

dBRIEF



Cover story *p.15*

Gender: Empowered and equal

In focus *p.39*

Aarong artisans take a stand for gender equality

Stories of dedication *p.41*

Inside story *p.45*

Skills training: A livelihood pathway for the transgender community

Published by

BRAC Advocacy for Social Change
BRAC Centre
75 Mohakhali
Dhaka 1212
Phone: +88 02 9881265 Ext. 5724
Email: dbrief@brac.net

Advisors

Moutushi Kabir, Director, Communication and Outreach
Mohammad Azad Rahman, Programme Head, Advocacy for Social Change

Editorial consultant

Tanim Ahmed

Photo credit

BRAC Communications

Creative design

Jannatul Ferdous, Designer, Material Development Unit, Advocacy for Social Change
Nakiba Bari, Designer, Material Development Unit, Advocacy for Social Change

Special Contributor

Nishath Sultana, Programme Coordinator, Gender Justice and Diversity
Roushon Akhter Urme, Manager, Gender Justice and Diversity

Editors

Md Mazedul Islam, Programme Coordinator, Advocacy for Social Change
Chiraranjan Sarker, Advocacy Analyst, Advocacy for Social Change
Sameeha Suraiya Choudhury, Lead Content Strategist, Communications
Rifat Islam Esha, Deputy Manager, Leadership Communications and Employee Engagement, Communications

Executive Editor

KAM Morshed, Director, Advocacy, Technology and Partnership

3rd issue, November 2019

Contents

Foreword I-II

Editorial III-IV

Development update 1-14

Cover story Salma Khatun: The international cricket all-round wonder from Bangladesh 15-16

People's perception of violence against women in Bangladesh 17-19

Swimming against the wave 20-22

Journey towards gender equality and women's empowerment 23-28

Bangladeshi women's movement: Some reflections 29-30

The struggle of Bangladesh women continues 31-32

Role of youth in establishing women rights and achieving gender equality 33-36

Safe citizenship for girls 37-38

In focus Aarong artisans take a stand for gender equality 39-40

Stories of dedication Crafting beauty 41

Najmuddin Qeyami: I am BRAC 42

The story of a real life changemaker 43-44

Inside story Journey towards gender responsive workplace 45-47

Helmets on, all geared up, women ready to accelerate with Scooty 48-49

Women-friendly spaces in Rohingya camps 50-53

How empowerment and livelihood of adolescents (ELA) programme is creating impact in the lives of girls and women in Africa 54-57

Skills Training: A livelihood pathway for the transgender community 58-59



Foreword

Over the last decade, Bangladesh has made significant progress in terms of women's participation in the labour force, gender parity in primary and secondary education, and representation of women in politics, administration, and decision-making processes. The initiatives of the Government of Bangladesh to mainstream gender issues in national policies and plans have enabled this success, and further enhanced gender equality and women empowerment in the country.

The Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman started the process of uplifting women's status by establishing equal rights of women with men in all spheres of the state and of public life as constitutional obligation under Article 27 and 28. Honourable Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina is committed to integrating gender equality and women's empowerment, and the multi-dimensional activities adopted in the ideals of Bangabandhu are universally acclaimed. As a result, Bangladesh today is a role model for other developing countries.

The government has taken steps to ensure women and children's development in Bangladesh through various policies, plans and strategies. It has prioritised gender equality in its seventh Five-Year Plan (2016-2020), setting a gender vision of "a country where men and women will have equal opportunities and rights, and women will be recognised as equal contributors in economic, social and political development". The government has also considered women's engagement in political and economic activities as a crosscutting issue, and one of the main drivers of positive social transformation. The National Women Development Policy 2011 formulated by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) is representing the guidelines for overall development of women.

The government has aligned the women empowerment process into its seventh Five-Year plan, Vision 2021, and SDGs 2030 and 2041. The vision of MoWCA is "society with gender equality and child protection" and its mission is "establishing the rights of women and children, and women's empowerment through mainstreaming in development". We are working hard to achieve our vision and mission.

The present government is committed to attaining the Sustainable Development Goal 5 of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. The government has been working to implement the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action in collaboration with civil society, NGOs, and development partners. Bangladesh has already attained the Millennium Development Goal 3 through its achievement of gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level, among other successes.

Bangladesh has made notable progress in women's empowerment in the last 10 years, and has experienced an appreciable change in society because of its efforts in this regard. For example, the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap highlighted Bangladesh's progress in closing the gender gap in the last 10 years. Additionally, the country's achievements have been exemplary in many sectors such as in reducing infant and child mortality,





poverty alleviation, increase in women entrepreneurship, education, and health. Our prime minister has been honoured with Planet 50-50 Champion Award by United Nations Women, Agent of Change Award from Global Partnership Forum, and Global Women's Leadership Award 2018 in Global Summit of Women for her excellent achievement in gender equality and empowerment of women entrepreneurs not just in Bangladesh, but also in Asia and the Pacific regions.

Both government and non-government sectors have played significant roles and they have often worked in a collaborative fashion. In order to reduce the poverty and vulnerability of women, the government has taken various income generating activities and training programmes to ensuring their financial stability.

Joyeeta Foundation has been established for branding the activities of women entrepreneurs. An initiative has been taken to impart training to 20 million women entrepreneurs in rural areas. The government has constructed hostels for working women and daycare centres for children. To ensure girls' rights, the government has also established adolescent clubs. The government, through EFT under G2P system, has implemented programmes for underprivileged women along with pregnant women and lactating mothers in the social safety net programmes such as VGD, maternity allowance, lactating mothers allowance, and micro-credit.

Bangladesh has made significant progress in major sectors in terms of gender equality and women empowerment, but we have a long way to go. To 90' in terms of social indicator, prevention from violence against women and reducing child marriage are not satisfactory. To prevent, reduce and manage violence against women and children, different programmes have been taken by the government, such as the establishment of one stop crisis centre,

To reduce the gender-gap, we need more consistent and continued efforts from the government and non-government organisations

National Forensic DNA Profiling Laboratory, National Trauma Counselling Centre, Toll-free Helpline 109, "Joy" Mobile Apps and safe homes for women and children etc. The government has formulated different acts and rules in this regard such as Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act 2010, Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Rules 2013, DNA Act 2014, Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017, Dowry Prohibition Act 2018, Child Marriage Restraint Rules 2018, etc. Additionally, the National Action Plan to Prevent Child Marriage (2018-2030) is being implemented. To address such issues, it is essential to invest in changing mindsets and societal attitudes towards women and girls. Poverty, gender discriminatory behaviours and attitudes, immorality, lack of awareness are the root causes of

violence against women. To reduce the gender gap, we need more consistent and continued efforts from the government and non-government organisations.

I hope this publication will be a useful resource not only for BRAC, but also for the governmental agencies and other development partners to achieve the gender targets of the Sustainable Development Goals.

I believe that attaining gender equality is everyone's responsibility. The government, NGOs, civil society, and development partners should work together to achieve gender equality and empowerment of women to fulfil the dream of the Father of the Nation of building "Sonar Bangla" - a developed country by 2041.

Kamrun Nahar
Secretary
Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs



The year 2018 marked the centenary of women gaining the right to vote in Great Britain and Ireland. The watershed moment for the British women's suffrage movement came when the Representation of the People Act was given Royal Assent from George V on 6 February 1918, giving approximately 8.4 million women the right to vote. Introducing the bill against the backdrop of a united country fighting the First World War, the Home Secretary George Cave said, "War by all classes of our countrymen has brought us nearer together, has opened men's eyes, and removed misunderstandings on all sides." The bill meant women over the age of 30, who met specific property qualifications, could vote for the first time - however, it would take another decade for women over 21 to be given the same voting rights as men. In fact, the campaign for equality continues today.

The most significant progress in gender equality, at least as far as legality goes, is enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights some 70 years ago. Both men and women are given the same rights including the right to live free from violence, slavery, and discrimination; to be educated; to own property; to vote, and to earn a fair and equal wage. Yet almost everywhere around the world, women and girls are still denied them, often simply because of their gender.

Since that day, the journey towards ensuring women's right, voice and agency made progress at a slow pace. The OECD report 'The Social Institutions and Gender Index (Sigi)', 2014, shows that underage marriage rates have barely come down this decade as one in six girls worldwide is still married before turning 18. The numbers have decreased so slowly since 2012 that experts warn that it will take a century before ending child marriage. When it comes to domestic violence, one in three women in the world has faced domestic violence, and 27% of the world's female population think it is acceptable to take a beating from their husbands under certain circumstances. Women still face legal restrictions over unwanted pregnancies in 119 countries, with only two countries having decriminalised abortion since 2012.

Forty-one countries recognise only a man to be the head of the household; 27 countries still require that women obey their husbands by law, and 24 countries require women to have the permission of their husbands or a legal guardian (such as a brother or father) in order to work.

The recent "Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020" report published by UNWOMEN, however, depicts a slightly rosier picture. The report argues that several indicators of women's agency and voice show progress. These indicators include the rising age of marriage; greater social and legal recognition of a diversity of partnership forms; declines in birth rates as women are better able to choose whether and when to have children, and how many; and increased economic autonomy of women. Of course, these statements are based

Editorial

on global averages and may not be directly relatable to a specific country or community. However, large-scale demographic changes, access to education, changes in ideational and social norms, changes in legal structure and practices, social mobilisation by actors such as NGOs, and globalisation seems to play an important role in this progress.

It is undeniable that women's activism has played a crucial role in bringing about changes. There has been tremendous political will across countries to give better legal protection, introduce positive discrimination to ensure equity, and build stronger institutions. The Sustainable Development Goal is one example of such global resolve.

Meeting SDG 5, gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, demands the elimination of violence and an end to harmful practices; ensuring women have access to economic resources, including equal inheritance rights and equity in family laws; and promoting shared responsibility for the provision of unpaid care and domestic work, which falls disproportionately on women's shoulders. To 'ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all' (SDG 3), women need access to reproductive healthcare and family planning; to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (SDG 4), girls must be able to delay marriage and complete their schooling; to 'promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all' (SDG 8), workplace regulations must be in place, including those that enable women and men to combine caregiving with paid work.

Despite all the political will and gradual progress in ensuring human rights for women, social, cultural and religious norms remain a sticky point, and one that is very difficult to address. While we all are aware that changing such norms need a multi-pronged approach and maybe broad-based partnerships. This is the key premise of BRAC's work in this area. There is no one approach, no one sector. Rather it should be a whole-of-society approach where interventions have to target the whole lifecycle of women.

This issue of dBRIEF, which highlights this crucial development issue, tries to shed light from various angles. Starting from the history of the movement in Bangladesh to some of the invaluable guidance of BRAC's founder Chair Emeritus Sir Fazle Hasan Abed attempts to paint the past and future with a broad brush. A few selected interventions of BRAC to promote gender equality will also highlight how we are attempting to address this complex issue.



Development update

KAM Morshed

FY19 - the year that was

Bangladesh's economy has performed well especially in the face of several national and international adversities. As estimated by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), the gross domestic product (GDP) grew at 7.86% in FY18, higher than the initial target of 7.4%. The provisional estimate for GDP growth rate in FY19 is 8.13%.

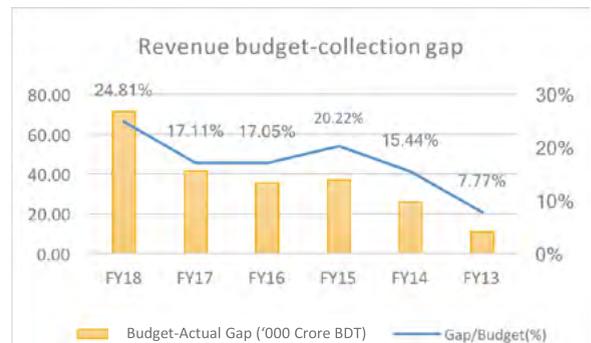
FY19 saw an increase in both public and private investment as the total investment rose to 31.56%, which is slightly lower than the 7th five year plan (7FYP) target. This growth is mostly fuelled by an increase in public investment and a marginal increase in private investment.

Bangladesh has one of the lowest revenue to GDP ratio.

Despite slight revenue growth in FY19, the ratio is still stagnated at around 10% level for more than a decade.

Additionally, the gap between revenue collection target and actual collection is increasing since FY12. The final tally for FY19 is not out yet, but the large gap is expected - some analyses suggest a record high gap of around BDT 110,000 crore from the original target, which is the highest in Bangladesh's history.

(Fig-1) Revenue budget-collection gap



Source: Monthly Fiscal Reports of Ministry of Finance

The Bangladesh Bank estimates that due to low food inflation Bangladesh recorded a moderate 5.48% annual inflation, which was 5.78% in FY18. After the steep rise since January 2019, the point to point general inflation in June 2019 dropped to 5.52% from 5.63% in the previous month.

The provisional commodity export in FY19 indicates a more than 10.55% growth in the nominal term, which was 5.81% in FY18. In the backdrop of reported year-on-year declines in

export growth of Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, South Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, Hong Kong and China, this growth is commendable.

Total merchandise commodity export during FY19 increased by USD 3.87 billion to USD 40.54 billion compared to USD 36.67 billion during FY 2017-18¹. Of the export, 84.2% of FY19 were either woven garments or knitwear which is slightly higher than FY18 share of 83.5%. In other words, while the policy directive is to diversify our export basket, if anything, in FY19 it was even more concentrated. The provisional data from Bangladesh Bank suggests that the final import figure of FY19 will be slightly higher than FY18 and is expected to stand at USD 59.9 billion². Hence, Bangladesh's overall trade deficit is set to decline in FY19.

Total receipts of workers' remittances during FY19 increased by USD 1.44 billion or 9.62% and stood at USD 16.42 billion against USD 14.98 billion of FY18. This is an all-time high receipt and can be attributable to the introduction of mobile financial services (MFS) such as bKash as the last mile solution to send remittance among other measures. The remittance inflow through MFS increased 74% in May 2019 alone compared to the previous month.

According to Bangladesh Bank, the country's foreign direct investment (FDI) in the first 11 months of FY19 increased 32.91% or USD 248 million compared with the same period of the FY18.

Net FDI inflow in the country from last July to this May stood at USD 2,067 million against USD 1,925 million in the same period a year earlier. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) world investment Report 2019, FDI inflow into Bangladesh totalled USD 3.6 billion in the 2018 calendar year, up 68% year-on-year. Chinese investments in Dhaka Stock Exchange, bKash, and a USD 1.4 billion Japanese investment in the tobacco industry explain this surge. As a result, Bangladesh's share of FDI to South Asia rose to 6.7% in 2018 calendar year from 4.1%. It may be noted, around 80% of the FDI to South Asia ends up in India.

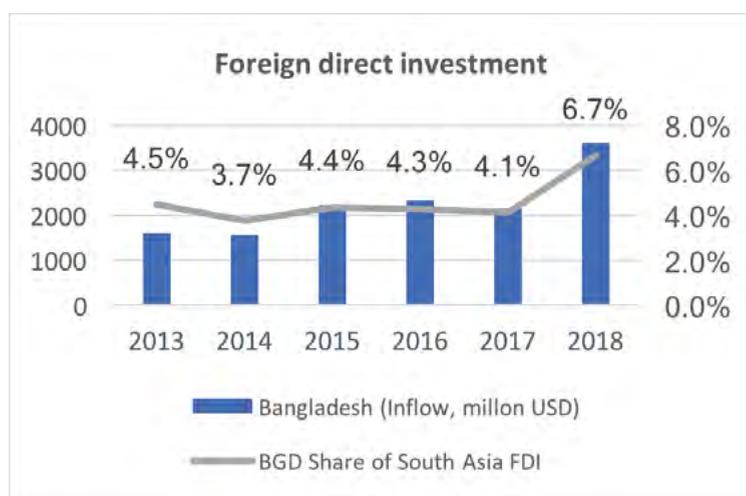
Before we discuss FY20, a brief discussion on our fascination with the GDP growth number as a measure of success might be useful.

Growth highlights FY19

	2018[a]	2019[b]
Nominal GDP (USD bn)	274	301.8
Nominal GDP (BDT bn)	22,505	25,362
Real GDP growth (%)	7.9	8.1
Expenditure on GDP (% real change) [c]		
- Private consumption	11	5.4
- Government consumption	15.4	8
- Gross fixed investment	10.5	8.2
Exports of goods & services	8.1	14.9
Imports of goods & services	27	4.8
Origin of GDP (% real change) [c]		
- Agriculture	4.2	3.5
- Industry	12.1	13
- Services	6.4	6.5
Consumer prices (avg; % change)	5.5	5.5
Trade balance	-16,913	-17,236
Goods: exports fob	38,687	41,589
Goods: imports fob	-55,600	-58,824
Current-account balance	-7,593	-6,627

Source: Economist Intelligence Unit. [a] Actual, [b] Forecast, [c] Estimate

(Fig-2) foreign direct investment



Source: World Investment Report, 2019

¹ The Bangladesh Bank, Major Economic Indicators: Monthly Update, Volume 07/2019

² Economist Intelligence Unit shows a slightly reduced figure of USD 58.8 billion.

What is so gross about the gross domestic product?

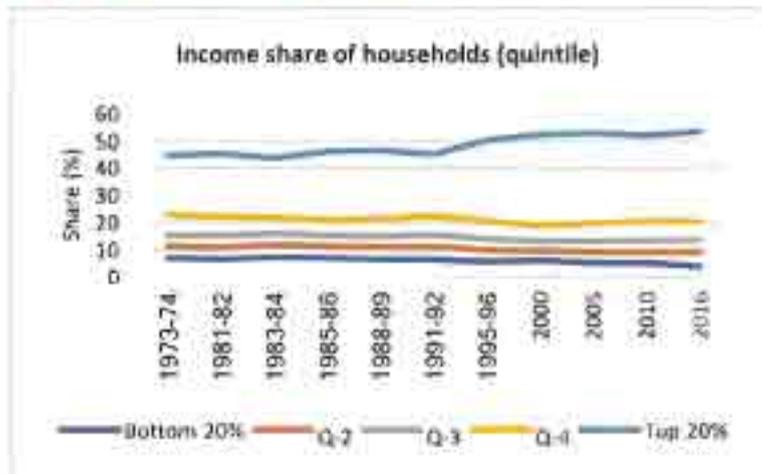
When it comes to GDP growth, Bangladesh outperforms many countries, including developed countries of the world - which is generally considered as the measure of success by the general public, media, and politicians. The single number, to summarise an economy's performance is simple and convenient. However, as the inventor of GDP measure, Simon Kuznets warned us, the measure has nothing to do with well-being.

GDP growth figure is considered an end rather than as a means to an end, no matter how the fruits of that growth are invested or shared. Hence, GDP does not measure whether a country is taking care of its precious natural resources such as clean air, mental health of the people, so and so forth. Similarly, from a GDP perspective, nuclear warheads do just as well as hospital beds or community clinics.

In our case, for example, only less than 2% of the GDP is spent on public education and less than 1% of the GDP is spent on health which exemplifies how we are ignoring our future (skilled and healthy people) and prioritising here and now.

Another example of how the GDP figure does not represent well-being is

(Fig-3) Worsening inequity



Source: Different issues of NBS reports

associated with distributive justice. The Household Income and Expenditure Surveys for different years show that the distribution of the GDP and the national income has been uneven and getting worse by the year. The last Household Income Expenditure Survey conducted in 2016 reveals that the top 5% of the population possesses about 29% of national income while the bottom 5% accounts for only 0.23% of the national income. More alarmingly, this situation is getting worse each year. From 1973-74 till 2016, the poorest 20% have lost more than 3% of their share of national

income, while the richest 20% gained around 9%.

The GDP also shed no light on how the products and services were produced. Was it produced by children - thereby compromising the future of a nation or at the cost of environmental degradation to challenge the sustainability of the growth? Were the labourers fairly paid? Where there gender justice? Was the production process inclusive? These are just a few of the critical questions that the GDP number does not answer.

Progress in comparison to Asian neighbours

One interesting way to analyse Bangladesh's progress, both economic and social, is to compare it with some of the countries that have started their economic journey almost at the same time as Bangladesh - even though some like Malaysia and South Korea started from a much stronger base, while others like China started from a lower base. The data is based on the Maddison Project Database of 2018*.

*Please see <https://www.rug.nl/ggdg/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2018>



In 1970, Bangladesh's real GDP per capita in 2011 constant USD was around USD 1306, while China was around USD 1115, India was around USD 1155, and Myanmar was around USD 756 only. After 17 years, the endpoint looks different. Figure 5 presents the times the real GDP per capita increased between 1970 and 2016, and 1991 and 2016. The result is very interesting.

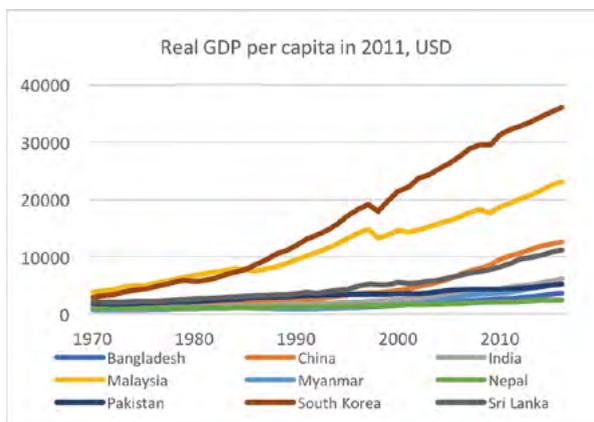
From 1970, Bangladesh multiplied the real GDP per capita by 2.75 times, while China, India and Myanmar multiplied their real per capita GDP by 11.27, 5.3 and 6.99 times.

