

The Situation of Women in Bangladesh

Introduction

Bangladeshi women contribute substantially to their households and to the country's economy. The majority of women workers are primarily 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, lawyers, journalists, government employees, and for nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Their activities, in turn, contribute to the transformation of traditional values and gender roles of Bangladeshi women.

There are over 1,000 local and national organizations in Bangladesh that generate self-employment opportunities for over 8 million poor, mostly women, through microcredit and training in literacy, technical skills, and legal rights. Civil society, particularly women's organizations, have been a strong force in bringing forward women's issues and interests onto the country's development agenda. Moreover, Bangladesh has more than 18,000 registered NGOs of a diverse nature working on a broad range of development issues.

Recent years have witnessed an increasing awareness of women's productive roles, mobility, and their contribution to development. Ever since the First World Conference on Women in Mexico (1975), gender issues have increasingly become a predominant theme of the worldwide development discourse. Bangladesh was one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1978, three years after the Mexico Conference. Concerted efforts by national and international development agencies, and the Government's own commitment to both national and international pledges, paved the way for the enhancement of women's position and status in society. The Government has already prepared a National Policy for Advancement of Women and made some noteworthy progress in implementing the National Action Plan, prepared in response to the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA).

In spite of these achievements, the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic, and political life of the country. Gender discrimination is widespread in all spheres and at all levels, as indicated by official statistics on health, nutrition, education, employment, and political participation. The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to all citizens, but in family matters such as marriage, divorce, custody, maintenance, and inheritance, laws discriminate against women. The policies and programs of the Government, some NGOs, and other institutions do not sufficiently address the need for women's empowerment. The "welfarist" approach is

visible in some development interventions in which women are viewed as beneficiaries and handicapped but not as potential contributing partners. Less aptitude to accept new ideas, a nonconductive environment, and inadequate resources are the major factors for the continuing “welfarist” approach. On the other hand, bilateral and multilateral donors and their nongovernment development partners have a general tendency to design development interventions on efficiency and equity grounds.

Demographic Background of Women in Bangladesh

Age and Gender Composition of Population

Demographic changes related to fertility and migration influence the Bangladeshi economy and society to a great extent. For years, Bangladesh was characterized by a youthful population structure with a heavy concentration of children (below 15 years) and an imbalance in the sex ratio. Over time, however, the fertility rate has declined remarkably and this significantly affected the population composition. In 1995-1996, about 53 percent of the population belonged to the active age group and 41 percent were children (BBS 1997). By way of contrast, in the 1980s children constituted half of the population.

Changes in the age structure and the gradual dominance of the active age group over children suggests the onset of fertility transition in Bangladesh. The female population of reproductive age was 29.8 million in 1996. This number is likely to reach 37 million in 2010. There is little evident improvement in the overall sex ratio, which shows a preponderance of men over women. Bangladesh is one of only four countries in the world where males outnumber females. Over a period of more than two decades, the sex ratio decreased from 108 to 105. However, it improved remarkably in urban areas, suggesting a greater volume of women's independent migration to cities and also a higher prevalence of family migration. In 1995-1996, sex ratios for rural and urban areas were estimated at 104 and 106, respectively. The same ratios were worked out at 106 and 129, respectively (1974 census data).

Fertility

The fertility rate has dramatically fallen from 6.34 per woman in 1975 to 3.8 in 1996, mainly due to effective family planning measures, increased age of marriage, effective immunization, and reduction of child mortality. Total fertility rate estimates from various sources show an unmistakable declining trend since 1975 and during 1975-1996, there was a reduction of about 3.16 children per woman over this 21-year period. Here, too, women were the major factor behind fertility reduction as they are the major adopters of family planning measures. Fertility is higher in rural (2.76) than in urban areas (2.48). In rural areas the fertility rate is higher for women aged between 20 and 35 years. For urban women, women's increased participation in the labor force starting at adolescence contributes significantly to controlling fertility.

Mortality

With regard to mortality, the population belonging to 0-1 and 50 years and above is more vulnerable than any other age group. For the 0-1 age group, the mortality rate of the male population used to be higher than that of the female population, but now the death rate of girl children is higher than boy children. Women are also gravely exposed to the dangers of childbirth. The maternal mortality rate of 444 per 100,000 live births is one of the highest in the world (BBS 1997). A pervasive gender differential in entitlement to food, nutrition, and care leads to a higher death rate of girl children than boy children. Factors such as high maternal mortality, women's unnatural deaths, and trafficking have all made women more vulnerable than men.

