

BITTER TRUTH

# Dowry: The continuing crime



Md. ASADULLAH KHAN

**T**HE status of women in the country has not substantially changed for the better even after an appraisal of the fact that empowering women, meaning redistributing power from men to women, can ensure more balanced development of the country. Gender inequalities in access to resources and opportunities negate the concept of human development and spirit of democracy. This empowerment that would have given the vast majority of women the freedom of choice for self-development has been appallingly missing.

A World Bank report on women in this region suggests that poverty and deeply etched social attitudes have produced a kind of imprisonment of the country's female population. Notwithstanding the fact that women in the country constitute almost half of the total population, hardly any major, meaningful effort has been taken to enable them to participate actively in the political, socio-cultural and economic life of the nation equally with men.

The two core issues, elimination of social injustice and economic exploitation of the girl child, can be tackled through motivation, policy guidelines, and bold leadership at the government level. The genesis of discrimination and cruelty against women can be traced to the social apathy inherent in the male population of the sub-continent. Though our constitution provides for equality between sexes with proper protection for women and children, people are still governed by personal family customs and rules that fail to give women their due.

It is the dowry system, which makes a daughter a family burden and a son who collects the dowry an asset, that has led to such a situation. Dowry is a social malady that makes the lives of newlywed girls, or even housewives with years of family life, extremely miserable. Stories of deprived husbands trying to kill their wives for their failure to get dowry money from their

parents fill the pages of newspapers with a sickening regularity.

A report published in *Prothom Alo* on February 15 said that Soma Akhtar, (20), a newly-wed housewife was burnt to death by her in-laws because her father was unable to meet the dowry demand. Police did not record any murder case. Meanwhile, local self-styled religious leaders restrained Soma's father from filing any case with the police and imposed a fine of Tk.5 lakh on Abdul Qadir, father-in law of the deceased Soma, through an arbitration of the local influential mastans and so-called religious leaders.

A woman on fire has made dowry deaths most vicious of all social crimes. Despite vigorous efforts by some activists and women's rights organisations to eliminate this menace, the numbers have continued to climb.

Odhikar, a women's rights organisation, in a report published recently, revealed that a total of 1,257 women were killed, 348 were tortured and 243 committed suicide due to dowry-related violence between January 2005 and February, 2011. The report further added that 526 women were victims of acid violence, while 1,876 women and 1,598 girls were victims of rape.

Although many cases of dowry harassment had been reported of late, a staggering number had not. Despite all attempts to prevent it, an epidemic appears to be in the making. It is a phenomenon that escapes easy answers due to a complex mix of social trends. With get-rich-quick becoming the new goal of life, dowry has become the perfect instrument for upward material mobility.

It is a difficult battle to win for women. They are handicapped by history, victims of firmly embedded gender system. In Bangladesh, women are yet to wake up and take a bold stand against dowry because most

of them do not have education, employment or business to fend for themselves. Sad but true, it typifies the nonchalance towards the crime. The belief that most husbands or families can get away with such a crime is one of the main reasons why torture on wives is so common.

All findings indicate that dowry demands in the country have multiplied tenfold over the last one decade. There is a sticky web of issues surrounding it. Most males belonging to middle class or ultra-poor families, due to lack of proper education and culture and prompted by unusual greed, have realised that dowry is an easy way to acquire wealth.

There exists a toothless attitude in a majority of families who participate in dowry based marriages instead of opposing it. People talk glibly about dowry prohibition and anti-dowry movement but when it comes to their own sons and daughters, most people would do the same thing. In most cases affluent parents think that big dowries will strengthen their daughter's position in the husband's family. But, should the marriage go wrong, there is no way that these fabulous gifts in the form of cash, jewelry and property can be retrieved.

In most cases girls do not have any knowledge of or participation in any deal. Dowry is often a monetary deal between two men—the bride's father and the groom or groom's father. Despite promulgation of dowry prohibition act, the number of dowry-related atrocities and deaths is climbing. The law may help in taking temporary punitive action, but women need real social, financial, moral, and ideological support to stand firmly against an age-old system that has almost got an unwritten societal sanction. A big social movement is a must to stop the giving and taking of money.

