

“Contending with the second-generation challenges to women’s empowerment involves dealing head-on with matters related to decent work, sexuality, and male privilege—and creating an alternative vision for Bangladesh.”

Women’s Struggles for Empowerment in Bangladesh

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Bangladeshi women’s lives have changed remarkably in the past few decades. Women live longer, they have fewer children, and the risk of dying during childbirth has fallen dramatically. Women prime ministers have ruled the country since 1991. Women hold seats in Parliament and local government. Gender disparities in education have declined rapidly. Women play a key role in the country’s main export sector, ready-made garments (RMG). Given Bangladesh’s unpromising economic, social, and political conditions after independence, examining how and why these changes occurred, and what impact they have had on women’s choices and lives, may yield important lessons for other countries. And as Bangladesh experiences rapid socioeconomic and political shifts, there is an urgent need to confront emerging challenges to women’s empowerment.

Bangladesh is grappling with a deep economic crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic while trying to maintain its pace of growth. Meanwhile, the great improvements in women’s lives hide persistently uneven gains in their empowerment—and resilient patriarchal norms that push back against these changes. These norms limit women’s mobility, their presence in public spaces, their sexuality, and their reproductive choices. Women and girls from poor families and religious, ethnic, and sexual minority groups experience further marginalization. Marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance are governed by laws based on religious codes, limiting equality within the family. Women and girls suffer from high rates of malnutrition and gender-based violence. Early marriages are prevalent. Women also shoulder a disproportionate share

of household chores, reflecting a resistance to changing deeply rooted gender norms surrounding the division of labor in families.

The challenges to women’s empowerment posed by these persistent patriarchal norms and unequal status in family law are further deepened by the rise of religious forces in formal politics. These forces promote a conservative vision of women’s role in society, and they are increasingly accommodated by the mainstream political parties. The country has been governed by a single party, the Awami League, for the past ten years. The party’s latest victory in the January 2023 elections, boycotted by the main opposition, has consolidated its power. The space for dissent is shrinking as laws are passed to control the media and public debate. These trends have implications for women’s ability to organize as counterforces push back against their gains in economic and civic life. How these challenges are tackled will shape the lives of millions of women.

RAPID GAINS, REMAINING CHALLENGES

In the 1970s, Bangladesh started from a lower base than other South Asian countries in health, education, women’s labor force participation, and political engagement, but it has made rapid progress since then. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Index ranked Bangladesh first in South Asia in gender parity. Globally, it ranked 59th.

The expansion of family planning and population control programs brought about a decline in the number of babies born per mother, from seven in the 1970s to two in the 2000s. Maternal and child mortality have declined with the expansion of maternal care and immunization programs. In education, Bangladesh closed the gender gap in enrollment in primary and lower secondary

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education in the early 2000s. But the gender gap at the tertiary level remains a challenge: only 36 percent of students in higher education are women.

Bangladesh had very few elected women representatives in the 1970s, but it now boasts the world's longest-serving female prime minister, Sheikh Hasina. Women have headed key government ministries, including home affairs, agriculture, foreign affairs, education, and women's affairs. Quotas ensure female representation in legislative bodies, including the national Parliament, which has 50 seats reserved for women. About one-third of the seats at the local government level are reserved for women, resulting in the election of 15,000 women nationwide. Yet women's presence in politics has not led to influence on policy. Women are nominated by their parties to parliamentary seats, but they are typically seen as proxy candidates for the male members of their families. At the local level, women are perceived as being good at solving welfare and family disputes, but their effectiveness in handling economic and development concerns is widely questioned.

Since 1981, the two main-stream political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), have been led by women—Sheikh Hasina and Khaleda Zia, respectively. They both rose to leadership through dynastic politics. Both women played pivotal roles in the survival of their parties and led the pro-democracy movement in the 1980s. They have alternated as prime minister and leader of the opposition since Bangladesh's return to democracy in 1991. There is a bitter rivalry between them (Zia is currently under house arrest after being convicted on corruption charges), and the country's politics is deeply polarized.