Migration

Another important demographic feature is internal and international migration. In a longitudinal study of rural poverty (Rahman et al. 1996), between 1988 and 1996, outmigration by landless agricultural labors was found to be one of the significant reasons for the reduction of rural poverty in Bangladesh. Between 1994 and 1998, more than 200,000 Bangladeshi nationals went abroad to work. Women represented nearly 2 percent of these workers. However, there is also a sizeable number of undocumented women migrant workers who have gone to the Gulf countries and to Southeast Asia, who also contribute significantly to the country's foreign exchange earnings. Bangladesh is one of the few countries in the world where remittances by overseas workers contribute a third to the country's trade deficit and nearly a tenth to the gross domestic product (GDP) (Afsar 1995). Readymade garments produced by the cheap labor of largely female rural-to-urban migrants constituted nearly one third of export earnings and nearly 10 percent of the GDP.

Social and Cultural Issues for Women

Family

By custom, a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal social system exists in Bangladesh. The life of a woman in Bangladesh is therefore dominated by this social system. Such a system upholds a rigid division of labor that controls women's mobility, roles and responsibility, and sexuality. Traditionally, a woman in Bangladesh derives her status from her family. Her role includes the maintenance of her family as a social institution and as an economic entity. Most importantly, through childbearing and child rearing, she ensures the existence of succeeding generations. Increasingly, however, women's roles, responsibility, and mobility are changing due to persistent poverty and the gradual erosion of the familial umbrella of support.

Patriarchy: Its Roots and Manifestations

The traditional patriarchal society of Bangladesh is based on class and gender divisions. Class mobility allows movement between rich and poor, but the division of social space and the difference in behavioral norms between men and women are rigidly maintained. The family, which constitutes the basic unit of social control, sets the norm for male and female roles. Within this system, the father, or in his absence, the next male kin, is the head of the household. As a result, both decision-making powers and economic control are vested in the hands of men. Furthermore, the family operates through a clearly defined system of rights and obligations. This is demonstrated when Muslim women waive the right to inherit their fathers' property in favor of brothers or in the event of inheriting property, pass control to their husbands or sons. In both cases, the man gives protection to the woman in return for control over her property, thus directly reinforcing a patriarchal tradition.

Gender Segregated Roles

Over time, Bangladesh's patrilineal system has given high value to sons as potential providers and perpetrators of family names. They receive preferential treatment and access to education, better nutrition, and health care. Women, on the other hand, are generally viewed in their reproductive roles and are given a subsidiary status as economic dependents. Society has dictated that daughters are temporary members of their natal homes. Since they are perceived as nonproductive members of the family, daughters have little access to education, especially in poor families. Scarce resources are invested in the sons as potential providers. Although girls' enrollment at the primary level has increased remarkably, from around 50-80 percent between the 1980s and 1996, their dropout rate is much higher than boys from the secondary level onwards. Parents are reluctant to send daughters to school because they fear for the daughters' safety, as chastity and the reputation of unmarried girls are crucial factors that determine her value in the eyes of her potential husband and in-laws. Girls are viewed as potential mothers and homemakers, thus priority is given to their training in domestic chores rather than to their right to an education.

Marriage and Fertility

A woman, on an average, is married before reaching the age of 20 years (BBS 1998). Since marriage, among other things, transfers guardianship of the bride from her father to her husband, permission for further education, employment, hospitalization, or any other disposal of a married woman's time outside her conjugal residence is to be sought from her husband. On the average a Bangladeshi woman has four pregnancies in her lifetime and she needs to consolidate her position in the new family by giving birth to male children. In general, as head of the household, the husband makes most of the important decisions. By the time she reaches 50 years of age, one woman out of four in Bangladesh is expected to be either divorced or widowed. Sociocultural norms have discouraged remarriage for widows and divorced women, so they comprise 90 percent of the widowed and 94 percent of the divorced population. Abandoned women are yet another category, constituting the majority of the hard-core poor who enter the labor market for survival, as heads of their households. Increasingly, however, women are becoming more active in both domestic affairs and public life. Women's increasing labor force participation and public

awareness efforts by NGOs and the mass media have played an important role in encouraging this.

Violence Against Women

Forms of Violence

News of rape, assault, trafficking, death due to dowry, etc., are common features of Bangladeshi society. The four broad categories of violence against women in Bangladesh are domestic violence, violence at the workplace, trafficking in women and forced prostitution, and sexual abuse.

The present form and nature of trafficking can be explained by poverty and social disintegration. The spread of wage employment or bonded labor such as domestic labor, women working in the sex trade (mail-order brides), in entertainment (e.g., camel jockeys), child abuse, and organ trading can be identified as demand factors. Supply factors are the economic situation and social vulnerability (e.g., a poor abandoned woman might give her child for labor more easily than a more affluent woman), and frequent natural disasters (due to which many shelterless and abandoned children and women result). Bangladesh's location (adjacent land border of 4,222 km with India and 288 km with Myanmar) facilitates trafficking of women as it is loosely patrolled. Common means of trafficking are kidnapping; abduction; marital migration (through fake marriage); selling of small children by parents, guardians, and close relatives; selling of wives by their husbands; and deceiving migrant workers.

