

## Women Empowerment Scenario: Bangladesh Perspective

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**ABSTRACT:** Empowerment of women is such a process which controls women rights, challenges and gender disparity in parental and social institutions. The socio-economic condition refers to the social dignity, educational qualifications, family marriage system, mother, social value, occupation salary and wealth etc. The Bangladeshi women have made massive gains since the country achieved its independence in 1971. During the last four decades a significant achievement has been recorded in political empowerment, better job prospects, improved education and the adoption of new laws to protect their rights.

This paper examines the contribution of women entrepreneur in different sectors of business and commerce that contribute to the national economic development in Bangladesh. The sectors to which they contribute most are Agriculture, Readymade Garments and Small Business Enterprises. A large majority of the households in Bangladesh depend upon agriculture and related activities like livestock rearing, fisheries and forestry. The ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh started in the late 1970s and became an important player in the economy. The industry has contributed to export earnings, foreign exchange earnings, employment creation, poverty alleviation and the empowerment of women. SME plays a significant role in the economy and it is also considered a major sector to contribute to sustainable development of our country. In Bangladesh SME provides over 87% of the total industrial employment and is responsible for the creation of over 33% of industrial value added goals. At present women entrepreneurs constitute less than 10% of the total business entrepreneur in Bangladesh.

**KEYWORD:** Women empowerment, Entrepreneurship, Agriculture, RMG, Decision-making, development, Bangladesh.

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Bangladesh is a resource-limited and overpopulated country where society is highly stratified, Services and opportunities are determined by gender, class and location. However, women make nearly half of the population which means huge potential to be utilized for socio-economic development of the country. Existing sex ratio in demographic structure of Bangladesh indicates that women comprise almost 50% of the total population (BBS, 2006). They are essential part of nation's human resources. However, the gender ratio shows that although the male population is high at birth and early ages up to 14 but the scenario reverses after 14. It indicates that the females are more resistant than the males (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Sex Ratio of Bangladesh Population at different age groups

At birth	1.04 male(s)/female
0-14 years	1.03 male(s)/female
15-24 years	0.88 male(s)/female
25-54 years	0.9 male(s)/female
55-64 years	0.95 male(s)/female
65 years and over	0.96 male(s)/female
Total population	0.95 male(s)/female

Source: (CIA World Fact book 2015)

Due to this demographic structure, the issue of the participation of women in the mainstream economy is imperative. Without a meaningful and active participation of women, half of the total population, in regular

economic activities, a dynamic and sustainable economy is impossible. A sustainable economy is a precondition for national growth and prosperity including institutionalization of a democratic system. It is also impossible to achieve the target of a poverty-free society without incorporation of women in the mainstream economy. Women's economic empowerment is an inevitable part of development discourse. Excluding women from the mainstream development program, institutionalization of a sustainable development process is just unthinkable. It is inspiring to mention here that a new woman's entrepreneurs" class is increasingly emerging each year taking on the challenge to work in a male-dominated, competitive and complex economic and business environment (BWCCI, 2008).

However, even through many studies have been conducted on women empowerment but here has been little research done on the topic that empowering women leads to the economic development. The purpose of this study is to know whether women empowerment leads to the economic development of economy. If women empowerment can be properly ensured, it increases participation of women in the labor force and reduces poverty in the economy, increases production and they can support their families. If women are the owner of property and earn money, they can contribute to their families, society and countries financially.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

The overall objective of the study is to examine the key gender issue involved in development in the SME, RMG and Agriculture sectors, with a view to addressing the problems of exclusion of women from access to market, technology and finance and make recommendations to understand the present condition and contribution of women in Bangladesh.

## III. METHODOLOGY:

This report is based on the information collected from diverse sources following a specific methodology. This report has been written on the basis of information collected from secondary sources.

### Women Empowerment:

Women Empowerment is a holistic concept. Women empowerment induces women awareness of their right, self confidence to have a control over their lives both at home and outside and their ability to bring a change in the society. Empowerment has many elements which depend upon and related to each other i.e., Economic, social political and personal.

In Table 2, we synthesize and list the most commonly used dimensions of women's empowerment, drawing from the frameworks developed by these various authors. Allowing for overlap, these frameworks suggest that women's empowerment needs to occur along the following dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, familial/interpersonal, and political.

**Table 2:** Commonly used dimensions of women empowerment and potential operationalization in the household, community, and broader arenas.

