

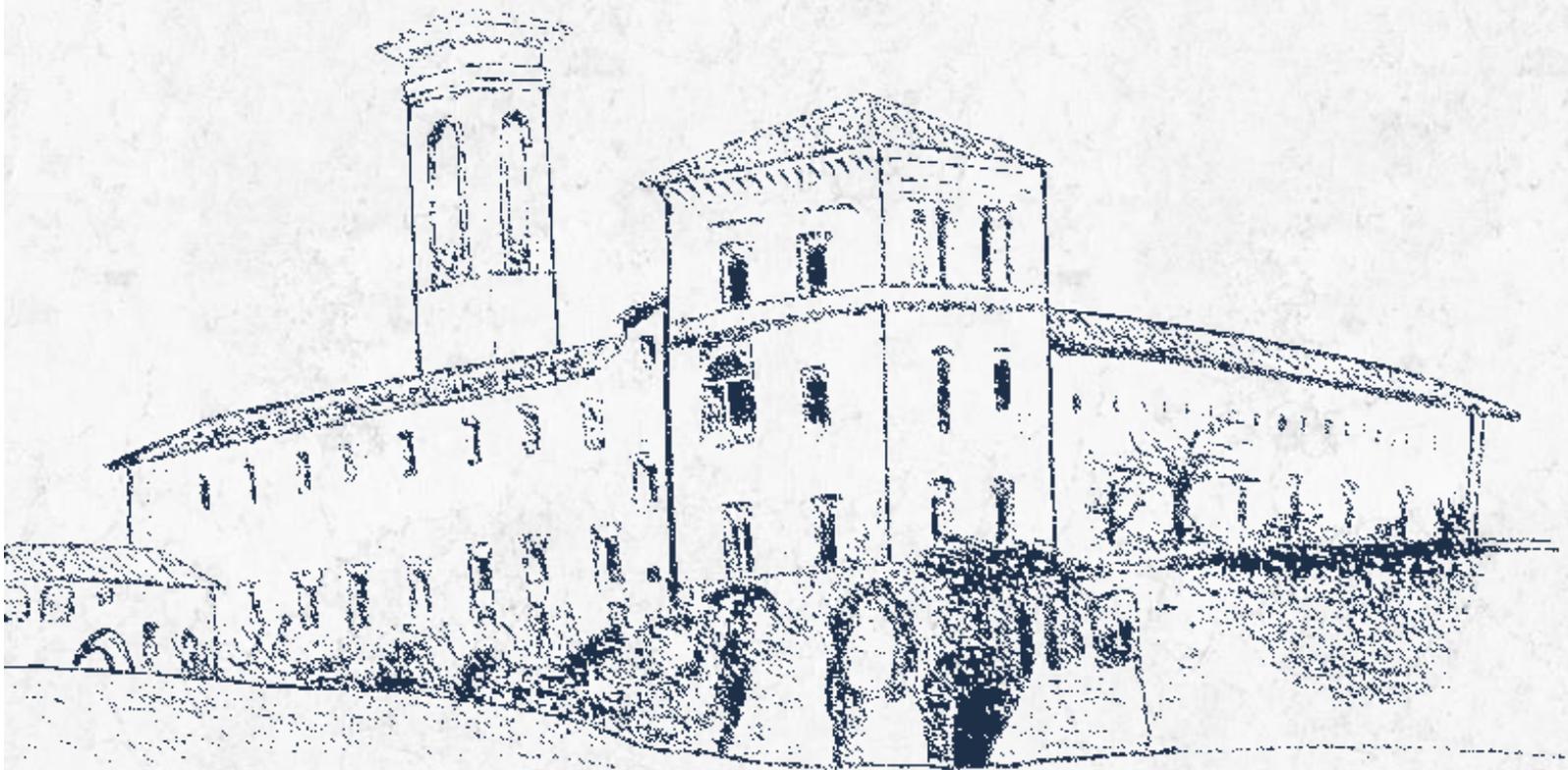
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Women's Participation in Bangladesh's Labour Market

Sazeeda Johora Thakur ¹

Abstract

Purpose – The article is concerned with Bangladeshi women and their role in the labour market.

Design/methodology/approach – Both a quantitative and qualitative approach has been employed.

Findings – Like in many other countries, maternity, housework and little education are major barriers to women's participation in the labour market.