However, if the base is changed to 1991, the multiplier for Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar become 2.72, 5.11, 3.53, and 5.85 times. In other words, most of the GDP growth for Bangladesh and Myanmar took place after 1991. In fact, for Bangladesh, the real GDP per capita grew by only 1.5% from 1970 to 1990.

Another way of comparing Bangladesh's progress to its neighbour is to investigate the social progress that our country could reach. Based on the data on past and projected rates of educational attainment of the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), Bangladesh will still have around 18% people without any formal education in 2030.

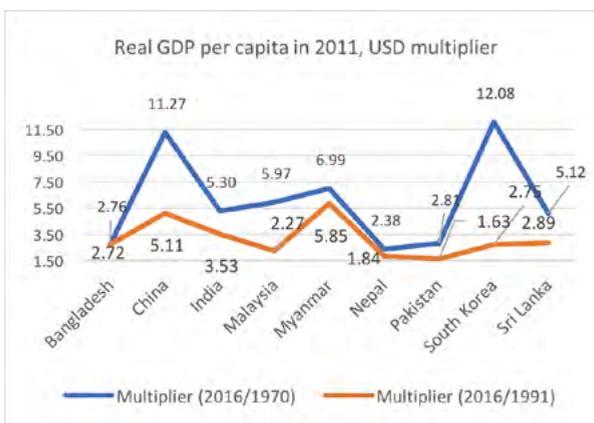
One can note that in 1970, 80% of Maldivians had no institutional education,

(Fig-4) Comparative GDP PPC growth



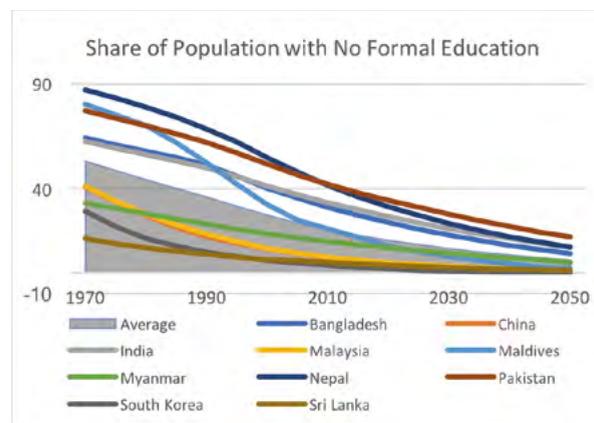
Source: Maddison Project Database 2018

(Fig-5) Comparative GDP multipliers



Source: Maddison Project Database 2018

(Fig-6) Progress in education



Source: IIASA

but as of 2015, the rate went down to 16% and is expected to reach around 7% by 2030. Of course, having a small number of population makes it easy for the country to make this stride. In relative terms, among the South Asian neighbours, Bangladesh performed better except for the Maldives, in reducing the initial level of people without formal education from 1970 to 2015.

Here is an interesting comparative progress report of selected Asian countries based on how many more years a 10-year-old is expected to live. The data is from the UN Population Division and Human Mortality Database.

Notice how Nepal sprinted from the very bottom to a respectable position. Sri Lanka was the leader of the pack but lost the leadership to civil war. A 10-year-old in South Korea was expected to live only one year more than a Bangladeshi 10-year-old in 1970. By 2015, the difference has grown to eight years. A 10-year-old in the Maldives was expected to live five years less than a Bangladeshi, but by 2015, the Maldivian is expected to live five years more.

It is good to note that the only country in South Asia which is doing better than Bangladesh is Sri Lanka.

?

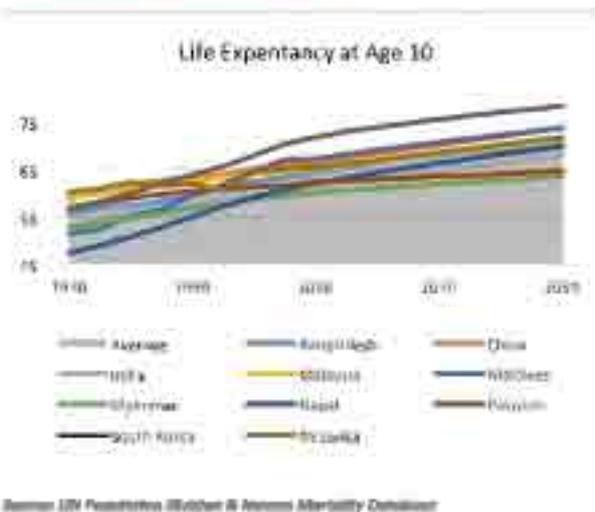
DID YOU KNOW

In 46 countries, women now hold more than 30% of seats in national parliament in at least one chamber.

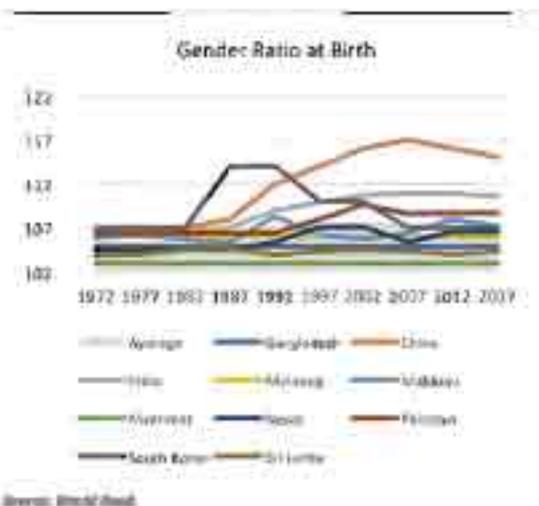
China is the worst performer in terms of gender ratio with a very high ratio of 117:100 followed by India and Pakistan, these countries have 110 and 108 males respectively for 100 female children. The good news is, the divergence is reducing in all these three countries.



(Fig-7) Progress in health



(Fig-8) Gender ratio at birth



Development outlook: Bangladesh

Despite the rise in global trade tensions in mid-2018, Bangladesh's ready-made garment (RMG) sector is doing better, which should continue in the near term and contribute to higher export. At the same time, increased imports for megaprojects, especially the Rooppur Nuclear Power Plant Project, will require heavy outlay. As a result, the current account balance can dip further. The GDP growth, as we have seen in the past few years, is expected to be driven by these large public investments.

The remittance inflows for South Asia in general and Bangladesh, in particular, is expected to remain strong. The budgetary measures taken to offer a preferential exchange rate for remittance through official channel should yield more official inflow.

The contribution of agriculture to the GDP will continue to decline in terms of value, though the sector is expected to provide employment of

more than half of the population. On a factor cost basis, economic growth will continue to be driven by the services and manufacturing sector. In addition to RMG, the ongoing shift of low-value manufacturing away from China will influence manufacturing growth in Bangladesh.

After a bumper rice harvest in the boro season (March-May), food prices are expected to ease. Even though, an increase in retail prices for natural gas from 1 July has offset the impact of lower food prices on the headline rate of inflation. However, on the whole, the rate of inflation in Bangladesh in FY20 will be lower than FY19.



Stronger international economic ties

Bangladesh is set to graduate in 2024 from least developed country (LDC) status to developing country status. With the graduation, Bangladesh will lose some forms of concessional aid, as well as the preferential market access to the EU from which LDCs typically benefit. To offset the impact of such eventualities and to ensure smooth graduation, the newly-elected government started earnest efforts to secure bilateral trade and financing agreements with major economic partners.

After the South Asian Association for Regional Co-operation (SAARC) hit a dead-end in recent years, Bangladesh has renewed its interest and reinvigorated its engagement with the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation (BIMSTEC). BIMSTEC, which include five of the SAARC countries, represents one-fourth of the global population and USD 2.7 trillion of global GDP is all set to gain increasing diplomatic space and importance among the countries in the region.

The Petrapole-Benapole checkpoint between India and Bangladesh is Asia's business land-customs checkpoint - but it only handles a fraction of regional trade between the two countries. Two pending agreements - the BIMSTEC Coastal Shipping Agreement and the BIMSTEC Motor Vehicle Agreement, aimed to facilitate trade and transport linkages between member countries, are expected to be finalised before 2024 and thereby improve Bangladesh's market access.

At the bilateral level, Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited Japan on 28 May 2019 and signed agreements worth USD 2.5 billion for infrastructure development. More importantly, the premier met with the Japanese businesses to invite them to invest in Bangladesh. It is only prudent to get Japan to invest in Bangladesh, and tap on to Japan's geopolitical interest in the region to give Bangladeshi import preferential treatment.

Our prime minister has also visited Brunei at the end of April to strengthen bilateral ties between the two countries. Brunei, a large producer of Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG), can especially help Bangladesh meet the energy needs and improve our country's food security.

Budget FY20

A national budget, worth BDT 5,23,190 crore, was placed in the national parliament on 13 June 2019 for FY19-20 with a focus on developing communications infrastructure and human resources, and achieve the 8.2% GDP growth. While the proposed budget is relatively larger than the revised budget as a percentage of GDP, but it is smaller than the budget proposed in FY19.

Sectoral allocation of the annual development plan (ADP) in the FY20 budget proposed an allocation of 27.4% for development of human resources (education, health, etc), 26% for communication (roads, rails, bridges, etc), 21.5% for rural and agricultural development (agriculture, rural development, water resources, etc), 13.8% for power and energy sector, and 11.3% for other sectors.

The target for revenue collection is set at BDT 377,810 crore, which is around 11% higher than the original FY19 budget, and around 19% higher of revised revenue target for FY19.

FY20 budget in brief (in bn BDT)

	FY20	FY19 ^[r]	FY19
Budget Size	5,231.90	4,425.41	4,645.73
% of GDP	18.10%	17.40%	18.30%
Expenditures (A)			
Operating/Recurring Expenditures	3,102.62	2667.28	2,824.15
-Dev. Expenditure	2,116.83	1,734.49	1,796.69
- ADP	2,027.21	1,670.00	1,730.00
- Non-ADP development budget	89.62	64.49	66.69
Loan/advances/food account	12.45	23.64	24.89
Sub-Total	5,231.90	4,425.41	4,645.73
Revenues (B)			
- NBR Tax Revenue	3,256.00	2,800.00	2,962.01
- Non-NBR Tax Revenue	145	96	97.27
- Non-Tax Revenue	377.1	270.13	333.52
Sub-Total	3,778.10	3,166.13	3,392.80
Deficit (A-B)	1,453.80	1,259.28	1,252.93
Deficit Financing			
Domestic Sources	773.63	787.45	712.26
- Bank Borrowing	473.64	308.95	420.29
- Non-Bank	300	478.5	291.97
Ext. Borrowing	680.16	471.84	540.67

Source: FY20 Budget Documents

National Board of Revenue (NBR) is tasked for the collection of around 86% of the revenue while the rest will be collected from non-tax revenue. The trouble is, the budget document has not made it clear how this higher target is going to be met.

Like in the past years, the budget stipulates a deficit of around 5% of the GDP, of which around 2.3% is expected to be generated from external sources and the rest 2.7% is left for internal financing. Of these, 2.7% is internal financing, the banking system needs to supply 1.65%, and the sale of savings certificate is expected yield 1.05%.

Given Bangladesh's low debt to GDP ratio, even when the cost of debt is going up, the proposed external funding should not be risky for the country. Additionally, the move to reduce the dependence of costly savings certificates is a generally positive move. However, the banking system is already struggling to maintain liquidity - partly due to the raising of non-performing loans (NPLs). The private sector credit growth in April dipped 52-month low. At this time, increased dependency by the government on the banking system can exacerbate the crowding-out effect.

The FY20 budget targets a gross foreign aid receipt of BDT 79,558 crore (BDT 57,670 crore in RBFY19). Since around 97% of the foreign aid is allocated through ADP, how much of the foreign aid target can be fulfilled will largely depend on the implementation of ADP. Especially, the 25 megaprojects with BDT 52,758 crore of allocation and most falling behind the schedule will be the key determinant.

While many have dismissed the promise of a 'smart budget' and termed the FY20 budget as run-of-the-mill, a few aspects can be highlighted. The budget speech hinted on a few revenue collection reforms although the specifics are missing. For example, the intent is expressed to expand revenue office at the sub-district level. Similarly, the government is working on automation and digitalisation of all operations of income tax, value added tax (VAT) and customs departments. Bringing taxpayers under the tax net by conducting a survey, bringing

administrative reforms, making tax identification number (TIN) compulsory for receiving different utility services seems more like a general intention than a definite plan. Drafting of a new Income Tax Act following the international best practices and a new Customs Act are going to be promulgated soon. However, the issue of corruption and connivance or how the government is planning to deal with such issues were not highlighted.

A new and somewhat innovative proposal to introduce insurance for the expatriate Bangladeshi workers and their families is made. The budget proposed BDT 100 crore to provide seed capital to promote all types of start-up enterprises among youths. There is another BDT 100 crore allocation for training and creating employment for the youth.

The budget speech reintroduces the idea of 'crop insurance' and 'livestock insurance' for farmers. We believe that introduction of these two measure would have significantly positive impact on sustainable poverty reduction, though the budget document contains nothing specific.

Allocation for social safety nets (SSN) in the FY20 budget is increased by 15.5% to BDT 74,367 crore. However, the SSN budget excluding pension increased marginally to 9.8% in FY20 budget from 9.5% in FY19 budget or from 1.7% of GDP to 1.8% of GDP respectively. This allocation is much lower than the target of 2.3% of GDP outlined in the 7FYP. Moreover, the allocation fell short of several SSNs set out in the national social security strategy (NSSS). For example, the combined primary and secondary school stipend in the budget for FY20 is only 10.16% of the NSSS target. Like the last time, this year's speech has mentioned a 'universal



DID YOU KNOW

For the fourth time in a row, Bangladesh has been classified as the most gender equal country in South Asia
- World Economic Forum

pension scheme', but unlike last one, there is no allocation for the scheme.

There will be a 2% incentive to those who send remittance through formal channel. This measure effectively acts as a means of exchange rate depreciation for remitters and will encourage more use of the official channel.

The budget proposed a number of changes in the related provisions for the capital market. Starting FY20, a 10% tax will be imposed on stock dividends. Similarly, 15% tax is imposed if retained earnings and reserves exceed 50% of paid-up capital. Both these measures intend to incentivise a cash dividend and may attract small investors to the capital market. However, the logic to lure small individual investor to a volatile market is somewhat unclear. Instead, the decision to introduce a provision to avoid multilayer taxation on dividend income of non-resident companies might be a better strategy to attract more foreign investment to the market.

FY20 sectoral allocation (in bn BDT)

Sector	Allocation	Share
1 Public Administration	1540.09	29.44%
2 Education and Technology	794.84	15.19%
3 Transport and Communication	648.29	12.39%
4 Local government and Rural development	378.84	7.24%
5 Defence	325.58	6.22%
6 Social Security and Welfare	297.69	5.69%
7 Agriculture	283.55	5.42%
8 Energy and Power	280.5	5.36%
9 Public Order and Safety	276.36	5.28%
10 Health	257.32	4.92%
11 Housing	66.03	1.26%
12 Recreation, culture, & religion	43.88	0.84%
13 Industrial and Economic Activities	38.91	0.74%

Source: FY20 Budget Documents



What is the budget to grassroots

There is an ongoing effort to engage the grassroots to the development process of the national budget for a few years now. The government has taken initiatives, development think tanks (like Unnayan Shamannay) and media houses (such as Channel I) are but a few organisations who are particularly known for these efforts. Recently, BRAC and iSocial joined with Unnayan Shamannay to develop a 'general equilibrium' model to identify the extent of impacts that budget proposals and other macroeconomic policy changes might have on the grassroots to supplement and help such engagement of grassroots in the budget-making process.

As part of the initiative, a survey was conducted on May 2019 that covered 4,800 households selected randomly. The following are the top findings from the survey:

People expect prices to rise

Two-third of the respondent of our survey feels that budget means price escalation and sufferings for them.

Many viewed national budgets as a yearly economic evil that they have to endure and does not bring any good.

However, when describing a 'good budget' both the poorest and the middle-class respondents felt that the government should spend in education (64%), agricultural subsidy (38%), health services (49%), communication infrastructure (37%), and employment creation (30%). The fact that the poor and the middle-class segments of the population have the same priority means that the poor do not see the budget as a tool to reduce disparity.

Similarly, when asked to prioritise among various social safety net programmes, both the poor and the middle-income groups expressed the same priorities. Once again, we would like to conclude that the poorest segment of the population is not aware of the fact that social safety nets are specifically meant to reduce disparity.

Political leaders understand needs of grassroots

When asked to prioritise their demand from the government, most respondents (irrespective of economic class or profession) said they wanted the government to enhance education support (61%), the supply of seed and fertiliser (76%), and improve disaster preparedness and weather forecasting (68%). The obvious similarity of priorities amid the two groups seems to be a part of 'social contract' that has emerged as part of Bangladesh's development vision.

Hence, it is not a surprise that this prioritisation is reflected in all major development policies of the government, be it the five-year plans, perspective plan, election manifesto or in the 'Delta Plan'. One can conclude that the political vision of 'Developed Country by 2041' and the various components of it has deeply influenced the priorities of the people and vice versa.



This social contract not reflected in budget

Analysis of the FY20 budget that we have presented above, and various other analyses conducted by renowned institutions like Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) clearly show that these priorities are not reflected in the budget. In fact, the budget has failed to live up to the expectation that it will be closely aligned with the ruling political party's election manifesto.

Two particular findings of the survey can be cited to explain this misalignment. The survey shows that as high as 20% of the social safety nets is going to middle-income class. While there are a few social safety net programmes which are not dependent on economic condition such as the pension scheme, it is difficult to explain such a high rate of mistargeting with such type of programmes alone. Similarly, around two-thirds of the beneficiaries of the social safety nets are men. Given that the government prioritises the economic empowerment of women and run several programmes targeting women, this low rate of women beneficiaries is a clear misalignment of the government's priority and budget proposals.

It is difficult to comment on where and how such misalignment takes place. It can be the traditional budget-making process and the tools used, it can be the lack of empathy of the people involved in producing the budget or it can be other stronger interest who skew the budget allocation or any combination of the three. Whatever the cause, such misalignment is costly for the country's development as well as for the democratic values of our societies.

Budget FY20

Macroeconomic outlook

Asia is all set to re-emerge as the most powerful economic power by 2020 in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms. Asian economies will become larger than the rest of the world combined for the first time since the 19th century. Not only is Asia growing richer it is also uniting as a constructive force for global economic governance. This glowing Asian forecast is not without nuances that need careful considerations.

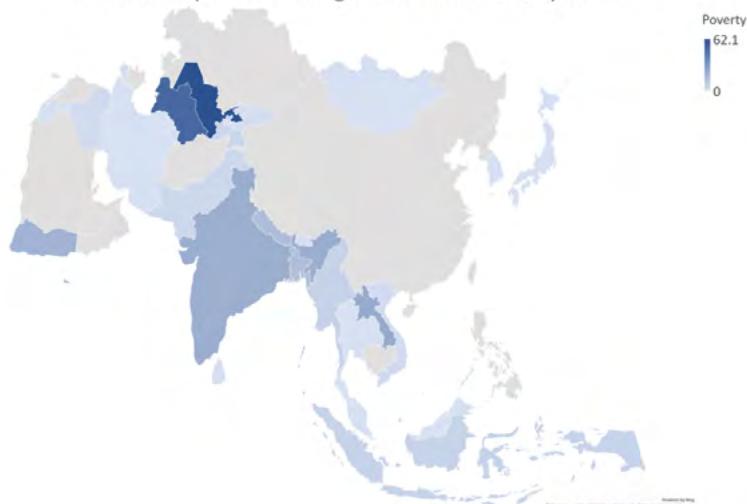
Developing Asia is expected to maintain a strong but moderating growth despite economic and political tensions. Asian Development Bank (ADB) forecast the regional GDP growth at 5.7% in 2019.

The ongoing 'trade war' has softened the GDP growth of PRC at 6.2% in the quarter ended in June 2019 - lowest in 27 years. Meanwhile, the tension between South Korea and Japan ignited fear of disruption in the global manufacturing supply chain for semiconductors— and that is adding to worries on an already slowing world economy. Some analysts even predict that the region's high-technology exporters, like South Korea, Taiwan, and Singapore, look to experience significantly tougher external demand conditions that will weigh on growth. North Korea's aggressive stance may have no significant impact yet.

Overall, at the sub-regional level, the

(Fig-9) Asian in extreme poverty

Share of Population Living in Extreme Poverty in Asia



Source: World Bank, Latest data from Asian countries

South Asian growth prospect in 2019 is revised downward at 6.6% from 6.7% in 2018. India's growth is lower than expected - 7% in 2019, and is the key influence. The growth projection for Bangladesh remains strong at 8% for 2019. Inflation in South Asia is expected to rise at 4.7% in 2019 from 3.7% in 2018 due to currency depreciation and rising input cost in agriculture. Macroeconomic imbalance in Pakistan and Sri Lanka, of course, remains a concern for the South Asia sub-region.

