

Social media: A game-changer for Bangladeshi women

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THE prime minister is a woman. The main leader of the opposition is a woman. The speaker in the Parliament – the citadel of democracy – is also a woman.

If the question is about the presence of women in high offices, Bangladesh has established its mark across the world.

But if the question is about whether the goal of women's empowerment has been achieved, one has to admit that there is a long way to go.

There is a general notion that the rise of women's representation in public offices will herald a new era of women's empowerment. While it cannot be denied that there is a clear need for more women in public office, that alone cannot ensure improvement in the quality of lives of ordinary women.

Participation of women in electing a government is also an important parameter in assessing the extent of women's empowerment. Our country scores high on this count as well because Bangladeshi women do participate in significant numbers when it comes to voting. A voting day looks like a celebration as women stand patiently in long queues to exercise their franchise.

SOCIAL MEDIA TRENDS	
100 percent respondents use social media	
100 percent respondents use Facebook	
61.5 percent respondents consider themselves as moderate (5-10 hours a week) users of social media	
70 percent respondents spend more than an hour every day in social media	
83 percent respondents have used social media some time or the other to share their views	
69 percent respondents have used social media for work/business	
85 percent think that social media has empowered them	
64 percent respondents encourage others to use social media	
Findings from research study conducted by the author.	

But the same women often shy away from engaging in public and political debates, and instead allow the male members of their families to represent their concerns or views. Ordinary women somehow maintain an arm's length from public dialogues in the country and it has often surprised social scientists.

But a silent change is sweeping across the country with social media becoming an important aspect in the lives of women, especially those who live in urban and semi-urban areas and have access to the internet and smartphones. These women are making their voices heard, clear and loud, in social media. And the trend is not only encouraging, but also raises hope for an equitable society.

That's what I found out while conducting a research study using both quantitative and qualitative techniques as part of my academic curriculum at Visva Bharati University in West Bengal.

Though internet penetration in Bangladesh is low and only a small percentage of women (around five percent)

use social media their voices are being heard as they express their views – be it a case of domestic violence or a current international event – in public and feel more and more empowered. And as a trend, this is significant in a country where women have, over generations, chosen to remain silent.

The quantitative side of the research – based on interviews of 50 women from urban and semi-urban areas – resulted in numbers which prove that social media has become a part and parcel of women living in these areas. With 83 percent of the respondents claiming that they have used social media to share their views and 85 percent thinking that social media has empowered them in some way and that their freedom would be curbed in the absence of social media tools, there is little doubt that social media is making a considerable impact in the lives of women.

The manner in which women's presence exploded on social media during some recent developments – be it against the whims of a celebrity hero or assault on women – confirms these numbers. Not only is social media helping women express themselves by writing blogs, or connect with each other, it has also given them the chance

to contribute to family income. Women with entrepreneurial abilities are using social media to sell an entire range of items—from homemade food to designer clothes.

Given the urban-rural divide in a country like Bangladesh, one has to admit that the phenomenon of social media has, till now, been urban and semi-urban in nature. And it can be said with certainty that the trend is likely to be replicated in rural areas as women in urban and semi-urban areas have always acted as role models for their counterparts in rural Bangladesh.

The Bangladesh government is working hard on its mission of Digital Bangladesh and taking internet to the remotest corners of the country, and there is little doubt that use of social media is likely to grow exponentially in the country in the coming days. In the eighties and the nineties, Bangladesh made its mark in the world by empowering women through microcredit institutions. Going by the trend in modern day Bangladesh, one can say with certainty that the next big push towards empowerment will come through social media.

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Addressing underutilisation of labour

BARKAT-E-KHUIDA

BANGLADESH has been making steady economic progress over the past decades. But Bangladesh will not be able to achieve eight percent GDP growth rate by 2020 unless major concerns relating to its labour force and employment are adequately addressed.

First, while the working age population increased between 2000 and 2013 from 74 million to 106 million, it remained unchanged at that level in 2015-16. The pattern is, by and large, similar in both rural and urban areas and among both males and females.