Women face double peril. Inside the closed doors is humiliation, outside awaits public ire. Harassed and tortured women these days are going to court or police for protection, but even if appeals for protection are met only scorn greets them when they return home. Despite the stigma, dowry continues to be a nightmare in marriage. The odd NGO groups or women activists or human rights and women lawyers' associations may pursue one or two cases and rehabilitate some tortured women, but a major breakthrough is hardly possible because social intervention is low and ignorance high.

The laws these days, because of the intervention of the apex court, are very stringent. But a dowry death is relatively easier crime than murder to prosecute and so the crime continues. Due to several factors, most deaths go unreported. The majority of the victims belong to the underprivileged classes and do not have the means to fight out the lengthy legal battles. Because the court appearances and seeking police protection are a traumatic experience, most women prefer to sweep their bitter experiences under the carpet. Surveys conducted by the World Bank and NGOs reveal that economic progress and a change in social attitudes can halt the degradation of women's status.

The laws relating to marriage and divorce are being violated with impunity. Control over law and order and protection of women's rights, or for that matter any form of rights, has long since passed from the hands of administration to some so-called religious leaders and in most cases to some hoodlums or crime syndicates enjoying patronage and protection at high levels.

The people in the rural areas who give *fatwas* oppose literacy programmes and women's employment. There are reports that women have been subjected to torture, humiliation and divorce on the basis of *fatwas* or edicts issued by these people. The farcical side is that social prejudice and double standard of morality tend to stigmatise women even if they had been sinned against instead of sinning.

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## Recent FDI trend

EBNEY AYAJ RANA

**F**OREIGN Direct Investment (FDI) has been playing a great role in modernising the economy of Bangladesh for the last fifteen years. For developing countries like Bangladesh, moving from an agrarian economy to an industrial economy seems to be an imperative pre-requisite for economic development. The move towards an industrial economy needs an intensive saving and investment.

There are some determinants that attract FDI, such as geographical location, cheap labour cost, government attitude towards liberalisation of the existing laws of the host country, skilled manpower, incentives for investors, exemption of taxes etc. Considering these determinants, among the emerging economies, India and China have become the desired place for investment. However, the Board of Investment (BOI) of Bangladesh claims that

capital: direct investor's purchase of shares of an enterprise in another country, (2) Intra company loans: debt transactions between parent enterprises and affiliates, (3) Reinvested earnings: direct investor's share of profits not distributed as dividend or remitted to it, which is reinvested.

FDI inflow was not at an appreciable level until 2004. In 2002, the total FDI inflow was \$ 328.3 million, in 2003 it was \$ 350.2 million, and in 2004 it was \$ 460.4 million. But in 2005, FDI inflow doubled (\$ 854.3 million) compared to 2004. Bangladesh Investment Handbook (2007) stated that this was the second highest volume among South Asian economies. Then the economy experienced a slight downfall in FDI inflow in 2006 and 2007 -- \$ 772.9 million and \$ 666 million respectively due to political instability.

Inflows of foreign direct investment during 2005-2010 Sector-wise foreign and joint venture investment during 2010-2011

However, in 2008 the economy witnessed the highest ever inflow of \$ 1,086 million, an 80% increase in comparison with 2007. In 2009, the economy experienced 35% inflow (\$ 700 million) in comparison with 2008. In 2010, there was an increase of nearly \$ 200 million, with a total of nearly \$ 900 million in comparison with 2009 due mainly to significant increase in equity capital inflow. Besides we see that the inward FDI stock as percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has also been rising since trade liberalisation, though we see a slight downfall in 2007 and 2008.