Research limitations/implications – Bangladesh's Labour Code should provide more protection to female employment, helping women to strike a balance between family and work.

Originality/value – The paper focuses on Bangladesh, a country where little research has been conducted on the issue of female employment.

Paper type – Qualitative and analytical paper

Keywords – *Bangladesh, Labour Market, Female Employment, Family and Professional Life*

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is one of the largest-populated countries in South Asia and the 10th most populous state in the world² (as of 1 July 2015³, some 158.90 million people lived there). In 2015, the ratio between women and men was 100 to 30, meaning that women accounted for almost half of population in the country.

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² World Population Review, *Bangladesh population* 2019, <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bangladesh-population/> [Last accessed : 11 September 2019].

³ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Education Scenario in Bangladesh: Gender perspective*, February 2017, p. 15.

Therefore, they can play a part in the country's economic development. However, some cultural barriers exist hampering women's full participation in the labour market. They are still mostly engaged in housework and economically dependent on males. Furthermore, those who enter employment face issues concerning the reconciliation of professional and family life. This state of affairs can only be overcome if women are given proper education and training helping them to develop the expertise needed to tap into their potential and contribute to national growth.

2. Research Purpose

The aim of this research is to understand the factors hindering women's development and participation in the labour market. To this end, data collected through surveys concerning their household, economic and living conditions will be examined, along with the existing literature on this topic. This data will be useful to appreciate the cultural, socio-economic and educational variables characterizing a large number of Bangladeshis and to raise awareness of the problems faced by women when entering the labour market. In this sense, education is key to promoting female employment and upgrading their societal status. Consequently, this research aims at identifying the necessary measures to improve Bangladeshi women's living and working conditions.

3. Methodology

Given the objectives outlined above, both a qualitative and a quantitative approach has been adopted. Qualitative data has been collected from secondary sources (books, journals, reports, and articles), while quantitative information has been gathered from that issued by different institutions (the UN and the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, among others). All data points to gender inequalities in industry, underlining that some barriers are in place affecting women's ability to strike a balance between work and family in Bangladesh.

4. Women's Role in Bangladeshi Society

Traditionally, Bangladeshi women are devoted to housework and are not encouraged to participate in economic and social life. Providing for the family concerns men only, so they act as breadwinners and decision-makers in the family.

Bangladesh is a Muslim country, so inhabitants stick to the principle that women should always follow the instructions of their parents and husbands,

thus they are not allowed to make decisions on their own. Consequently, and despite the role that women can play in the labour market, they are poorly involved and often excluded from employment. This situation also counters what the Quran says about men and women: *“The believers, men and women, are allies (awliya) of one another. They enjoin the ‘common good’ (al ma’ruf) and forbid the bad (al munkar), they observe prayers (salat) and give charitable alms (zakat) and obey God and his Prophet”* (Qur’an, 9:71). In this statement, equality between men and women is promoted, as they support one another through a spiritual, emotional and companionate alliance. Interpreting this verse, Fadlallah⁴ (2019) speaks of: “a ‘coalition’ between men and women in ‘faith’, a ‘wilayat iman’.” He also states that: “this verse reaffirms the egalitarian vision of the Qur’an, which encourages women to be involved in all areas of social and political life, in contrast to the traditional exclusivist understanding that tends to reduce women to their function as wives and mothers, a role that, while important, cannot constitute their unique horizon in life”⁵ (Fadlallah, 2019). Notwithstanding these words, women’s participation in society is still low in many Islamic countries undergoing development, including Bangladesh.

5. Female Participation in Industry in Bangladesh

Female participation in the labour force is pivotal for inclusive growth and well-being. There has been an increase in women’s contribution to modern sector activities (Amsden, 1980). One good example of this state of affairs is South Africa, which has become successful in maintaining a consistent trend in this connection (Ntuli, 2004). According to the former World Bank president, Jim Yong Kim, “Countries such as Bangladesh are encouraging female participation in the workforce. If they [Bangladesh] stay on track, their female workforce will grow from 34 to 82 percent over the next decade, adding 1.8 percentage points to their GDP”⁶. In countries like Bangladesh, which focus on export-oriented industrialization, the involvement of female labour is necessary, due to the rapid growth of labour intensive export-oriented industries like garments, electronics, toys, leather products, etc. (Lee 1981).