Recently, violence against women has reached another dimension with the rise in the number of trials through the "*fatwa*" (religious judgments) in rural areas. Village elders usually form a "*shalish*" or tribunal to settle some local disputes. This traditional custom of excluding women in the rural *shalish* can be manipulated by the local *mullahs* (religious leaders) and the social elite to find women guilty of extramarital sexual affairs and other acts. Punishments are meted out (in accordance with religious laws as interpreted locally) in contravention to the existing penal code. Some women were flogged publicly and a few among them have committed suicide. Prompt protest and local actions by women's organizations, NGOs, and human rights groups forced local administrators to take legal measures against the perpetrators.

Legal Measures

Several legal measures were adopted to safeguard women's legal rights. In 1983, the Cruelty to Women Ordinance was promulgated. This law made kidnapping, trafficking, rape, attempt to cause death, acid throwing, etc., as offenses with a maximum penalty of lifetime imprisonment or the death sentence. The Anti-Terrorism Ordinance (1992) provided for punishment for all kinds of terrorism including harassing and abducting women and children. The Immoral Trafficking Act (1993) provides for punishment for forcing a girl into prostitution. In 1995, the Women and Child Repression (Special Provision) Act was enacted. It provides capital punishment to offenders. An increasing incidence of rape and violation of women by the police and law enforcement agencies in several well-publicized cases brought to light loopholes in its execution. Hence, the Act has been revised and renamed as the Women and Child Repression Prevention Act of 2000. In spite of these

provisions, loopholes in existing laws, lack of proper implementation, and the weak commitment of law enforcement agencies are major obstacles. It may be concluded that laws alone cannot be the only deterrent against violence. They must be backed up by conscious public opinion, prompt action, and efforts to change society's attitude towards women.

Legal Rights and Political Participation of Women

The Constitution of Bangladesh grants equal rights to women and men in all spheres of public life [Article 28(1), 28(2), and 28(3)]. However, due to a variety of cultural factors as well as the misinterpretation of religion, women's human rights are often violated. Various laws have been enacted and amended to protect women's rights: the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance of 1961, the Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act of 1974, the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, the Family Court Ordinance of 1985, and the Child Marriage Registration Act of 1992. However, often women are not conscious of their rights. This is particularly true of poor women.

Marriage, Divorce, and Custody

Although the Muslim Family Laws Ordinance specifies the legal age of marriage at 18 years for women and 21 years for men, this provision of the law is regularly violated. Society discourages women from initiating divorce and even when marriages are registered, the women or her relatives do not seek to have delegation of authority for divorce. In Hindu law, there is no provision for divorce. As in Common Law, divorce is allowed and men can divorce their wives on the ground of adultery alone, but a Christian woman has to prove adultery and other matrimonial offenses. In Islamic law, a mother is not regarded as the legal guardian of her children. In case of divorce, she is entitled to custody of her son until he reaches the age of seven years, which is extended to puberty in the case of her daughter. Hindu law also considers the father to be the natural and legal guardian of the person and property of the minor child. The court decides on the custody, maintenance, and guardianship of the Christian minor after the death of the father, who is considered to be the natural guardian. However, the court under any religion may appoint any person or mother of the minor child as a guardian if the father is proved to be unfit.

Inheritance and Maintenance

Women's right to property/inheritance is not equal to that of men. Under Muslim law, a daughter inherits one half the share of her brother. A wife receives one eighth of the deceased husband's property, whereas the husband receives one fourth of his deceased wife's property, when there is a child. Hindu women's right to inheritance is limited. Christians provide equal inheritance between sons and daughters (MOWCA 1997).

Existing laws on child support do not adequately enforce male responsibility for their children's welfare. Data on the incidence of family desertion by men are not available. However, anecdotal evidence and existing data suggest the incidence of abandonment of women and children by men is increasing. In one estimate, it was found that close to one third of women are married to men who have other wives whom they do not maintain. Men are expected to support their wives and children if they themselves have initiated the

estrangement, but support can only be enforced if men remain in the vicinity, which is often not the case. There are no sanctions against men who do not support their families and the wife generally moves back to her natal home with the children. She may be given a place to stay, but she usually has to take responsibility for feeding and educating her children as well as making a living.

Some Positive Developments

Bangladesh has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women with reservations [(Articles 2, 13 9(a), and 16.1 (9c) and 16.1(f)]. Recently, the Government withdrew the reservations on Articles 13(a) and 16.1(f). The remaining reservations are under review. Since the provisions of this Convention are not yet incorporated into national legislation, the Government is not legally bound to them.