Although their presence as party leaders has strengthened women's symbolic representation, public preference for male leaders is still strong. The Gender Social Norms Index shows that about 69 percent of Bangladeshis believe that men make better leaders. Men hold most of the leadership positions in the mainstream political parties. Few women are in senior-level posts in the bureaucracy. Women officials are found mostly in the state education and health sectors.

The entrepreneurial acumen of women micro-credit borrowers and the hard labor of female garment workers are much celebrated in Bangladesh's story of women's empowerment. But progress on

women's economic participation has been slow. The female labor market participation rate is around 42 percent.

Women's work is concentrated in agriculture and formal industries such as garment making and agro-processing. About 3.2 million women work in the RMG sector, making it one of the largest employers of women. In urban areas, women fill various kinds of informal jobs, mainly in domestic work. Millions of women participate in home-based work through credit and asset transfer schemes that fund craft making and the raising of poultry, goats, and cattle. Many of these programs are implemented by Bangladesh's world-renowned "banks for the poor," and by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) such as Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC). But men still earn more than women. And lack of job security and poor work conditions remain key areas of concern.

The Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes women's equality in the public sphere. Article 29 stipulates that the state can pass laws favoring women. But governments' attitudes toward women's formal legal equality have been contradictory. Whereas they have passed progressive laws to address different forms of gender-based violence, they have also retained male privilege in the domain of the personal status laws that govern marriage, inheritance, and parental rights. Most of these personal status laws have not been reformed since 1961.

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WHAT ENABLED (UNEVEN) PROGRESS?

Progress in women's empowerment was not inevitable. Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971 in a brutal war. In the 1970s, it was an aid-dependent new country riddled with poverty, famine, natural disasters, and political instability. As a Muslim-majority country with agrarian socioeconomic structures, its cultural practices stressed women's economic dependency on men and the institution of *pardah*. *Pardah* involved restricting women's interactions with men outside their families, as well as mobility in formal paid work and other public spaces. Segregation of men and women was enforced to ensure sexual purity, since a woman's reputation was crucial to family honor. Yet despite all this, women's empowerment became a part of Bangladesh's development success story.

The war of liberation created many widows, rape survivors, and abandoned women. After the war, the “patriarchal bargain” (as pioneering gender relations scholar Deniz Kandiyoti has called it) broke down. For rural women, male protection and provision had been the other side of the tacit bargain in which they accepted limits on their autonomy, and these benefits were no longer guaranteed. Both the 1971 war and the famine of 1974, in which 1.5 million people died, created what Naila Kabeer, a leading scholar of gender and development, terms “watershed moments.”

The aftermath of these catastrophes drew the attention of Bangladeshi policymakers and development actors to the relative exclusion of women among beneficiaries of development programs and state policies. Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, the founder of BRAC, the world's largest NGO, later reminisced about how the famine revealed the determination of poor, rural women to fend for their families in the absence of men. This led to the development of women-centric programs at BRAC.

The breakdown of the patriarchal bargain pushed rural women to challenge purdah norms around mobility and market engagement. They participated in food transfer schemes such as the Vulnerable Group Development program, as well as home-based production schemes. They also migrated to urban areas in search of work. The patriarchal practice of controlling women's engagement in paid work was further challenged by women's entry in large numbers into the burgeoning RMG sector in the 1980s and 1990s.

The sector relied heavily on the supply of cheap female labor. Businesses and global capital considered female workers to be particularly suited for garment work because they had “nimble fingers” and were considered more compliant than men. Though the work conditions were precarious, the ability to earn an income allowed women to make decisions within the home. Women workers reframed purdah norms by arguing that as long as they were modestly dressed and maintained purdah of the mind (keeping free of lascivious thoughts), they were upholding the norms. Some suggested that men could maintain “purdah of the eyes” by lowering their gaze in the presence of women.

These watershed moments show that Bangladeshi women are not passive. They have acted in response to the various opportunities offered by the state and the private sector. These moments also reveal that changes in women's power do not occur automatically through the process of

economic growth and development. Bangladeshi women grabbed the proverbial bull by the horns.