Dimension	Household	Community	Broader Arenas
Economic	Women's control over income; relative contribution to family support; access to and control of family resources	Women's access to employment; ownership of assets and land; access to credit; involvement and/or representation in local trade associations; access to markets	Women's representation in high paying jobs; women CEO's; representation of women's economic interests in macro-economic policies, state and federal budgets
Socio-Cultural	Women's freedom of movement; lack of discrimination against daughters; commitment to educating daughters	Women's visibility in and access to social spaces; access to modern transportation; participation in extra-familial groups and social networks; shift in patriarchal norms (such as son preference); symbolic representation of the female in myth and ritual	Women's literacy and access to a broad range of educational options; Positive media images of women, their roles and contributions
Political	Knowledge of political system and means of access to it; domestic support for political engagement; exercising the right to vote	Women's involvement or mobilization in the local political system/campaigns; support for specific candidates or legislation; representation in local bodies of government	Women's representation in regional and national bodies of government; strength as a voting bloc; representation of women's interests in effective lobbies and interest groups
Familial/ Interpersonal	Participation in domestic decision-making; control over sexual relations; ability to make childbearing decisions, use contraception, access abortion; control over spouse selection	Shifts in marriage and kinship systems indicating greater value and autonomy for women (e.g. later marriages, self selection of spouses, reduction in the practice of dowry; acceptability	Regional/national trends in timing of marriage, options for divorce; political, legal, religious support for (or lack of active opposition to) such shifts; systems providing easy access

	and marriage timing; freedom from domestic violence	of divorce); local campaigns against domestic violence	to contraception, safe abortion, reproductive health services
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**Present status of women in Bangladesh:**

Bangladesh has been working relentlessly to ensure women’s overall development by affording them equal and active participation in the mainstream socio-economic activities and removing the various impediments to their empowerment. The current government is committed to attaining the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of gender equality and empowering women as well as implementing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action. Bangladesh has already substantially achieved the MDG3 as it has secured gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level, among other successes. The Constitution of Bangladesh also grants equal rights to women and men in all spheres of public life [Article 28(1), and 28(3). The Constitution also keeps an obligation for the state to ensure women’s active and meaningful participation in all spheres of public life (Article-10).

Bangladesh is a role model of women empowerment and development in the world map. Bangladesh faces big challenges in religious and cultural aspects but the powerful and dedicated women have taken the challenges and crossed the barriers. According to the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index 2014, Bangladesh has made continued progress in tackling gender disparity in four key areas – economic participation, education, health and political empowerment. The country ranked 68th among 142 countries scoring 0.697 (with 0.0 being inequality and 1.0 being equality).

Gender Inequality Index in SAARC Countries: According to the UN Development Program me’s Human Development Report for 2015, Bangladesh ranks 111 out of 188 countries on its Gender Development Index; and 67 out of 75 on the Gender Empowerment Measure, a measure of gender inequality in economic and political terms (Table 3).

**Table 3:** Gender Inequality Index in SAARC Countries

Country	Gender Inequality Index 2014	Rank	Parliamentary Seats % held by Women 2014	Secondary Education % Female 2013	Labor Work Force % Female 2013
	Value				
Maldives	0.243	49	5.9	27.3	56.2
Sri Lanka	0.370	72	5.8	72.7	35.1
Bhutan	0.457	97	8.3	34.0	66.7
Nepal	0.489	108	29.5	17.7	79.9
Bangladesh	0.503	111	20.21	34.1	57.4
Pakistan	0.536	121	19.7	19.3	24.6
India	0.563	130	12.2	56.6	27.0
Afghanistan	0.693	152	27.6	5.9	15.8

Source: Human Development Report 2015, United Nations, New York

Bangladeshi mothers are participating increasingly on their children’s education by choice. The country has managed to reduce the gender gap at all levels of education, particularly at primary and secondary education, i.e. in youth literacy and secondary school enrolments. With the continuous efforts, the girls are doing better results. In these two areas, disparities have been reduced at a faster rate in Bangladesh than the global average (ILO-2014).