On the other hand, Southeast Asia is expected to post a GDP growth rate of 4.8% in 2019, down from 5.1% in 2018. The sub-region's open economies were more exposed to the trade conflict which were partly offset by strong domestic demand. Meanwhile, some countries are successfully repositioning to benefit from United States-China trade war. Vietnam's export grew, for example, by 6.7% in the first five months of 2019, buoyed by a 28% rise in exports to the US, and its already sizeable inflows of direct investment increased by 27%. Other economies also saw growth in exports to the US pick up. The best performer among the ten countries in this sub-region includes Brunei Darussalam, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

Commodity price, especially the price

of crude oil, remains in the watch list of most Asian countries. After reaching USD 60 per barrel in January, following the withdrawal of US waivers on Iranian oil export, the price of crude rose to a five-month high of USD 74 per barrel in late April. The fear of global slowdown and heightened tension in the Middle East caused the price level to seesaw. However, the overall outlook remains volatile.

On the other hand, all three World Bank indexes tracking food prices continued downward in 2019. A downward trend for global food prices that started in Q4 of 2018 continued into 2019, pushing the food commodity price index down by 7.8% year on year in the first half. This is a mixed blessing for Asia—the net importer's benefits, but their farmers suffer due to the low market price.

Human development outlook

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (UNESCAP) latest Sustainable Development Goals Progress Report shows that when it comes to some

of the SDGs, the region is going backwards. These are the goals related to access to clean water and sanitation (Goal 6), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), and responsible consumption and production (Goal 11). However, despite the many challenges facing Asian efforts to achieve the goals, there are reasons to be optimistic as the situation can be turned around in time.

Poverty and inequality

After sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia is the home of the highest number of people suffering from the indignity of poverty and inequality. The 2019 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index by United Nations Development Programme and Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative suggests that about 17.5% of South Asia's population and 2.1% of East Asia and the Pacific's live below the national poverty line. However, the picture is dire when compared to the multidimensional poverty threshold. The same report suggests that 45.6% of people living in South-Asia and 42.3% of people in East Asia and the Pacific are living in multidimensional poverty. In South Asia and in East Asia and the Pacific 18.8% and 14.9% of the people are vulnerable to multidimensional poverty respectively, indicating a large populace is hovering precariously just above the poverty threshold.

Climate change

Asia, especially the South Asian region, is one of the regions that will be hardest hit by global warming. South Asian countries that face the highest level of risk include Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives and—to a lesser extent—India and Pakistan. High temperatures, long coastlines, and the dependence of a large proportion of the region's population on agriculture and fisheries make South Asia one of the most vulnerable parts of the world when it comes to climate change.

Even though most of the countries in the region have dedicated policies to address these issues, they often suffer from a lack of funding - owing to the region's generally low level of economic

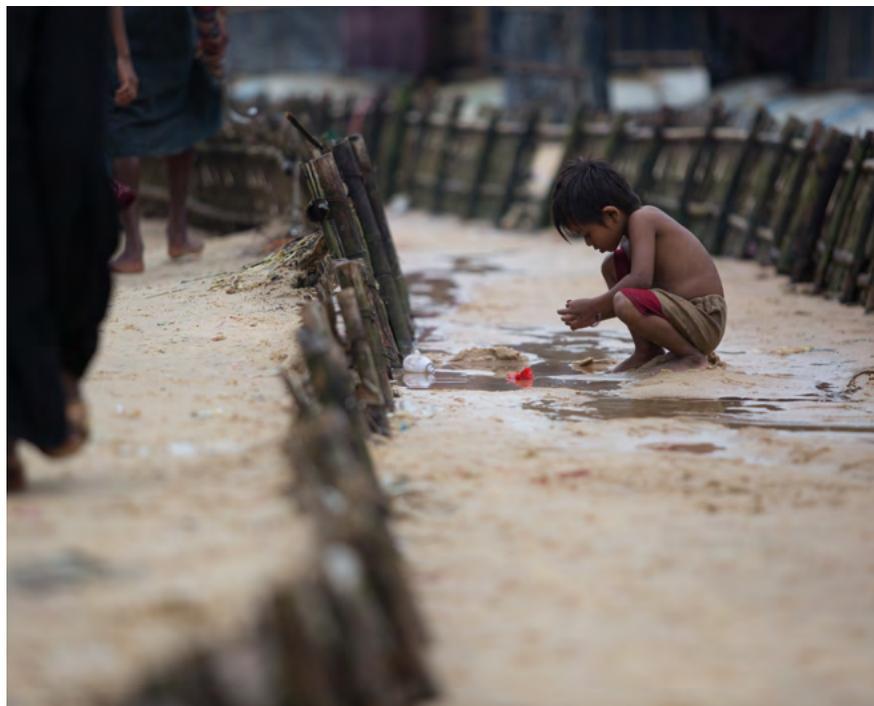
development and its rapidly growing energy needs. These issues, coupled with the inadequate response at the global level, will make the economic effects of climate change in these countries more pronounced in the long term.

A 2018 ADB study predicts that, under an unmitigated global climate, in Southeast Asia alone, rice yields could decrease by as much as 50%, the cumulative loss of reef-related fisheries is estimated to reach USD 58 billion during the first half of the 21st century; we are likely to lose 26,000 children under the age of five by 2030 as a result of climate change-related malnutrition.

Rapid socioeconomic development is converging with worsening threats from natural hazards to pose an unprecedented risk from catastrophes. Already, rising temperatures have caused Himalayan glaciers to melt, increasing the risk of floods and landslides during monsoon season. In the long-term, permanent disappearance of the glaciers could affect the flow of major Asian rivers, including the Yangtze, the Mekong, and the Brahmaputra. Asia is also the home to three of the world's top five polluters - China, India, and Japan. The transition towards non-emitting sources of energy has been uneven, with some countries like India, becoming global champions of renewables, while others, like Japan, doing little to address the emission problems.

Demographic dividend

UNESCAP estimates that half of the world's 1.8 billion young people live in the Asia-Pacific region. For most countries, this interconnected and active youth population is the source of demographic dividend and innovation. Yet, International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that the youth unemployment in Asia is proportionately



higher; 35% of the region's unemployed were youth (aged 15-24), although youth made up only 20% of the working-age population. Many of these young people are employed in the informal sector with poor wage and long working hours. Uncertainties associated with the Industrial Revolution 4.0, failure of the education system to meet market demand, and depleting support network are but a few challenges facing today's youth - coming in the way of their potential. The situation is made worse - what with the disproportionate and higher burden endured by girls and young women.

Urbanisation

Asia hosts the majority of the world's megacities - it currently has 1.5% annual urbanisation growth, which will result almost 55% of its population will to live in urban area by 2030. Currently, almost 25% of Asia's urban population is poor, and the rate is increasing as the influx of poor people into cities continues. Key challenges of this rapid urbanisation include sustaining cities as engines of growth, bridging the supply and demand gap on infrastructure services, strengthening urban management and governance capacity, to name a few. Food security in urban areas, which is predominantly dependent on

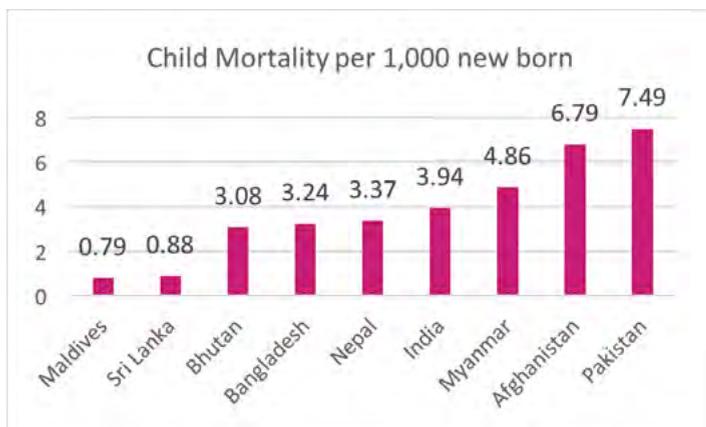
food produced in rural areas, is fast becoming a challenge too.

Refugee crisis

Asia hosts some 3.5 million refugees (mostly from Afghanistan and Myanmar), 2.7 million internally displaced people and 1.6 million stateless persons.

The Afghan refugee population constitutes the largest refugee community in the world. From emergencies requiring urgent humanitarian assistance to situations where innovative longer-term solutions are required, the Asia and the Pacific region's refugee situation warrants special mention. There are more than 2.2 million Afghan refugees worldwide, with most of them having received protection and assistance from the Islamic Republics of Iran and Pakistan for almost four decades. Within Afghanistan, some 1.2 million people are internally displaced. The situation is likely to remain precarious with continuing internal displacement. Starting in August 2017, the Rohingya crisis has become the fastest-growing refugee crisis in the world. Currently, around 1.1 million Myanmar nationals are taking refuge in Bangladesh.

(Fig-10) Under five mortality in South Asia



Source: UN Inter-agency Group for Child Mortality Estimation, 2017



During the Millennium Development Goals period (2000-2015), the maternal mortality rate in Bangladesh fell from 322 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births in 2001 to 194/100,000 live births in 2010, indicating a degree of success in the health sector.

The Bangladesh Maternal Mortality and Health Care Survey 2016 found the maternal mortality ratio (MMR) was 196/100,000 live births, ie it was almost unchanged since 2010. Looking ahead, the fourth Health, Population and Nutrition Sector Program 2017-2022 has targeted an MMR of 105/100,000 live births by 2022 (Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 2017), and the SDG target for 2030 is to bring MMR down to below 70/100,000 live births.

Toward these targets, the government initiated a three-year midwifery diploma course under Bangladesh Nursing and Midwifery Council (BNMC). Births attended by skilled health professionals climbed from 5% in 1991 to 42% in 2015, and further to 53% in 2017. The government has also been implementing an accredited CSBA (community-based skilled birth attendant) training since 2003 in both the government and non-government sectors.

The infant mortality rate declined from

94 infant deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 29/1,000 in 2015; while the under-five mortality rate declined from 151 deaths per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 36/1,000 in 2014. The neonatal mortality rate stood at 18.4 per 1,000 live births in 2017. The SDG 3 aims to further reduce the under-five mortality to 25/1000 live births, and neonatal mortality rate to 12/1,000 live births.

Regarding communicable diseases, the HIV/AIDS prevalence remains comparatively low in Bangladesh. However, with an estimated incidence rate of 225 per 100,000 population in 2015 for all forms of tuberculosis (TB), Bangladesh has one of the 30 highest TB burdens in the world. An estimated 45 per 100,000 people died of TB in 2015 (National TB Programme Annual Report 2017). Bangladesh is also one of the major malaria-endemic countries in Southeast Asia; the incidence of malaria incidence was 4.3 per 1000 population in 2015. Bangladesh aims to bring the incidence down to 3 per 1000 population by 2020 and eliminate malaria by 2030.

Looking at non-communicable conditions, achieving the SDG targets relevant to these diseases will pose a big challenge for the country. Bangladesh is one of the worst ten countries in the world for the high prevalence of tobacco use and its associated health risks. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports an increase in the death rate due to traffic injuries in Bangladesh from 13.6/100,000 population in 2013 to 15.6 in 2017. SDG 3.6 focuses

on reducing the number of deaths and injuries resulting from road traffic accidents. The eighth National Road Safety Strategic Action Plan 2017-2020 addresses this SDG target and aims to improve road safety.

Achievement of SDG 3 will largely depend on successful implementation and monitoring of the health sector initiatives undertaken by the government and its partners. Among the key challenges awaiting Bangladesh will be working on targets not reached during the MDG period as well as achieving the new targets for SDG 3. Public expenditure on health in Bangladesh is one of the lowest in the world at less than 1% of GDP. Consequently, the out-of-pocket health expenditure (71.8% in 2015) is one of the highest in the world, posing a significant burden on poor people seeking health services.

BRAC's contribution

In the context of SDG 3 (good health and well-being), BRAC's interventions align with nine of the 21 core indicators, linked to seven of the core targets under this goal. Three of BRAC's programmes are directly associated with these targets – Health, Nutrition and Population Programme (HNPP), Integrated Development Programme (IDP), and Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) – plus contributions from Aarong (a BRAC social enterprise).

BRAC HNPP aims for improved utilisation of maternal health services including safe delivery care at the community level and in urban slums. The community-based approach employs a wide network of frontline community health workers to ensure that people living in poverty can access high quality, affordable health and nutrition services. It incorporates modern tools and technologies for case identification, with the eventual goal of zero tuberculosis and malaria by 2030.

BRAC IDP also contributes to targets under SDG 3 through health centres, delivery centres and health workers in hard-to-reach areas. BRAC WASH works on reducing the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution, and contamination which will contribute to SDG 3.9.



Progress on SDG 3

BRAC's community-based healthcare approach employs a wide network of community health workers serving people living in poverty through bridging gaps between formal healthcare systems and communities. BRAC provides this service through two components under the Maternal, Neonatal and Child Health Programme: 'Manoshi' (urban) - which operates in city slums of nine city corporations, and Improving Maternal, Neonatal and Child Survival (IMNCS) - which works in rural areas of 14 defined districts.

In the urban slums, BRAC's trained community health workers (CHWs) (known as *shasthya shebikas* and *shasthya kormis*) as well as urban birth attendants at delivery centres (also called 'birth huts') provide service to the most vulnerable women and their children at a low-cost and with minimal infrastructure. In rural areas, *shasthya kormis* are trained as skilled birth attendants to assist in safe home deliveries. This programme also includes referral services for prompt identification and management of complicated cases

at local public health facilities in urban and rural settings. Special birthing places in urban and rural areas offer safe and clean delivery by trained health personnel including the provision of services for preventing post-partum haemorrhage.



During the period of January-June 2018, a total 397,053 deliveries were conducted by skilled birth attendants (80% at the facility and 20% at home). More than three-quarter of births in targeted areas were conducted by skilled birth attendants (77% in 2016 and 78% in 2017).

Moreover, in the areas covered by IDP, another 5,256 births (representing 26%) were attended by BRAC supported skilled health personnel in 2017.

BRAC's HNPP provides comprehensive newborn care to reduce the neonatal mortality rate. During antenatal care visits, the CHWs educate mothers on essential newborn care (ie wrapping, drying, cord care, and initiation of breastfeeding within one hour of birth), and continuation of exclusive breastfeeding till the newborn is six months. CHWs in rural and urban MNCH areas visit all mothers and newborns within 24 hours of delivery to record birth weight and assess, counsel, and refer in case of any neonatal complications. CHWs follow up on the infants with low birth-weight and their mothers by visiting households and using a standard protocol until the babies reach the recommended body weight. BRAC interventions ensured 1,433,173 children of 0-6 months of age in 2018, and 1,152,269 children in 2017 were exclusively breastfed. The number of 7-24 months old children in BRAC intervention areas who consumed a minimum acceptable diet was 281,380 in 2017 - which increased to 502,331 in 2018.

BRAC IDP aims to decrease neonatal mortality rate by 30% in the programme's target areas by 2020 against the baseline level. The neonatal



mortality rate in the IDP operating areas has fallen from 21% in 2016 to 17% in 2017. IDP further aims to improve the socioeconomic conditions, empowerment, and livelihoods of 1.1 million poor and ultra-poor people in the hard-to-reach areas in wetlands (*haor*) and riverine islands (*char*) as well as among indigenous peoples in the north.

BRAC is the principal recipient (PR) of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM), and the government of Bangladesh. The aim of the tuberculosis control programme is to reduce the morbidity, mortality, and transmission of TB until it is no longer a public health problem. At present, BRAC covers 322 sub-districts from 45 districts, 11 city corporations with a population of 101 million people including 49 academic institutes, 41 prisons, 484 peripheral laboratories, and 28 external quality assessment centres. BRAC also operates two port hospitals and three EPZ, 28 GeneXpert and X-Ray sites, and 34 X-Ray sites. BRAC is leading a group of 42 local NGOs who are the sub-recipients (SRs) of the GFATM. Between 2016 and 2019, a total of 504,608 persons with TB were diagnosed and enrolled for treatment.

The National Malaria Control Programme (NMCP) established an effective partnership with a consortium of 21 NGOs led by BRAC. BRAC's malaria control programme aims

to provide preventive care, early diagnosis, and prompt treatment and mass distribution of LLIN (long lasting insecticidal bed nets) among 18.09 million of the population at risk. During 2016-2018, 44,746 malaria patients were diagnosed and treated in climate-affected areas.

Community-based prevention of non-communicable disease (NCD) - hypertension, diabetes and cancer - is being implemented by BRAC in selected areas. As the primary service delivery agents, CHWs have been trained on how to screen for diabetes and hypertension using bedside tests/exams. They are able to recognise the 'normal' and 'deviated' results and advise accordingly. From January to June 2018, 115,552 patients with hypertension were screened, and among them, 50,765 were referred for confirmation of diagnosis and treatment. In the case of diabetes, the numbers were 89,897 screened and 41,816 referred. Health education on early signs of breast cancer and cervical cancer is also being provided.

On SDG 3.7, HNPP initiatives ensured 10,190,601 women of reproductive age (15-49 years) had their need for family planning satisfied with modern methods in 2018.

CHWs supply non-clinical methods at household levels and make referrals for clinical methods. They also monitor and refer to complications and side-effects management through locally available public and private health facilities supported by HNPP. In 2017, 68% of the targeted eligible couples were using modern contraceptives.

To reduce adolescent and unwanted pregnancy, HNPP is providing health education for women of reproductive age, including adolescent girls, as well as targeting boys and adult males. HNPP's reproductive health services include limited curative care, education, counselling, and nutrition, and other health advice. During the period of January-June 2018, a total of 1,478,764 pregnant women were registered and among them, 180,690 were adolescents (10 -19 years). Health forums are arranged at adolescent development programme (ADP) clubs.

The number of people that gained access to improved (safe) drinking water through WASH interventions was 21,720 in 2016; 43,714 in 2017; and 79,418 in 2018. Of these, at least 45% were women. Moreover, 23,814 people gained access to hygienic latrines through revolving funds which increased to 25,670 people in 2018. Also, 183,590 people gained access to a hygienic latrine through grants (at least 45% are women) in 2017; and 237,780 people in 2018.

KAM Morshed is the director of BRAC Advocacy for Social Change, Technology and Partnership Strengthening Unit



DID YOU KNOW

Male who are part of the High-skilled share of Labor Force is 4.4 while female is only 1.2
- World Economic Forum



Salma Khatun

The international
cricket
all-round wonder
from Bangladesh

Rowshon Akhter Urmees interviews Salma Khatun

If boys can play cricket why can't I? I used to wonder, when I was a child. I used to play cricket with my maternal uncles and neighbourhood boys at home in Khulna. I was the only girl but I played well enough for them to pick me for every match. My mother scolded me sometimes. She said it hampered my studies but she never kept me from playing cricket. At that time, I had no idea that Bangladesh would have a women's cricket team some day or that I would come this far. I did not even have a coach. I just played cricket because I loved to play.

I started with a tennis ball and a bat fashioned out of a coconut branch stem. Back in 2007, I had been to visit my grandparents in Gopalganj when I heard that a national women's cricket team was about to be formed and they were recruiting players. One of my friends sent the news to my family. I left my grandparents' and hurried to where they were having the trials. I saw

several other girls - Shukhtara and Baishakhi - practicing there. I did not have the sports attire and went there in casual dress. I tied up the dupatta around my waist and tried some spin bowling. Everybody was impressed with my performance.

"Will you be batting or bowling?" asked the coach. "Whatever you say," I replied with confidence. Later, they said that day I had played better than the boys. As I did not have proper attire, I did not continue that day. A coach named Salauddin bought a jersey and shoes for me.

In the middle of all this, I had a small accident while playing. I even needed a few stitches on my lips. The coach, who always addressed me as beta - meaning son in Bengali - said, "Take rest beta!" But I did not want to miss the opportunity of playing with my teammates abroad. I kept playing and made the team that would tour Malaysia in 2007.



"Will you be batting or bowling?" asked the coach. "Whatever you say," I replied with confidence. Later, they said that day I had played better than the boys.



The first time I went to Malaysia for the match was also the first time I had stayed away from my parents. I missed home very much and I did not even have a phone keep in touch with them. While the other girls were roaming around the city before the match, I was feeling homesick. The coach found out and gave me his phone to talk to my parents. After talking to my parents, I felt at peace and enjoyed the rest of the trip. We won the match too.

During my whole career, I experienced the biggest surprise in 2008 when one day I was practising with others at the Dhanmondi Women's Complex. The coach called me and asked me to go with him. "But where are we going?" I asked. "You will see," was all he said.

We stopped a few metres away from a press conference and that is when I found out that I was going to be the captain and this press conference was for me! I had the capability, but a captain has to speak English too. And I could not. So I never expected to become the captain. But the coach always say, "You will talk through your performance, not your words." It was so sudden that I was completely overwhelmed with joy. Tears rolled down my cheeks. That was the first time I faced so many cameras flashing at me. I answered the questions of journalists very calmly, yet inside, my heart was trembling. I am still the T20 Captain. I was the best all-rounder in the world in 2014-15.

The Bangladesh team had a victorious international debut when we won two matches against Thailand in a series in July 2007. We



then competed against China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Nepal, Singapore, Thailand, and the UAE to win the ACC Women's Cricket Tournament the year of our international debut. Within four years, Bangladesh women's team was given the one-day status in 2011, after beating the United States and finishing fifth in Women's Cricket World Cup qualifier. We got our first major international trophy beating the formidable India in the final of T20 Asia Cup in an exciting finish.

My cricket journey was smooth thanks to the support of my family, but I know the scenario may not be the same for everyone. In Bangladesh, it is not easy for girls to play cricket especially in rural areas, unless the girl is supported by her family. Even being on the national team, I sometimes hear taunts on the streets. There are comments passed around. But I never pay attention and never allow those things to distract me.

