

Recognise women's unpaid work

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THE standard policy prescription for women's empowerment is employment and education. Access to income in particular is seen as improving the bargaining position of women in the household. The neoclassical economist whose paradigm dominates mainstream development policy fails to consider the power relations within the household. The paradoxical effects of structural adjustment policy and globalisation led to new forms of gendered, sexualised, ethicised and racialised social exclusion, and on the other hand opened up new spaces for women's engagement in public sphere through activism of global, national and local levels.

The time women spend in unpaid work is time women can devote to paid work. Empowerment is the only solution for giving equal status to women in any society. Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is a multifaceted objective. Women's unpaid work is not recognised, therefore they are considered as passive dependents. In addition, non-recognition of women's activity not only leads to undervaluation of economic contribution but also contributes to their lower status in society relative to men. At the macro and micro levels of gender analysis, the gendered division of work and responsibilities imply labour immobility and less income on the part of women. Although women are the major producers of non-market economy, current system of GDP measurement excluded them from mainstream and made them invisible in national statistics. However, many policies that have responded to women's needs have concentrated only on monetary activities and overlooked women's investments on non-monetary activities. Official definition of productive work is an inadequate indicator of how people spend their time and the social value of what they do. There is a need for reappraisal of theories that treat the household as a unit because the household is not a unified construct, rather it is a convergence of separate economic sectors. The combination of production and reproduction distinguishes women from men as they bear a double burden of reproducers and producers. In addition to engaging in productive activities women are responsible for the reproduction and production hence the double burden. It is important to take an integrated view of activities outside and inside the household. There is a misconception that those who are economically productive do 'real work' while unpaid work is not considered as real work. It is well known that time is one of society's most important economic resources. For instance, women's disproportionate share of unpaid work relative to men constitutes a stronger constraint on their participation in and gains from the market and state. Women's lower incomes

and relative lack of power over public finance decisions contribute to this inequality.

Although women receive no cash wages for their labour in the home they do gain in status for staying out of the rat race and not competing with men. Unpaid work carried in near isolation -- housework -- does not share the formal characteristics of real work and thus has been systematically excluded from the purview of traditional organisational research. Household work is situated activity, and demands both new questions with new answers.

Abstracting women from their social

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realities eclipses the relational nature of gendered power and interdependency of women and men and paints a distorted picture of women's choices and possibilities. The double burden of paid and unpaid work undermines women's quality of life and is profoundly disempowering. These obligations pose a serious obstacle to women's labour force participation and have major impact on their lives and well being more broadly. As we have discussed above, unpaid work underpins much of this -- being a major "barrier to women's economic empowerment." In many ways it is a social issue; the missing part of empowerment equation.

Recognising and addressing the enormous time and effort consumed by unpaid work must be a priority if we are really serious about empowering women. It also influences their relative standard of living, as measured by national income statistics. Reliance on estimates of the total value of marketed output fails to capture important dimensions of women's lived experience. Although women are contributing their time and labour, "no wage" and "no recognition" is placing them as dependent and inactive agents in our society. Unpaid workers do not get equal position like the

paid workers in any society. Hierarchically paid workers have social status and society can easily address them, but unpaid workers' situation is that "they are nowhere."

The emerging recognition of unpaid work, especially of women, has now caught global, regional and local attention for public action to promote women's empowerment. Economists and policy makers responded to women's needs by concentrating on monetary activities and overlooked women's non-monetary activities. Therefore, measurement of unpaid work and its effects of depletion challenge the dominant normative framework and gender hierarchies. The failure to consider the context and the multiple roles of women -- as care providers, educators and workers -- exhibits the blindness of orthodox economics towards care work and household labour in general. Both conceptually and in policy terms unpaid work is downplayed and not counted.

Feminist economics has brought the distinct conceptual frameworks, which render visible critical area of economy that have empirical scrutiny by "male stream" economics, namely production and work. Feminist economists have also been able to make noteworthy breakthrough at the level of the empirical methods for "counting" and valuing the unpaid components of this work.

The widely held consensus in development praxis is that the world cannot afford to do without women's full contribution at every level of social, economic and political activities. The empowerment of women is an end in itself, because it is a question of basic human rights.

Over the last few decades the initiative to ensure equal rights of women has been successful in mobilising women to stand up for their rights in Bangladesh. Regardless of their active role regarding gender issues, the gendered power relations and power politics in the gender and development arena has not been critically analysed to address the structural causes of gender inequalities from a holistic perspective. Therefore, a social transformation of power and gender relations has become evident in many aspects of development programming on gender issues. Gender based violence (GBV) has limited women's choices in all spheres of life, and clarifies the consistently meagre gender related development indicators in vital sectors like health, political participation, education and employment and equal access to and control over resources and services.

Conventional policies have proven to be largely ineffective because they have failed to see different layers of realities. Issues are crucial for addressing the structural inequalities and releasing women's potential as agents of change, including increasing women's access to control over benefit from basic assets and their participation in decision making. The most significant problem is at the intervention level where women are perceived as a homogenous group.

Different women have different needs, which policy makers completely denied. Therefore, planners mainly respond to practical needs without considering the strategic needs, which preserves and reinforces gender inequalities. Actually, real change will come only if families and parents believe in the value of girl children rather than treating them as burdens. Social dialogue and public debate are very powerful means for transforming traditional mentalities or cultural norms. There is no doubt that only social dialogue can address the discrimination against women because dialogue takes different routes, new ideas and brings diversity. Egalitarian views need to develop between men and women so that the differentiation between femininity and masculinity is resolved. Women and men must acquire the humanity to stop the power relations in the family. Sustainable development cannot take place until women of a country get their due rights.

We will have to think that while some men are part of the problem, all men are part of the solution, or can be part of the solution. However, day-by-day, women are creating invisible revolutions through their everyday activities for breaking the immense barriers and fighting the limitations which were traditionally ascribed to them by their family and society. They are trying their best to know the road map for changing their present status and replacing their common traits, which will thus create a new era of development.

It is very important to shift the focus from approaches that treat women as victims of development who are waiting to be rescued. The planners should consider women as social agents, and that is necessary to take an agent-oriented approach on women's agenda. Therefore, women need to be assisted through holistic approach and comprehensive programmes that not only address their lack of productive resources but also their subordinate situation within households and society at large. In sum, there is a need for multipronged policies to address the needs of different categories of women in Bangladesh. Thus, social dialogue and public debate are more powerful for transforming traditional mentalities or cultural norms. Women should engage themselves more actively in a constructive debate with policy makers and negotiate the conceptual and policy issues that affect them directly. Gender equality cannot be attained in the absence of equal rights and women themselves have to be the active agents for this change. Therefore, a more critical understanding and analysis of political, economic and social realities facing men and women in developing countries is needed, otherwise gender equality interventions designed towards that end will always be a fallacy.