Bangladesh has the eighth lowest gender gap in political empowerment in the world. This is partially due to the fact that it has had a female head of state for longer than any other country in the world. In addition, the proportion of seats held by women in the national parliament doubled from 10 per cent in 1990 to 20 per cent in 2011 (ILO Report 2014)

At present, women have joined in the fields of risky and challenging jobs like defense, Boarder Guard of Bangladesh (BGB), police, airlines pilot, drivers of train, bus, taxi, three wheelers; in building construction, brick fields and also in fire service etc. They are also participating as athletes, in games and sports like cricket, football, wrestling, shooting and kabadi etc.

**Bangladesh - Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate):**

The female labor force participation rate has been increased day by day .Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate) in Bangladesh was 33.04 as of 2017. Its highest value over the past 27 years was 33.04 in 2017, while its lowest value was 23.11 in 1990.

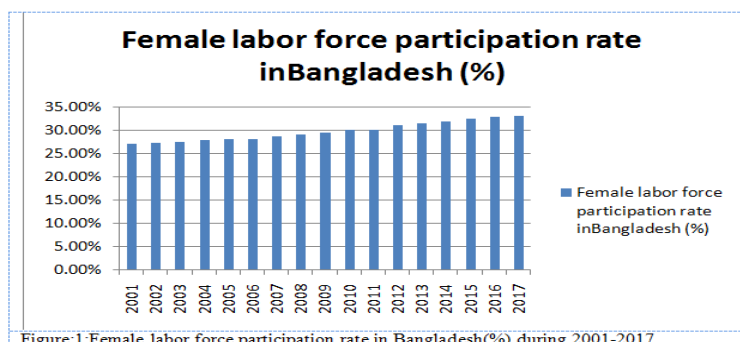


Figure 1: Female labor force participation rate in Bangladesh (%) during 2001-2017

Source: International Labour Organization (ILO), retrieved in November 2017.

**Economic contribution of women empowerment in Bangladesh:**

Works typically divided along gender lines, with men being responsible for “outside” work and women for housework and child care. Bangladeshi women suddenly changed their activities. They are now working in different economic activities and paying important role in national economy. They are adding value in GDP. Here we will discuss the role of women in national economy in terms of Agriculture, RMG and SME.

**Agriculture:**

In Bangladesh though most of the farmers are male but a lot of women are now playing an important role in the improvement of agricultural sector as well as the economy of Bangladesh. A large majority of the households in Bangladesh depend upon agriculture and related activities like livestock rearing, fisheries and forestry. In 2009-2010, crops accounted for 77.7% of the total agricultural production, fisheries 7.8%, livestock 7.7% and forestry 6.8%. Sectors Contribution Crops 77.7% Fisheries 7.8% Livestock 7.7% Forestry 6.8% Total 100% (Source: Ministry of Agriculture, 2009-2010). Despite their routine domestic work, women are very actively involved in agricultural production in Bangladesh. The primary activities of women in agriculture sector are as follows; Cultivation, Home Gardening, Livestock, Poultry, Vegetable growing, Post-harvest processing and Preservation .In Bangladesh, 120355263 people are engaged in agriculture and agriculture based industrial activities. Among those people 64091508 are men which is 53.25% of the total population and 56263719 are women which is 46.75% of the total population. Statistics is given below:

**Table 4:** Sector wise Contributions in GDP: The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Bangladesh

Agriculture sector	Manufacturing sector	Service sector	others	Total
23.50%	28.60%	41.80%	6.10%	100%

Source: Bangladesh Bank, Data released on December.2010

The agricultural sector accounted for nearly 23.50% of Gross Domestic Product which provides US\$ 27.16 billion. Women contribution in GDP is US\$ 10.58 billion. (Source: Bangladesh Bank; Data released on November 2010). It is estimated that women represent a substantial share of the total agricultural labor force, as individual food producers or as agricultural workers, and that around two-thirds of the female labor force in developing economies is engaged in agricultural work

**Women in Ready-made garments (RMG):**

The Ready-Made Garments industry has been placed as the largest export earner of Bangladesh. The garment sector has provided employment opportunities to women from the rural areas that previously did not have any opportunity to be part of the formal workforce. This has given women the chance to be financially independent and have a voice in the family because now they contribute financially. Women are also adding value in national economy from this sector. At present 2.88million (78% of the total garment worker) female workers engaged in RMG sector of Bangladesh. The ready-made garment (RMG) industry of Bangladesh started in the late 1970s and became an important player in the economy. The industry has contributed to export earnings, foreign exchange earnings, employment creation, poverty alleviation and the empowerment of women. The RMG industry enjoyed a meteoric rise from 30 enterprises in 1980 increased to about 5400 in 2011-12 fiscal years. The growth of garments industries & number of workers of over 6 years as follows:

**Table 5:** The growth of Garment Industries and number of workers of over 6 years

Year	Garment factories	Employment(million)	Women worker(million)
2006-2007	4490	2.40	1.92

2007-2008	4743	2.80	2.24
2008-2009	4925	3.50	2.80
2009-2010	5063	3.60	2.88
2010-2011	5150	3.60	2.88
2011-2012	5400	4	3.12

Source: BGMEA, 2012

In 2012, Out of 4 million manpower employed in BGMEA member factories, 3.12 million are women (78%), majorities of them are disadvantaged and economically poverty stricken women folk. Woman in RMG Employment in the RMG (Ready Made Garments) industry has provided direct access to cash income for the first time to many poor women. In 1999, the industry employed directly more than 1.4 million workers, about 80% of whom were female. With the growth of RMG industry, linkage industries supplying fabrics, yarns, accessories, packaging materials, etc. have also expanded. Many women are getting opportunities to work in those industries. The economic empowerment of these workingwomen has changed their status in the family. Particulars Figure Total worker 4 Million. Total women worker 3.12Million (78%). It is the largest exporting industry in Bangladesh which is increased during the last 20 years. It attained a high profile in terms of foreign exchange earnings, exports, industrialization and contribution to GDP within a short span of time.

Year	Export of RMG (in millions)	Total Export of Bangladesh (in millions)	Percentage of RMG's to Total Exports
2009-10	USD 12496.72	USD16204.65	77.12%
2010-2011	USD 17914.46	USD 22924.38	78.14%
2011-2012	USD 1089.69	USD 24287.66	78.60%

Source: BGMEA, 2012

The contribution of women in RMG sector can be viewed in following topic: Chip Labor: Bangladesh is a third world country. Labor is chip here particularly women labor. Garments Industry has become flourishing here because of chip labor of women. Skill: Bangladeshi Women are traditionally expert in sewing. They are creative in clothing. With their creative work, they put an importance in the success of garment industry here. Bangladeshi women are expert garment related work. Bangladeshi govt. also provides training for them. So, they become an asset to RMG. As a result, foreign investor feels interest to invest in Bangladesh. Earning Foreign Currency: Bangladesh exports garment products. By exporting garment products, she earns huge foreign currency. Women are like engine of RMG sector of Bangladesh. So, there is no doubt the participation of women in earning foreign currency is very important. Adding value in GDP: Garment industry added 10% of the total GDP in the year 2009-2010. As women drive the garment sector, we can say, women are adding value in GDP.EPZ: In Bangladesh, there are 9 EPZs. In these EPZs women are the main labor. Because of the labor of women, these EPZs are running successfully. So, they are also adding contribution in our EPZs. Standard of living: In past Bangladeshi women were confined in home. But time has changed. They are working in different sectors. Among the sectors garment industry is one. They are also earning money from working in garments. As a result, standard of living is increasing day by day. In this regards, their contribution can't be eliminated. Increasing face value of Bangladesh: Bangladesh exports RMG products in different parts of the globe. People of those countries praise the quality garment products of Bangladesh. The face value of Bangladesh increases.

#### **Women in SME:**

SME plays a significant role in the economy and it is also considered a major sector to contribute to sustainable development of our country. In Bangladesh SME provides over 87% of the total industrial employment and is responsible for the creation of over 33% of industrial value added goals. At present women entrepreneurs constitute less than 10% of the total business entrepreneur in Bangladesh. Whereas women in advanced market economics own more than 25% of a business. Establishment of women entrepreneurs" enterprises started growing during 1970s and increased during the 1980s and 1990s. The highest record of enterprise establishment was during 2001-2005, nearly 50% enterprise were established from 2000 to 2010. Despite its importance for the economy, the emergence of women entrepreneurship in SMEs is a new phenomenon all over the world. In Bangladesh, women entrepreneurship started developing in fact after the Liberation of Bangladesh. Very few women entered the profession of business before the seventies. Bangladeshi women entrepreneurs need to have an extra quality in the form of dogged determination and resilience since this is needed to fight with adverse situations which seem to confront the female entrepreneurs than their male counterparts in the present-day context



**Table 6:** Economic activities of women entrepreneur in Bangladesh

Manufacturing and trading (%)	Only Export	Whole sell	Service	Only Import	Retail	Both export and import	Other	Total
41.6%	10.6%	6.2%	12.8%	0%	13%	1.6%	14.2%	100%

Source: Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industries, 2010

According to the Bangladesh Economic Review 2009, around 6 percent of the country’s \$90billion economy comes from SMEs. Bangladesh is rightly dubbed as a country of the SMEs. Bangladesh industrial economy is thickly populated by these industries which amount for over99 percent of the private sector industrial establishments and provide more than 80 percent of industrial employment. The relative SME shares in total GDP range between 25-30 percent and that in manufacturing value added vary between 40-45 percent.