Compared to before, nowadays women are more willing to enter the cricket ground. Bangladesh Cricket Board has been taking many initiatives to promote cricket and extending support to women. It has declared that coaches have been allocated for women cricketers in 64 districts along with separate coach for women cricketers in Bangladesh Krira Shikkha Protishtan.

However, there remains serious gap in sponsorship. I don't know why, but

unlike other countries, in Bangladesh, the sponsors are not willing to sponsor the Women's Cricket League, whereas in the men's league, every player gets personal sponsors. Some even get international sponsors. As we did not receive any offer of personal sponsorship, we cannot even think of any foreign sponsors. I think sponsors need to consider women seriously as women's league is starting to become popular and running quite well.

There is also a gap between men's salary and women's salary in the cricket league. Women's salary was initially very low. After the Asia Cup, there was an announcement that the salary range would be increased from June or July 2019.

Besides hard work, devotion and passion made me successful. Meanwhile one's behaviour and respect towards coach and fellow teammates is also important. We need to always remember that practice and devotion can bring success. Through my devotion and skills, I have come this far in life and cricket has made it possible for me to make a place in people's hearts.

Interview composed by:
Rowshon Akhter Urmee is a manager of advocacy and networking at BRAC Gender Justice and Diversity Programme





People's perception of violence against women in Bangladesh

Ezzat Tanzila Evana

BRAC has become the world's number one NGO for the fourth consecutive year in 2018, reaching 110 million people in 11 countries of two continents. One of the pillars behind BRAC's success is its willingness to hear the people at the grassroots. BRAC finds out about expectations and needs of the people before embarking on a new initiative. It was as part of that practice that BRAC Advocacy for Social Change Programme ran a nationwide survey about the perception of the people at grassroots to ascertain their needs and voice their concerns.

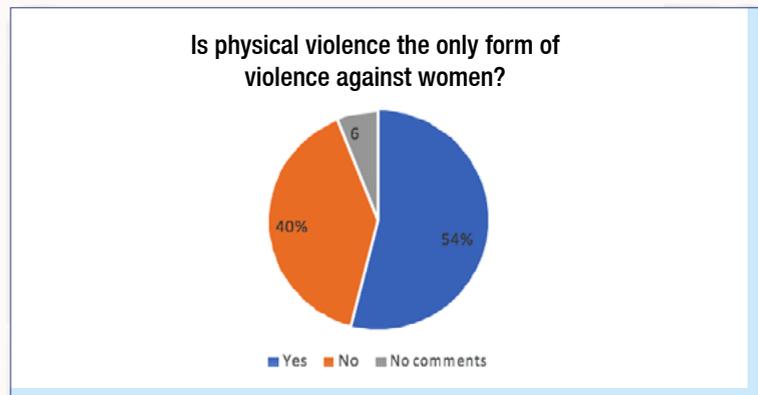
Violence against women was one of the key parts of the survey of February 2019. Violence against women is a fundamental violation of human rights and is also one of the most under-recognised problems in Bangladesh. Though Bangladesh has been performing significantly well in closing the gender gap compared to the neighbouring countries, gender-based violence such as rape, sexual harassment on the streets, and domestic violence, is on the rise.

Violence against women is not only associated with just physical violence but also with mental torture. To understand the prevalence of this problem, it is important to discuss the root cause which is deeply embedded in our culture like family values, gender roles, beliefs, customs, etc. This survey aimed to bring out the common perception of the people about violence against women so that it would be possible to work towards behavioural change to create a world free from it. The questionnaire of

the survey was designed in a way that each question represented a common scenario in everyday life where women face violence.

Understanding violence against women

Respondents were presented with a case study - a working husband abuses



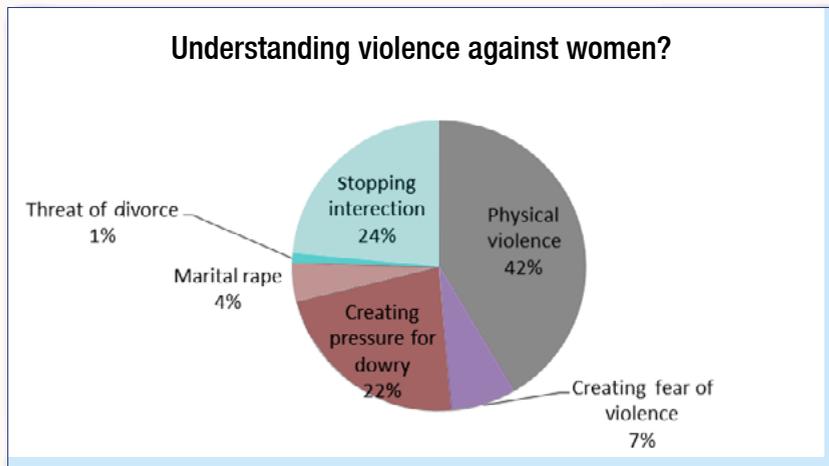
his wife verbally on a daily basis. When asked whether it can be considered or termed violence against women, more than half (54%) said 'no'. To understand people's perception on violence more clearly, a question was asked about what constituted as 'violence'. Almost

every day. When the girl told her father about it, his response was not to protest - in fear of retaliation. Based on this scenario, respondents were asked whether the father was right. 80% of the respondents said the father was wrong. It is a matter of hope that half

People's perception of eve teasing as sexual violence

Respondents were asked what they thought about the way boys and young men often behave with girls and women on the streets. More than three-fourth (76%) of the respondents said 'eve teasing' was a form of sexual violence.

More than 50% of those who said 'eve teasing' was sexual violence were young males aged between 18 to 35. However, it is a matter of concern that nearly one out of every four respondents (24%) thought 'eve teasing' was normal behaviour for young boys and men.

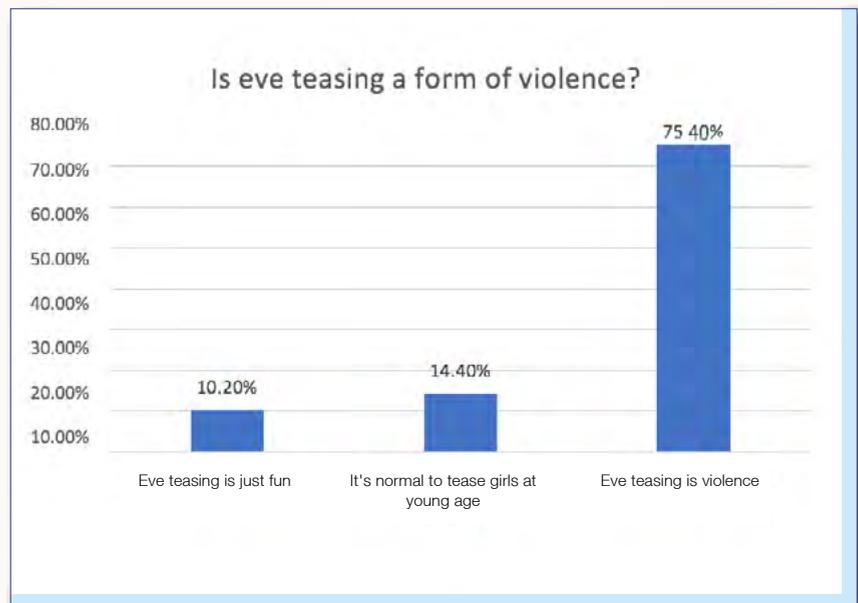


40% said physical violence was the only form of violence. Notably, 6 out of 10 respondents said that they understand mental torture such as creating pressure for dowry, threatening to divorce or not divorcing could constitute as violence against women.

These results indicate that people only consider violence when it takes an extreme form whether physical or mental. However, regular abuse at home is still not considered violence by the masses.

Only 1.1% respondents thought 'threat of divorce' is a form of violence against women, 4% thought 'marital rape' meant being violent, and just 6.9% recognised 'fear of violence' as a form of violence. Lack of gender and human rights education in the mainstream education system is the major reason for the lack of awareness about the many forms of violence against women.

of them were male. Among these male respondents who thought protesting



Protesting eve teasing: Resistance out of fear

Another small case study was presented with a scenario of 'eve teasing' where a schoolgirl was stalked by some local youth on her way to and from school

was right, more than half were youth aged between 18 to 35. Interestingly, only 15% of the respondents said standing up to 'eve teasers' is unsafe for the girl and the family, and surprisingly 92% of them were women which gives an indication that people, especially women, do not feel comfortable seeking help from police or law because of the ineffectiveness of the system.

Media's role in instigating sexual violence

The way media presents news of sexual violence often creates more harassment and intensifies the trauma of the victim. Regarding that, the respondents were asked what they thought about news

items that get published in mass media on violence against women. The responses reflect that more than 9 out of 10 respondents are not satisfied with news treatment. The recommended options in the questionnaire included replies like media should be more cautious when publishing the name of

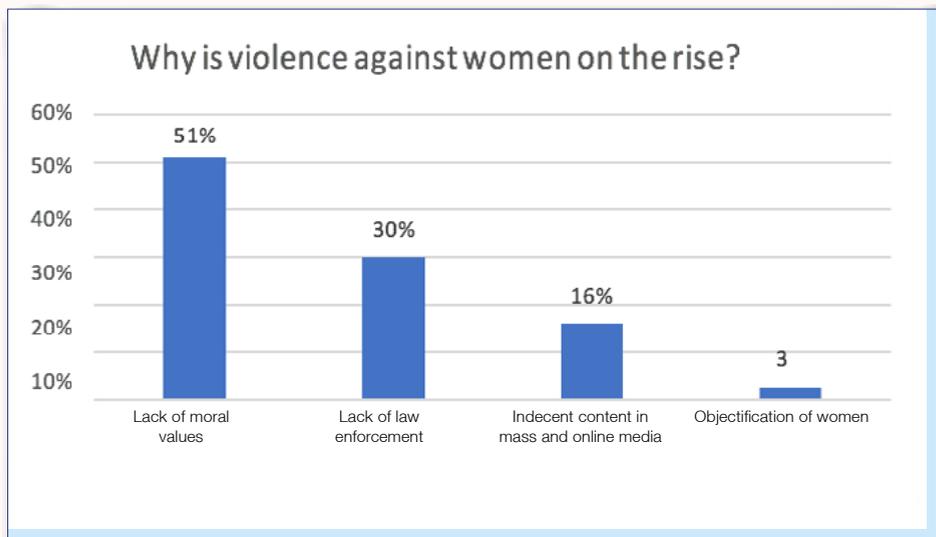
Reasons behind rise in violence against women

Half of the respondents (49.9%) said violence against women has been on

the rise due to an overall lack of values in society. More than 50% of them were male, of which 55% were youth aged between 18 to 35. More than one-fourth (28%) of the respondents thought that a lack of proper execution of law caused the rise in violence.

It is evident from the responses that people understand the reasons and severity of violence against women. However, lack of gender-based education, lack of execution of law, delayed justice, and a culture of blaming the victim together conspire behind the rise of violence against women in an alarming rate in Bangladesh.

Ezzat Tanzila Evana is a policy analyst at BRAC Advocacy for Social Change Programme



the survivor and taking consent before doing so, refraining from giving detailed description of the incident focusing more on the violence so that the perpetrator is brought to light, and not blame the victim. More than 90% of the respondents chose one of these options which meant most of the people want media to tailor their content in such a way that it will not create a space of embarrassment for the victim, and restrain others from such acts of violence.

Indecent content

Next, there was a question whether 'indecent content' in popular culture instigated violent behaviour. 65% of the respondents said indecent representation of women in popular culture and pornographic content instigated men towards sexual violence and harsh behaviour towards women. Indecent content can range from sexist comments to nudity or portrayal of misogyny. However, when asked about the causes of rising sexual violence against women, only 15% of the respondents blamed easy availability of indecent and pornographic content in mass and online media.





Swimming against the wave

Anna Minj

Women in Bangladesh did not really have enough opportunities to flourish when I started working for women's empowerment. It was a critical phase. But I had a dream that one day, the situation would evolve into something better. That dream I nurtured, and it was that thought which inspired me to start working for women. Now, after decades, I see rays of hope.

The journey to reach where I am now has not been smooth. I was a refugee in 1971 during the Liberation War. I also saw the famine of 1974. Growing up in an indigenous community in the 1970s and 80s in a remote village was a challenge in itself to get quality education with no support mechanism, no patron, and no clear means to a future. Despite the obstacles, I had only one thing pushing me forward — the resolve to make my life count.

Harsh lessons

I grew up in a remote village called Motherganj of Thakurgaon with four brothers and a sister. Thakurgaon shaped my childhood. Poverty had shown me how scary life could be. The fear of not being able to go to attend school came true several times, but I was determined not to veer off the path towards my vision.

My father was always an inspiration to me and wanted all his children to be

educated and have better lives, though he could not always afford that.

I saw my parents' frustration and agony for stopping their daughter's education despite her avid interest and talent. But they were compelled to accept the harsh reality of poverty. Despite the several instances when my studies came to a stop, I never failed to pull myself back up.

I could not avail the luxury of new books or a school uniform. That did not hold

“

Belonging to an indigenous community in the 70's-80's, it was a challenge in itself to get quality education with no support mechanism, no patron, and no clear means to a future. Despite the obstacles, I only had one thing going for me — my urge and my resolve to succeed

”

me back from occupying first position in my classes. Nor did it keep me from studying science instead of humanities or commerce which was more common among girls in school and later in college.

I completed my Secondary School Certificate from St Philip High School, Dinajpur, and then my Higher Secondary Certificate from Holy Cross College, Dhaka. University was not easy. I knew traditional engineering or medicine would not be possible for me. So I chose the safer option and went to Eden Women's College in Dhaka and completed my graduation. I completed my masters from Jagannath University in Dhaka and a postgraduate diploma in project planning and management at the Institute of Development Policy and Management in the University of Manchester, UK.

Beginning of my professional journey

Having finished studies, I wanted to embark on a career to support my family. Development sector had still not become my ultimate goal. However, I was inspired by my senior colleagues working in development and wanted to be part of this journey. Caritas Bangladesh opened the doors to my professional life.

I worked there for more than 12 years in different positions and was associated closely with the integrated women's development programme across the country. Through its extensive field work, I acquired a deep understanding about development, particularly the plight of women and indigenous people. I

once again came close to see the daily struggles and tribulations of women and was moved profoundly. From that point onwards, I knew I had to be their voice. A stint with CARE Bangladesh followed my Caritas tenure, after which I moved on to join BRAC where I currently work.

Being a female professional, my journey was not an easy one. Even though I was qualified, I had to work twice as hard to obtain the same acknowledgements as my male colleagues. I had to prove myself over and over again. Today, my



position is a result of my endurance and perseverance. Today, women have a better working environment compared to mine in the 90's when people used to have a disregard for women working in NGOs.

Nowadays the term 'working woman' has become accepted. Coming from an indigenous community, I have had the privilege of mobility and norms where women are treated better than in mainstream society. That is where I had to start fighting gender stereotypes and it tormented me.

My lawyer husband stood by me every step of the way and encouraged me to stick to the course I had chosen. During my job at Caritas, I was blessed with a daughter and a son. The field trips, project management and child care doubled and tripled my struggle. Nevertheless, I did not consider them as obstacles as I had a clear vision and determination. I wanted to contribute and bring change to the life of the poor, especially women and those from my own indigenous community. Instead of

allowing constraints to slow me down, I took them as new milestones to conquer.

Lights of hope

I did not confine my ideology to my work only but extended it to my family life as well. I am a proud mother of a daughter who is an electrical and electronic engineer, and a son, a graduate of the Institute of Business Administration, University of Dhaka. I tried not to portray the typical figure of a mother, one that is embedded in our mindsets when I was raising them. I believed in shared responsibility and equal distribution of housework. My children were brought up in an environment where parenting was not all about the mother making them tiffin or getting them ready for school or helping them with their homework. All those chores were shared with my husband.

I have raised a strong and independent daughter who stands against injustices and never lets an opportunity to speak against social imbalances slip by. I raised her with the vision of a liberal woman and the perspective to live in today's chaotic world. I am proud when I find my daughter and son behave with women and girls in a sensitive and respectful manner. They are driven by certain values and demonstrate sensitivity that can strike a chord with diverse groups.

A long way to go

My work through these years has led me to understand the current status quo. Our women are still shackled. One of the main hindrances is violence against women, which is the heinous form of male domination and control over women. Child marriage in Bangladesh is still the highest (52%) in South Asia according to UNICEF. The weapon used against women is patriarchy with brutality, be it rape, physical abuse or mental torture. The culture of impunity has led to further deterioration of the situation, which in most cases does not favour women.

Bangladesh has a number of laws in favour of women, especially prohibiting certain forms of violence against women including the Penal Code 1860, the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, the Cruelty to Women Ordinance 1983, the Suppression of Immortal Traffic Act 1993, the Prevention of Repression

?

DID YOU KNOW

At current rates of change, it will take 217 years to close the gap in pay and employment opportunities between women and men.



Dreams do come true

Bangladesh holds a strong ground on women's empowerment with significant achievement in women's economic participation, reduced infant and child mortality, gender parity in education, increased women's entrepreneurship and consistent women-friendly policies.

The accomplishment is globally recognised too. As per the Global Gender Gap report (2018) Bangladesh holds the 47th place while India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal lag behind. In the Gender Gap Index of 2017, we secured the first spot in South Asia. There are several silver linings that help us move forward to conquer new horizons. I get a deep sense of satisfaction when I find Bangladesh women's football and cricket teams consistently performing well. Moreover, increased women's participation in decision making and policy structures add another feather to our achievement.

The world is moving faster than ever before. If half the population is left behind as they toil away in bedrooms and kitchens, the whole nation will remain under threat. I dream of a Bangladesh where women and men become equal beings and are respected equally in their communities.

Anna Minj is the director of BRAC Community Empowerment, Gender Justice and Diversity and Integrated Development Programmes

against Women and Child Act 2000, Child Marriage Restraint Act 2017 etc.

However, most of the laws are not commonly known by mass population and so are seldom enforced. Not only that, the judicial system is complex and insensitive towards women and takes a long time to reach a verdict. Furthermore, exploring opportunities still remains an uphill challenge for many women. Thus, by default, they lack the exposure to a fast-paced world.

To ensure effective women's participation in decision making we have to pave the way for their empowerment and mobility.

Another reason for lower participation of women in professional fields is the unequal division of labour. The number of women in leadership roles is still low proving the existence of a glass ceiling.

We need to commit and contribute to create congenial environment, address discrimination, defend violence against women and advance women's empowerment. We need to practice the shared responsibility concept in household chores and reinforce it among the masses. It is time we broke free from the clichéd world to one where we recognise women's potential and their contribution to the economy.





Journey towards gender equality and women's empowerment

A short reflection of women's movement in Bangladesh from 1972-2019

Ayesha Khanam

1

According to academicians and theoreticians, the definition of women's movement as cited by Peggy Antrobus stands thus:

- A women's movement is a political movement - part of the broad array of social movement concerned with changing, social conditions
- A women's movement is grounded in an understanding of women's relation with social conditions - an understanding of gender - as an important relationship within social relationships of class, race and ethnicity, age and locations
- A women's movement is a process, discontinuous and flexible, responding to specific conditions of perceived gender inequality or gender-related injustice. Its focal points may be women's organisations, but it embraces individual women who identify with the goals of feminism
- Awareness and rejection of patriarchal privilege and control are central to women's movements
- In most instances, the movement is born at the moment when women become aware of their individuality as women, their alienation, marginalisation, isolation or even abandonment within broader movement for social justice or social change. In other words, women's struggle for agency within a broader struggle is the catalyst for women's movements



The history and salient features of women's movement of Bangladesh reflects all these features. This movement is of course linked with the women's movement which emerged during the anti-colonial struggle in this sub-continent. Women's movement included social transformation for national liberation from colonial exploitation, resistance movement in different social issues, reform for discriminatory social and family laws, like *sati daha*, resisting early marriage, introduction of widows' marriage etc. Strong social movement was initiated by great social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandit Ishwar Chandra Bidasagar. Female education was one of the central issues of that reform movement.

After the creation of India and Pakistan, East Pakistan started to see another movement for self-determination, autonomy and sovereignty. This movement went on from 1952-71. Secularism, nationalism and the concept of nation state on the basis of non-communal secular national ideals developed during this time. This resulted in the emergence of an independent Bangladesh.

A large section of women actively participated in the anti-colonial movement during the British Raj directly and indirectly. The same thing happened during the struggle for autonomy, or during women's movement for their right to education and cultural identity. Pre-Bangladesh women's movement was concentrated on reform of family laws. Women's role during the Liberation War 1971 claims special evaluation for its significance.

From 1972-80, women's organisations and women's movement of Bangladesh appeared to be focused on women's position within the family, society and the state. The patriarchal system and culture had led to an unequal relationship between men and women, that brought about negative consequences. Simultaneously women's movement concentrated on awareness about patriarchy and the need for organised effort. Women's movement also started active networking with men and other sections of society to raise awareness on gender equality.

Women's movement became a part of national movement for democracy, against all types of autocratic governments. It always upheld the spirit and values of the Liberation War as well as democratic principles of equity.

Based on the experience of movements during 1970s-80s, women's movement of Bangladesh drafted a concrete proposal to address the unequal relationship between the man and woman in the family. There was a concrete proposal addressing the unequal status of women named 'Uniform Family Code' for women of Hindu, Muslim Buddhist, Christian communities (who are citizens of Bangladesh). This was to establish equality between men and women in marriage, divorce, guardianship



and inheritance. This drafted bill was submitted to the prime minister, speaker, parliament members and ministries. The main objective of this proposal was to eliminate unequal power relations. The proposal drew the attention of United Nation's CEDAW committee and it has become a topic of discussion there from 2000 at UN CEDAW committee meetings.

