



BRIGADIER GENERAL (RETD) SHAHEDEL ANAM KHAN
Moderator of the session

In 1995, the Beijing Declaration was signed. It was a very significant declaration containing 12 concerned areas, all of which must be fulfilled if we are to achieve the SDGs by 2030. The Global Gender Gap Report 2020 finds that it will take 99.5 years to achieve gender equality, which means we still have a long way to go. Since our economy is not big enough to provide all women with jobs, we should create opportunities for them so that they can earn by running small businesses.



UMMAY HABIBA SHARMIN
Vice President and Head of Legal Affairs
LankaBangla Finance Limited

While Bangladesh has been run by women heads of state for the last twenty years, it is really unfortunate that we still have to talk about these issues. Of course, the country has made some progress in women's empowerment. Our achievement in girls' education is commendable. Bangladesh has earned 50th position in the World Economic Forum's (WEF) ranking in gender equality. However, the question is, does this position represent the socio-economic condition of women in the country? We have to identify the problems that are stopping us from achieving gender equality and work towards solving them.



FAHMIDA KHATUN
Executive Director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)

Advanced technologies used for increasing productivity are disrupting the labour market and women with low skills are the first victims. Women will be the first victims of the fourth industrial revolution in all sectors including the RMG sector. So they will need better education and relevant skills for retaining their jobs. A matter of further concern is that, compared to rural women, less urban women are entering the labour force.

Although the participation of girls is higher than that of the boys in primary and secondary levels, this is not the case in the higher secondary level. For this reason, 35 percent of women who are currently in the labour force are doing low paid jobs. Child marriage is still prevalent in our society, which is also a major reason for women's low participation in the labour force. Besides, while women's political participation at the grassroots level has increased tremendously in the last five decades, it is still very low at the upper level.

Women's unaccounted work is not only devalued, but sometimes it also leads to physical violence. Therefore, we should not only recognise women's unpaid work but also bring them to the labour market. To that end, we should undertake some fiscal policies: investing more in women's education, skills development, healthcare and childcare is what is needed. It is good that the government has taken several projects for women under the social safety net programmes. However, these are restricted mostly to allowance to poor and destitute women. Therefore, the government needs to think about what more they can do for women so that they can enter the job market.



ROKEYA KABIR
Executive Director, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)

To achieve gender parity, we have formulated the National Women Development Policy and the National Action Plan to End Child Marriage (2018-2030), etc. Unfortunately, all these laws could not reduce discrimination against women, which is reflected through the increased violence that has been taking place against women across the country. We have definitely made progress in some areas.

Our state must be secular and the role of the media is crucial in this regard. Nobody would face any form of discrimination and religious bigotry would never win in a secular state. Religion has always been used to prevent women's freedom of movement, deprive them of their inheritance rights and political participation. It is the state's responsibility to stop all forms of discrimination and violence against women and achieve gender equality. Otherwise, however little progress we have made in attaining gender equality will also fade away.



SANGITA AHMED
Senior Vice President, Bangladesh Women Chamber of Commerce and Industry

The movement for attaining gender equality has been going on since 1913. Sadly, we are still talking about this issue. Being an entrepreneur, I believe that there are limitations in our job market, but there is no limit to innovation and entrepreneurship. More women should come forward with their innovative ideas and start their own business. Doing business is particularly good for women because of the flexibility of working hours. At the same time, there should be a recognition of the homemakers in our parliament. The economic contributions of homemakers – as a teacher of their children, as a nutritionist of the future generation – should be evaluated based on their educational qualifications. If that can be done, society and family will respect the homemakers.



FARHANA ANWAR RAHMAN
Senior Vice President, BASIS

Today, the girls in our society are doing very well in schools, colleges, and universities. However, their participation in the corporate sector is still not up to the mark. In a lot of institutions, we talk about women's representation. However, this cannot be considered an ornamental post. There needs to be a massive change in the mindset of women if they want to climb the corporate ladder. Women definitely have the ability to reach the top but they lack confidence.

Women tend to have a fear of technology and if they continue to lack behind in technology, our goal of achieving 50 percent economic contribution from women will take much longer. Therefore, we have to bring them closer to technology. We should also create social awareness about how, with the use of technology, women can contribute to their family.



FARZANAH CHOWDHURY
MD & CEO, Green Delta Insurance Company Ltd

Only women empowering one another is not enough. We also need to see what the male corporate leaders are doing and learn from that. We can have a forum where both males and females can learn from one another instead of just discussing the problematic issues. If we want to secure women's rights, they have to be embedded in our corporate strategic objectives. One of the problems is that even with a lot of flexibility, we are unable to retain female employees.