Health, Reproductive Health, and Nutritional Status

Gender Asymmetry in Health

Given the size of the population, health expenditures receive inadequate allocation at the household level. Women are more disadvantaged than men in terms of access to health care. Unlike most countries of the world, the life expectancy of women in Bangladesh is slightly lower than men. Women family members are less likely to receive modern medical care and they generally rely on traditional and cheap methods of health care. Even today, trained personnel attend only one third of births in Bangladesh. The maternal mortality rate is still very high at 440 per 100,000 live births. The nutritional status of girls is also worse than that of boys. Some additional health indicators are given in Table 1.

Though the rate of maternal mortality has gone down over time, it still remains high. In the case of maternal mortality, 16-25 percent of deaths are due to septic abortions, 20 percent due to eclampsia, 5-10 percent due to postpartum sepsis, and another 5-10 percent of women die due to tetanus. The remaining major causes of female death are bleeding, prolonged labor, and violent deaths (BBS 1998). Most of these factors are preventable with proper health care, but the majority of women in Bangladesh have inadequate access to health services.

Health Expenditure, Access to Basic Health Services, and Morbidity

Only 30 percent of the Government's total health expenditure is actually allocated to basic health services, with the bulk of expenditures going to population control services. There is one hospital bed for 3,200 persons, one doctor for 6,000 persons, and one nurse for 15,000 persons. For a population of 120 million, there are only 6,556 midwives, 1,795 lady health visitors, and 28,000 family planning field workers (UNDP 1996). The overall status of health services in Bangladesh is poor with about 30 percent of the total population having access to basic health services. The prevalence of morbidity was estimated at 17 percent of all persons in Bangladesh in 1994-1995. However, it varies by gender, age, and place of residence of the person. Children, the elderly, and women in general are more vulnerable to sickness. Among women, mostly active adults and those in the reproductive

age group are more prone to sickness. Males suffer from acute and chronic conditions in lower proportions than females. Fever is the most prevalent disease cutting across gender, class, and age hierarchy. This is closely followed by cough and cold in urban areas where the morbidity rate is higher than in rural areas and a staggeringly high morbidity rate was estimated at 40 percent (Afsar 1999). Among others, diarrhea and peptic ulcer were reported by a substantial number of male and female patients. Malaria and arsenic poisoning are the other important emerging health threats in addition to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS.¹

Table 1: Health Status by Gender
(per thousand population)

Indicator	National		Rural		Urban	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Crude death rate (1998)	5.3	5.0	3.8	3.6	5.9	5.0
Infant mortality death rate (1998)	56.0	58.0	64.0	68.0	45.0	49.0
Under-5 mortality (1,000 live births, 1997)	114.0	110.0	67.0	63.0	122.0	118.0
Maternal mortality (1,000 live births, 1997)	4.4	-	4.45	-	3.74	-
Expectation of life at birth, 1997	59.7	60.5	59.2	59.6	62.0	62.7
Prevalence of underweight among children of age group 6-71 months (1995-1996)	56.8	58.1	58.8	59.9	47.2	45.4
Nutritional status of women (percentage of anemic, age 15+ years, 1995-1996)	n.a.	n.a.	85.0	n.a.	69.0	n.a.
Type of birth attendant						
Trained	28.3	n.a.	25.7	n.a.	33.9	n.a.
Untrained person (midwife, others)	64.2		70.6		49.9	
Qualified physician/doctor	7.6		3.4		16.1	
Persons (females of age group 15-49) per maternity and child welfare center						
In 1993:	4,729					
In 1996:	4,629					

n.a. = not available

Sources: *Statistical Yearbook*; Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, BBS; National Nutrition Survey (Unpublished) UNICEF; Sample Vital Registration, BBS, different years.

Government Policy and GO-NGO Interventions

The Government of Bangladesh has been pursuing a policy of providing at least minimum essential health care for all and for reduction of maternal and child mortality. It has approved a Health and Population Sector Strategy, which includes the National Health Policy. The thrust of the Policy is to ensure primary health care to all with a special emphasis on vulnerable groups such as poor women and children. To combat malnutrition, the Government has formulated a Food and Nutrition Policy and a National Action Plan for Nutrition. During the last decade, the Government pursued maternal and child health and family planning as the key approaches to primary health care.

¹ Human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

The role of NGOs in addressing issues of women's health is significant. Successes achieved in family planning have been due to coordinated efforts between government organizations (GOs) and NGOs. Providing health education has been the thrust of most development NGOs. A coordination body to monitor progress on commitments made at the International Conference for Population and Development is comprised of representatives of NGOs and women's organizations.