From 1980-90 there was a change in context both internationally and nationally. Nationally, the women's movement actively participated in the struggle for establishing democratic values and culture against militarism and autocracy. During this period,

women's movement of Bangladesh became recognised and formed an inseparable part of the national democratic movement. The movement took place under the leadership of the likes of Sufia Kamal, Jahanara Imam and other women, cultural activists, organisations and development organisations. Women's movement had a significant role behind the introduction of the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980. The period from 1980-90 saw formulation of gender-sensitive laws. Internationally, there were some achievements and forward-looking steps taken by UN as 1975 was declared women's year, and 1976-85 women's decade; the Nairobi forward strategy and the 3rd and 4th world conferences on women in 1990 and 1995 further strengthened women's movement.

1980-1990 was also the period of national movement for democratic rights, culture and values. It was a time of re-establishing democracy and introducing parliamentary democracy. Simultaneously, there was an anti-communal socio-cultural movement. Women's movement and women's activism was very active and visible in that national struggle. During that period United Women Forum was formed by the women's organisations and leaders for an organised campaign for gender equality, empowerment and democratic values and culture on the basis of charter of 19 demands.

A number of civil society organisations and women's fronts of the political parties joined this forum. From our experience, we know that from 1975-1995, there was a UN initiative for gender equality and women's empowerment. The role of the United Nations was positive and concrete. The UN initiatives include the Declaration of UN Convention on the Elimination of All kinds of Discrimination Against Women 1981(UN CEDAW), the women's year and the women's decade, the Nairobi conference, Vienna Declaration and Plan of Action, Declaration on Violence Against women of 1993, Cairo International Conference on population and reproductive rights. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action was a result of two decades of women's movement at the national and international levels.

Women's movement of Bangladesh was actively and strongly linked with this global process. As part of the South Asian Women's right movement, women's organisations formed a non-governmental preparatory committee. Many NGOs, CSOs were active members of the forum. In September 1994, women's movement in Bangladesh was centering around the global UN women's movement. There were also multidimensional activities in

that process. These world conferences (1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th) had created a visible process with an outcome and concrete programme in 12 areas of concern named 'Platform of Action and the Beijing declaration'.

There is a clear declaration in constitution of Bangladesh for full participation of women in the public sphere. From 1972-2019, women's participation gradually increased in politics, policy making and every tier of public and private institution. The number of women parliament members has since been on the rise. Since the 90s, women's participation in the local government has visibly increased. From grassroots to the parliament, women's presence has increased both through direct election and indirect election.

The women representatives are participating in public activities, but in spite of all these, women in Bangladesh are not yet in a position to exert their independence. They are not yet developed to form a political force, and they are not in a position to raise their voices in the parliament independently.

In all these policy making bodies (from local government to the parliament), they still seem to be considered as second class citizens. For more meaningful, effective participation of women, women's organisations and women's movement of Bangladesh submitted a recommendation with a concrete proposal of introducing direct election to the reserved seats and to increase the number of these seats in the parliament. In the 1990s, women's movement submitted a draft bill 'Bangladesh Constitution, Fourteenth Amendment Act'. According to the international consensus, the state has the right and responsibility for taking affirmative action for making a level playing field for both men and women. From that point of view, Bangladeshi women's movement continues to lobby and engage with policy makers.

In global activism, some women's organisations of Bangladesh were visible at the frontlines. This global initiative and activities created a positive, concrete impact on women's movement in Bangladesh. The National Women Development Policy and Plan of Action was the direct and indirect result of that conference. In the 4th World Conference, the states initiated a programme which was a joint effort of state and non-state actors. All these conferences, declarations, programme, plans of action added a new dimension to both national and global women's movement.



Women's movement of Bangladesh experienced a new global experience and new exposure for a new initiative and transformation of women's rights activists. A strong group of women's leaders and organisers came about and started stronger activism with a more united front.



Women's organisations and women's movement of Bangladesh had played a pioneering role in identifying UN CEDAW from the very beginning of the convention's declaration. Women's movement of Bangladesh took UN CEDAW as a tool for promoting women's human rights in Bangladesh. It is the women's organisation that had first translated it into Bangla from English and disseminated it. These women's organisations started giving alternative reports to UNCEDAW Committee from 1992-1993. Women's movement of Bangladesh is very vocal and active on full ratification and implementation of UNCEDAW principles. Activism still continues to this day. The initiative first taken by one women's organisation, was later adopted by four women's organisations.

Currently the united forum named UNCEDAW Forum for Bangladesh has more than hundred women's and human rights organisations, NGOs, CBOs (community-based organisation) preparing periodic alternative reports from Bangladesh over the last decade.

Another strong salient feature of women's movement is the identification of violence, especially domestic violence as serious violation of women's rights since the early 1980s.

Some women's organisations started multidimensional activities from 1980 against all kinds of atrocities and violence against women. It should be mentioned specifically that women's organisations particularly raised their voice against violence against women as violation of women's rights. In Vienna in 1993, we heard of the slogans 'Women rights are human rights', 'Violence against women is violence against humanity', etc. Women's movement of Bangladesh therefore started in the early 80s.

Women's organisations, human rights organisations and development organisations vigorously and concretely initiated these programmes and policies. Women's organisations and women's movement of Bangladesh started from 1980, and is still continuing the struggle against all kinds of resistance, patriarchy, patriarchal culture, taboo, stigma which are persistent in society. Multidimensional activities are going on from a holistic approach by women's movement to resist and reconstruct socially-constructed unequal power relations. During 1980-1995, women's rights organisations initiated multidimensional activism.

A strong law reform movement started from the beginning of independence of Bangladesh in 1972, addressing

unequal family relations between the two sexes in marriage, divorce, guardianship and inheritance among women of Hindu, Muslim, Buddha and Christian communities.

Women's organisations and women's movement played a strong role from 1972 till date as a voice raiser, drafter, facilitator and disseminator of all pro-women anti-discriminatory laws. Free legal aid clinics have been running since 1985 by some women's and human rights organisations. An alternative dispute resolution process has been started by the initiative of women's organisation for family disputes. It is important to mention this process has been accepted by the government. Now

From 1972-2019 gradually increasing the number of women in politics, policy making and every tire of the institutions. The number of women member of women Parliament member is also increasing day by day.

this process has been accepted in the entire South Asian region.

Women's movement took the initiative and lobbied with the government to start programmes like one-stop crisis centre and victim support centre for survivors of violence. Now there is a positive experience of collaboration of both state and non-state partnership. These centres are run by the government and 12 women's rights organisations are actively supporting them.

There are two types of activism: rights-based approach and welfare approach. Women's movement of Bangladesh is practising both.

In spite of all kinds of activism, women in Bangladesh remain vulnerable. In spite of multidimensional activities by state and non-state actors, violence against women and girls, security of women's life, rape and murder are increasing at an alarming rate.

On the other hand, positive changes are prevailing, for instance, the empowerment of women and the commendable role played by women in the economic field or politics. In every profession, the role of women and contribution of women is highly visible. While they have gone on to become high achievers, instances of violence, religious extremism and patriarchal values strongly prevail in the



family, society and the state. There exists a strong conflict in the lives of women, especially young professional women. They are in serious dilemma regarding their professional roles and their roles in the family. It is becoming more challenging for the younger generation. The root cause is patriarchy and a traditional division of labour. Housing, transport, day care and

sexual harassment at the workplace are becoming everyday hurdles for women.

Women's movement, state and other important stakeholders should take into account this issue as a serious sociological issue. More research and re-evaluation is essential to address this.

Challenges to be addressed:

1. Patriarchy: Patriarchal culture against women and girls still prevails in the family, society and state levels.

2. Fundamental institutions, parliament, law enforcing agencies, judiciary, government and different institutions need to be gender sensitised.

3. Lack of gender-sensitive curricula in the educational institutions pose a big problem.

4. Lack of proper implementation of

state and government policies in due time.

5. Lack of proper implementation of pro-women laws addressing gender-based violence.

6. Bangladesh has four fundamental institutions: parliament, government, judiciary and law enforcing agency. Media needs more gender sensitivity.

7. Lack of strong political will and concrete policy programme and attitude to eliminate, reform and change the

structurally created discrimination in different spheres of women's life.

8. Changing the existing male-centric property right laws.

9. Increasing violence against women and girls and lack of security of women is becoming a big concern. Increasing sexual harassment in public transport and public places is a threat to free mobility of women and girls.

10. General lack of awareness and education in the society and state at large is an issue of concern.

Recommendations:

1. Fundamental and basic gender issues should be included in all the layers and levels of educational institutions.

2. In the government, important training institutions should be more gender sensitive. For more gender sensitivity in judicial system, gender equality issues should be included in the judicial training institution curricula.

3. There should be a critical appraisal of the implementation of 'National women's development policy' identifying the impacts and steps to be taken. Updating policy programme should be done seriously.

4. For more sustainable and result-oriented participation of women, direct election should be introduced in the reserved seats for women in parliament.

5. Positively charged political institutions should be formed by the government and parliament. SDG 5 should be taken into serious consideration.

6. For resisting and eliminating all kinds of violence against women, related ministries and administration need to make more coordinated and consolidated efforts.

7. The role of women's ministry should be enhanced and strengthened, and a full-fledged ministry is needed with gender-sensitive and skilled human resource.

8. Rape law should be reformed — burden of proof for rape should be on the perpetrators' side. A concrete recommendation has been submitted to government recently on testing and examination method. This is a landmark verdict. Now it is important for related institutions to take immediate essential steps to implement the verdict.

9. Zero Tolerance Policy programme should be announced by the government. Finally, different socio-cultural organisations, women's organisations, civil society organisations should be united and start an anti-violence movement. Violence against women and girls is a crime against humanity. Roles of family and society should be strengthened.

10. Evaluation and critical appraisal of (a positive gender-equal policy of finance ministry) gender budget initiative should

start. A monitoring and evaluation desk for teams may be established for evaluation and for monitoring the ongoing policies and programmes to identify positive impacts and critical areas.

11. As a state, Bangladesh is signatory of some of the important conventions and declarations. United Nations CEDAW convention is for eliminating existing structural inequalities between men and women. The government of Bangladesh should ratify this convention fully without any reservation and should undertake implementation strongly. Reservation on article 2 of CEDAW convention should be withdrawn without any delay.

12. Following 'Concluding Observation' observed and suggested by UNCEAW committee's meeting about women's equal rights in family and property, Bangladesh government should start concrete activities and policy programmes. There is a long-time effort of women's movement of Bangladesh to include this issue in the UNCEDAW Committee meeting. Suggestion for introduction of the Uniform Family Code should be taken into consideration.

13. National and institutional mechanisms which promote and protect women's and girls' rights should be strengthened.

14. A national commission for the status of women may be established for continuous monitoring and evaluation of the situation of women and girls and for updating the progress and identifying new concerns. There are positive experiences of this kind of government and states in the South Asian region including India.

15. Housing, transport, day care centre, sexual harassment free environment is a critical issue for this generation of women. Easily accessible and safe transport is a highly critical issue. Steps should be taken to address this issue by both

governmental and non-governmental organisations.

16. An all-out comprehensive progress map should be granted by the government and women's movement for mapping the progress and implementation of the Beijing platform of action, and the 12 areas of concern identified in the 4th world conference on women in 1995.

17. UN sponsored programme to implement the SDGs has already been started by Bangladesh and other UN affiliated organisations. Now it is essentially for 15 line ministries and the women's ministries to periodically evaluate and monitor implementation.

18. Women's movement should be more united in changing structural inequality and promote and protect women's and girls' human rights in Bangladesh.

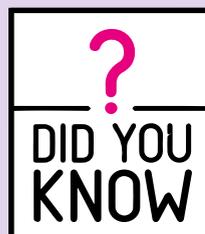
19. An all-out comprehensive effort should be taken from a holistic approach and should work in a multi-dimensional manner.

20. Indigenous women's rights, security and safety should be a special concern for the government and women's civil society organisations.

21. A positive culture of women's and girl's rights, safety, security and dignity should begin.

22. The human rights and safety of girls and women from Dalit and indigenous communities should be addressed in the development and social security projects. Women with different physical abilities have rights and their genuine demands should be fulfilled on a priority basis.

Ayesha Khanam is the president of Bangladesh Mahila Parishad



Globally, women earn 23% less than men and the latter not only own 50% more of the total wealth but also control over 86% of corporations. In India, the billionaires' list contains just nine women.

*1. *The Global Women's Movement: Origin, Issues and Strategies*; Peggy Antrobus; Zed Books (January 30, 2005).



Bangladesh women's movement: Some reflections

Maheen Sultan

The women's movement in Bangladesh traces its roots back to the anti-colonial movements against the British and later against Pakistan that pre-dated the independence of the country. The 'woman question' (Jayawardana, 1986) was at the centre of social reform movements in the late 18th and 19th centuries in Bengal. Women actively took part in the anti-colonial struggle with protest marches, demonstrations, picketing, etc, and they participated in various social welfare activities.

The elite and urban women participated in public life through social welfare activities and in the political struggle for independence. Women's education and legal reforms were at the centre of these movements. There was a strong demand for women's education from figures like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain at the beginning of the 19th century.

After Bangladesh's independence, the government's attention towards women increased with the realisation of their poverty and vulnerabilities first with a programme addressing the women who had been raped in the Liberation War, and later with public works and programmes

targeting poor women that included Food for Work, Road Maintenance and Vulnerable Group Development programmes (Hossain 2007). The UN Decade for Women (1975-85) and the availability of donor funds for women for development initiatives led the government to set up various institutions such as the Department of Women's Affairs (previously a directorate) and the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.

Women's organisations focus on a broad range of issues such as political empowerment, economic equality, legal reforms of customary and gender biased laws, violence against women, reproductive rights, etc (Jahan, 1995; Kabeer, 1989). The first women's organisation to be formed was the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad which had strong links with left wing political parties.

Gradually a wide range of women's organisations were set up including small women's organisations operating at the local level, women's development organisations, and national level advocacy and activist organisations. Many of these organisations claim to be feminist organisations and some

emphasise changing gender power structures. Other women's organisations may work on addressing practical gender interests (Molyenux, 1985) and may not have aims to change gender power structures.

The dependence on external aid in the 1970s and 1980s made it possible for the government to emphasise gender issues in development projects. Feminists both in the country and abroad used international development agenda strategically to create pressure on the state for implementation of gender equity. The disadvantage was that women's rights issues were seen by the public either as a 'western import' and/or a development issue promoted by the donors (Nazneen and Sultan, 2009). Feminist organisations have faced questions regarding their commitment and legitimacy as representative of women's interests from non-NGO civil society actors and the wider public.

A shift in women's political and civil engagement took place after the democratic transition in 1990. As women's organisations and female

students played active roles in the pro-democracy movement of the 1980s, they were recognised as a separate constituency during the first caretaker government after the fall of the former military dictator Ershad in 1991. They were consulted about the right approach to include women in politics and policymaking, and the revised Representation of People's Order brought in reforms for representation of women in political parties. Reforms in local governance brought in a large number of locally-elected women representatives. The preparations for the Fourth World Women's Conference in Beijing in 1995 also created a scope for women's groups to access the policy space, especially since the preparatory process was inclusive, and the government encouraged women's participation and contribution. While this was true for drafting laws and policies, it also applied to the preparation of national reports and technical documents related to gender and development.

Where is the women's movement in Bangladesh now? It is recognised at the government level as a constituency that needs to be consulted and included at every step of the way. It also has technical capacity in integrating gender issues into development efforts. Women's activists and gender specialists are working in different non-governmental organisations, international organisations and in the cultural arena as well while many of their male counterparts are strong supporters of women's initiatives. At the individual level, women and girls are standing up for their rights and recognition, and protesting against injustices like early marriage and sexual harassment.

However challenges remain and sometimes seem to multiply, and overwhelm our efforts to tackle them. Countless cases of rape, sexual harassment, discrimination keep coming to our attention. We are dealing with backlashes to the movement at the political, institutional, social and even family levels. Collectively and individual women and girls are bearing the brunt of the anger. The attack on Nusrat Jahan in Sonagazi Feni and her violent death was all because she dared to protest against sexual harassment. However the courage she showed in protesting and wanting justice as well as the strength of the public outcry against her death gives hope that the struggle for rights cannot be pushed back.

Maheen Sultan is a senior fellow (practice) at the Centre for Gender and Social Transformation, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development . She is also a member of Naripokkho - a women's activist organisation



At the individual level, women and girls are standing up for their rights and recognition; protesting against injustices like early marriage and sexual harassment.





The struggle of Bangladeshi women continues

Nusrat Jahan

Bangladeshi women have come a long way in terms of economic and social empowerment. Beneath the good statistics though, all is not well.

Today girls are at par with boys in completing education up to twelfth grade. Before the days of ready-made garments (RMG), women's participation in the formal economy was minimal. Capitalising on the abundant female labour force, Bangladesh has become the second-largest RMG exporter. Just in the last couple of decades, women's participation in the labour force has more than doubled.

Bangladeshi women are not only progressing on the socio-economic front, their presence is strongly felt in the political arena. For the last three decades, the country's prime minister has been a woman. The country ranked fifth in the 2018 Global Gender Gap Index (GGI) on closing the gap in political empowerment. In fact, Bangladesh ranked 48th in the overall GGI ranking,

just above the US and way ahead of all other South Asian and most African nations.

At BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), we hoped to find young women moving forward with young men, if not side by side, then at least in close proximity.

In a survey conducted among 15-35 year olds, we noticed an interesting find: up to higher secondary level, young men and women indeed have equal completion rates across all socioeconomic classes. But how much of this achievement is translating to other indicators of empowerment?

Compared to their male counterparts, fewer women across all levels of education say they are confident about their English language and computing skills – two of the most sought-after skills for better jobs.

Among those who have completed their education, young women are much less

likely to be involved in paid jobs than young men. Furthermore, young women with higher education almost close the gap with young men in terms of paying jobs. But only 4% of young women study beyond higher secondary level; the rate is 7% among adolescent men.

Stark economic disparity between men and women is not uncommon across the world. But with so many powerful female leaders in the country, we wonder, do Bangladeshi young women feel more empowered today? Our survey was especially interested in the youth's perceived freedom of choice, not just because it is a basic human right, but also because it is closely related to an individual's sense of agency.

In our survey, many more men reported enjoying freedom of choice in all aspects in life than women – whether it came to choosing educational institutions, occupations, freedom of physical movement or spending money, men have the upper hand. The most stark difference was observed in case of

whether it came to choosing educational institutions, occupations, freedom of physical movement or spending money, men have the upper hand. The starkest difference was observed in case of freedom of physical movement; only 40% young women believe they can move freely, half as much as young men.

freedom of physical movement; only 40% of young women believe they can move freely, half as much as young men.

Lack of freedom in physical movement for young women is particularly troubling. As we have already seen, young women lag far behind young men in most important aspects of life – higher education, skills and participation in the economy. Being able to move freely is essential for women to access education and employment. And physical mobility is exactly where

young women are struggling the most.

In 2015, Bangladesh joined the likes of Cambodia and Bhutan to become a lower middle-income country. But the road is still long. To this day, almost a quarter of Bangladeshi people live in poverty, of which 13% live in extreme poverty. In the long quest for prosperity and equity, young people should play the central part. When half the population is lagging behind, it's clear that the existing process is neither equitable, nor is it moving fast enough. So, what can we do? Two questions need to be addressed in this regard.

First, it is imperative to investigate why the educational achievement of women – up to higher secondary level – is not translating into jobs. Second, we must address why the rate of pursuing higher education is so low among young women despite better prospects of earnings.

One of the possible factors that contribute to this is early marriage. It was found that 62% of women get married before they

turn 18 and, among them, less than 1% study beyond higher-secondary level. Most young girls remain bogged down with household chores.

Secondly, women's safety outside their homes needs close attention. In our survey, a large number of young people consider sexual harassment and rape to be a major problem in Bangladesh. Most women feel unsafe to travel out of their homes.

Further research into this matter is crucial to decide on a proper action plan. This is no longer a question of basic human rights. If we want to take the nation forward, we must first and foremost, take its women forward.

Nusrat Jahan is the head of business development and knowledge management at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development, BRAC University



1 In this survey we did not intend to measure the rate of unemployment rate among the youth. Instead, we wanted to measure the percentage of youth who are engaged in economic activities.



Role of youth in establishing women rights and achieving gender equality

Robaet Ferdous

Everywhere in the world, discrimination against women is a commonplace phenomenon. One of the main reasons why Bangladesh is collectively falling behind as a nation is the prevailing discrimination against women, who make up 50% of the nation's population. Surviving in this competitive world as a developing nation will require massive socioeconomic overhaul, or all efforts to bridge this gender gap will fail. When it comes to establishing women's rights in Bangladesh, we should explore the states and roles of women and the reasons behind this discrimination. The role of the youth in establishing women's rights and achieving gender parity is significant in this case.

Women face discrimination when it comes to accessing the same health benefits as men - be it in cases of employment, income opportunities or education. This disparity testament to the fact that various women-centric development programmes are not enough to bridge the gap. Unequal

distribution of opportunities is barring women's development and restricting the nation from fully using its manpower.