We have to use our platform to counsel women and keep them at work. Education is important in this aspect. We also need to increase women's participation in STEM. We have to bring more women into decision-making and they have to prove themselves in such roles.



FAUZIA MOSLEM
Acting President, Bangladesh Mohila Parishad

The extent of violence we hear about in the media does not clearly depict the accurate picture as the real violence rate is much higher. I believe, the power relations between men and women are completely uneven and if we cannot overcome it, violence cannot be stopped. The laws that we have in our constitution can protect women in their public life but there are no laws to protect them in their personal space.

The failure of our judicial system to properly address these injustices and punish the perpetrators is a big cause for the prevailing violence. Thus, we need to establish better governance. We also need to reform our rape laws; the burden of proof should fall on the perpetrator. We also need to check if women are safe at their workplaces.



SHAMIMA PERVIN
Programme Specialist, UNFPA

73 percent of women say they have been victims of violence, according to the data provided

by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). Gender-based violence is, therefore, a big barrier to women's development and is tainting our achievements.

Whenever we talk about women's issues, we consider them only as "women's affairs". In terms of the government and institutions, we consider it the task of Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, for instance. We need an inter-ministerial intervention. We need to look into how much capacity Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs has to influence other ministries and how sincere and cooperating other ministries are about implementing women's development-related policies.

If we want to become a developed country by 2041, we must provide the youth with proper education to form healthy mindsets. We must let girls grow in a way so that they don't see motherhood as the only destination for themselves.



PREEMA NAZIA ANDALEEB
President, WIL (Women in Leadership)

The right execution of policies is important. Sexual harassment at the workplace has spread to a dangerous level and we need to address it adequately.

Stigmas still prevail concerning divorced and single women in our society. Attire is also a taboo if it doesn't match the "societal standards". Without the label of being attached to a man, a woman is not given any value in this society regardless of her background.

We need sufficient data on how many women who pursue higher education actually venture into the job market. We should actively work more with popular cultural expressions such as movies, stories, arts, literature, reports, etc., all of which can impact how we view women. Families can also play crucial roles to empower the women in their homes.

Besides, we don't have enough data on how many females who pursue higher education actually venture into the job market. Without this data, we can have very little idea on the level of impact we have achieved till date.



MOHAMMAD HAFIZ AL AHAD
Senior Vice President and Head of Human Resources, LankaBangla Finance Limited

LankaBangla Finance Limited has a platform called Shikha where we promote our female employees to be future leaders. It has a two-fold option – external and internal. For external, we have special loan facilities for the women entrepreneurs and those who have business ideas. If they come to us with a viable business model, we will provide a loan with a minimum interest rate compared to the market.

Secondly, apart from loan facilities, we are emphasising on educational facilities. We are currently in talks with the top three business schools in the country to offer a short course on business to the interested women entrepreneurs so that they know how to manage a business.

Internally, this platform itself is the voice of all our female employees. So, we have a whistleblower policy and sexual harassment policy in place.



SAIDUR RAHMAN
Executive Director, Road Safety Foundation

I believe the adversities that women have to face still exist as a result of erosion of moral and ethical values and due to the absence of relevant education. We should include these in our education system so that from the very beginning, children can learn ethics and develop themselves as human beings and not merely as male or female.

We have also talked about building national awareness. If we want greater participation from our people, we need to enhance awareness in the country. Besides, we can follow other countries and observe a national holiday on International Women's Day since a lot of people are unaware about this day.

Bangladesh's public transport has never been women-friendly, and the situation is only worsening. Number plates should be made visible inside the vehicle so that transport workers abstain from inappropriate behaviour. The drivers, helpers, and supervisors should have identity cards with their names displayed. Public transport should remove opaque window covers, which create unsafe environments inside the vehicle. The city corporations should look into making covered bus stops suitable for women to use. Public transport sometimes contains embarrassing inappropriate advertisements, and so concerned authorities should look into preventing these.



TASLIMA YASMIN
Assistant Professor, Department of Law,
University of Dhaka

Progressive change is required in religious law. The right to compensation of wives who are arbitrarily divorced is a fundamental tenet of Islamic Law, but our lawmakers have never considered this. Divorced women receive no state support. Hindu women cannot even divorce their partners.

Child rape victims are usually penetrated using objects. Forensic reports of these cases show the victim has been sexually assaulted but not raped, because our rape law contains a definition of rape which does not include anal sex or penetration by an object. We still follow the Evidence Act of 1890, which allows a rape or sexual assault victim to be considered a liar if their immoral character can be proved. Furthermore, sexual harassment, assault, or rape of sex workers are not even taken into consideration.

There is no application of our domestic violence law, since the remedies are completely quasi-criminal. The court merely asks the perpetrator to stop domestic violence. Domestic violence has also been specifically excluded from the "Nari o Shishu Nirjaton Damon Ain."



