



Gender Portrait

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For over one hundred years, the women's movement has been taking place in different ways and rhythms with the result that the word 'woman' has become a central issue of discussion. A woman's life, her livelihood, her thoughts, her work and many other aspects have been given importance in research, policies and action plans. 'The woman' has become a subject matter at national and international levels. But it is also true that questions are still being raised as to how much progress or development has been made in improving women's lives. Questions have been raised as to the degree to which women's interests have been served as a result of improving the position of women, or how much of this has been done for the sake of the economy, the society and the political environment.

If I speak from a woman's point of view - women are much more conscientious than before, they are much more concerned about protecting their rights and certainly much more active. Violating a woman's rights does not pass off anymore without any questions.

Women's participation in the economy, society and politics takes place in a different context. I mention a different context because women have always participated in these fields but their participation was not recognized. Previously, it was believed that 'a woman does not work'. At least now women's participation and fundamental right to work has been acknowledged. However, progress still needs to be made. I want to begin my discourse on this very issue because today the main topic of our discussion revolves around a woman's working life.

Do women work? What kind of work do women do and what are their worries? Questions come forth about how much security and independence women have at their workplace.

We can start by saying that although there is a long history of struggle and campaign regarding women's rights, respect and status; it is only in this century, specifically in the 1970s, when women's image as a working woman was discovered. In 1975, Esther Boserup's book "Women's Role in Economic Development" gave the world's conscience a knock. It painted a picture of women's role in economic development and the production process that previously had been completely missed by policy-makers in the past. Boserup presented her data and facts in such a way that she proved that all women work for their living and no one is really dependent on others. But because the work that women do is not recognised as 'work', these women are not accredited as being working women.

So what do we really understand by the term 'working woman'? The simple answer to this question is -- those who work for wages. So in straightforward terms, only those women who sell their labour in the market to make a living are known as working women. From the very beginning I would like to reject such a classification and count all women as working women. However, I do not hesitate to admit that the problems and possibilities of home-centred women are markedly different from those of women who sell their labour in the market. Additionally, there exists a separation between the formal and in-formal sectors of work in the public sphere. Organized labourers can only be found in the formal sector. Women workers in the informal sectors are not recognized as an employee or as working women.

The main reason why I have brought on this discussion is because generally our understanding of the definition of working women is limited to those gainfully employed outside of the home. Actually, all women are working women. Some women work within the four walls of the home trying to protect their survival. Some women are also forced to take over the responsibilities of work outside of the home along with their domestic work.

Social protection of women workers in the garment industry

The Social Safety Net Project (SSNP) is a jointly funded project of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Government of Bangladesh which supports women garment industry workers who have lost their employment. Project assistance includes providing support in searching for employment through contacting employers; employment creation through the provision of training and setting up appointments with potential employers; promoting self-employment through linking up women with providers of micro-credit; and accommodation support through arrangements with low-cost shelters. SSNP has started piloting the project at Rampura and Mirpur areas of Dhaka where a large number of garment industry workers reside.

The components of SSNP include tracing unemployed women workers, providing livelihood counselling, skills enhancement, and assistance in finding employment. The Department of Women's Affairs of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs is designated to implement this project.

SSNP's accomplishment at a glance:

Regional centres:	02
Incorporated in the database:	10,159 persons
Re-employment:	300 persons
Livelihood Counselling:	2,526 persons
Focus Group Discussions:	34
Micro-credit Link-up:	4 NGOs
Training:	203 persons
Identified low-cost housing:	08

Source: SSNP Project Office, The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs

In addition to the obligations at home, these women take on the responsibility of working outside. So if we want to know anything about working women it is essential for us to have a comprehensive idea about their lives.

Let us start by talking about the home front. In this case, the lack of women's security is centred on her role in the home. Inside the four walls of her dwelling, women look after the other members of the family on a regular basis - which is what is expected of women. How valuable women are to the family will depend on how skilfully and efficiently they are able to carry out these duties. But this does not mean that women's position will be very strong nor that women will not be subject to humiliation even if they are able to maintain a good standard of service - no one can ever guarantee this. No law can guarantee the security of women's position despite all of women's responsibilities and hours of work. Family life is of course a very private matter - so the State is not inclined to intervene. This policy of not wishing to intervene would have been admirable if the equal rights of men and women in a family were recognised, and if both of them were equally powerful. But this has not happened in reality. The State has given the responsibility of the economic security of women to men and has also given men the power to 'discipline' women. If a woman 'neglects' her duties, even to a small degree, or is 'disobedient', the man can actually take lawful steps against her. It takes no time for the responsibility of 'disciplining' women to be given to the society, the husband or the family. Through fatwa, arbitration and trial society never wastes time to punish women who have failed to properly serve or show subservience. The State, as I have already said, shows indifference under the context of following a policy of non-intervention. Women have no security.

Women provide arduous labour to secure their position in the family; women are forced to block out all of their prospects in order to attain security in their life. Even in the case of collective family labour, there is no recognition of women's contribution - there is no question of women having a share of the money earned. For example, the credit of farming goes only to the male farmer, not to the female.