Gains in women's health, declining fertility rates, and increased opportunities for girls' education were driven by a wide-ranging coalition of groups with shared goals. Civil society actors, NGOs, international development organizations, and state agencies were willing to sustain partnerships with each other and work with local communities to scale up antipoverty and service-delivery programs targeting women. Policy continuity under successive governments also created favorable conditions for women's empowerment. The family planning services initiated in the 1970s were maintained by successive governments; systems were created for easier access to care as well as home delivery. The school stipend program, rolled out in the 1990s to keep girls in school, was expanded by subsequent governments.

The women's movement played an important role in pushing for legal and policy reforms, particularly in matters related to violence against women and equal citizenship. The movement has its roots in anticolonial struggles against the British and the nationalist revolt against Pakistan. Despite its middle-class urban roots, this is one of Bangladesh's most vibrant social movements. It encompasses a variety of participants, from mass membership-based organizations, professional societies, and workers' collectives to specialized research, legal aid, and advocacy groups. In recent years, youth-led platforms and Indigenous women's groups have become growing parts of the movement.

Since independence, women's rights organizations and feminist groups have conducted research, collected evidence, lobbied the government, used their expertise and networks to shape development policies, provided legal aid and shelter to survivors of violence, and mobilized on the streets to protest gender inequality. They have also worked with NGOs on economic empowerment. But the women's movement and feminist groups have had to carefully frame their positions in public and manage their relationships with NGOs and international agencies to avoid being labeled as drivers of a “Western agenda.”

EMPOWERMENT WITHIN PARAMETERS?

From the 1970s through the 1990s, the availability of donor funding for various women's development schemes created incentives for successive Bangladeshi regimes to push for women's

empowerment and pursue international legitimacy. The empowerment agenda focused on economic participation, provision of birth-control measures, skills, and education. State and donor agencies promoted an instrumental vision whereby women's empowerment would lead to improved family welfare, reduced poverty, and benefits for children's education, nutrition, and health.

Faced with opposition from conservative sections of society to contraception (which is viewed as un-Islamic), girls' education, and women's participation in paid work, this instrumental vision of women's empowerment was intended to mitigate patriarchal resistance at the community level and within policy circles. Over time, ruling elites, including the current government, have claimed ownership of this approach. But the idea of women's empowerment having an intrinsic value *for* women has been missing from the vision.

Donor funding also fueled the expansion of the NGO sector in the 1970s and 1980s. NGOs were favored for service delivery since the state lacked capacity. Inventive NGOs such as BRAC and Grameen Bank developed different models and outreach programs, focused on empowering women through credit delivery, asset transfers, nonformal education, human rights training, and legal aid provision. Over the years, the state adopted many of these models and set up partnerships with NGOs. Although NGO programs have led to improved well-being for rural women, the impact of these programs on women's ability to mobilize and claim rights is unclear.

NGO credit groups allowed access to non-kin-based networks for rural women, whose interactions with men and women not related by blood or marriage are otherwise limited by social norms. But the evidence is inconclusive as to whether women's participation in credit groups leads to their taking leadership roles within their communities and contesting male privilege, or running in local elections. Some members of women's credit groups protest domestic violence and collectively sanction men responsible for such acts. Yet these women also adhere to traditional gender norms in other respects so as not to draw the ire of their communities.

NGOs also follow informal practices that reinforce male guardianship. They secure permission from husbands for their wives to participate in credit schemes and consult men at the community level to shape women's empowerment programs in ways that diffuse resistance. In the 1980s and

1990s, NGOs faced criticism from the rural patriarchy for working with women. Women's participation in credit programs sometimes led to domestic violence, as some men resented women's increasing control over household finances and decision-making power. But this kind of male resistance never found a strong political platform and has waned over time.

Across rural society, there is now acceptance of women's participation in home-based schemes and particular forms of paid work (teaching, government jobs), and of their access to education and health programs, since these are recognized as leading to better outcomes for women and their families. Such changes show that women's empowerment is supported by the wider Bangladeshi society, development actors, and the state—but only within certain parameters and always for the benefit of others.

