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INTERVIEW

A financially independent woman is a free woman



Taslima Begum, a freelance beautician, earns quite a comfortable living, allowing her to maintain a family, pay rent and her children's tuition fees all on her own. But this was not the case even a few years ago, when she was living with her abusive husband.

He would not let Begum out of his sight even for a moment and despised the idea of her working outside. She would face humiliation on a daily basis, sometimes even physically portraying the brunt of the abusive relationship.

All these had a tremendous effect on the children, to the point that they began to suffer from depression and performed poorly at school. Today, a year after the divorce, she only wonders why she had not separated long ago; she also wonders whether all this downgraded behaviour was due to the fact that she was the weaker sex and was a dependent — not being able to earn her own living.

Certainly, things are very different today — Begum is financially independent and she worries about all the women in the world, who are not financially independent because to Begum, there's no vice worse than financial dependency.

As a voice to all these women and an assurance to a future of respect and civility, we spoke to **Fahmida Khatun, executive director, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)**, who gave us an insightful peek into the economics of gender equality, SNA, Pink Tax and financial freedom.

LS: Equality is not a women's issue, it's a business issue. Gender equality is essential for economies and communities to thrive. What is your viewpoint regarding this?

FK: This is quite simple and straight forward. Women represent half of the population. But at present, women's participation in the labour force is only 36 percent, according to the Labour Force Survey 2016-17 of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics.

If a substantial amount of workforce is outside the labour market, it is natural that we are being deprived of the potential contribution of women to the economy.

In 2015, a report by McKinsey Global Institute found that in a "full potential" scenario where women play an identical role in labour markets as men, global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) will increase by

USD 28 trillion by 2025, which is 26 percent.

This implies we are losing out on a substantial amount of our GDP by not integrating women in the labour force. This is true for Bangladesh too. In 2017, a World Bank study estimated that by increasing women labour force participation to 45 percent by 2020 will help Bangladesh increase its GDP by one percentage point.

LS: The economic value of the homemaker has not yet been included in the SNA (System of National Accounts), and their valuable contributions are still overlooked. Do you think giving them recognition, and prizing the intrinsic value of unpaid labour will help in the process of achieving 'real' equality?

FK: A large part of economic activities undertaken by women in Bangladesh, including household chores, care and agriculture work, remain unaccounted for since conventional measures such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) primarily considers goods and services produced for markets. This transmits the wrong signals to policymakers, whose allocative and distributional decisions are then influenced by this. Family members' attitudes towards a woman who does not have an income are often discriminatory. This outlook also occasionally leads to violence.

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Since they do not generate any monetary value, their contribution to both the family and the economy is totally overlooked.

On the other hand, if someone was engaged to do these jobs in exchange of a

salary, it will go to the GDP.

But this is not about paying women a salary for their household activities. It is about recognising their contribution, both at home and at the national level.

Many women are undervalued in the family, as they do not have an income. But the fact that even if these women wanted to take part in the job market, all of them could probably not be able to do so as there is no one in their families to look after small children or senior citizens. We take these chores at home for granted and tend to forget that without women doing these, husbands would not be able to work at offices smoothly, children will remain unattended, and overall, the wheels of the household will cease to move.

So, what is required, is first, the recognition of women's unaccounted household work. Secondly, those who have qualification and have a desire to engage in income earning activities, should be supported by their families. Thirdly, policymakers have to make an enabling environment so that these women can work outside home. Facilities such as safe day-care centres for small children, adequate transportation exclusively for women, secure female hostels for women from outside cities, and overall improvement of safety for women should be established.

LS: As currently measured, GDP does not take homemakers and their contributions into account, but it probably should. More recently, The Economist called for a "new metric" of economic progress that included "unpaid work at home, such as childcare, cooking, and caring for relatives." What is your opinion on this matter?

FK: We have been demanding for establishing a satellite account where women's unpaid work will be reflected. This account is not a part of the main framework of the GDP, but will be presented in parallel

with SNA to reflect women's unpaid activities.

This is to indicate the amount and value of women's unpaid work. Besides, BBS should also regularly undertake time-use survey to record all types of activities women perform at home from morning till evening, and then value that according to the market price.

The reason for such demand is that there is adequate evidence on the amount of time spent by women in unpaid work at home. CPD had conducted time-use survey among 8,320 women and 5,334 men in 5,670 households across 64 districts of Bangladesh who are aged 15 years and above. We have found that the value of women's unpaid household work was equivalent to 76.8 percent of Bangladesh's GDP in FY2013-14 based on the replacement cost method, and 87.2 percent of GDP based on the willingness to accept method. Besides, it was also found by the study that on an average, a female member of a household undertakes 12.1 non-SNA activities on a typical day, while the corresponding figure for a male counterpart is only 2.7. Our survey also found that time spent by a female household person (aged 15 years and above) on 'non-SNA' works (7.7 hours) is about three times higher compared to a corresponding male person (2.5 hours). Regrettably, in Bangladesh, unpaid work has never been considered as part of national accounts estimates. This has primarily neglected the contribution of the women in economy and society.

These findings clearly reiterate the need for a "new metric" in our economic progress. Hence, one of our recommendations for policymakers is to conduct comprehensive Time-Use Survey by the BBS as part of Labour Force Survey on a regular basis. This is to present the time-use pattern of both women and men across various activities.

The government needs to show political will and should undertake necessary policy steps towards reforming the estimation practice of SNA in order to reflect women's unaccounted activities in the estimated GDP. To this end, the government may consider forming a technical committee consisting of statisticians, economists, gender specialists, advocacy groups and relevant