When women enter the formal workforce, the enormous family responsibilities on their shoulders keeps pulling them back. It becomes very difficult for women to give their full attention and time to their work. The intense surveillance of women's co-workers' is another hindrance that they have to deal with. Whether women are coming to work on time and whether women are able to do their work skilfully is indeed closely monitored by co-workers or employers. But beyond that, women have to respond to many questions and solicitations as well - or they are forced to leave their workplace if faced with barriers. In office-based work, women for the most part tend to be situated in the lower ranks in the hierarchy. Because they are few in number, it is not always possible to secure women's rights and promote their self esteem through collective efforts. 'Equal pay for equal work' remains a slogan for the women's movement to protect the rights of women who earn their livelihood directly from their labour. Other important issues to be addressed are that women often find themselves relegated to the least remunerated positions and are subject to reproach, physical abuse and sexual harassment.

Securing representative positions for women in the decision making process is still dependent on the likes and dislikes of certain sections of society. Even though there has been a change in this process at the level of local government, inequality is too blatantly present in the distribution of tasks. In spite of everything, women are not lagging behind in terms of their presence in the workforce, their contribution and their struggle for their rightful share. Women have to work twice or three times as hard for this and have to sacrifice their leisure and comfort in a desperate attempt to survive in the role that society has given them.

It's not true though that this struggle has gone completely without recognition. Women's full participation is ensured in the Constitution of Bangladesh. Women have charted their paths in different offices, courts, business organisations and educational institutions. The government has formulated the National Policy for Women following directions from Human Rights Charter, the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and the Beijing Platform for Action; taken measures to make Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) gender-sensitive, and made an effort to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). These efforts are being implemented through programmes by Government and non-government organisations (NGOs) are also carrying out programmes to support women's development and secure women's rights.

Despite the numerous initiatives taken by Government and NGOs, there has not been any mentionable success in women's empowerment in the area of preventing violence against them or liberating women from humiliation and discrimination. In my experience, the main reason for this is that we have never tried to question the gender-based roles of men and women. We have piled up additional responsibilities over and beyond the traditional role of women for societal needs and, at times, to show respect for women's demands for rights - but the solution to the main problem has never been found. Women have gradually been confined to even more gruelling work. On the other hand, even when women work for their livelihood, they are not respected. In fact, women are perpetually pushed towards the disrespectful status of being a dependent. Today our clear demand is - a complete recognition of women's status as working women. □

Why do we need a gender equality page?

Aliur Rahman

At the very beginning of the discussion let us try to analyse the theoretical concept of gender. This concept is used very frequently these days in socio-cultural movements and development programmes. The term 'gender' is used mainly to depict those characteristics of a man and woman that are socially constructed. Gender refers to attitudes, roles, behaviours and values assigned by culture and society to women and men. These roles, attitudes, behaviours and values, which are culturally and socially determined, define the behaviour of women and men and the relationship between them. Gender differences between women and men vary over time and between places.

The newspaper is a very significant mass medium which not only provides information but also shapes public opinion. Similar to other social institutions, newspapers play a significant role in constructing and reinforcing criteria used to judge men and women in our society. So the question is whether the portrayal of men and women represented in newspapers promotes gender equality? We have observed that since newspapers work within the patriarchal mindset of



expressed the opinion that since the concept of equality has still not been established in news presentations, women's pages bring to attention issues that would never have been published otherwise. Following the discussion, the participants came to the decision that a 'gender equality page' would be relevant for both men and women alike because gender discrimination is an issue relevant to both. As women remain in a subordinate position, the different dimensions of ensuring women's rights will be highlighted in a 'gender equality page'.

At the same time, issues related to men in terms of equality will also come up in this page. For example, men's right to paternity leave to increase their involvement in raising their children. Likewise, does the image portrayed in the mass media represent all men? These issues certainly need to be addressed as well.

We feel that in the future a gender equality page will not be limited to a single page. Slowly, the entire newspaper will have a balanced representation of men and women but this effort can start from a gender-sensitive page. □



Equal participation of men and women in all spheres of life

Role of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs in achieving gender equality

In very few countries around the world is there a separate ministry for women's development. The Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh is an outstanding example of the policy makers' commitment to ensuring gender equality. The ministry was set up in 1978 with the aim of policy setting, planning, strategy formulation and implementation at the state level for women's advancement. Different ministries of the Bangladesh Government, several non-government organisations and women's groups are involved in various programmes for women's development. The responsibility of coordinating the programmes of these institutions is entrusted on the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs as the lead ministry for women's advancement. The Department of Women's Affairs and the Jatiyo Mohila Sangstha are the implementing agencies of MoWCA.

- Human resource development and training for self-reliance
- Poverty alleviation and employment creation
- Socio-economic development
- Prevention of violence and trafficking of women and children and securing safe custody
- Providing institutional services, such as, working women's hostels, day-care centres, etc.
- Awareness raising and empowerment programmes
- Awareness raising among women
- Providing job-based and self-employment training
- Assistance in protecting women's legal rights
- Assistance to self-reliance through micro credit programmes

Source: Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs
The People's Republic of Bangladesh