Bangladesh is considerably behind in easing the pathway for women's advancement. The nation is also lagging behind when it comes to politics, administration, and policies focusing on women's rights. Women's participation in various formal and informal sectors including agriculture, industry, and services have increased but it is still far behind many other countries. The nature and extent of torture and violence are ever increasing. Despite the constitutional mandate (Article 29) which clearly forbids discrimination at the workplace, the proportion of women in the civil service remains low. Women's participation in institutional development and decision-making is limited as well.

Despite all efforts, the wage gap still persists. The income of matriarchal families is 40% lower than that of

patriarchal families. In most cases, women are considered 'unskilled labour'. Women also face obstacles when they try to master marketable skills. The atmosphere is still not conducive to easy entry of professional women into institutional labour force. Although men and women live in extreme poverty, women continue to carry the burden of poverty far more than men.

Millions in Bangladesh cannot afford to consume 2,122 kilo calories every day. As a result, children are malnourished and sometimes suffer from stunted development. Despite the government's national plan to integrate women into the economy through productive work, only a small portion of the total budget was allocated for this programme in the 2016-2017 fiscal. As a result, women are deprived of fundamental rights and cannot get out of poverty.

The girls of this country also face extreme poverty and deprivation. Young adolescent girls in urban slums are married due to poverty and social insecurity. Child marriage rates in

Bangladesh are the highest in the world. Half of our girls are married before they turn 20. Three out of every four girls in Bangladesh marry between their mid to late teens.

The picture of violence against women in our country is alarming. Rape, acid attack and domestic violence are increasing every day because of the culture of impunity. The core reason for such detestable acts is that gender discrimination is embedded in our social system. Society assigns gender roles to women and men and as a result, discrimination becomes inherent; in simple terms, this is called gender disparity. As women are not financially and politically empowered, the system deprives them of equal rights, equal status, and they are constantly subjected to torture.



Gender disparity is not a menace limited to Bangladesh; it is present everywhere. Although women enjoy the freedom of mobility in developed countries, it is still not the same as that of men and even less so in underdeveloped countries.

Ever since one is a child, they are assigned specific gender roles. Social construction of gender is a result of this socialisation process which bars women from having equal access and ownership to wealth, opportunities and rights. Families teach young girls as women they must be tolerant and accommodative. Sacrifice and servitude become her religion. The birth of a girl child not only brings about disapproval but sometimes means torture and neglect for the mother. People with traditional points of view do not care for their girls properly because they think only boys are destined to provide for their family. Such ingrained discrimination within the family eventually instils strong patriarchal values among the children. Prioritising boys over girls becomes the norm and it is perpetuated down the generations. Few grow up to be aware

about the necessity of equal rights and fairness. Change in this mindset is of utmost importance for children, boys and girls alike.

A vast number of households live from hand-to-mouth in Bangladesh. In such families, much of a woman's effort goes towards meeting the men's demands. These women believe that this is what an ideal role of a wife and mother should be. And these beliefs are passed down from generation to generation. While father and son get to eat the better portion of the meal, the mother and daughter are left with the leftovers. This is the reality for a large number of rural poor and urban low-income families.

During their teens, when boys play outdoors, girls are expected to play with dolls within the confines of their homes. When arrangements are made for boys' education, girls are burdened with household chores and caring for their younger siblings. They are denied education, safety, nutrition, and healthcare. The number of girls in primary schools is more than the number of boys but this number declines as learners get older. Girls constitute only a third of the students at the secondary level and there is just one girl out of every four students at the higher secondary level. The numbers at the tertiary levels are even more stark.

There is no real difference between girls and boys, be it in potential, merit or competence. It is the society that draws the difference between them. Especially when it comes to considering potential and competence. It is the society that creates discrimination and constructs their lives for them. Boys get every opportunity to flourish their lives; they grow up to be significant human resources, protectors, and breadwinners. The conservative culture ensures the same is not true for women.

Women's contribution in socioeconomic activity

When a woman wins, the country wins. There is no scope of detaching women from society. But the reality is far from this. Despite constituting half the society, women are still barred from making much progress in any arena. In the socioeconomic context of Bangladesh, the position of women is far below men. In every case there is mammoth gender gap. Even though women's contribution to socioeconomic development is infinite, there is no acknowledgement of this on the national scale.

While calculating the GDP, 98% of a man's productivity is accounted for. For women, this number stands at 47% because household work (unpaid labour) is not recognised as economic work. In the context of productivity, women have always been deemed to be economically unproductive and inactive consumers.



But women are both producers and consumers.

Furthermore, statistics do not acknowledge women's economic contribution either. Although women are always busy with some form of work, statistics show that women's working hours are less than men. Because the link between labour time and production period in the production system is fragile, women's work hours are not statistically measured.

44-85% of the work is done by women when it comes to building shelters, cleaning, feeding or caring for livestock in Bangladesh. Men's participation rate in this regard is somewhere between 0-50%. Women in Bangladesh have played an important role in resolving domestic nutrition issues through vegetable gardens in the homestead. A survey of ILO posits that adding women's total household chores will account for half of the national production of many countries.

Women are also directly involved in agriculture and poultry farming in Bangladesh. Rural women have been contributing to agricultural production and various economic activities without receiving any acknowledgement.

Women's participation in garments and cottage industry is on the rise. Approximately five million people have been employed in the garment industry, 80% of whom are women. The country's garment sector is now entirely reliant on women workers. Across the country,

75% of foreign currency is achieved from the garment sector. But there remains widespread discrimination between men and women in terms of wages. Bangladesh's tea industry is one of the leading foreign currency earning industries. The country's 158 tea gardens have 500,000 workers of whom 100,000 provide direct labour. Among them, women account for 52% of the total workers. Their daily wage is BDT 24 only. For this meagre remuneration, they have to collect a minimum of 24 kg of tea leaves.

Women are also engaged in the food processing industry. In a farm, a man's wages are much higher than a woman's. However, the contribution of women in agriculture is no less than men. Various studies have shown that women have been deprived of maternity leaves, earned leaves, medical leaves, extra fares, and transportation facilities as compared to men, even though in many workplaces, women are engaged in riskier jobs and give more hours as well.

In our current social situation, women do not get the opportunity to build political authority or take decisions. Women's participation in political matters is limited. However, women have participated more in the administrative field in the last two decades. Women's participation in government jobs is far less than that of men and stands at only 8%. Apart from this, only a 15% quota is allocated for women in government departments. Of the first-class officers, only 6% are women. Majority of women do not even get the same rights as men and are not

allowed to make their own decisions. Existing challenges of establishing rights and eliminating poverty cannot be tackled with policy planning only. Few policies and programmes are rolled out from time to time in this country. Because no one knows how to spin the wheel, these plans only stay on paper. Whether or not there are welfare schemes for women, or if there are defects in the implementation of those steps remain a matter of secondary concern. It may not be an exaggeration to say that implementing policies and programmes for poverty alleviation of the country's marginalised population or women is the most difficult thing to do. It includes coordination, decentralisation, accountability and transparency, incentive, leadership and organisation, management of policy processes, and maintaining relationships between different stakeholders.

Role of young generation in establishing women's rights

Today's young people have seen socioeconomic and political disparity and the menaces of a gender divisive society. In addition, today's youth have seen uneven globalisation and the spread of information technology. All of this plays a significant role in shaping how they think. This group of individuals is not unfamiliar with poverty and malnutrition. The lack of education and employment, poor law and order, lack of healthcare, and increasing terrorism are but some of the countless evils that pervade our society. If children are being exposed to these from an early age, what hope do we have for them when they reach adulthood?

But young people are the most important human resources in the country.



DID YOU KNOW

“Gender equality is more than a goal in itself. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”

— Kofi Annan

They account for about 30% of the total population. 80% of them live in rural Bangladesh and most of them live in extreme poverty. Most of them never get the opportunity to receive proper education or skill development training. As a result, one-third of the youth in our country remain unemployed.

Our greatest assets are our young people. They have the maximum production and operational skills; they are highly creative and bold. In future, these young people will play potent roles in building our nation and augmenting its development. To eradicate the traditional patriarchal system, to make a gender sensitive society, and to remove gender discrimination, these young people must lead from the front. In the interest of the overall development of the country and establishment of women's rights, the following topics must be emphasised:

1. Patriarchal attitudes must be rejected; one must not influence others to commit any discriminatory acts against women, and take conscious social initiatives for establishing women's rights.
2. One must take legal action in establishing equal rights of children in succession to property.
3. The culture of oppression of women must be abolished, and a syllabus of gender equality should be incorporated in the education system.
4. Young people's voice should be present in state initiatives such as road safety and security of women.
5. In order to break the oppressive culture, public-private organisations, women and human rights organisations, civil society as well as the youth will have to come forward.
6. Young people must develop healthy cultural practices.

If we properly identify and assess the reasons behind the ongoing struggles of women, achieving equality will no longer be an impossible feat. In this regard, the role of the youth as well as the government, policy-makers, and the civil society is highly imperative. It is possible to build a humane society through joint effort, where women can develop sans trauma from childhood, as a result, the establishment of women's rights will be possible.

Robaet Ferdous is a professor of the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the University of Dhaka

This article has been translated from Bengali to English by Faiza Adiba who is working as a partnership analyst at BRAC Advocacy for Social Change Programme





Safe citizenship for girls

Hasne Ara Begum

Bangladeshi women face sexual violence every day. Of more concern is that these incidents do not receive the attention they deserve. Violence against women adversely affect young girls' psychosocial development, productivity and the ability to realise their potential. Dropping out of school, discontinuation from formal education and child marriage are directly linked to violence against women.

Amid an increasing trend of sexual harassment, BRAC launched MEJNIN (Meyeder jonnyo nirapod nagorikotto — translating to 'safe citizenship for girls') in 2008. Realising the destructive effects of sexual harassment, BRAC's gender justice and diversity (GJD) programme has been implementing a neighbourhood-based edutainment campaign in the same name, MEJNIN since 2012.

The campaign is designed to create awareness on the effects of child

marriage, sexual harassment and its negative impact on girls' education and their right to freedom and choice. The programme involves a wide range of participants including girls and boys, parents, teachers and community watch groups. By 2018, MEJNIN had reached 975 schools covering 394,000 male and female students in different districts (40% of whom were boys) and another 200,000 community members and professionals including police and journalists. A school-based student orientation method is used to organise public educational campaigns in communities, at local and national levels. It also works closely with journalists on media campaigns and with state level authorities (ie, police and concerned ministries) to ensure girls' rights to education and advocate for the eradication of child marriage.

MEJNIN's interventions are designed to contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals 4 and

5. It aims to promote sensitivity and awareness among students, teachers, parents and community watch groups to support adolescent girls in preventing sexual harassment and child marriage,



**DID YOU
KNOW**

Globally, 750 million women and girls were married before the age of 18 and at least 200 million women and girls in 30 countries have undergone female genital mutilation.

building leadership skills and advocating for collective actions. Even after MEJNIN stopped operating, various sexual harassment elimination networks have remained active.

The MEJNIN intervention works in three tiers — secondary schools, communities and national level advocacy. Students are oriented on sexual harassment prevention and protection issues, strategies and legal remedies, community-based risk mapping of sexual harassment, involving school and local authorities for risk mitigation, psychosocial counselling, referrals for medical and legal support, community-based campaigns, mass awareness through information, education and behavioural change communication. The student watch group, community watch group act as active change agents within schools and communities.

A study reported positive results in relation to change in participants'

understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment, and recognising it as a form of violence and crime; increased attentiveness to incidents of sexual harassment; and increased reporting on all forms of sexual harassment (RED, 2013; Sadeka Halim, 2016). Most of all,

MEJNIN helped break the culture of silence around sexual harassment. It also made the way in recognising 'eve teasing' as a form of sexual harassment, and a punishable crime under national law.

BRAC supported the government through MEJNIN in the implementation of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women) and other national and international instruments upholding the right to be free from violence. The experience and learnings of MEJNIN can be incorporated into a national education system targeting young

people to promote gender equality. BRAC has a holistic approach to tackling social barriers. MEJNIN is now integrated into BRAC's education and community empowerment programmes.

The movement against sexual harassment has gained success in developing countries in recent years but it has been a challenge for Bangladesh. The current forms and trends of sexual violence reflect the highly silent cultural value, absence of equal opportunities, and conventional social practices. What is required is structural changes in formal and informal sectors for collective action. We believe that the creation of a shared vision will be a strong tool to eliminate this injustice.

Hasne Ara Begum is a programme coordinator at BRAC Gender Justice and Diversity Programme



Aarong artisans take a stand for gender equality

Sasi Kumar

I got the opportunity to work closely with thousands of artisans when I joined the Ayesha Abed Foundation (AAF), which works with people from various backgrounds and with diverse skill sets. Creating a gender-sensitive workplace or ensuring gender equality in the social enterprise sector is indeed a challenge. Although I have had the opportunity to witness minute gains every day, there are still miles to go.

As the head of the Ayesha Abed Foundation, I work closely with the staff and artisans. The foundation recruits and trains artisans from across the country in its production hubs. These products are then sold through Aarong, one of BRAC's biggest social enterprises, which has gone on to become a noted brand in Bangladesh. We recruit, train and engage artisans in a variety of activities. While recruiting, we find that most women and young girls have survived domestic violence. They are sometimes treated like liabilities by their families. When these women and girls start to

earn on their own, it gives them solid ground to fight back from. At Ayesha Abed Foundation we try to provide that platform. We recruit trainees and prepare them to become skilled workers who we call 'artisan'

We are expanding our horizons to reach people who can be contributing figures in their families instead of being treated as a burden. We recruit transgender persons and people with disabilities to enable them to realise their potential and become an asset for the economy and their communities.

Gender is among the most discussed topic around the world. A gender-responsive world free from violence and discrimination is desirable to all but the journey towards that world is not an easy one. Prevailing social customs and conservatism forbid women to work. While it is particularly challenging in certain parts of Bangladesh, AAF relentlessly pursues every such case to ensure a better life for women. The AAF archives are replete with such instances

and incidences right from the time of its formation in 1983.

We spoke to our artisan groups several times, had formal and informal meetings and tried to make them aware about their rights, social dignity, income generation process and the outcomes. From 2017, we have completed nearly 30 day-long sessions with artisans and their families on gender discrimination, gender sensitivity and gender equality.

In addition to workplace safety, we have conducted more than 1,200 sessions on artisan development initiative (ADI). I can say with great delight that their daily livelihoods and operations have changed gradually.

We began to recruit more staff and artisans from 2014. While the male-female staff ratio in the early years was 80:20, it is closer to 60:40 currently. This is a great achievement for us as we strive towards 50:50 ratios by the end of the year 2021. In addition, the ratio of male-female artisans is near about 5:95 currently. We are now emphasising on safe, healthy and gender-sensitive working environment.

We have already built adequate toilet facilities, day care centres, medical centre and are working to upgrade them for compliance requirement. In addition, we take the social and family life of our artisans very seriously for their economic involvement.

As indicated earlier, female artisans' roles at homes especially as regards to household work is high. Although the regular working hours for artisans are from 8am to 5pm, most need to go home in between to serve meals to their families. Female workers are often forced to hand over their income to their husbands. They cannot contribute to the decision-making process, and many face domestic violence. In this regard, we collaborated with BRAC's gender justice and diversity programme. We have been conducting monthly sessions on specific issues for artisans and their families under gender integration initiatives since 2017.

Five of our factories in Jamalpur, Jashore, Kurigram, Jhenaidah and Rajbari are covered through this programme. These sessions have been effective: most of our artisans are now more aware about their rights and dignity. They are also equipped to solve some of their problems on their own. Some of the artisan groups have already taken initiatives to stand against child marriage or gender-based violence. Some also have sought legal help. It was interesting to have the spouses of the artisans come and listen to the messages and information that their wives were receiving. We have also found that almost all the artisans began to save after the orientations.

Furthermore, people running the sub-centres are more confident

now and have a basic knowledge to provide counselling to an individual or a family. The positive change in discussion sessions with the artisans is quite visible and evident. They say their relationship with their husbands has improved as regards to expressing opinions and taking decisions, making their own choices and saving money on their own.

Participation and cooperation between partners in household work has reduced domestic violence. Though it is challenging to engage men and boys in gender integration process to end violence against women and girls, we have been successful in reaching 1,383 male family members of artisans in a series of monthly sessions on positive parenting, sexual and reproductive health, sexual harassment at public place, shared responsibility in household work as well as access to and control over resources, violence against women and children, child marriage and referral linkage etc.

Over the last couple of years, there have been remarkable changes Ayesha Abed Foundation staff and artisans. Through the training sessions, the attitude and approach have changed. Now the male and female staff members are aware of their rights and roles. It is not only at the office but also at home that the men have begun to share more of the burden that the women had borne before. The most significant tools in this kind of development approach are following up, monitoring and documenting evidences of good practices. Most importantly, we need to involve the new generation to create a world free of violence and discrimination.

The journey towards gender equality in Ayesha Abed Foundation has been noteworthy because of the collective ownership and accountability. The biggest challenge lies in transforming mindsets around gender and ensuring women have access to equal opportunities.

Our female workers are from urban, rural and in some cases



remote areas. Although it is easier to reach and convey messages on gender issues to women in urban areas, it is not so for their rural counterparts. Family obstacle remains another challenge. Most family members of our artisans consider women as objects to enslave. Gender issues, as I have indicated earlier, cannot be resolved within a day or two simply with training but needs follow up, monitoring and refreshment session over and over again. It is a matter of changing ideologies rather than just activities.

We are developing a succession plan to enable more female staff members to take on leadership positions. We are continuing our efforts to make Ayesha Abed Foundation more gender responsive through dialogue sessions and workshops that also include family members — husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons.

**Sasi Kumar is
the head of
Ayesha Abed
Foundation**

Stories of dedication



Crafting beauty

Chiraranjan Sarker

I want to be remembered for my work. I want to live peacefully and with all the love I receive from everyone.

-Chandan Kumar Roy, 2017 BRAC Values Award winner

For the last five years, Chandan has been working as a senior cleaner at BRAC Learning Centre (BLC) in Dinajpur. His everyday work reflects his reverence, dedication and commitment to BRAC's values.

To his colleagues, he is an exemplary employee who consistently maintains transparency and integrity. Asked to describe him, his colleagues mentioned how honest, respectful and hardworking he is, "He respects us and follows BRAC's code of conduct so diligently that it encourages us to be more like him."

"He never fails to raise his voice against injustice," they emphasised.

One gave an example, "Once, Chandan stopped and protested against a logistics officer, who is several ranks above him. For this bold and courageous step, he even had to go for an interview with BRAC's Ombudsperson. It was because of him that everyone involved with that incident was punished accordingly." Rain or shine, Chandan is always at work.

He has taken numerous creative initiatives to enhance the beauty of Dinajpur BLC. The green grounds host flocks of birds, and topiary of wild animals such as deer, horses and giraffes besides vibrant flowers. It is difficult to imagine such a place without seeing it with one's own eyes. It is as if the Dinajpur BLC is a sprawling park. Officials from public and private organisations visit here every day - appreciating the creative idea behind it. And all of that is Chandan's credit.

His main responsibility is to keep the BLC premises clean. However, he is always there when his colleagues need his help - setting up events, going to the market to arranging bouquets for special guests. He even gets frequent calls from

the deputy commissioner's (DC) office for landscaping the DC's bungalow, circuit house and the DC's office compound. Even the teachers of Hajee Mohammad Danesh Science & Technology University come to him for his opinion and help. Amid all this, Chandan never goes to bed without completing every single bit of his scheduled work.

And that is why he received a BRAC Values Award in 2017.

His dedication has turned the BLC into a place of serene beauty from what used to be infested with insects and snakes.

Asked how he felt about the award, Chandan said, "I had no idea what this prize was. When I actually got it, I was speechless."

"I realised that with such recognition, I needed to work even harder. Now that I have gotten this honour from BRAC, I must dedicate all my effort to my work."

Chiraranjan Sarker is an advocacy analyst at BRAC Advocacy for Social Change Programme



Najmuddin Qeyami: I am BRAC

“ I try my best to follow BRAC’s code of conduct in all my tasks. I always try to contribute to the organisation and its staff members through my work. ”

*-Najmuddin Qeyami, 2018
I am BRAC winner*

Najmuddin Qeyami is an assistant manager of BRAC Afghanistan’s procurement department. In 2004, he joined as a branch manager for microfinance programme. He was promoted to area manager within a very short time because of his excellent communication and facilitation skills. In 2010, he was appointed as a land and estate officer at Afghanistan’s country office.

His new role consisted of traveling to different field offices and solving legal issues with local government departments and land owners. Soon, his efficiency and honesty in dealing with such complicated issues were rewarded with

another promotion - first as procurement officer and then assistant manager for procurement department.

“Working with procurement has its challenges; that too in a country where corruption is rampant. Procurement officers are always at risk of becoming corrupt, but I have sincerely maintained my reputation as an honest employee,” said Najmuddin.

Once, Najmuddin received a cheque from his office to pay the electricity bill. The cheque was supposed to be worth AFN 35,000 (USD 500). When he was about to encash it, he realised the cheque was made out for USD 5,000 instead. He immediately informed his supervisor and returned the cheque for correction.

And it is because of Najmuddin’s integrity and sincerity, he has been able to manage the procurement department with zero corruption. He is involved in procuring goods and services worth about USD 1,000,000 annually.

But the biggest challenge for him was when he had to negotiate a ransom for two of his staff members. It was in 2016

when two of his expat colleagues were abducted from a remote province. The abductors asked for a huge ransom. As the designated negotiator, Najmuddin’s aim was to reduce the ransom without bringing his colleagues in harm’s way. After having negotiated down the ransom to a more acceptable sum, he undertook a perilous journey to one of the riskiest parts of Afghanistan. “I made it back safely with my colleagues,” said Najmuddin with a sign of relief.