Second, between 2000 and 2013, labour force increased by about 1.54 million annually. However, between 2013 and 2015-16, it increased by only 1.4 million. This is in sharp contrast to the Seventh Plan's projected annual growth of around 2 million people in the labour force. Between 2013 and 2015-16, there was hardly any increase in urban areas, with a nominal increase of 1.3 million in rural areas. Why has there been such a dramatic decline in labour force between 2013 and 2015-16? This is despite the fact that the working age group increased by around 2.5 million persons annually during 2000-2013, which, however, remained unchanged during 2015-16. Is it because of the huge underutilisation (unemployment and underemployment) of the labour force, where many in the working age population are discouraged to enter the labour market? In 2015-16, about four-fifths of the discouraged workers were in the age group of 15-29 years. Or, is this due to lack of quality data of the 2015-16 Quarterly Labour Force Survey?

Third, between 2000 and 2013 employment increased from 39 million to 58 million, i.e. an increase of 19 million, or around 1.47 million annually. However, between 2013 and 2015, it increased by only 1.4 million, or by only 0.47 million annually. This is in sharp contrast to the Seventh Plan's projected 2.3 million additional job creation in FY2015. What happened between 2013 and 2015-16 to slow down growth in employment to such low levels? Is it because of the limited capacity of the economy to create enough jobs, let alone "decent jobs"?

Fourth, there has been no marked change in the structure of the labour force. While the relative importance of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, the dominant occupational category, has declined from over one-half in 2000 to about one-third of the total employed population in 2015-16, professionals, technical,



The informal sector accounted for 87 percent of all jobs in 2010 and it has remained unchanged in 2013 and 2015-16.

administrative and managerial workers have registered a decline between 2013 and 2015-16. Likewise, there has been no marked change in the industrial structure of the employed population. Unlike the conventional wisdom that growth in the services sector will follow growth in agriculture and manufacturing, the employment structure in Bangladesh continues to become more service-sector-oriented, predominantly outside of the formal sector.

Fifth, there is a predominance of informality in the labour market. The increase in employment over time has largely been in the informal sector due to relatively limited number of jobs created in the formal sector. The informal sector accounted for 87 percent of all jobs in 2010 and it has remained unchanged in 2013 and 2015-16. The informal sector accounts for over two-fifths of GDP. The informal sector is considerably more dominant in rural areas, among females, and among the less educated. There are also informal workers (contractual and casual) in the formal sector, who get paid lower wages and do not have job security.

Sixth, vulnerable employment is pervasive. Between 2000 and 2015-16, the percentage of self-employed and unpaid family workers remained at around 58 percent. It is higher among females and in rural areas. Pervasive vulnerable employment is a major barrier to further reduction of poverty.

Seventh, skill level of the employed population remains at low levels, and has, indeed, worsened between 2013 and 2015-16. In 2013, one-fifth of the employed population had no schooling, which increased to about one-third in 2015-16. By contrast, those with higher secondary and tertiary level education declined from about one-fifth to only 11 percent. The relatively low skill level of the workers results in low labour productivity. The

Seventh Plan has rightly noted that inadequate human capital will be a limiting factor towards the absorption of the projected 2 million plus workers each year.

Eighth, given the predominance of the informal sector, pervasive vulnerable

employment, and low skill level of workers, the quality of jobs is extremely poor, especially among females and in rural areas.

Ninth, there is considerable underutilisation of the labour force and it is considerably higher in rural areas and among females. Furthermore, unemployment increases with level of education. The relatively high unemployment among the relatively more educated is due to limited absorptive capacity of the economy to utilise such a labour force, with adverse effects on the productive capacity of the economy.