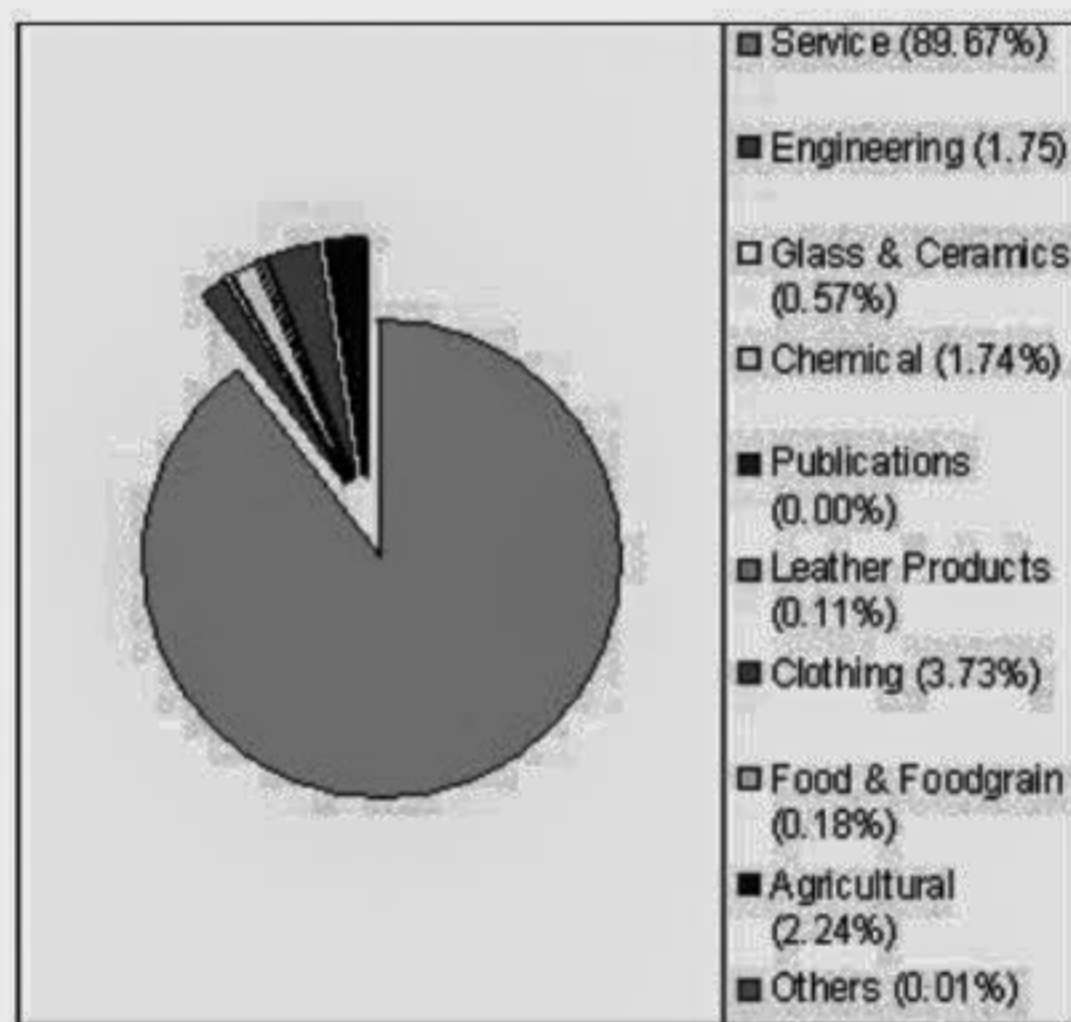
Although the cheap labour cost and geographical location attract foreign investors here, corruption, political instability, bureaucratic hassles and infrastructural insufficiencies are posing great barriers to FDI inflow.

The government should take steps to remove these problems. Political institutions and actors should be more compromising and consolidate democracy for the economic development of the country. The administrative structure should be more accountable and transparent to achieve a good governance system that restrains corruption. The government should enforce monitoring and evaluation procedures in establishing the infrastructures that can attract FDI. It should also emphasise human resource development through practical education and training programmes.

FDI inflow is most important for a developing

economy like Bangladesh, not only from the perspective of capital inflow and foreign currency but also from the perspective of new technologies and know-how, skills, and management practices of foreign investors. The value of the Bangladeshi taka has been declining against the US dollar. One of the reasons for this is less FDI. So, FDI is an important indicator for increasing the purchasing power of Bangladeshi taka. Besides, after the global financial downturn, the world is turning to the Asian economies since these economies have faced and handled the recession well, thus it is easier for Bangladesh to attract the world's foreign investors now than before.