Besides all his contributions, what stands out the most is his amicable nature - he treats everyone with equal respect and firmly believes in BRAC’s values.

He said, “BRAC has always recognised and acknowledged my contribution throughout my journey - not only as a BRAC employee but also as a human being. I embody BRAC’s philosophy and its mission and vision. I believe, I am BRAC.”

This story has been collected from BRAC Communications



The story of a real life changemaker

Rowshon Akhter Urmee

A technical manager in BRAC's gender justice and diversity programme in Rajbari, Sarowar Hosain began his career in 2003. At 26, he was not well-aware of women's issues and what 'gender' actually entailed. He was yet to open his eyes to discrimination, violence, assault and harassment. He admits quite candidly that even after having studied in renowned universities, he had not quite gained a deeper understanding about these issues.

"But 16 years of professional experience helped develop my critical gender lens and realise how gender discrimination is intertwined with every phase of a woman's life," says Sarowar. If it was not for his experience in the gender quality action learning (GQAL) programme, Sarowar would have remained ignorant about these issues. The GQAL programme, designed to radically change behaviour, comprises of a training programme for BRAC as well as for communities. Sarowar Hosain was a part of this programme in two phases -

from 2008-2011 and 2012-2016.

BRAC first experimented with building a culture of equality through this learning programme within the organisation and among the communities it operated. Sarowar feels that despite all the inherent discrimination, there has been commendable change in gender stereotyping at the grassroots level, "That has, in fact, motivated me to go even further."

Sarowar explains there is a gulf of difference between gender and any other development sector. "Unlike other sectors, gender requires that I change my own stereotyped mindset first, before anything else."

The gender team was asked to extend the GQAL programme to the communities in 1999 to promote gender equality.

Training sessions focused on 10 areas featuring gender discrimination. These included education, health, nutrition, property and entertainment. There were strong debates within the community as customary norms and outlook began to be questioned and criticised while detractors hardly thought such practices to be discriminatory. A series of training sessions, courtyard meetings and practical orientation gradually made inroads into the patriarchal mindset. Family members began to realise that equality of men and women was necessary for a better and more sustainable future. These in turn also led Sarowar to confront his own actions and become more sensitive.

Sarowar found many professional women who were themselves affected by a patriarchal mindset. Patriarchal practices also meant torture by male family members, often harming the professional career of women. He began to notice many of his female colleagues were putting up a front



where they only pretending to be happy in their personal lives while many were living through domestic violence, even though they promoted equality and spoke out against gender stereotyping in their professional lives.

Sarowar began to talk to these women. He would listen to them with empathy and although many women were uncomfortable in the beginning, they began to open up to him gradually. With a friendly demeanour and sincere intent, he was able to build trustworthy relationship with affected women and began counselling them. Sarowar managed to restore a peaceful environment within several families with his modest efforts.

His long years of experience in gender equality had lent him the ability to understand how patriarchal practices hinder women from fully evolving to their potential. He found that restricted mobility, unequal and gendered division of labour, triple burden role and social insecurity weighed down upon women.



Sarowar also found that his female colleagues seldom utilised the desk work policy during their menstruation. Not wanting to be taunted or ridiculed by their male colleagues, many women continued with their field work and never availed the benefit of desk work during that time of the month.

But Sarowar also found out that men often did not realise how their behaviour affected their female colleagues. And so he began to work with both the women and men. Gradually as the men were more sensitised and women more confident, they began to avail the benefit.

He says the education curriculum is

itself not sensitive enough towards gender and that is perhaps one of the primary obstacles to gender equality. Sarowar acknowledges his long practice of unequal burden household chores where his wife would have to share more of the burden. But now that has changed. “We share the burden equally between us.” This has rubbed off on his son too. “He was never too keen about sharing household chores.” But Sarowar has set a good example for his son - one where everyone shares the responsibility.

Sarowar thinks men are scared of equal opportunities because then they feel like they are losing dominance over women. “The world is for the brave people who defy customs and stand alone, or join the fight for equality.”

Rowshon Akhter Urmee is a manager for advocacy and networking at BRAC Gender Justice Diversity



DID YOU KNOW

- “Achieving gender equality requires the engagement of women and men, girls and boys. It is everyone’s responsibility.”
– Ban Ki-moon
- Three out of four employees in the NGO sector are female, but the majority of leadership positions at NGOs are still predominately held by men. - HR Council



Journey towards gender responsive workplace

Rumana Ali, Fatema Ferdausi

Since its inception, BRAC has adopted policies and taken initiatives to create a gender responsive work environment. In line with this effort and with reference to 10 markers, BRAC's gender justice and diversity programme (with the support of microfinance programme) organised an intervention from 2017-2018 in 170 branch offices in seven districts.

The BRAC Institute of Governance and Development conducted a study to assess the intervention of gender responsive branch offices from 2018-2019.

Description of intervention

The Gender Justice and Diversity Programme followed eight steps for ensuring a gender responsive workplace. The steps are:

- Provide gender integration training (GIT)
- Identify gaps in branch offices based on the 10 markers by GIT participants
- Develop an action plan based on the gaps
- Select a gender focal person (GFP)
- Form gender focal committee (GFC) that plays an active role in implementing the action plan
- Arrange coordination meeting with GFPs at district-level to equip them

with the capacity to fulfill their roles

- Conduct dialogues with regional and area managers to sensitise them
- Follow-up by Gender Justice and Diversity Programme staff.

Markers of gender responsive branch office of BRAC

1. All staff members of the office have GIT and each office has a gender action plan
2. Staff members have knowledge on and abide by the gender policy and sexual harassment elimination (SHE) policy
3. There is a gender focal person (GFP) in the office who plays an active role in achieving the 10 markers

4. Female staff members participate in meetings, forums and committees and their opinions are reflected in the decisions

5. There is proper application of affirmative action policies like maternity leave, extra hour for breastfeeding and desk work

6. All staff, irrespective of gender or designation, show positive attitude and behaviour towards female staff members

7. The office has certain arrangements like seating arrangements, toilet facilities, drinking water and breastfeeding corner for community women and children

8. The organisational policy of zero tolerance to sexual harassment is reflected in the working environment. Staff members know the reference number of BRAC's sexual harassment redressal committee (SHRC)

9. Office observes special events on women's rights like International Women's Day, International Day of the Girl Child, etc

10. Office has suitable toilet facilities for female and male staff members



did not meet all markers, and the case was the same for indicator 10 - requiring separate toilets for female staff members. 64% of the offices under the same group did not have all five arrangements (clean, smoke-free toilets with hooks for hanging clothes, baskets and adequate water supply) set for a female toilet. In case of indicator 2 that requires policies to be visible to all staff, there were significant differences between the treatment and control groups. At least 70% of staff members had knowledge of relevant policies and most of the treatment offices (93.3 %) satisfied this indicator.

Regarding behavioural change, half the offices had at least 70% staff members who cooperated with GFP and GFC to perform their responsibilities. Moreover, 70-100% female staff members of 83.3% treatment offices said they participated in meetings expressing their opinions and raising issues. Likewise, 70-100% of female staff members from 80% of treatment offices received cooperation and their

colleagues spoke to them respectfully. However, when it came to women's participation in meetings and the use of respectful language towards them, there was no statistically significant difference between the treatment and control offices.

A higher percentage of treatment offices had at least 70% staff members having knowledge on the SHRC and other helpline numbers, and have referred those to others. In case of indicator 5 that requires offices to ensure proper implementation of affirmative policies, a higher percentage of treatment offices showed positive result than the control group in case of desk work policy and allowing extra time for breastfeeding. The difference between groups was not statistically significant in case of maternity and paternity leave. Regarding another indicator on celebrating especial events on women's rights, the treatment group was found to be significantly different than the other. Figure 1 summarises the situation of the sample offices.

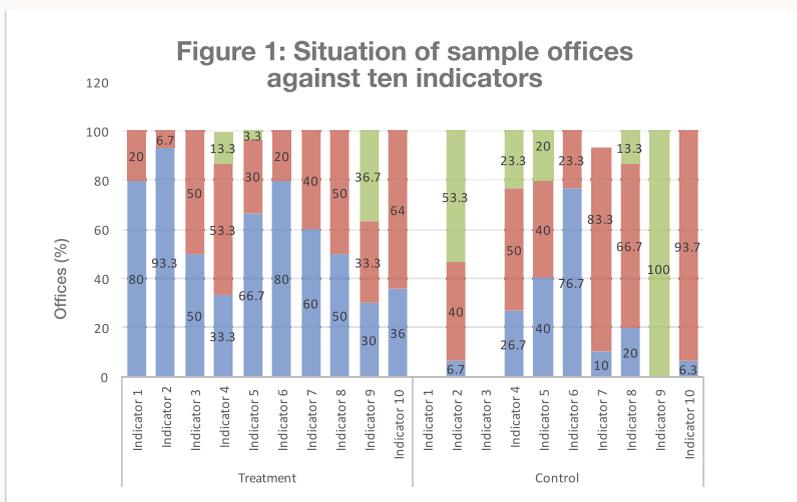
Study design

This study followed both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A group was chosen to identify the results of the intervention.

Four techniques were used for data collection - observation, document review, survey, and in-depth interviews. The data was collected from 60 branch offices - among which 30 had received intervention (treatment group), and the other 30 did not (control group).

Findings

There were significant differences between the control and treatment groups regarding indicators that need structural change like breastfeeding corner, separate toilets for female staff members, and local community facilities. However, some offices of the treatment group did not meet all the requirements of some indicators - arrangements for community women and children, for instance. 40% of the treatment offices



These offices were classified into three categories - green, yellow, and red - based on their performance on each indicator. Offices which performed 70-100% on an indicator were marked green, while offices with 40-69% success belonged to the yellow group, and those that scored 0-39% were labelled red.

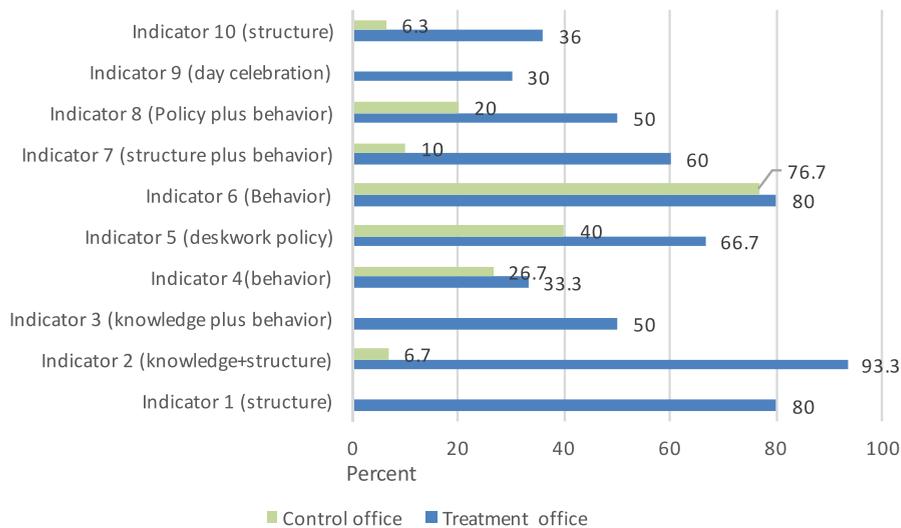
GFPs and GFC members played a major role in achieving the markers. In most cases, branch managers were the designated GFPs which may have had a positive influence on satisfying the indicators requiring structural change. Although some respondents felt there was a need to build facilities like separate toilets for female staff members and breast-feeding corners before the intervention, they were not built until it was officially required.

Respectful language increased after the intervention. The study found that an overall positive attitude towards female staff encouraged them to participate in official forums. Female staff members also reported that their male colleagues and supervisors became more sensitive about their special needs. For example, men became more conscious about pregnancy, women's need for privacy, breastfeeding corner, deskwork policy, and the need for extra time for breastfeeding.

In addition, the intervention made way for gender issues to be discussed at official meetings. Most of the offices reported to have discussed gender action plan at their regular monthly meetings.

While exploring the behavioural change of both male and female staff members regarding sexual harassment, the study found that everyone became more sensitive and aware about their actions and behaviours. The intervention provided female staff members with the message about who to contact, and what to do if they experienced sexual harassment. This made them take action against the harassers. The presence of GFPs and GFC members were also found to guide women in this case.

Figure 2: Percentage of offices belonging to green group at ten indicators



Challenges

Some factors like too much work pressure and traditional attitude of hiding or not talking about menstruation prevented female staff from taking benefits of deskwork policy. Likewise, provision of half an hour extra for breastfeeding mothers was also reported to be insufficient and was not implemented in most cases. Moreover, women could not take maximum benefits of sexual harassment elimination policies due to women's acceptance of subordinate position, and their tendency to hide incidents of sexual harassment. Furthermore, housing in rented space also created challenges for some offices to work on the indicators requiring structural changes.

Recommendations

Female staff members should be encouraged to report sexual harassment, and should not hesitate to challenge subordinate position when necessary. This study also suggests that the deskwork and breastfeeding policies should be reconsidered so that women can actually benefit from them. Furthermore, capacity building training should be provided to GFPs and GFC members to enhance

their performance. And finally, follow-up and monitoring mechanism need to be developed to continue or monitor the progress of the offices.

Conclusion

The studied intervention has inspired respondents to work towards gender equality at the organisational level by providing guidelines of a gender responsive office, educating staff members about their rights, and equipping staff members and offices with the capacity to deliver services in a gender sensitive way. This has brought all the interactions between staff and clients under scrutiny, offering a simplified method to report sexual harassment and setting gender responsive workplace as an agenda for all staff and offices to achieve.

The intervention can claim success for achieving the indicators in most cases and offering the concept as well as the standard of a gender responsive office that can be followed as a model by other institutions working on the same agenda.

Rumana Ali is a senior research associate at BRAC Institute of Governance and Development. Fatema Ferdousi is a manager at BRAC Gender Justice and Diversity Programme



Helmets on, all geared up, women ready to accelerate with Scooty

Selina is a working mother of a 3-year-old and an employee of BRAC's microfinance programme. Her office is a 30 kilometre-commute away from her home. To make it in time, she wakes up at 5 in the morning every day. She completes all the household chores before leaving for work.

Public transport is a hassle for her since she has to break up the commute between rickshaw van or an autorickshaw and then by bus or rickshaw. But whether she will be on time depends entirely on the availability of vehicles. Selina has to start very early to make sure she gets a seat on the bus but even there, she is always apprehensive of being harassed. Sometimes, Selina doesn't make it to office on time.

What is more, the nature of her job requires her to travel from one village organisation (VO) to another, covering 30-40 kilometres every day. Sometimes she has to put in long hours at work. Work-life balance sometimes seems like a luxury.

This may be the story of one Selina, but many women can relate to it. It's a story of thousands of working women in Bangladesh. It is a race against society, prejudice, their own families, themselves and most significantly, a race against the opposite gender. For the sake of gender equality, men and women employees are often compared or measured by the same standards. But is it really the same? The road is a bit smoother for men, as they have fewer things to focus on, whereas a working woman has a long list of priorities and responsibilities to balance both work and personal duties.

BRAC, as an equal-opportunity-employer, has always practised. One of BRAC's gender strategic goal is to increase men-women ratio at entry level to 60-40 and to 70-30 at mid-level management. BRAC wishes to reach a fully balanced workplace by 2020, but as of 2018 the scenario seems distant with the male female ratio at 73:27.

Focus group discussions were conducted with the female staff member

from microfinance programme, which has the largest workforce in BRAC, to ascertain the reason. These discussions revealed that many of the supervisors evaluated performances of males and females for their speed of work. It was an indicator where women typically lagged behind in because unlike their male colleagues riding motor bikes, women commuted on public transports which made them typically slower in moving around.

A survey targeting women working in microfinance sought to find whether they were interested to ride scooties to and from work. Approximately four out of every five respondents said they would be interested to learn how to drive a scooty and use it for work. That is how BRAC's 'Scooty for Speed' initiative took off.

BRAC's human resource and learning division and the microfinance programme in association with BRAC Driving School jointly took an initiative to pilot this project with 18 junior women trainee officers ready to take over as

Dabi Branch Managers. Participants went through an intensive training of six days including mostly practical classes on the road and classroom sessions to strengthen their theoretical knowledge. Learner's license for each participant was arranged so that they could take off on the road as soon as possible.

This was followed up with further sessions to encourage the women to continue their ride and show how this simple change could impact their work-life balance. A medical officer and a psychosocial counsellor were at hand to answer all the questions that these first batch of riders had. There was a workshop where senior officials were present. They presented the new bikers with words of encouragement.

The initiative aims to encourage more female staff to start riding the scooty too challenging social prejudices in their own little ways.



After the successful pilot, another survey at BRAC showed that **62%** of female staff were interested in learning how to drive a scooty. BRAC will arrange scooty driving training for interested female staff in association with BRAC Road Safety and Driving School.

Total surveyed female staff – **9,053**

Total interested female staff – **5,656**

Initially, the training will start in four districts with 2,088 female staff who have bought a scooty in 2018-19. The trainings will take place in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rangpur and Jessore.

This write-up is prepared by the talent management team of BRAC Human Resource and Learning Division





Women-friendly spaces in Rohingya camps

Tahmina Yesmin

“Shantikhana is my idea of heaven. Every time I come here, I feel like I’m home.”

This is what 16-year-old Nur Kayes had to say about a women friendly space run by BRAC.

“I do not remember the last time I laughed without fear and trauma. I found peace in BRAC’s Shantikhana, something I did not think would be possible after the atrocities I had seen,”

15-year-old Laila describes. These are but a few of the recurring thoughts of regular participants of BRAC facilitated

women-friendly spaces at the Rohingya camps. ‘Shantikhana’ translates to ‘home’ or ‘place of peace’.

Over the last one year and a half, BRAC Humanitarian Crisis Management Programme (HCMP) has been providing a comprehensive response with life-saving services to over 911,359 forcibly displaced Myanmar nationals in Cox’s Bazar.

Over half of them (55%) are women and girls according to an Inter Sector Coordination Group (ISCG) report. Almost everyone witnessed and experienced extreme violence including rape, murder, and arson which triggered the exodus in August 2017. The Rohingya refugees, especially the women, girls and children, remain vulnerable at the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. They still face threats and risks of sexual assault and gender-based violence. They are not only traumatised by their past, but many still suffer from physical injuries.

The largest development organisation

in the world, BRAC, initiated a multidimensional response for the displaced Rohingya from the beginning. A comprehensive protection support is one of these emergency services for the vulnerable Rohingya women and girls.

The ‘woman-friendly space’ is one of the major gender-based violence protection approaches taken by BRAC’s humanitarian programme for Rohingya women and girls. These women-friendly spaces ensure a safe space. BRAC followed the global standard model when designing and building these spaces, and customised them based on the choices of the Rohingya and their cultural norms.

Women-friendly spaces

Also known as ‘safe space for women and girls’ or ‘women and adolescent centre’, these centres aim



to curb violence against disadvantaged women. Rohingya women have been suffering from violence both in Myanmar and Bangladesh. They are severely deprived, and are denied access to life-saving information and basic services on mental health, clinical care, legal assistance, security services, relief distribution, and skills development activities.

Women-friendly spaces aims to ensure that women have a safe and private place to meet and talk which helps reduce their pain and trauma. They can avail different women-centric services there as well. The centres are open only for women and girls.

The objectives of the women-friendly spaces are to provide an area where women and girls can:

- Socialise and rebuild their social networks
- Receive social support
- Acquire contextually relevant skills
- Access safe and non-stigmatising multi-sectoral gender-based violence response services (psychosocial, legal, medical)
- Receive information on issues relating to women's rights, and health



Regular activities of women-friendly spaces

- **Recreational activities include drawing, henna art, storytelling, playing ludu, magical pillow passing, makeover, etc**
- **Session on social issues and gender-based violence using pictorial cards or other materials to raise awareness**
- **Case management services**
- **Referrals for legal and medical services**
- **Psychosocial support**
- **Life skills support eg leadership training**
- **Engagement and community participation with activities like problem-solving, etc**
- **Tailoring, embroidery, knitting, block and other handicraft training, and using these for psychotherapy**
- **Formal vocational training and livelihood activities**
- **Home visit by outreach workers, volunteers and staff to inform community members about activities and services**
- **Focus group discussion (FGD) by outreach workers and volunteers to assess the community situation and making people aware of gender-based violence and other social issues**
- **Distribution of dignity kits and other necessary materials as needed**
- **Providing informal education - awareness session**
- **Newspaper reading to increase awareness about current issues**

Each women-friendly space has separate rooms for skills development, recreational activities, and awareness training to help prevent sexual and gender-based violence, give psychosocial support services and case management. There are designated spaces for childcare, breastfeeding, adolescent girls, and indoor games.

BRAC staff members conduct FGDs within the community to ascertain their needs before setting up a women-friendly space. This exercise also helps them build a relationship with the community and understand their choices. The rapport encourages women and girls to join the women-friendly space activities. BRAC is operating nine women-friendly spaces in seven camps. At least 50 women and adolescent girls attend each women-friendly space every day, and they are connected with different services as well.

Each women-friendly space has a number of community outreach workers and volunteers from their community to create a strong bond, understanding and trust. These volunteer groups directly support beneficiaries, especially young women and adolescent girls forced to stay home.



