

The Socio-Economic Status of Urban Women in Bangladesh

by *Khair Jahan Sogra*

En se basant sur des facteurs socio-culturels, légaux et éducatifs ainsi que sur la participation des femmes au monde du travail, le présent article

examine le statut socio-économique des femmes qui vivent dans les centres urbains du Bangladesh. Malgré les tendances récentes, le statut des femmes ne s'est pas sérieusement amélioré. Les besoins économiques ont forcé la société à changer de comportement envers les femmes mais l'attitude est restée la même.

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Urbanization has become a universal phenomenon and has emerged as one of the outstanding features of the developing world. This is true even in a predominantly rural country like Bangladesh, where although 85 per cent of the population remain in rural areas, the rate of urbanization is as high as 17 per cent (CIDA). Although the growth of cities and large urban population has done little to radically alter the status of women, important changes are occurring. According to a 1989 survey, 1.5 million women are employed in urban areas, out of which 33,300 work within the professional, technical, and managerial ranks (Akhter). Compared to the total population, this number may be small, but the women who constitute it represent a distinct break from the traditional position of women in Bangladesh.

Profiles of urban women in Bangladesh

Women who are engaged in activities in urban areas are in three categories:

migrant women workers, long-time urban residents who seek employment for economic reasons (urban women), and women who work for reasons other than economic (elite women) (Enayet).

Migrant women workers come from villages to urban centres, mainly for the purpose of earning a living. The majority of women in this group are illiterate, unskilled, and untrained in any trade. Considered "low class," they find employment as domestic workers in upper and middle class homes. They are paid minimal wages, have unspecified working hours, and do not enjoy any job security.

Urban women live permanently in the urban areas. They see wage employment as a means of improving their present standard of living and are usually highly educated. They generally occupy professional and managerial posts and enjoy some degree of job security, regular working hours, and high salaries, with leave and fringe benefits.

Rather than working for economic reasons, elite women work mainly for personal fulfillment, satisfaction, and a sense of independence. These women are generally highly educated and belong to what is known as the "elite" urban class. They are engaged in occupations in which they are often the owners and financiers. Economic reasons are only a secondary consideration for them.

The socio-economic status of urban women in Bangladesh

Status can be defined as the ranking one has in terms of prestige, power, and esteem (Buvinic). According to this definition, the status of women in Bangladesh is quite low. This stems largely from the prevailing religious traditions of the region: Islam and, to a lesser extent, Hinduism. The influence of religion on the overall position

of women in Bangladesh cannot be underestimated. Religion and religious practice begin creating and reinforcing women's low status at the moment of birth.

When a male child is born, he is welcomed into the world by the *Ajjan*, or an offering of thanks to God in the form of a Muslim prayer call. Daughters are not so joyously welcomed into the world. In fact, they are viewed more as a liability than a blessing. As they grow up, daughters perceive the preferential treatment given to their brothers, fathers, and other male members of the family, but are instructed that getting less of everything without complaint is the ideal behaviour of a good woman. In this process, they learn to accept the essentially inferior status of women in society.

As a whole, it can be said that Bangladesh women are dominated by a religious order that enshrines a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, which in turn enforces the dependence of women on men and regulates the role and relative status of women (Khan). *Purdah*, or female seclusion, is a key component in this

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system of control. It is most often identified with the tradition of Islam, but variants of the practice are found in the other religious traditions of the Indian sub-continent (Kabeer). *Purdah* acts as a physical restriction on the mobility of women by defining their proper place as being within the boundaries of the home. It creates a gender segregated world which identifies

tifies men with the public/social sphere and women with the private/domestic sphere (Kabeer). *Purdah* also operates at an ideological level, prescribing the correct mode of behaviour for women (submissive and modest), and reinforcing the belief that women are vulnerable and in need of protection.

In economic terms, *purdah* upholds a division of labour by differentiating between male and female

space. Men and women are not permitted to mix freely in public, thus the work women undertake is often in the home. As women are obliged, or even forced, to accept the imposi-

tions of *purdah*, the market for their labour is informal and almost always either underpaid or unpaid. Often women work within the boundaries of the home, under the direct supervision of men, where the products of their labour, as well as the proceeds, often pass directly into the hands of husbands, fathers, and other male relations (Kabeer). As women are not allowed to attend the market-place, the products of their labour remain socially invisible, while the economic power resulting from their labour, as it is transferred directly into male hands, is utterly non-existent.