EXPLOITATIVE STRUCTURES

Bangladeshi women are still grappling with patriarchal norms and practices that are resistant to change, even as new challenges have emerged in family, economic, and civic life. Contestation over women's empowerment is particularly evident with respect to early marriage, opposition to equal economic opportunities for women and personal status law reforms, and violence against women in the home and in public spaces. Underlying these disputes is the desire to maintain male privilege and control over women's bodies, along with the exploitative structures that shape women's incorporation in global supply chains.

Marriage is virtually universal for Bangladeshi women. Bangladesh has the fourth-highest rate of early marriage in the world. Although the average age at marriage has crept up very slowly, about 59 percent of girls are married off before they turn 18, which is the legal minimum age. This has led to a high number of teenage pregnancies and high rates of malnutrition among young mothers and babies. Preventing early marriage has proved difficult. Large-scale awareness-raising programs have changed the popular rhetoric around child marriage, but not the practice, even though it is illegal. In some instances, adolescent girls have sought help from teachers, NGO workers, or the local police to prevent marriages from taking place, but such interventions are not common.

Poverty, fear of sexual violence, worries that girls will engage in premarital sex and violate the family's honor, and higher dowries for older girls

all induce families to prefer early marriages. The state recognizes these pressures. The current government included an exception clause when it amended the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 2017, allowing parents to marry off girls as young as 16 under certain circumstances. A statement from the Women's Ministry assured parents that this would help them deal with cases of elopement and unwanted pregnancies. Despite vociferous opposition from NGOs, women's rights organizations, and children's rights groups, the clause was not withdrawn. During the pandemic and in the post-pandemic period, the number of early marriages increased—a trend linked to long school closures and the lack of economic opportunities for younger women.

Despite the enactment of various laws to counter violence against women, levels of violence against women in the home and in public spaces are still high. According to a 2021 World Health Organization report, about 50 percent of Bangladeshi women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of their partners at least once in their lives. Unless domestic violence takes an extreme form, few women lodge formal complaints. Many women and men believe that men have the right to use violence if their wives fail to perform domestic chores, do not take care of the children, leave the home without asking permission, talk back, or refuse sex.

The Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act was enacted in 2010 after a long and sustained campaign by women's rights and legal aid organizations. There were long delays in setting up procedures for implementing this law. The Women's Ministry, social welfare officers, and the police still lack adequate resources to provide services to survivors of violence. How effective the law can be if properly implemented and enforced remains to be seen.

Sexual harassment and assault in workplaces, at universities, and on public transport is a frequent occurrence. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, the workplace was reported as the second-most-common location in which women suffered physical and sexual violence. A recent survey covering 5,000 women revealed that about 36 percent had experienced harassment on public transport. A UN Women survey of public university students found that about 76 percent of female respondents said they had been sexually harassed.

These figures are not surprising, since the traditional normative frames that govern women's mobility and sexuality license violence against those who are perceived as transgressing gender norms in public spaces. In May 2023, a young woman was verbally and physically abused by a mob at the Narsingdi railway station over the way she was dressed. After the incident went viral online, a criminal case was filed. The judge presiding over the case chastised the woman for not dressing "decently."

Incidents of rape, gang rape, and sexual assault are on the rise, but the reason is unclear. The increases could be due to better reporting, or a greater willingness on the part of survivors to come forward, or to a rise in actual incidents. Many survivors are reluctant to file cases. The few that do rarely get justice.

Women's rights organizations, feminist groups, and their male allies have repeatedly demonstrated against harassment, assault, and rape. In the past few decades, female and male students in public universities have organized to protest cases of sexual harassment perpetrated

by fellow students and teachers. But there are no specific laws that address sexual harassment. In 2009, the High Court Division of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh

issued a directive that required universities and various public bodies to form committees to investigate complaints and develop procedures for responding to sexual harassment. After 15 years, many organizations have yet to comply.