Ensuring women's equal access to the benefits of public health care is critically dependent upon gender-specific health strategies. Since 41 percent of the total population is below 15 years of age, the health of adolescent girls is a major area of concern, as they are more vulnerable to reproductive health problems, STDs, and HIV/AIDS. Only recently, domestic violence and rape have been viewed as public health problems because they are a significant cause of female mortality and morbidity. Violence against women leads to psychological trauma and depression, injuries, STDs, HIV/AIDS, suicide, and murder.

Education and Training

Gender Asymmetry in Education

Education receives the highest allocation of resources in the Bangladeshi social sector. As boys are perceived ultimately to take care of parents, sending them to school and investing in their education is preferred to investing in girls. Nevertheless, the primary level enrollment rates for girls have gone up remarkably (Table 2). The gap between male and female enrollment, which stood at 22 percent in 1985, declined to 3 percent over the past decade and a half.

Although noteworthy achievements have been made in female enrollment at the primary level, progress has been very slow in secondary level education. At this level male and female enrollment rates improved by 5 and 10 percentage points, respectively, between 1985 and 1995. At the primary level, girls' enrollment is increasing; it has risen from 45 percent in 1990 to 49 percent in 2000. At the secondary level, the dropout rate of female students reaches half, which is higher by 10 percentage points than the rate of male students. Very few women continue their education up to the tertiary level. This negatively affects the overall rate of return from education and women's labor market entitlements.

Table 2: Educational Status of Women

Indicator	National		Rural		Urban	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Adult literacy rate ¹⁵⁺ , 1998	42.5	59.4	36.2	56.1	60.0	75.4
Net enrollment, primary school, 1997	80.0	82.9	82.8	96.8	83.8	82.1
Net enrollment, secondary school, 1995	19.0	23.0	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Dropout rate at secondary level, 1996 (%)	48.4	37.8	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

n.a. = not available

Notes: Secondary level covers grades VI to XII and 13-16 age group.

Source: Sample Vital Registration, BBS; Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, BBS; *Statistical Yearbook*, 1997, BBS; UNESCO, Paris, BANBEIS (1998).

Lower access to technical education and higher secondary education, gender-biased curriculum, and curriculum without job prospects are critical concerns for women's education that must be addressed through coordinated efforts.

Government Policy and GO-NGO Interventions

Employment opportunities provided by the readymade garments sector, the Government's Food-for-Work Program and the stipend scheme for girls up to grade 8 are some of the important factors behind the rise in enrollment of girls at the primary level. To achieve a 100 percent literacy rate by the year 2005, the Government has also started a massive total literacy movement. Various program and policy measures have been undertaken to increase enrollment and arrest dropout rates, especially for girls. Adult education for women has also been emphasized. There is also provision for increasing teachers' training of women for both the primary and secondary levels.

Nonformal education programs run by Bangladeshi NGOs such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee have been internationally acclaimed. Some large NGOs run thousands of schools providing education to children who are not able to avail of Government-sponsored education. The Government has recognized this contribution of NGOs and there is significant collaboration between them. There is a special emphasis on girls' education as education and the eradication of illiteracy are considered to be the first steps toward the empowerment of women.

Women's Economic Participation

Women's Employment

Traditionally, women are largely involved in the nonmonetized sector and in subsistence activities. With increasing poverty and the breakdown of the supportive kinship umbrella and also due to the demand generated by some sectors, women's participation in the labor market has increased since the mid-1980s. In the last decade, women have experienced some major changes in the labor market, primarily in terms of the nature of jobs and opportunities.

The Bangladeshi employed labor force is estimated at 41.7 million or at 54.6 million using the extended definition² and it increased in size by nearly 5 million since 1990-1991. In other words, around one million people enter the Bangladeshi labor force annually. The share of female employment between agriculture and nonfarm work is changing. The nonfarm sector is generating female employment at an increasing rate mainly due to the fact that government and nongovernment interventions are more concentrated in this sector. The occupational pattern of employed persons and the annual growth rate by major occupation from 1990-1991 to 1995-1996 shows that the growth rate of females employed in the sales occupation is the highest (51.1 percent) among all the major occupations. The second highest growth rate is observed in the case of production labor. While the growth rate of the

² Under the extended definition of labor force, persons who are engaged in some major household activities such as food processing, threshing, cleaning, and livestock and poultry raising are considered as part of the economically active population.

male labor force has increased steadily (1.7 percent) in agriculture, forest, and fisheries, the trend is negative (-1.1) in case of females.