**Table 7:**The sector wise contribution of women in Bangladesh economy

Name of the sectors	% Enterprises
Garments/Home textile	16.1%
Printing	1.6%
Handicraft	69.4%
Agro based	3.2%
Parlor	4.8%
Food	3.2%
Others	1.6%
Total	100%

Source: Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industries, 2010

**Challenges in Change:**

Yet, Bangladeshi women continue to face many challenges. The following are the issues those are considered to be the challenges towards empowerment of women.

- Traditional attitude of the men and society of Bangladesh.
- Many non-formal barriers against the women.
- Lack of confidence since they are new in many arenas.
- Lack of starting capital is a big challenge.
- Lack of proper technical and managerial efficiencies
- The maternal mortality rate in Bangladesh is 240 deaths/100,000 live births (as of 2010).Sexually transmitted infections are relatively common, although though the rate of HIV/AIDS is low.
- Not having land and property rights as women’s inheritance rights are poor, discriminatory laws and patriarchal social norms make it difficult for many women to have access to land.
- Sexual harassment and Eve teasing and indecent assault are rise in the society since more and more girls and women are going out home.

Women are also disproportionately affected by unemployment, underemployment and vulnerable employment (Fig. 2).

**Fig. 2 Factors affecting women empowerment in Bangladesh (Naz- 2006**



**Recommendation:**

From the study it reveals that the following actions are very important for promoting women empowerment:

1. **Family support:** Family support is the most important for helping women to come out from the barriers and hinders of social and religious bindings.
2. **Education:** Education is the basic right for development of human being to acquire knowledge for management of natural resources for the wellbeing of all lives on the earth. According to UN Agenda 2030

Sustainable development “Goal No. 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” under which by 2030 it should be ensured that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes; all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education and so on (UN SDG Agenda 2030). Bangladesh has already been implemented free education up to secondary level for the girls.

**3. Social Support:** Without congenial and peaceful social atmosphere, it is not possible to empower the women. According to UN Agenda 2030 “SDG No. 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels, it is the obligation of the society to support the womenfolk to empower”.

**4. Government’s facilities:** The government should provide support with reserve quota in education, employment and leadership to equalize the women’s position in the mainstream. It is urgent to make laws and ordinances especially for women’s security such as humiliation, sex abuse, eve-teasing, violence and child marriage etc. Facilities like maternity leave, baby care, transportation to and from working places, academic and training institutes and recreational places etc. to be provided. According to SDG 5.a reforms should be undertaken to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.

**5. Self motivation and determination:** Self motivation and determination of women are also very important to gain mental courage to overcome the obstacles for achieving their rights in the social and working arena. According to Margaret Sanger, “Woman must not accept; she must challenge. She must not be awed by that which has been built up around her; she must reverence that woman in her which struggles for expression” (Psychology Today 2013).

**6. Correct explanations of religious and spiritual norms.** In many cases, misinterpretation of religious explanations misguides the common people; as a result women are harassed and suppressed. A social action plan is necessary for correct explanation and execution of these complicated norms.

#### IV. CONCLUSION:

It is obvious that the people of Bangladesh are changing their mindsets in connection with global context and they are showing more respect to women and giving them priority to take part in all levels of development. Without participation of women, Bangladesh can never be a Sonar Bangla. So the women should be supported all the way to establish their empowerment to lead change in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi women are marching forward but it is essential to provide them more support so that those who are living in rural Bangladesh can make their presence felt in all spheres of national life. The government is doing its best to increase literacy among women so that they do not lag behind in any respect. However, it is utmost essential to prevent child marriage, dowry related violence and sexual harassment from the society. It needs to rise together and spread the light of education which will empower women to be able to put more effort to nation building (Financial Express May 19, 2016).

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