In 2019, women's rights and legal aid groups formed a coalition to push for the reform of laws and penal code procedures that deal with rape. The coalition's efforts have led to legal changes concerning how survivors can be questioned about their sexual history and medical procedures, including a ban on the "two finger test," a colonial-era practice to gauge if a woman had had previous sexual experience. Despite these changes, rape is still widely viewed as a crime driven by lust that women somehow provoke.

Harassment and violence deter women from engaging in paid work and education. Women workers also lack collective power to challenge low wages and precarious and unsafe work conditions, as the struggles of women garment workers have illustrated. Bangladesh has suffered some of the worst industrial disasters in the RMG sector's

Progress on women's economic participation has been slow.

history. In 2013, the horrific Raza Plaza factory collapse caused the deaths of 1,134 workers, many of whom were women.

RMG workers are organizing to demand compensation for injuries, living wages, and safe conditions. Women workers are visible in these protests but face arrests and harassment. The outcome of recent wage negotiations, which resulted in concessions far below what is needed to counter the rise in living costs, revealed their weak position compared with business elites and international buyers. The prime minister stated that the workers could either accept the package or prepare to go back to their villages, claiming that any further increase in wages would result in job losses because global investments would move elsewhere in pursuit of lower labor costs.

Post-pandemic economic pressures have created new challenges for women. As poor families cut costs, women's health and education are adversely affected. During the pandemic, women from poor urban families lost their jobs because of layoffs and lockdowns, or switched to more precarious work. Unemployment rates are higher among young women than men. But the economic crisis has strengthened the prevalent view that men's needs should be prioritized in the recovery plans. About 88 percent of Bangladeshis believe that men deserve better job opportunities than women.

Skills training and diversification of jobs are critical for creating new opportunities for women. Family support remains vital for women to engage in paid work. Compared with men, women spend four times more time on childcare and performing household chores. Most families think women can work only if they can balance both family and occupational demands.

STRUGGLING FOR EMANCIPATION

Bangladeshi women's struggles for emancipation remain incomplete. How women workers negotiate the competing demands of their domestic roles and their jobs will be critical in determining whether paid work emancipates women or not. Securing safe work conditions and living wages will not be easy in a time of economic precarity, and in a context shaped by business elites and global economic forces.

Struggles against the routine torment of sexual harassment and threats and actual cases of violence in public spaces will require legal reform, workplace

policies, and a shift in the way female sexuality is perceived. Young women have organized both online and offline to protest harassment and assault and to start a public debate, despite facing backlash from various quarters. A recent study of online violence by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development showed that feminist activists were viciously trolled for protesting rights violations. How women's rights groups and their allies organize to advance the public debate will be critical for change. The framing of the debate needs to take account of intersectional concerns, particularly violence against Indigenous and minority women perpetrated by the majority and discrimination against transgender persons.

The Bangladeshi state and civil society have played key roles in creating opportunities for women. State power matters hugely in countering patriarchal pressure and violence against women. But as a constituency, women matter less to the ruling party and its pursuit of maintaining power. The international development agencies, among the key allies of the women's movement, now have limited financial and political clout in Bangladesh. Closer alliance with these groups carries the risk of being branded as "Westernized" and losing legitimacy.

As the government pushes through new laws that limit civic dissent, such as the 2023 Cyber Security Act, can NGOs, the women's movement, and feminist groups influence the women's empowerment agenda in positive ways? The government is under pressure from Islamic civic platforms such as Hefazat-e-Islam, which was formed during contestation over a proposed clause in the National Women's Development Policy establishing equal property rights for women. In 2011, the government adopted a much watered-down policy because of widespread protests by Islamist groups. The public presence of Islam has deepened as a new middle class has emerged, holding conservative views on women's sexuality and personal status laws.

Contending with the second-generation challenges to women's empowerment involves dealing head-on with matters related to decent work, sexuality, and male privilege—and creating an alternative vision for Bangladesh. This means countering the interests of business elites and the organized resistance of religious forces. Whatever the outcome, it will be a long and hard struggle. ■