This is true primarily of women in rural areas, but can be the case for some urban employed women as well. Women employed in the cities, labouring as helpful daughters, obedient wives, and ideal mothers, surrender their pay-cheques to male heads of their respective families without any expectation of accountability in return. This indicates that a large majority of women have no control over their earnings, thus their influence on family spending and family debt is also very limited (Manohar).

It would be a mistake, however, to believe that *purdah* restricts the autonomy and physical mobility of all women in the same way. Urban middle and upper class women are free to

move about outside their homes to their offices and other places as they wish. Urban middle and upper class women, however, are often still dependent on their male guardian's permission in choosing a particular type of job. As Bangladeshi sociologist Dr. Mahmuda Islam observed,

a beginning has been made towards the breaking down of traditional bondage. Partly due to economic pressure women (in urban areas) have been permitted to go out of their homes and to seek employment side by side with men... these women set the trend of future development of women in this society. (43)

Yet, as urban middle and upper class women have freedom of movement, and thus are not physically restrained by the practice of *purdah*, their education at an early age in the social traditions of their country, of which *purdah* is a part, often affects them in the workplace, imposing upon them a psychological version of the physical practice of seclusion by limiting their self-confidence and initiative (Manohar).

On the surface, the legal status of women in Bangladesh, while not completely equal to that of men, appears on paper at least to be almost on par. But the reality of the situation is somewhat different.

As society favours the authority of men over women, there is not surprisingly a distinctly patriarchal interpretation of the law. The legal status of women is governed by the Constitution (its Acts and Ordinances), the civil laws, and the family laws of each religious community. The Constitution of Bangladesh grants equal rights to women in all spheres of life, except those which are governed by Personal Laws (for example, Muslims are governed by Sharia). Having come into effect in 1972, the Constitution stipulates the fundamental rights of women in Articles 28 and 29. Article 28 stipulates: "the state shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only

of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth." Article 29 states: "no citizen shall, on grounds of...sex...be ineligible for, or discriminated against in respect of any employment or office in service of the republic." In addition, Article 122 grants the right to vote to both men and women.

While the Constitution ensures equality of genders, it also acknowledges a deeply rooted inequality between the sexes, and for this reason reserves unto the government the authority to make special provisions to offset this inequality through legislation. Currently, 15 per cent of managerial and 20 per cent of non-managerial jobs in the public sector are reserved for women. In the case of primary school teachers, 50 per cent of the total number of positions are reserved for women.

While the Constitution acknowledges the historic disadvantages faced by women and empowers the government to take "affirmative action" with respect to women, this power is not effectively used in practice. In general, civil laws tend to reaffirm the cultural traditions of patriarchy, thus reducing the effectiveness of the constitutional provisions guaranteeing the equal status of women. For example, lower level women employees, such as messengers and cleaners, are prohibited from travelling abroad unless they are accompanied by their spouses, or they receive special government clearance. Another example of legally sanctioned limits upon the autonomy of women is the rule that monetary compensation for injuries cannot be paid directly to the women concerned (World Bank Report, 1991).

In Personal Law women are equally at a disadvantage. According to Muslim Personal Law, men have a unilateral right to divorce, while women are prevented from initiating proceedings against their husbands. In addition, men may opt to marry more than one woman, while women are relegated, theoretically, to being but one of several women whom a man might call "wife." Finally, women suffer adversely in inheritance law, as

Women exhibit great reluctance to exercise or demand rights because of the negative attitudes of society.

wives and daughters are entitled to much smaller shares of their deceased male kinsmen's estates than those reserved for surviving sons.

From time to time women activists in Bangladesh have proposed revisions to these laws, but their proposals have been rejected on the grounds that such laws are based on "Quranic injunction," and thus are sacrosanct (Khan). Even in the case of blatant unconstitutionality, laws adversely affecting the status

of women are seldom overturned. This is true not only because the legal establishment is, like society itself, a reflection of patriarchy, but because of the

reticence of women. Women, even educated and enlightened ones, tend to exhibit great reluctance to exercise or demand rights because of the overwhelmingly negative attitudes of society at large towards justice seeking, activist women. Such women are generally perceived to be troublemakers, and hardly representative of ideal Bengalee women. Even those women who are thoroughly convinced of the righteousness of their cause lack confidence in their ability to gain a satisfactory result in any legal challenge they might make (Manohar). So, while many laws proclaim the equality of genders, the law has fostered little change in the lives of Bangladeshi women. The most important reasons for this failure of the law can be traced to the fact that the laws on the books that do uphold the rights and autonomy of women have necessarily challenged the traditional male prerogative (Khan).