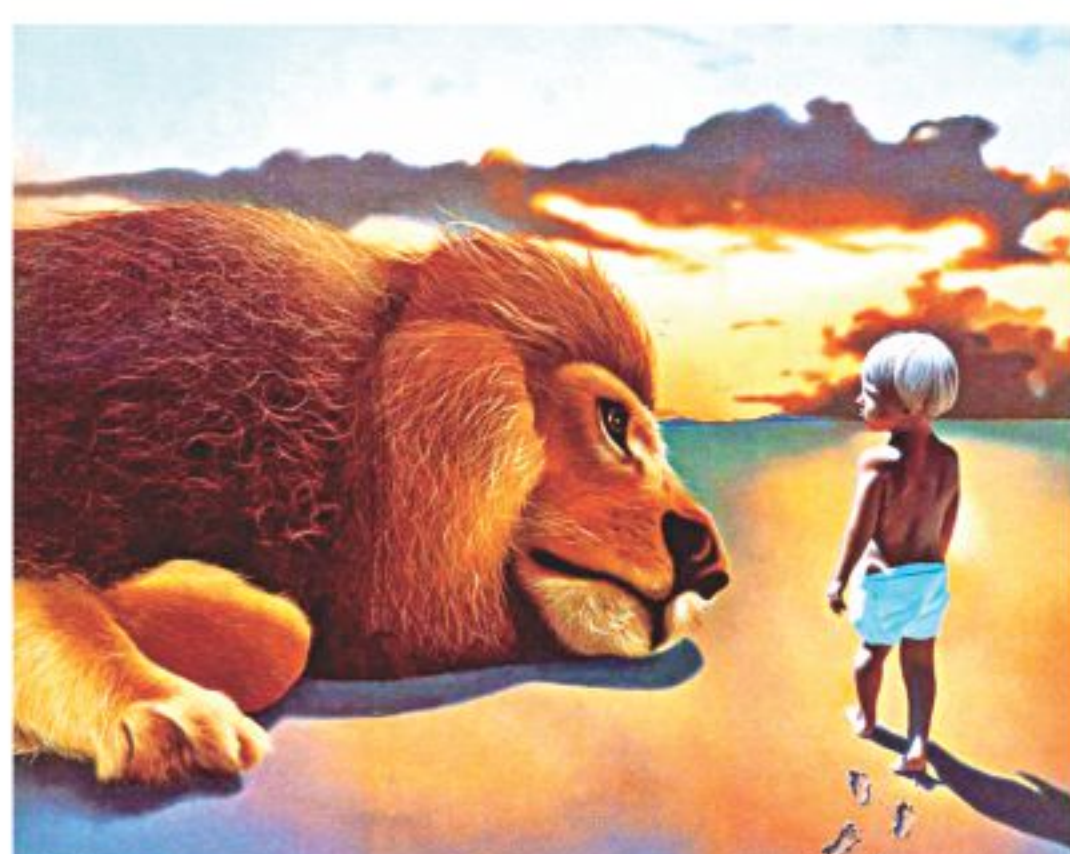
Tenth, there are marked gender inequalities in the labour market in terms of labour force participation and employment.

Eleventh, there has been a decline in youth labour force since 2010. The proportion of employed youth in total employment has also declined. This decline is certainly due to lack of adequate job opportunities.

Given the need to address the above concerns, policies should include measures to: (i) raise overall productivity of the economy; (ii) address bottlenecks to increase investment, especially private investment, by improving the overall investment climate; (iii) attach greater focus on high-productivity manufacturing, especially export-oriented, and services sectors; (iv) make greater investments in human capital and ensure improved efficiency of the health and education sectors; (v) modernise and further expand the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs); and (vi) improve the quality of jobs. These measures, if adequately implemented, will have positive effects on the overall employment situation in the country, and thereby, contribute to the growth of the economy.

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A WORD A DAY



IMPAVID
adjective

Fearless

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Spoil

6 Jazz variety

11 Happened

12 Brighten

13 Whimpers

14 Small amphibians

15 Ontario, for one

17 Artery problem

18 Come together

20 Nay voter

22 Ornate vase

23 Used a mirror

26 Near-sighted Mr.

28 Painter Degas

29 Sown

31 Lingerie buy

32 Reduced amount

33 Joined the choir

34 Dose unit

36 Thick slice

38 Provinces

40 In reserve

43 Golfer Stewart

44 Chop-house order

45 Useful skill

46 Discernment

DOWN

1 Whale group

2 Metal source

3 Strike settings

4 Narnia lion

5 Editor's spot

6 Golfer Hogan

7 Not appointed

8 Pacifier losers, perhaps

9 Director Preminger

10 Nuisance

16 Lobed organ

18 Bound

19 Test type

21 Call for

23 Chef's collection

24 Bring home

25 Pull along

27 Like some rural bridges

30 Two-way curve

33 Dancer's boss

34 Mama's mate

35 Some nest eggs

37 Misplaced

39 Harden

41 Purr producer

42 Squeeze (out)


YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

B	E	T	S		P	A	N	O	U	T
A	C	R	E		A	L	A	S	K	A
T	H	A	N		L	A	P	S	E	D
S	O	D	A		J	E	R	K		
		E	T	A		M	I	F	F	S
O	F	F	E	R		S	N	A	I	L
M	I	A					I	R	E	
I	D	I	O		B	O	R	E	D	
T	E	R	R	A		A	R	T		
		I	N	T	H	E	R	A	W	
A	D	A	G	I	O		G	A	L	A
L	I	L	I	A	N		O	D	O	R
A	G	E	N	C	Y		N	E	E	D


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