⁴ Fadlallah, M.H. (1935-2010), the Lebanese scholar, <http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/articles/are-men-and-women-unequal-in-islam/> [Last accessed : 11 September 2019].

⁵ Asma Lamrabet, *Are men and women unequal in Islam?* <http://www.asma-lamrabet.com/articles/are-men-and-women-unequal-in-islam/> [Last accessed : 11 September 2019].

⁶ Statement given at the World Bank Group/IMF Annual Meetings at Lima, Peru, on Friday. *The Daily Star*, Wednesday, October 11, 2015.

According to the *World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2018*, “female employment in Bangladesh has seen a 35% increase, reaching 18.1 million from 2008 to 2017, whereas male employment has reported an 11% increase, reaching 45.7 million”⁷. Even if the rate of female labour force has increased (from 35.5% in 2015-16 to 36.3% in 2016-2017, that is 0.8) it is still very low if compared to the global average of 52% (International Labour Organization, Labstat)⁸. Based on the last survey of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics⁹:

- Informal employment and economy play a vital role in employment. In rural areas, 93.3% of women are engaged in the informal sector (87.4% in urban areas). At the national level, only 8.2% of women operate in formal employment, that is nearly half of the share reported for males;
- The unemployment rate for women stands at 4.2% (1.3 million), that is more than twice that of males;
- The average monthly earnings for women in national currency is 12,254 Taka, which is lower than males’ remuneration;
- Out of the 6.6 million working people who are underutilized, 3.5 million are women;
- Women are mostly employed in the service and sales sectors (30.3%), followed by skilled agricultural work (23.6%), elementary occupations (14%) and machine operations (13.9%);
- Almost 7 out of 10 women face vulnerable working conditions (e.g. inadequate earnings, low productivity and difficult conditions of work).

6. Women’s Participation in the Labour Market: A Comparison with Canada

Canada has been taken as a benchmark in that it fares well in terms of gender equality. It is the world’s tenth largest economy and a vibrant, multicultural democracy¹⁰. The unemployment rate declined from 6.4% to 6.3% in the 2017 to 2019 time-period, and stable unemployment is foreseen for 2019¹¹.

⁷ Dhaka Tribune, March 8th, 2018, <https://www.dhakatribune.com/business/2018/03/08/women-workforce-employment-without-empowerment> [Last Accessed: 22 August 2019].

⁸ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, *Labour Statistics in Bangladesh-An empirical analysis*, August 2018, p. 94.

⁹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, *Labour Force Survey*, Bangladesh 2016-17, January 2018.

¹⁰ Gross domestic product ranking table (based on nominal GDP of nation-states in 2015), *The World Bank working paper*, 2015.

¹¹ *World Employment Social Outlook: Trends 2018*, International labour office: Geneva, ILO, 2018 p. 15.

Though there is high female participation in Canada, women are under-represented in key manufacturing jobs, occupying 4.4% of jobs in industrial, electrical and construction trades, 4.5% of jobs in maintenance and equipment operation trades and 15.7% of jobs in machine operation¹². Most women are well educated, as 53 and 48 percent of them possessed university qualifications (a bachelor's degree or higher) in 2017 and in 2018¹³, respectively. Moreover, according to a recent International Labour Organization/Gallup poll, 77 percent of Canadian women prefer to have a paid job rather than staying at home. Men also agree on this; 80 percent of them prefer women to be in employment¹⁴. The data indicates that women in Canada are more interested in engaging into productive sectors that have a potential impact on the country's socioeconomic context.

7. Reasons and Barriers for Women being under-represented in Certain Positions

Awareness. Societal awareness is one of the causes for women's underrepresentation in the labour market. Women's enablement depends on a range of factors including psychological, cognitive, economic, social and political dimensions (Stromquist, 1995). This indicates that empowerment is understood not only as an extrinsic control over resources (human, financial, intellectual), but also as a growing intrinsic capability, seen through greater self-confidence and an inner transformation of women's consciousness that enables one to overcome external barriers to accessing resources or changing traditional ideology (Sen and Batliwala, 2000). Research has also highlighted that self-confidence and self-esteem are essential 'first steps' to one's empowerment (Anderson, 1996; Claridge, 1996). According to NCBP (2000), women constitute almost half of the population in Bangladesh. Their status has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to education, health, marriage, children, employment and social equality. Consequently, awareness is an important indicator of the psychological dimension of women's enablement in Bangladesh and in society as a whole.

