

Closing the gap

Challenges to achieving gender equality



ABDULLAH SHIBLI

REDUCTION of gender inequality is a goal embraced by nations across the globe. One of the goals of the UN Sustainable Development programme is gender equality (number 5)

and Bangladesh government has committed its energy and resources to achieving it. However, the recent Global Gender Gap Report published by World Economic Forum (WEF) indicates that while Bangladesh has moved up in global ranking from 72 to 47 among the 144 countries surveyed, the country along with many others has reverted back in the most important dimension, i.e., economics.

In the decade since 2006, when WEF started collecting and publishing data on gender disparity, there has been considerable progress in our collective efforts to move towards gender equality, but the latest report indicates that there was a slight but discernible setback in 2017. The gap in health, education, politics and economics "widened for the first time since records began in 2006." Karl Schwab, Founder and Executive Director of WEF added that, "Overcoming the biases—unseen or otherwise—that are keeping us from closing the gender gap represents an overwhelming economic as well as moral imperative."

The gap in income, wages, and job opportunities between men and women in a developing country like Bangladesh is pervasive and entrenched. Statistics collected by BBS and various surveys, as well as various studies and newspaper accounts, indicate that women face discrimination in the workplace, and have limited access to healthcare, education, politics and technology to name a few areas. As any practitioner of development policy will testify, elimination of gender inequality presents a formidable challenge and inter-country comparisons provide a very clear picture of the difficulties, as well as favourable factors.

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continued widening of the economic gender gap already observed last year, it will now not be closed for another 217 years. This year, the economic gender gap has reverted back to where it stood in 2008, after a peak in 2013. An alarming dimension of this failure is, of the 1.6 billion people who live in extreme poverty, the majority are women. For Bangladesh, despite increased globalisation and the inroads made by the market economy, job opportunities for women have remained very limited and often restricted to a few sectors. Research studies indicate that women in professional positions are still struggling to find the higher paying jobs that men have access to more easily, and find gender-bias as prevalent as they were decades ago. "Discrimination, workplace harassment, high dropout rate and glass ceiling are factors causing corporate environment unfavourable for women," according to a study done by Professor Jashim Ahmed of NSU and others.

In this context, SDG-5 seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls by 2030. The policy actions taken up by individual countries and the UN seek to redress the gaps between men and women in terms of poverty, labour markets and wages, and participation in private and

Commission, also indicates serious gaps in data collection efforts on underage marriage, proportion of women in managerial positions, system to track our legal framework to guarantee women equal right to land ownership, public allocation for gender equality and women's empowerment. One can hope that various ministries and departments of the government will be entrusted to gear up for data collection.

Finally, while the SDG Data Gap study indicates that our data collection effort is robust in 8 of the 14 indicators of gender equality, doubts persist about the statistical system and data accuracy. For example, Indicator 5.1.1 measures whether or not 1) national laws exist to promote gender equality and non-discrimination against women and girls and 2) there exist mechanisms to "enforce and monitor" the implementation of legal frameworks for each area of law. Indicator 5.2.1 considers the proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age. Studies published by the UN show, in the majority of countries with available data,



public decision-making. Other areas of intervention include violence against women and girls, inheritance laws, ownership and control of property, mechanisms to "enforce and monitor" the gender-neutral implementation of legal frameworks for each area of law.

In Bangladesh, the government and the cabinet have undertaken to monitor our progress in reaching the SDGs. Our success will depend on our ability to track and assess the various indicators and metrics for these goals. In "Data Gap Analysis of SDGs", a self-assessment published last year, the government has identified serious shortcomings in our data collection efforts in 6 out of 14 indicators to measure gender inequality. In two areas, currently there is no data. These are, indicator 5.3.2 "Eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" and Indicator 5.a.1 "(a) Proportion of total agricultural population with ownership or secure rights over agricultural land, by sex; and (b) share of women among owners or rights bearers of agricultural land, type of tenure."

The study, undertaken by the Planning

less than 40 percent of the women who experience violence seek help of any sort. Among women who do, most look to family and friends and very few look to formal institutions and mechanisms, such as police and health services. Less than 10 percent of those women seeking help for experience of violence sought help by appealing to the police.

The implication of the above finding provides a cautionary tale. "Although administrative data from health, police, courts, justice and social services, among other services used by survivors of violence, can provide information on violence against women and girls, these do not produce prevalence data, but rather incidence data or number of cases received in/reported to these services. We know that many abused women do not report violence and those who do, tend to be only the most serious cases. Therefore, administrative data should not be used as a data source for this indicator," advises the UN Statistics Division.

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Americans have a deep-seated, optimistic view of social mobility, rooted in history and rags-to-riches narratives.

PHOTO: REUTERS/BRENDAN McDERMID

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Prisoners of the American Dream



STEFANIE STANTCHEVA

To many observers, US Republicans' recent passage of a sweeping tax bill was out of step with the country's needs. With inequality worsening, wouldn't most Americans want to

close the income gap by instituting a more progressive tax system?

Surprisingly, the answer is no.

Americans have a deep-seated, optimistic view of social mobility, rooted in history and rags-to-riches narratives. Today, however, that view is based more on myth than on fact.

According to survey research that my colleagues and I recently conducted and analysed, Americans estimate that among children in the lowest income bracket, 12 percent will make it to the top sometime in their lifetime. Americans also believe that with hard work, only 22 percent of children currently in poverty will remain there as adults.

In fact, only 8 percent of poor kids will make it to the top, and 33 percent will remain in poverty. In other words, Americans overestimate upward social mobility, and underestimate the likelihood of staying poor for generations.

Americans seem somewhat unique in this respect. In Europe, many people are more pessimistic about social mobility. Unlike Americans, most Europeans overestimate the odds of remaining in poverty.

Views about social mobility are not uniform across the political spectrum or

geographic regions. In both the US and Europe, people who call themselves "conservative" on matters of economic policy believe that every child has equal opportunity, and that the free market is fair.

The opposite holds for those who call themselves "liberal" on economic issues. These people favour more government intervention, because they believe that, left to their own devices, markets will not ensure fairness and may generate more inequality.

Perhaps the most striking finding concerns people's response to information that challenges their perception. When shown pessimistic data about mobility, for example, liberals become even more supportive of redistributive policies. Conservatives, on the other hand, remain unmoved.

Part of the reason stems from mistrust of government. Just 17 percent of conservatives in the US and Europe say they trust their leaders. Many believe that political systems in their countries are rigged, and that politicians can't or won't improve things because they have become captured by entrenched interests, mired in legislative stalemate, or stymied by bureaucracy.

Clearly, reality is not so neat. But what is clear is that people's views about social mobility have as much to do with ideology and geography as with their circumstances.

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