It is high time for us to compete with other developing countries in attracting FDI since Vietnam, a comparable economy with ours in terms of size and macroeconomic indicators, had a growth rate of 5.5% in 2009, which is below



Sector-wise foreign and joint venture investment during 2010-2011

ours, but has FDI inflow of \$ 4,500 million. Moreover Pakistan, that is assumed to be more vulnerable to political unrest, had a growth rate of only 3.7% in 2009 but has FDI inflow of \$ 2,387 million.

FDI is a necessary indicator for our economic growth but is not sufficient. We have to keep in mind that we should be competitive to attract the investors, but in a way that does not affect our economy. The policy makers should be more vigilant in assessing how much investment we need to achieve the aspired GDP growth, how much investment we can make domestically and how much FDI is needed to fill the gap. Then, on the basis of our need, we should go for arranging the competitive investment climate in our country and promoting the country's comparative advantage.

Since the information on Bangladesh, its economic environment and its investment climate, is not available to many prospective foreign investors it should be presented to them so that they can match their demands and priorities with what Bangladesh offers. In that case, the Trade Commission and other actors in international relations should come forward to bridge the information and communication gap.

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## People whose names fit their jobs



Nury Vittachi

**I** once wrote an article about music copyright in China and the guy in charge was a Mr. Song. And another about a Hong Kong car mechanic called To Bar, pronounced "Tow Bar."

It's amazing how often you meet people with aptonymsnames which seem just right for them. Did

you notice that the two US politicians who fought to delay taking action against global warming were Republicans named Doolittle and DeLay?

One of the UK's top brain doctors is Lord Brain. A world-class hurdler is Maria Stepanova and a famous Israeli tennis player is Anna Smashanova. Then there's the funeral company in Texas called Boxwell Brothers. Dentists called Payne are a dime a dozen and there's even one in the United States called Chip Silvertooth.

A common name from northwest India is Butt, and there are loads of Dr. Butts, some of whom must be proctologists. In the US there's a Chinese ophthalmologist called Dr. Look, a college professor scarily named is Dr. Failor, and an insurance salesman with the wonderfully appropriate name of Justin Case.

Are these just chance? Some say not. Researcher Jen Hunt of the University of Manchester wrote in *The Psychologist* in 1994 that she had noticed: "Authors gravitate to the area of research which fits their surname." She pointed to an article on incontinence in *The British Journal of Urology* by J. W. Splatt and D. Weedon.

Intrigued by this, *New Scientist* magazine coined the term "Nominative Determinism," speculating that names may guide their holders into specific jobs.

It's all good fun, but a bit obvious from an Asian point of view. In this part of the world, we've always assumed that one's name and destiny were indelibly connected.

South Asia is overflowing with drinks merchants named Bottlewalla, car salesmen named Tyrewalla and umbrella salesmen named Brollywalla (walla is Urdu for "job"). Reader Noel Rands once told me about a girl he knew called Jasmine Sodabottlepopbottleopenerwalla. Her surname was all one word, and her grandparents were retailers ofwell, I don't have to tell you.

In East Asia, too, names are linked to destiny. For decades, it has been common in Chinese society to name a female first-born baby "Brotherwanter," to show fate that the female child's main job was to prepare the way for a male child.

In rural China, you'll find more than 10 varieties of the name Brotherwanter from Ushering-in-a-Brother to Hoping-for-a-Brother to the rather subtle name It's-All-Right, which is short for (and I am not making this up): It's-All-Right-To-Have-A-Girl-First-Since-A-Brother-Is-Coming-Right?

I'm not sure what the girls think about this, and frankly do not wish to ask them, since this is a touchy subject and they would probably kick me to death.