¹² Mike Holden & Marie Morden, *Untapped Potential, Attracting and engaging women in Canadian manufacturing*, Summary paper, Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters' March 2017, p. 6-7

¹³ Labour force survey estimates (LFS), by educational attainment, sex, and age group, annual, Statistics Canada, CANSIM Table 282-0004, January 2018. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1410002001> [Last Accessed: 22 August 2019].

¹⁴ *Towards a better future for women and work: Voices of women and men*, International Labour Organization and Gallup, March 8, 2017.

Educational gaps, the timing of marriage, sex bias, social and religion awareness are further barriers hampering women's development in Bangladesh.

Education. The education system in Bangladesh is mainly divided into three levels: primary education (Grade 1-5), secondary education (Grade 6-10), and upper secondary education. As far as primary education is concerned, the net enrolment rate reported an increase in the 2010 to 2015 time period¹⁵. Specifically, in 2010 the enrollment rate for boys and girls in primary education was 97.6 and 92.2, respectively, while in 2015 it reached 97.1 and 98.8. Though the net enrollment rate increased in 2015, in the same year the dropout rate in primary education for girl was reported at being 17%¹⁶, and was mainly due to financial distress. The situation is different in secondary education. In 2015, the net enrolment rate among women was 62.61%, but the dropout rate was 45.92%. The reason behind them leaving school was their engagement in housework. The dropout phenomenon is particularly evident in grade 8, because of financial issues and early marriages¹⁷. According to UNICEF, education in the early years of a child's life is the basic foundations to become an educated, socially aware, healthy and balanced individual to participate in, and contribute to the financial and social wealth of societies¹⁸. As for Bangladesh, there exists a marked gender disparity in primary, secondary and upper secondary education that needs to be eliminated. The Bangladeshi government is trying to impose compulsory attendance in primary school and good-quality education for both girls and boys. For women development, it is also necessary to increase the rate of enrolment in secondary and upper secondary education.

Training. Training is one of the most important components to maintaining gender equality in the industrial sector. It is a transformative process needed to acquire knowledge and techniques for developing skills. In addition, training is the process which helps a woman to change her approach to manage and retain their position. As of 2018, there were 3,596 active RMG factories in Bangladesh employing 3.5 million workers, 60.8% of whom were females and

¹⁵ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, UCEP Bangladesh, *Education Scenario in Bangladesh: Gender Perspective*, February 17, p. 20.

¹⁶ *Education Scenario in Bangladesh: Gender Perspective*, p. 23.

¹⁷ *Education Scenario in Bangladesh: Gender Perspective*, p. 33.

¹⁸ UNICEF, Why Early Childhood Development?, https://www.unicef.org/earlychildhood/index_40748.html.

39.2% males. According to a CPD¹⁹ study, “only about 0.5% of managers in RMG enterprises are females, and only about 9.3% of HR managers in the RMG sector are females. On the production floor, of 60.8% women, most of them are employed in the sewing section (73.9%) and only a limited percentage of them works in the cutting section (22.7%)”. A gap thus exists between skilled and unskilled woman. That is why there is discrimination between men and woman. Training also affects wage differences between male and female workers. Bangladeshi women are not able to develop their skills because of a lack of training. Consequently, the wage divide is destined to increase, as women are not given the opportunity to review their skills and increase their technological literacy.

Failure to Reconciliate Family and Professional Life. Considering Bangladesh's social norm and traditional scenario, women bear the heaviest burden when it comes to balancing work and family. More generally, women spend more time than men on family-related activities, working 4 times more than men in unpaid care activities at home²⁰. According to the Time Use Pilot Survey 2012²¹, women spent more time in household work (3.6 hours) than men (1.4 hours). In addition, Section 94 of the Bangladesh Labour Act 2006²², specifies that in every establishment where 40 (forty) or more female workers are ordinarily employed, one or more suitable rooms shall be provided and maintained for their children who are under the age of 6 (six).

Maternal health. Maternity is one of the biological burdens that creates a substantial problem on women's time. Therefore, pregnancy and child birth affect women's ability to work and are considered as a key barrier for women's participation in the labour market. This issue is evident not only in Bangladesh but all over the world. A recent study conducted in Denmark suggests that “women who are successfully treated by IVF (in vitro fertilization) earn persistently less because of having children” (Lundborg, Plug and Rasmussen, 2017)²³. It is also evident that most women have their contract terminated

¹⁹ Mostafiz Uddin, *Declining female participation in RMG sector: CPD Study*, May 8th, 2018 | CPD in the Media, CPD study citation, <https://cpd.org.bd/declining-female-participation-in-rmg-sector-cpd-study/> [CPD- Centre for Policy Dialogue].

