infrastructure, and transportation sectors;
- (ii) preparing and implementing GAD indicators for evaluation of different projects;
- (iii) including gender-related information in the management information system and as a part of the regular reporting system; and
- (iv) establishing a system of accountability on gender-related reporting within the organization.

In the Bangladeshi context they have also played an active role in establishing coordination between government and nongovernment efforts for the implementation of GAD policies. They provided financial and technical assistance to the Government for pre- and post-Beijing actions. They have also made positive contributions to the preparation of the NAP.