WFS case management service adheres to global standards with trained workers and a proper system. Following is the model:

Case management

Step 1: Introduction and engagement

Step 2: Assessment

Step 3: Case action planning

Step 4: Action plan implementation

Step 5: Case follow-up

Step 6: Case closure

Case management activity follows a confidential gender-based violence information management system (GBV-IMS) and a quarterly reporting mechanism to understand the trend of incidences.

Psychosocial counselling is one of the



major needs for the women and girls. Sexual and gender-based violence survivors are referred to trained counsellors for one-on-one sessions at the women-friendly spaces. Each women-friendly space has regular psychosocial counselling support with skilled staff supervised by professional psychosocial counsellors. Survivors feel safe and hopeful as counsellors listen to them in a private space with full empathy and respect; where women are guaranteed dignity and safety. The counsellors conduct individual as well as group sessions, and refer clinical psychological issues to the nearest specialist or organisation that provides the service.

Most Rohingya women and girls are deprived of education and skills development opportunities. The centres provide basic literacy and skills development training to the participants. Two craft trainers are selected for each women-friendly space from the community. They work as paid volunteers and teach other women and girls tailoring, stitching, embroidery etc. Sewing material and machines are provided by BRAC. Skills development and small entrepreneurship trainings are also part of the programme with the help of Ayesha Abed Foundation at selected camps.

Women's leadership training is also among women-friendly spaces activities where women are trained to strengthen their leadership quality. They provide support to other women and girls as mentors.

Women-friendly space staff discuss gender-based violence prevention at

the centre. Besides, raising awareness on gender-based violence, they also cover response mechanism and other social issues with the participants at designated sessions. The topic is covered with two separate batches given that the nature of content will be different for adults and adolescents.

Legal awareness and need-based legal services are also provided with the support of professional female lawyers. Legal officers support them with specialised legal services with the help of local thana and law enforcing agencies.

'Men and boys engagement' is an important and effective approach for ensuring response and prevention mechanism of sexual and gender-based violence incidences. BRAC organises these activities to connect men and boys with their nearest women-friendly spaces. Selected men and boys' groups are established for a support mechanism for male survivors (both men and boys), and protect them from probable negative coping mechanisms as well. Selected 114 role models are functioning as positive change-makers in the community in different camps. They conduct small group discussions on various social issues in a suitable place in the community such as tea stall etc. These activities start with locally popular sports activities like sullom (a local game), carom, kite-flying, and football. Radio listening, newspaper reading, documentary shows, and skills training on photography and computer literacy are other regular activities for ensuring effective engagement among them.



Referral services - case management workers also ensure referrals. These include healthcare and materials distribution.

Infrastructure of this centre

- Should be located in a suitable place that is easily accessible for women/girls.
- Should have privacy in these spaces
- Should have enough space for gatherings and meetings
- Should have floor mat or other seating arrangements
- Should have safe drinking water
- Should have toilet facilities with sufficient water
- Should have bathing and laundry facilities
- Should have a discrete case management room with enough light and air
- Should have separate rooms for counselling with enough light and air
- Should have space for tailoring/handicraft training and practice
- Should have play corner with toys for children
- Should have separate breastfeeding corner with sufficient light and air
- Should have a prayer room
- Should have locker, cabinet for storing case management documents
- Should have proper boundary wall
- All rooms, including toilets, should be clean and fresh
- Should have storage facilities for dignity kits and other emergency materials
- Should have some space for gardening where vegetables and flowers can be grown
- Should be decorated with information and communication materials, service mapping with contacts, charts and visual aids

Ensuring quality services

BRAC women-friendly spaces maintain a high standard of services. Following are a checklist used for ensuring quality:

- Staff should have relevant training and orientation on women-friendly space objectives and provide quality support
- Staff should be preferably proficient in Rohingya language
- Staff should understand what gender-based violence is
- Staff should know the core humanitarian standards
- Staff should be respectful towards

beneficiaries and be dedicated to serve

- Staff should maintain confidentiality/privacy of case management
- All registers should be well maintained eg attendance, material stock register, visitors' book, etc
- Daily activities/programme should be written and displayed on a board
- Staff should participate at site management and coordination meetings
- Maintain good rapport with stakeholders, other service providers (NGOs)
- Staff should have a regular practice of exchange visits with other women-friendly space staff

Women-friendly spaces are an entry

point to work on women's rights and women's empowerment in a conservative male-dominated Rohingya community. They provide basic services to women and girls who, in turn, become more confident, happy, and skilled.

After operating women-friendly spaces for one and a half years we observe that the women and girls are getting more confident than before, they are receiving skills, income opportunities, and awareness on various social issues. Women-friendly spaces create a strong network among the women and girls living in the community. They are connecting with numbers of women and girls every day and able to know others' sufferings and joys, know more information related to available services and alternative ways to address their own and children's needs. They get an opportunity to enhance their position and condition within their family and community where they were excluded due to negative cultural norms and practices. Essentially the women and girls find these services as a source of strength and peace in their lives.

This women-friendly space model can be followed for women and girls' empowerment in other communities as well.

Tahmina Yesmin is the team lead of the safeguarding initiative at BRAC



DID YOU KNOW

One in five women and girls, including 19% of women and girls aged 15 to 49, have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner with the last 12 months. Yet, 49 countries have no laws that specifically protect women from such violence.



How empowerment and livelihood of adolescents (ELA) programme is creating impact in the lives of girls and women in Africa

Nazneen Jahan Mithun

Twenty-year-old Scholastica was orphaned at nine, and at 13 her father and relatives were forcing her into marrying a much older, wealthy man. Scholastica was scared of becoming a wife and mother - although it is quite common to her region Karamoja, which is classified as one of the world's poorest and both socially and economically least developed region in northern Uganda (UNFPA, 2018). She escaped from home so she would not have to marry. She walked barefoot for miles on end, across precarious mountains in north-east Uganda, to run far away from home.

However, to turn the tide, she returned to her village at 15. Fortunately, she found her way to a BRAC ELA Club which provides girls like Scholastica with a safe space - where they can feel protected from abuse and can share their thoughts, joys and sorrows with peers.

Now, Scholastica is a mentor, a club leader, and during her sessions, she advises girls to shun early pregnancy and early marriage. She tells them not

to be deceived by boys and ruin their future prospects. She also encourages them to go to school to complete their studies. Recently, she has been in touch with her family, and was able to explain them to respect her rights as a girl child. Likewise, she encourages fellow girls who do not have sufficient financial support to engage in small businesses.

Scholastica says, "I am living an exemplary life by running a small bakery and restaurant, making doughnuts and selling cooked mixed maize and beans, chapatis and tea. I am not married, and do not plan to be any time soon. I do not think any boy or man can deceive or lure me if I am economically empowered. I am putting all my effort into expanding my business. I have no time to think about men and marriage."

Besides, she also spends her savings to support her sisters' education. Even now, her relatives want to get her sisters married off. But, Scholastica has been very strong, and has saved her sisters from child marriage. She explained to her relatives that the right to education for a girl child is same as that of boys. She also explained to her family and the community that a girl has the same rights as a boy to be educated - to become a lawyer, teacher, engineer or banker. Scholastica is working hard to



expand her business so that she can create employment opportunities for more girls from the ELA clubs.

BRAC's ELA programme has been operating for girls and young women like Scholastica, to create positive changes in their lives.

Context of women and girls in Africa

Women and girls in developing countries have been facing inequality for ages due to the socio-cultural discrimination - which remains biased towards men. These practices have, regrettably, only led to the detriment of humanity.



The world - where we live and breathe every day - is home to 1.8 billion people between ages 10 and 24, and the youth is growing the fastest in the poorest nations.

Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation's 2018 Goalkeepers report says Africa accounts for 60% of youth under 25. Echoing that, UNESCO also identifies that children (aged between 10 and 17) who are not in school constitute 57.8% of the total population in sub-Saharan Africa. Of them, 61.3% are young girls and women.

Furthermore, these youth groups also account for 60% of all unemployed Africans according to the World Bank. The young people face risks and barriers to a healthy transition to adulthood. This prevents them from accessing opportunities and gaining fundamental skills. These barriers often become predominantly challenging for adolescent girls and young



women whose lack of opportunity is compounded by gender-based discrimination and violence.

Across many African countries, young people's physical, social, emotional, and economic well-being is significantly undermined by high levels of poverty, gender inequality, and unequal power relations within the families, communities, and institutions. Limited access to basic services (health, education, financial services, safe and dignified employment opportunities, psychosocial support, and legal services), and lack of family and community support make the youth vulnerable to gender-based violence, early marriage, and teenage pregnancy. The youth might also become engaged in risky social and economic behaviour that often result in sexual and reproductive health problems including HIV and AIDs.

To overcome these challenges, changes are necessary in agency and at the interpersonal and fundamental levels for young people to be socially and economically empowered - thereby to become the change agent for the larger youth population across the globe.

How ELA started

With an aim to empower people and communities in poverty, illiteracy, disease, and social injustice, BRAC began its ELA programme in 2006 in Uganda. The basic concept of ELA stemmed from BRAC's adolescent development programme (ADP) that started in 1993 in Bangladesh, providing safe spaces for adolescent girls to help them retain literacy and life skills.



BRAC realises that girls across the developing world are at tremendous risk, and the costs of not protecting them are irreconcilable. Securing girls' futures is not only the right thing to do but it has positive implications for the economy at large.



Thus, a BRAC programme which originated in Bangladesh for adolescent development, has spread its wings in Uganda, Tanzania, South Sudan, Liberia, Sierra Leone and Nepal which includes only girls.

While expanding this programme outside Bangladesh, BRAC did not merely replicate the design, but also contextualised the design based on each of the country's needs and situation. BRAC adapts to local conditions, yet notably, many of the clubs' features are common across nations and cultures because girls in many developing countries face similar discrimination and abuse during adolescence.

ELA approach

BRAC believes that adolescent girls and young women are one of the most powerful agents for change in the world. With that in mind, BRAC created and continued to provide safe spaces for girls and young

women between 10 to 21 years, particularly those who dropped out of school, might be at risk of teenage pregnancy, those who already have children, and young people with disabilities. These safe spaces are known as ELA clubs.

The process of empowerment starts with 'safe spaces' close to girls' home, where girls can come together in the afternoon to discuss problems with their peers, share real life experiences, joys, and sorrows. They can also sing, dance, play games, socialise with their friends, and build social networks away from the pressures of family and male-centred society. These local girls' club spaces are either donated by the community people or rented in marginalised communities.

Building mentors is another key aspect of this programme. One girl is selected as lead mentor in each club, and provided with rigorous training. It is through their lead mentor that the other girls of the ELA clubs receive

life skills training, financial literacy, and livelihood skills. The life skills training equips girls with knowledge on sexual and reproductive health and rights, early pregnancy, health and hygiene, social issues, gender-based violence, relationships, child marriage, and health and nutrition. The adolescents are also linked with health facilities to ensure better access to health care and family planning.

Central to our approach is the understanding that social empowerment goes hand-in-hand with economic empowerment. In order to maintain and multiply success, ELA uses a combination of soft and hard skills training. Besides providing girls with life skills training, the programme also provides them the opportunity for economic empowerment. Along with livelihood or skills training, they are given basic financial literacy covering earnings and savings, budget management, and business planning. For older ELA members, these can be coupled with micro-loans that help them put their knowledge to work and start their own business in tailoring, trading or farming.

Women's empowerment and gender equality play a significant role in fostering health and human development. Empowerment describes the process of change where an individual with prior inability to choose has the access and freedom to make those very choices.

ELA is a process of providing access and freedom to make such choices through which over hundred thousand girls and women across the globe have been empowered since its inception.

This programme also works towards gender equality by creating opportunities for women and girls to enjoy the same socioeconomic rights and opportunities with equal access to education, health care, decent work, and representation in economic decision-making processes (World Bank, 2012) as men.

Evidences

Over the past decade, BRAC's ELA programme has offered close to a hundred thousand adolescent girls the opportunity for a better life through safe spaces, not to mention mentorship, life skills lessons, livelihoods training, and microfinance. Backed by rigorous evidence from randomised control trials in Uganda, Sierra Leone, and South Sudan, ELA has successfully empowered girls to reduce teen pregnancy, delay marriage, decrease

rates of sex against girls' will, increase earnings, and counteract negative effects on girls' schooling.

The World Bank brief¹ on Uganda shows that the ELA had both direct (on the girls in the clubs) and indirect (on the girls in the village but not in the clubs) impacts on the girls in the intervention villages by influencing behavioural and social norms in the community. In Uganda, a randomised controlled trial (RCT) revealed double-digit, village-wide impacts on girls in ELA villages on a wide variety of indicators after four years, including a 48% rise in income generation. Teen pregnancy and self-reported instances of forced sex also dropped by close to a third. It also indicates 62% reduction in marriage or cohabitation. These effects include all girls in ELA villages, not just participants. On top of that, evidence also showed a decrease in transactional sex among younger cohorts in the ELA villages.² More recent randomised evaluations on ELA from Sierra Leone and South Sudan show the programme performing strongly on multiple indicators, including education. In Sierra Leone, where Ebola broke out in the midst of the RCT, researchers found that the epidemic caused school enrolment to drop more than 20 percentage points, but participation soon offset that almost entirely.³ Similarly, in South Sudan, where civil conflict re-emerged between baseline and end-line, the violence caused affected girls to stop going to school - with ELA counteracting this effect.⁴

Despite starting in Africa, BRAC's ELA programme has now expanded to Asia, looking to empower adolescent girls and youth group - break the cycle of poverty, and unlocking their economic potential through education, life skills and livelihoods using the ELA club platform. From the programme experience in Africa, BRAC figured out that empowered girls are able to fight child marriage, protect themselves from teenage pregnancy, and build healthier

futures.

In line with BRAC's broader vision of rooting out poverty, particularly through empowerment of marginalised women and girls, ELA has been doing that and more across Africa and Asia. It can be claimed that girls in ELA clubs are empowered to take control of their lives, and build healthier futures for themselves, their loved ones, and their entire communities.

Nazneen Jahan Mithun is the head of the youth empowerment unit at BRAC International



DID YOU KNOW

- Women in sub-Saharan Africa are as likely to die in pregnancy or childbirth as women in nineteenth-century England, when Charles Dickens described these horrors in *Oliver Twist* and *A Christmas Carol*.
- Despite prohibitions, child marriage remains widespread around the world. About 37,000 child marriages take place each day.
- 60% of the world's chronically hungry people are women.

¹ The World Bank brief, Issue 2, May 2013

² Oriana Bandiera, Niklas Buehren, Robin Burgess, Markus Goldstein, Selim Gulesci, Imran Rasul and Munshi Sulaiman. *Women's Empowerment in Action: Evidence from a Randomized Control Trial in Africa*. London School of Economics, University College London, World Bank. July 2017.

³ Oriana Bandiera, Niklas Buehren, Markus Goldstein, Imran Rasul, Andrea Smurra. *Human Capital Accumulation in a Time of Crisis: Evidence from an RCT in Sierra Leone During the Ebola Epidemic*. London School of Economics, University College London, World Bank. March 2018

⁴ Niklas Buehren, Shubha Chakravarty, Markus Goldstein, Vanya Slavchevska, Munshi Sulaiman. *Girls' Empowerment and Conflict: Evidence from South Sudan*. World Bank. May 2018.



Skills Training: A livelihood pathway for the transgender community

Tasnim M Rahman

Whenever a child is born, the attending doctor or nurse or midwife announces the arrival of a 'girl' or a 'boy'. The practise is as common as it gets, a practice that is perhaps as old as time. That immediate declaration of the child's sex dictates numerous aspects of our lives but it is absolutely necessary to not take this for granted. There are some people whose gender identity evolves differently and might not fit the traditional notion of female or male.

This often creates a confusion because not many people know what 'transgender' actually means.

Too many people talk as if 'transgender' is a single entity. But the fact that it is an umbrella term, which includes a whole range of distinctions, is often ignored.

In other words, 'transgender' is an umbrella term that describes people whose gender identity or expression does not match the sex they were

assigned at birth. In addition to including people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex, meaning trans men and trans women, it may include people who are not exclusively masculine or feminine. This could include people who are gender-queer or non-binary, including bigender (people whose sense of identity encompasses two genders), pangender (people who consider themselves members of all genders), genderfluid, or agender (someone who identifies as having no gender or being without a gender identity). The term 'transgender' also includes people commonly called hijras or eunuchs. Moreover, there is no one way to be transgender, and no one particular way for transgender people to look or feel about themselves.

As a gender-responsive person, I always want to avoid misgendering a person. The first time I wanted to ask someone about their preferred 'name' and 'pronoun' was during an interview of a trans woman learner in BRAC's

skills development programme. Even though the question seems as simple as the answer, it has grave implications. Misgendering transgender people with the wrong pronoun (he instead of she) is widespread and, at some point, bothersome as people keep doing it — purposefully or by mistake. The question is less about her, him or them than it is about the significance of the answer: an ability to respectfully determine whether the speaker is transgender or cisgender.

My whole dilemma got sorted when I asked the learner's name and she replied with a subtle smile, 'My name is Monisha, but everyone calls me Rahim here. You can call me either.'

I insisted, 'Yes, but what would you prefer?'

The eyes sparkled at the recognition of acknowledgement. 'Monisha,' she said.

Monisha explained that even though she is publicly known as Rahim, she prefers Monisha because that is the name her guru ma (the leader of the transgender group) gave her. She said that when her family first realised that she might be a trans woman, their sense of pride kicked in. Monisha can still recount events six years later and she also remembers her uphill struggle over the last six years.

In the modern world of gender binaries, being denoted simply as the 'third gender' or hijra (which is the official umbrella term in Bangladesh) has led to many difficulties for transgender communities, starting from lack of recognition in the family and community, to inaccessibility to education, training and employment. Even if some of them manage to get a job, discrimination, bullying and intolerance hinder their progress. This discrimination even extends to the use of toilets as some may be forced to use the washroom of their socially assigned gender, while some others may be forced out altogether.

Most transgender people in Bangladesh make their livelihood by forcible begging, which almost borders on extortion on the streets. There appeared to be a slight ray of hope with the government initiative to rehabilitate and recognise trans people as a third gender. The possibility of this community joining the mainstream seemed a little closer to reality with this recognition on 11 November 2013.



Even though the government recognised them, implementation of the policy is yet to take place and that will only happen when transgender people are more visible in regular jobs. As important as it is to advocate for their social acceptance, it is also crucial to guide them towards steady employment.



Steady employment would mean addressing the barriers trans people face in securing a better livelihood — discrimination, lack of access, intolerance, etc. That is where BRAC's skills development programme (SDP) focuses with its commitment towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 4, 5 and 8).

These goals address most of the factors that influence marginalisation of minority groups. The programme's activities range from collecting transgender learners to sensitising their trainers, instructors as well as the potential employers during their job placement.

Monisha met her guru ma one day on her way back from school. The realisation of not wanting to be a boy troubled her. By the time she was convinced that this was more than just a phase, she fled with her guru ma, leaving her family behind. She was only seven.

When she was identified by SDP, it was easy to convince her guru ma to get her into the apprenticeship training programme. This was possible because Monisha was the youngest in the group and she shared a strong emotional bond with her guru ma. So when we approached her, she readily agreed to send Monisha for the training.

The guru ma also became Monisha's local guardian which made it easier for her to join the training and surprising as it sounds, Monisha still lives with her even though she does not contribute financially to the band of trans people living together. It is not so easy elsewhere. SDP field officers have to conduct numerous sessions with the parents,

local influential people, and elders in the community, trainers, and potential employers before enrolling transgender people for the apprenticeship training programme.

SDP recognises that most transgender people have a tough time finding work because they lack the required education and qualification, have almost no access to training opportunities, and face constant discrimination. Thus, besides training them, SDP extends its focus not only on sensitising the people in their training rooms and workplaces, but also in orienting the learners so that they can fight discrimination in a peaceful and patient manner which help get them recognition eventually.

Apart from the opportunity to choose from an array of trades, they also get lessons in life skills and soft skills, covering topics like self-awareness, menstruation, family planning, health and reproduction, HIV-AIDS, drug addiction, etc. The classes also familiarise them with the job market with sessions on how to negotiate with employers and on the concept of decent work.

Even though it is not easy to disregard the negativity and keep up motivation, Monisha has already trained for five months in tailoring and dress making and mastered the making of traditional salwar suits, blouses, and baby frocks. She is also one of the most vocal participants in her soft skills class and sometimes, the trainer requests her to let others answer a question or two. Monisha could not help but mention the support and affection she has had from her trainer and fellow learners. They often bring her lunch as they eat together.

When asked about her future plans, Monisha said, "One day I will have my own tailoring shop where I will be able to fulfil the dreams of many others like me!" She plans to help them strive for a better future. And thus, BRAC's skills development programme plans to keep on working for and with people like Monisha to fulfil their commitment towards making this world a better and sustainable place to live in.

Tasnim M Rahman is an assistant manager at BRAC Skills Development Programme

dTOON

Meaning of motherland, son??
The land which is your mother's
to work on, and your
father's to own.



Cartoon: Zulkarin Jahangir

Next issue of dBRIEF

The next issue of dBRIEF will be on 'Education'. We expect to cover interesting stories, initiatives/events taken on national/international/organisational levels, ground-breaking researches, and other relevant topics around the subject.

Moreover, we are planning to introduce a new section "Dear editor" from the next issue. The section will contain readers' reviews and constructive feedbacks on the current issue. In this regard, we are calling for your thoughtful insights, reviews and comments on this issue. Please submit your suggestions to dbrief@brac.net before 30 January 2020.