Women's Employment Status

Women's participation in economic activities shows great variations by gender, by nature of activity, and place of residence. For example, more than three quarters of employed women of 15 years and above are found to be unpaid family laborers as opposed to less than a tenth who are self-employed and a few (6 percent) contract workers. On the other hand, a large number of men are self-employed (47 percent), followed by contract laborers (26 percent). Only a few (13 percent) work as unpaid family helpers. The agriculture sector is overwhelmed by unpaid family workers who are disproportionately represented by women. Self-employed or own account workers are predominantly found in the trade, hotel and restaurant, transport, storage, and communications sectors where men's involvement is sizeable (nearly a quarter) and women's is negligible. Every four out of five workers in the construction sector are day or contract laborers, although this sector is represented by only 3 percent of the employed men and less than 1 percent of women. For women in the rural areas, the number working in the construction sector is likely to be higher. However, a sizeable chunk (nearly one fifth) of unpaid family helpers is found both in the agriculture and manufacturing sectors and women disproportionately represent them. Hence, even in the informal sector, women are not only concentrated in a few sectors, but also their labor is largely consumed without any remuneration. By way of contrast, although men are also overwhelmingly found in the informal sector, they are mostly involved as self-employed or own account workers, suggesting their greater access to resources and economic opportunities.

Rural Women's Economic Activities

Rural income-generating activities include 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, coir production, and handicrafts. A good number of rural women are also involved in rural construction work. Women workers are found in certain activities traditionally falling within the male domain (e.g., earthwork, construction, and agricultural work in the field). This is particularly the case for landless women who largely belong to the hardcore poor group. It indicates growing economic pressure and erosion of familial support and traditional beliefs and norms regarding women's outside work.

Urban Labor Market and Women's Participation

In urban areas, employed women are almost equally divided between unpaid family workers and employees. Nearly two fifths of employed women are engaged as unpaid family helpers, in sharp contrast to 83 percent in rural areas (Table A.1). Traditionally, rural women have always been involved in different kinds of informal activities like cottage crafts, horticulture, livestock and poultry rearing, etc. Although women are primarily responsible for homestead production, in most cases the husband is the dominant seller and handles the money himself. In recent years, more and more women are showing greater preference to sell the produce themselves even in rural areas. Nearly two out of every five urban

employed women are found in the formal sector, as opposed to only 4 percent of their rural sisters. This is mainly because of the readymade garments factories that provide employment to thousands of urban women. The readymade garments industry alone absorbed nearly a fifth of the women employed in the manufacturing sector and in the 1990s, the average annual growth rate of the female labor force in the industry sector was 16 percent, nearly double the growth rate of 9 percent in the 1980s (World Bank 1997). However, the government and NGO sectors helped create self- and contractual employment of about 15 percent of women who live in the rural areas (15+ years).

Nearly a quarter of all women are self-employed or engaged as day or contract laborers in urban areas as a result of greater economic opportunities available in the cities. Among informal sector activities, women mostly sell groceries, betel nut, soft drinks, snacks, sweetmeats, country cakes, etc., in small roadside shops. They also go door to door to sell ash, soap, sarees, bangles, etc. Others work as ragpickers and scavengers and also supply piecework such as garment making, embroidery, etc. A large number of urban women work as brick grinders and as household domestic staff.

A quota system was recently introduced for female recruitment in the public sector. Ten and 15 percent quotas were reserved for women for gazetted and nongazetted posts, respectively. Existing studies suggest that this is one of the major contributing factors for increasing female participation, although quota fulfillment is far short of the target (only 5 percent and 8 percent of quotas for class I and class II officers have been filled). A small number of women are found in the administrative, managerial, professional, and technical services of government.

Gender Asymmetry in the Labor Market

Underemployment is one of the most significant problems in Bangladesh's labor market. Although measuring underemployment is difficult, different estimates suggest more than a quarter of labor force fall under this category (World Bank 1997). Whether through unemployment or underemployment, women suffer more from this problem than men because of their limited employment opportunities, widespread illiteracy, lack of skills, and greater burden of household work.

Household expenditure surveys report that in the formal sector women earn three quarters of men's wage, whereas the gap between male and female wages in the informal sector is much wider. For example, women earn nearly three fifths and two fifths of their male counterparts as contract and self-employed workers, respectively. Women's share of the female wage is always lower compared to that of their male counterparts. The numerical strength of male vs. female workers is not necessarily associated with the male or female wage differential. For example, in the readymade garment and weaving apparel industries, where there is roughly a 2:1 ratio between women and men, a woman receives less than 22–30 percent of what is earned by her male colleagues. This is because men still predominate in more skilled occupations. A glaring gender divergence in the wage incomes earned can be explained by the difficulties women face in balancing household and income-generating activities.

An Analysis of Constraints Faced by Women in the Informal Labor Market

Working women's participation in the informal sector is disproportionately higher than in the formal sector. It is therefore worthwhile to examine the entry constraints they face and to examine the conditions under which they work. An understanding of these issues would help to identify policy implications for the well-being of women, their children and households, as well as for the country at large.