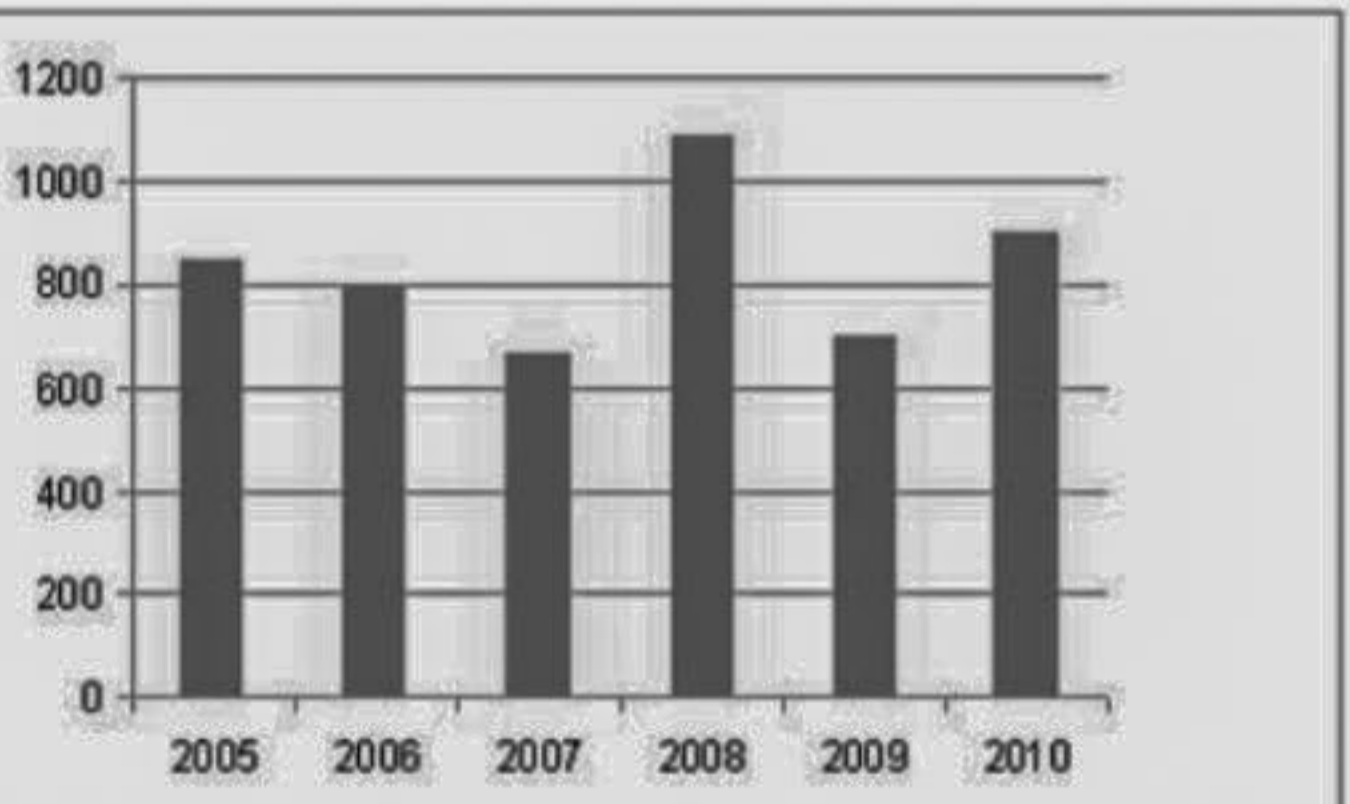
But if names guide your fate, what about people who have names that one really wouldn't want as a destiny? I recall meeting Truly Man and He-Man in Hong Kong, and both were rather delicate females (although in Chinese the meanings were less macho).

There's a girl in America named Tiny Bimbo. And a boy named Felon. Which proves what I have always said about parents: most should never be allowed to have children.

Anyway, I need to stop writing this column because it's time to go to school to fetch my three children.

Have you met them? Their names are Fetch-Dads-Drink, Earn-Big-Bucks and Help-Dad-Retire.