²⁰ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina and Sandra Tzvetkova, *Working women: Key facts and trends in female labor force participation, Female-to-male ratio of time devoted to unpaid care work*, 2014 October 16, 2017, <https://ourworldindata.org/female-labor-force-participation-key-facts>.

²¹ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Statistics and Informatics Division, Ministry of Planning, Time Use Pilot Survey 2012, October 2013, p. 11.

²² Amendment by the Bangladesh Labour Act 2010 & 2013.

²³ Lundborg, P., Plug, E., & Rasmussen, A. W. (2017). Can Women Have Children and a Career? IV Evidence from IVF Treatments. *American Economic Review*, 107(6), 1611-1637.

when they become pregnant or sent on leave without being paid. So they are compelled to work during the final stages of their pregnancy²⁴ or right after having given birth. Statistics show that 60% of working women reported concerns over long periods of separation from their children, especially breastfeeding mothers²⁵.

As a consequence, both female workers and their children suffer and sometimes this state of affairs causes physical and mental consequences which affect individual capability, fitness and future development.

8. Conclusion

“Bangladesh’s Constitution has provided progressive and gender-friendly governance institutions for all Bangladeshi in general and for women in particular”²⁶. The constitutional provisions (laid down in articles 19,27, 28(1), 28(2), 28 (3), 29(1), 29(2) and 40) cover many aspects regarding equal rights for men and women in public life, equal opportunities for all citizens irrespective their gender, also in the employment sphere. These provisions contain fundamental principles to ensure gender equality by providing human dignity in society. It is a prerequisite for a brighter and successful future, which lays the foundations for younger generations and tackles gender discrimination. It is also important to increase societal awareness of the issue; to change the approach about women’s role in society; to increase women’s labour force participation and to raise women’s productivity in high-skilled occupations.

To remove the barriers for woman participation and gear up women participation, it is vital to change attitudes towards women that can affect gender outcomes in work and in society. There is a strong link between societal attitudes that limit women’s potential and gender-equality outcomes in different sectors²⁷. Education is another central theme to help more and more women to enter the labour force and improve employment opportunities. The latter increase women’s bargaining power and reduce males’ economic burden. Education can also promote a new cultural approach concerning the value of women in society. In this regard, higher education institutions can encourage woman to engage in labour activities and prepare them for future development and growth. Like Canada, devising initiatives favouring education, training and

²⁴ War on Want (August 2011), *STITCHED UP; Women workers in the Bangladeshi garment sector* - <https://waronwant.org/sites/default/files/Stitched%20Up.pdf> [last access: 22 August 2019].

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Osman Ali, *Constitution and gender rights*, EDITORIAL,1 October, 2016, <http://www.theindependentbd.com/printversion/details/62146>.

²⁷ 2010–14 *World Values Survey*. See WVS Wave 6 (2010–2014), (<http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>).

skill development can help women to promote themselves for high and skilled professions. To remove inequality in society and garner significant economic benefits, it is key to attracting, retaining, and advancing women, raising awareness in society. This can also help women have more free time to spend in the workforce, in activities that benefit society, at home, or in other tasks of their choice. By a fairer redistribution of unpaid work, women could contribute to the family income and pursue training and education that increase their earning potential and boost their confidence, helping them to achieve high-skilled occupations. In addition, increasing women's participation in the labour market enables the government and other private sector institutions to create affordable, high quality, fully inclusive child care facilities, which in turn create further job opportunities for women. In order to redistribute unpaid house work equally between men and women, the former should be also encouraged to take paternity leave. In Bangladesh there is no provision regarding paternity benefit or leave, so it should be included in the Bangladesh Labour Act. More flexible working hours could also help women to strike a balance between family and professional life. Professionals appointed by the government (e.g. labour inspectors) can ensure employers comply with their obligations, conduct audits, inspections and surveys. In conclusion, women can contribute greatly to Bangladesh's growth and development. Yet this is only possible if their rights and dignity as humans are preserved, meaning they should not be seen only as housekeepers.

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