Most women in this sector work long hours with few days off. Subsequently, they face the problem of physical strain that is aggravated by low earnings/low profit margins generated from informal sector activities despite their hard work. Table A2 shows that although women worked 75 percent more hours per week than their male counterparts, they received only about three fifths of the wage paid to male contract/day laborers. The time spent and the income earned by women in the informal sector varied greatly by the nature of their involvement, by gender, and by place of residence of workers. For example, on an average, a woman working in the informal sector spends 26 hours per week as opposed to 48 hours spent by their male counterparts. However, except for unpaid family helpers, variations in men's time input are not as high as that of their female counterparts. Contract work consumes women's maximum time (37 hours). Self-employed women, however, work two hours more in rural areas than their urban counterparts and the reverse pattern is observed in the case of contract workers in urban areas. Women spend relatively less time performing activities as family helpers, compared to other categories of informal work and to men family members.

A dearth of money to hire household help, traditional time-consuming food habits, and the absence of child-care facilities increase women's burden of household responsibility and impinge on the time women can use for productive activities. A highly competitive labor market demands regular and timely participation that often becomes difficult for women to fulfill. Moreover, the greatest obstacle women face in the informal sector is their low access to resources whether in rural or urban areas. They lack the capital required for building the permanent structure of the enterprise, labor-saving tools to ease domestic burden, and raw materials and improved machineries needed to increase productivity in both the informal and formal sectors. The lack of cheap and safe transportation, harassment by employers and by the police, problems with middlemen, etc., are the other constraints faced by women in the labor market.

Women's Participation in Politics and Decision Making

Political Representation and the Electoral Process

Notwithstanding all barriers of *purdah* (literally: veiled) and patriarchy, women have become more politically visible in the last two decades. A quota has ensured women's presence in the local government and National Parliament. Among women politicians, the older group entered politics through social work, while some among them and the new generation of women have emerged from student politics. Despite many odds, statistics and analyses reveal a slowly growing trend towards women's political participation. However, they face an ominous challenge. There has also been a growing influence of money in

Bangladesh politics, particularly in electoral politics and in guarding/promoting spheres of influence. This acts as a further constraint on women's political participation since fewer women have access to financial resources. It is very difficult for women to work effectively in this system unless such practices are eradicated.

Women in Political Parties

Party affiliation depends on membership drives and on the organizational and electoral needs of each party. The actual number of women members in different political parties, however, cannot be determined, since gender-specific records are not maintained. Nevertheless, a slow trend towards women's greater participation has emerged over the decade. As party workers, women render valuable contributions in the mobilization of voters, especially among other women. Although there are only a few women in leadership positions, their numbers have increased over the last two decades.

There is limited female involvement in party hierarchical structures. However, the top leadership positions in each of the two largest parties are occupied by women. They became leaders during crisis periods and have been successful as driving forces and unifying factors of their respective parties. Significantly, neither of them inherited the mantle of leadership when their party was in power. Once placed in the position of leadership, they were able to generate their own dynamics and momentum to lead their parties through difficult times. Nevertheless, their close and inner circle of advisors mostly consist of men. In occupying the role of a leader in public life, they have perhaps contributed to liberalizing values in a predominantly Muslim culture where traditionally men had exclusive prerogative in politics. They played a crucial role toward democratization and brought about a certain degree of continuity into the political process. They have a strong potential to be positive role models for women of all ages in Bangladesh, provided they demonstrate a commitment to gender equity by involving more women in their parties and in government.

The election manifestos and constitutions of different political parties reveal that there is little emphasis on gender equality in party platforms. The Awami League, the current ruling party, stresses the principle of fundamental human rights. Gender equity is mentioned in terms of social and political rights. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), the major opposition party, places importance on women's roles in development and on income-generating activities for self-reliance, and pledges to implement the United Nations Declaration on Women's Rights step-by-step. The left-wing parties recognize that gender equity should be established. However, women's issues are not given any priority by political parties. There is no agenda or plan of action and no recommendation for legal or electoral reforms. The Jamaat-e-Islami does not believe in gender equality and even expressed its explicit preference for gender segregation in all spheres of life.

A limited sample survey in 1991 found that majority of the candidates voiced their support for gender equity but very few supported the legal or electoral reforms needed to bring about gender equity. This implies that the notion of gender equity is gaining ground at a slow pace.

Electoral Process

Although women do not hold key positions during the electoral process, they render significant contributions during election campaigns by taking part in organizing public meetings, processions, and rallies. Women leaders and party workers engage in the task of mobilizing and canvassing voters, particularly women, for their party candidates. By making special arrangements such as separate election booths for women, and females presiding as polling officers, the turnout rate of women voters has increased. During the general elections of 1991 and 1996, and local level elections in 1993 and 1997, the level of enthusiasm among women to exercise their voting rights was very encouraging. Because of the special arrangements and security measures taken by the Government, there were few disturbances and the presence of women in polling centers was significant.