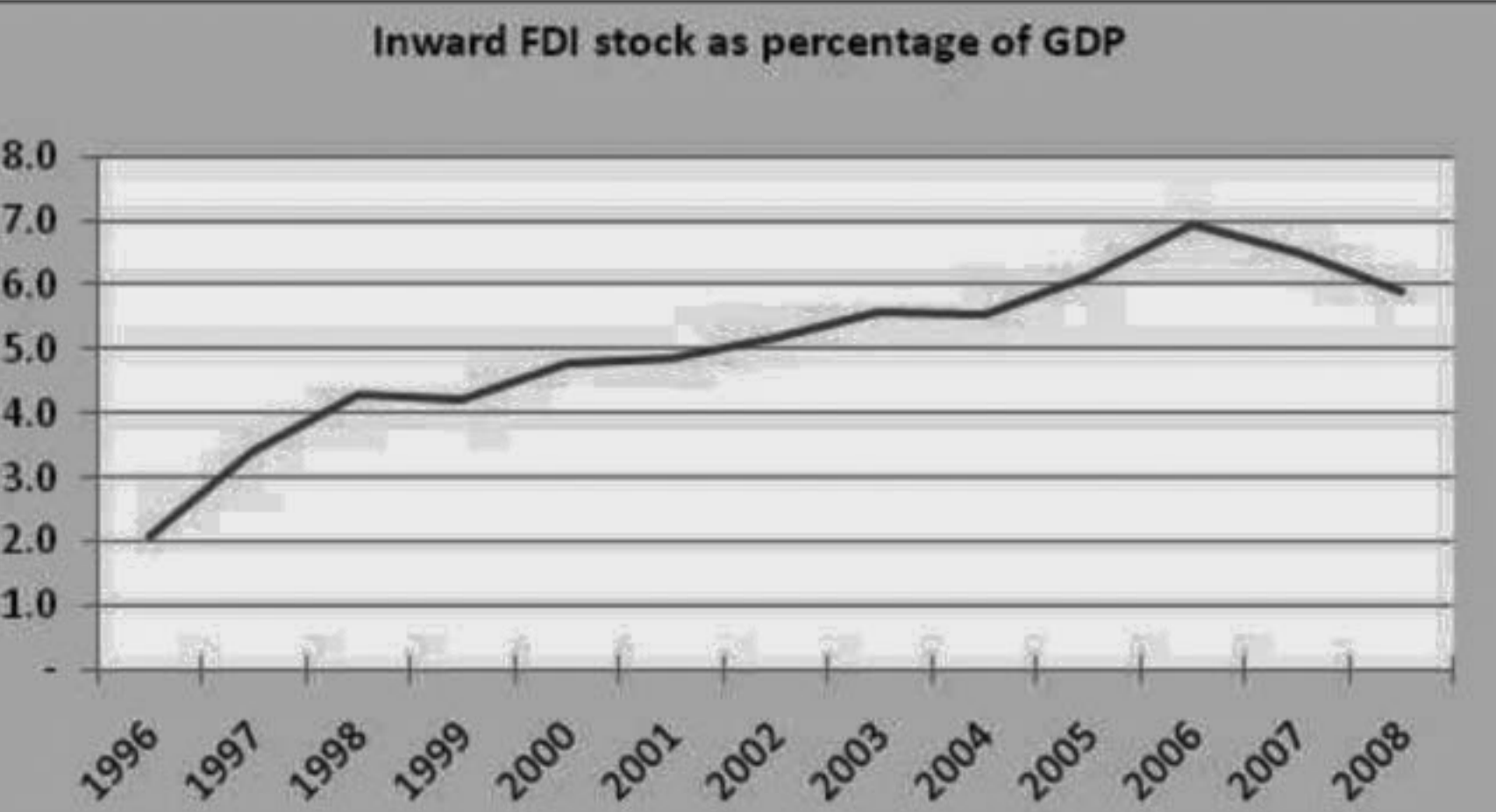
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Inflows of foreign direct investment during 2005-2010

Bangladesh also offers an attractive and unparallel investment climate in comparison with other South Asian countries.

We know Bangladesh liberalised its economy in early 1990s and introduced investment incentives to create a favourable climate for FDI. Before this, FDI inflow was not significant due to the absence of a favourable policy framework.



According to BOI (2007), FDI has been contributing to revamping the economy since trade liberalisation. Except nuclear energy, defense equipment, reserved forest area, security printing, and mining and railways, all other sectors have been made open for FDI.

Generally FDI is of three categories, (1) Equity