SABINA SULTANA
Senior Programme Officer, Multi-Sectoral Programme on Violence Against Women, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA)

MoWCA provides training opportunities. The residential training programme includes everything starting from motor training to ICT. Employment of women has now increased. More awareness is required on MOWCA's 4,838 adolescent clubs where peer group discussions take place to end child marriage. Gender-disaggregated data should also be made more readily available. There is a hotline for violence against women and children, which is 109, and an app called "Joy".



FARAH CHOWDHURY
Manager, Bangladesh Youth Leadership Center (BYLC)

The mindset about gender roles at the workplace needs to change. Why do men expect to go home and live as a paying guest, while a working woman has to come home from her job to cook and feed her family? At the same time, women expect flexible work hours from their employers, but why can't men have the same? Since men usually work long hours, their wives feel they have to go home early to take care of the family. Husbands should also be able to leave early to take care of family so that their wives can work long hours and provide more output.



ASHREEN MRIDHA
Founder & Chairman, Deshi Ballers and Former Athlete,
Bangladesh Women's Basketball National Team

Equal representation of women in sports is important. Our women's cricket and football teams are bringing in great results, and they are now talked about in the media. This is encouraging more girls to join sports. However, there are other emerging sports which don't get enough attention, such as our women's rugby and basketball teams.

Women face many barriers when entering the sports area: family pressure, societal pressure, lack of playgrounds, and urban infrastructure issues. A big reason for the lack of female mentors and leaders in sports is the age discrimination faced by women in this field.

Women do not receive equal pay in the field of sports. Media support is needed to tackle this. Sports federations and ministries must remove bureaucracy and make room for youth-led initiatives to develop. Private organisations need to help in terms of funding and financial support, since a lot of investment is required in sports to allow women to prosper.



UMAMA ZILLUR
Founder and Director, Kotha

We speak of women's rights for the purpose of gaining more economic opportunities, but

women should have rights as human beings, not because they are vehicles of change for the greater good of the society.

Changing mindsets is a concrete recommendation, which can be achieved by talking about body autonomy and rights, sexuality, masculinity and femininity, consent, and relationship abuse, through sexuality education programmes.

In Bangladesh, despite all the gender discrimination and issues with safety and security, we have had great success in education due to positive messaging about girl children in education, which is a big scope for the government to be involved in.

Rights and empowerment of women are talked about using vague terms. However, the costs that women have to bear are concrete: physical and sexual violence, giving up time and energy for other family members and not themselves, not having land and inheritance rights. Therefore, we need to use rigid terms in whichever space we talk about women's empowerment.



SHAMIMA BEGUM
Commandant (In-charge),
Police Training Centre, Tangail

Police are supporting and extending services from the root level to national and international levels in various respects. Community policing, victim support centres, women's support desks in districts, 999 quick responses, increasing number of women police, case management, scientific investigations and gender sensitive courses, workshops, and community consultations are continuous processes undertaken to promote gender equality.

With the help of other stakeholders, women need to be empowered in the following ways: creating a safe space, supporting independence and mobility, ensuring women's education, increasing savings and income, enhancing job skills and ensuring safe working environment, boosting decision-making power, providing proper health care and family planning, preventing domestic violence, building networks, holding public leadership and finally sensitising males to share household responsibilities.



FATEMA MOHAMMAD
Research Assistant, Power and Participation Research Centre (PPRC)

We require a policy-centric approach to change cultural norms which prevent women from taking up demanding jobs. Division of labour is an important topic which starts from home. There should be a central system in place which will monitor these inequalities and ensure equal treatment for both genders. In many cases, due to cultural norms, women fail to be assertive. Our girls are raised in a setting where they are not taught to negotiate or network. Soft skills development and confidence-boosting are crucial for women to progress.

After reaching the menopausal age, women face issues such as loss of confidence. During this time, their productivity might decrease, causing their demand in the labour market to fall. This area should be highlighted.



AROMA DUTTA, MP
Executive Director, PRIP Trust

Various laws are in place but their implementation and monitoring need more focus. The government and the NGOs are doing their share of work, but the people of the country as well as mass media need to play their part.

Our honourable prime minister has clearly stated her stance on zero tolerance towards violence and corruption. This is not only a women's issue but a cross-cutting issue. There is a gender budget but the ministries do not have any plan of action for this.



MAHFUZ ANAM
Editor & Publisher, The Daily Star

I want to ensure that The Daily Star, as a newspaper, realises and agrees with the discussion here today. We try to reflect your concerns in our work. We will try to do more with more consistency and awareness. I believe, without gender equality, Bangladesh will never be able to achieve its true potential.