The level of female education is an important indicator to assess not only the status of women in a society, but also the ability of a country to effectively use its human resources for national development. The educational attainments of Bangladeshi women are among the lowest in the world. Only one in three school-age girls in Bangladesh actually attends

school, only two per cent of women aged 20-24 are in universities, and only three out of 1,000 women work in professional jobs (World Bank, 1989a). In Bangladesh, public expenditure on education amounts to less than two per cent of Gross National Product (GNP), compared to an average of 2.3 per cent in other South Asian countries and 4.1 per cent throughout East Asia (World Bank, 1989b). The national literacy rate, according to the 1991 census, stands at 24.8 per cent, versus 36 per cent for India. The literacy rate for females above the age of five years is 22.2 per cent (World Bank, 1989b).

The whole issue of female education is inextricably bound up with the existing socio-cultural and economic environment. The common belief among rural people, that educated girls are rude, less affectionate, and more disobedient, acts as a major obstacle to female education (Abdullah).

Another factor which contributes to the decision on the part of parents not to send daughters to school is marriage. In Bangladesh, marriages are virilocal—in other words, women generally leave their parents to live in the home of their new in-laws. As this is the case, most guardians think that educating a daughter is a bad financial investment. Once a daughter is gone from the family home, she will not return, and none of her labours will remunerate them in any way. Thus, spending money educating a daughter will only benefit the family of her in-laws, not her parents (Mannan). Those women who do manage to make it to school often have to drop out as a result of early marriage, early motherhood, and family responsibilities (Ahmad qtd. in Manohar). Unlike primary education, neither secondary nor university education is free, a factor which acts even more negatively upon female enrolment. In a country that is not only poor but whose entire social system demeans the value of women, the costs of post-primary education are simply too high to allow families the leisure of educating their daughters.

In addition, higher educational institutions are all situated in urban areas, which makes it impossible for rural women to avail themselves of the opportunities provided by these institutions. Those women who do go on to secondary and university schooling generally come from the more elite segment of society.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the civilian labour force (aged ten years and above) in Bangladesh expanded by nearly 72 per cent from 29.5 million to 50.7 million between 1984-85 and 1989. During the same period, the female labour force rose eight-fold, from 2.7 million to 21.0 million, while male participation rose by only ten per cent, from 26.8 million to 29.7 million. This dramatic rise in the female labour force participation rate can be attributed to various factors including better access to education, increased work options, and changing societal attitudes towards working women.

Among other things, it is no longer possible for any one family member to earn sufficient income to maintain a desired or satisfactory living standard. This is true both for lower class families, who bear the brunt of the effects of rapid inflation and population increase, and middle class families. Poorer families seek merely to keep their heads above water, while

Most guardians think that educating a daughter is a bad financial investment.

middle and upper class families, in which both husband and wife are educated, have strong aspirations for a higher standard of living (Kazi).

Furthermore, the government policy of reserving jobs for women has resulted in an influx of women in service and clerical positions, and various international firms and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have

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instituted "affirmative action" hiring policies.

Finally, the increase in the number of export-oriented ready-made garment factories, in which 90 per cent of the workers are female, has contributed to the increase in urban female employment. In addition, despite the prevailing negative regard for female education, attitudinal change among parents in urban areas toward encouraging higher education and professional employment for their daughters has had an effect (Akhter).

While this loosening of cultural constraints is most pronounced among women of the upper and middle classes, similar changes are at work in the lowest strata of society, where women are being pushed into the paid labour market out of economic necessity. Indeed, economic pressures are overriding the basic tenet of the patriarchal system that grants males the role as primary and/or sole family bread-winner (Kazi).



Kamala, Himachal Pradesh, India, 1994
Photo: Brenda Cranney

Conclusion

In the last two decades, especially during the UN sponsored Decade of Women (1975-85), the government of Bangladesh has shifted its stance and has adopted more egalitarian policies. Even more important as a factor contributing to the increase of women in the work force than the new egalitarian slant of policy has been the devastating economic condition of the country. The economic crunch has forced women (particularly upper and middle class, educated women) to come out of seclusion and join the paid labour force. Out of necessity, the male dominated patriarchal society has relaxed its tight grip on women, but this has had little impact on the biases that colour men's attitudes toward women. Although women have equal status by law, in reality, this equality has yet to materialize in practice.

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FEMME

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MUJER

ЖЕНЩИНА

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