Participation at the Local Level

Bangladesh is governed by a parliamentary system. The Prime Minister is the chief executive of the country and is assisted by a council of ministers who form the Cabinet. The country is divided into six administrative divisions: Dhaka, Chittagong, Sylhet, Rajshahi, Khulna, and Barisal, and each is placed under a divisional commission. Each division is subdivided into *zilas* (district). Each *zila* consists of several *thanas* (police districts). There are 463 rural *thanas*. Below *thanas* are unions and each union is divided into nine wards. There are 4,479 unions in the country. The village is the smallest unit in a rural area, which contains several villages. In the urban areas there are municipalities and city corporations for four metropolitan cities. There are also *thanas*, and below the *thana*, the wards and *mahallas* (neighborhood).

Women were first elected to local bodies in 1973. The Union Parishad Election of 1997 is a milestone in the history of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh. The Government of Bangladesh enacted a law for direct elections to reserve seats for women in local level elections. In 1997 through an Act, the Government reserved three seats for women in the union *parishad* where women members are elected from each of the three respective wards. Apart from the reserved seats women can also contest for any of the general seats. Previously, the process of selection of the women representatives was on the basis of nominations and/or indirect election.³ Around 12,828 women were elected as members in the 1997 local level elections. A total of 20 and 110 women were elected as chairpersons and members, respectively, for general seats. The Government has already issued different executive orders to ensure women members' participation in various decision-making committees.⁴

³ In 1976, provision was made for two nominated female members in addition to nine elected members and one chairperson in each union *parishad*. The number of nominated women members was increased to three in 1983. Similarly, *upazila*, *zila*, and *pourashava parishads* have three nominated women members. The number of women members in city corporations depended on the size of population. The nomination system in the local government changed in 1993 to indirect election and accordingly three women members were elected by the chairperson and other elected members.

⁴ In addition to seven standing committees, five more standing committees were constituted to ensure effective participation of women as members or chairs of those committees. Activities of these committees relate to water sanitation, identification of poorest of the poor women and men for safety net programs, and primary and mass literacy programs. Women members also chair the social development committee, which undertakes activities related to education, health, water, sanitation and environmental protection, employment growth, and law and order.

The majority of women representatives regularly attended *parishad* meetings, but only a few of them participated in the deliberations and decisions. The female representatives usually involved themselves with mass education, family planning, immunization, handicrafts, relief activity, and *shalish* (mediation in the village court).

The women representatives have the potentials to become change agents for rural women and various NGOs. A few government institutions such as the National Institute of Local Government are training women on various development-related issues, legal aid, and organizational structure of local bodies and their roles and functions to enable them play their role effectively.

Participation at the National Level

The 1972 Constitution reserved 30 seats for women (through indirect election by other members) in addition to 300 elected seats in the National Parliament. Thirty seats for women in the Parliament are likely to be reserved for another 10-year term. In 1973 and 1979, no woman became a member of Parliament through direct elections. In the 1979 election, 17 women contested in the general election for Parliament seats, but none were elected. Later, two women were elected through a by-election for vacant seats. As in the local elections, women faced difficulties in campaigning. Some conservative groups tried to exploit religious sentiments to attract voters and to obstruct women candidates from holding public meetings and addressing the people. With perseverance, women managed to overcome the situation. In the 1991 national elections, 36 women contested for 35 seats, and won eight seats. In 1996, 35 women contested in the national election, and won 10 seats. Later two women won in a by-election. In 1991 as well as at present, two elected women were leaders of the two largest political parties; one became the Prime Minister and the other the opposition leader.

Cabinet and Public Services

Although two women Prime Ministers have headed the Government during the last six years and the leaders of the opposition in Parliament were also women, this does not reflect the gender composition of participation and decision making at the highest policy level. At the ministerial level, women's representation has never risen above 3 percent.

Before 1996, women were never given full responsibility over any important ministry. Apart from being Prime Minister, others were state or deputy ministers responsible for insignificant ministries such as Culture, Social Welfare, and Women. Currently one woman Minister, who had become a Member of Parliament in 1991 and 1996 through direct elections, is responsible for a ministry, i.e., Agriculture. Another woman minister is responsible for the Ministry of Forest and Environment. Existing evidence suggests that the social, cultural, economic, and political environment restricts women from taking an active part in politics. In order to involve women in national and local bodies, certain steps have to be taken at various levels. The importance of women's participation in the political process should be recognized by the Government and political parties. Women's perception of their political role could be enhanced through education, training, awareness, advocacy, employment, and legal measures. Mass media and other agencies can be used to help

motivate women. There is a need to disseminate more information about the need for equal political participation of women.