

Let our champion women power Bangladesh forward



Dr Ahmad Ahsan is the director of the Policy Research Institute (PRI) of Bangladesh and a former World Bank economist and Dhaka University faculty member. Views expressed in this article are the author's own.

AHMAD AHSAN

As much as winning the South Asian Football Federation (SAFF) championship, it was the 23-1 winning margin of the Bangladesh women's football team that was truly breathtaking. Such a lopsided score in five matches spoke of grit, energy, hunger, motivation, and sheer dauntlessness.

In a larger sense, this overwhelming score, and the championship, speak of the spirit of Bangladeshi women ready to power the country forward.

Women's empowerment – a gift of liberation – has already been a significant force behind development. After independence, women became more educated, rapidly achieving parity with men in primary and secondary education enrolment, aided by female teachers who comprise 61 percent of primary school teachers.

Women also used their reproductive rights under a proactive family planning programme to increase contraceptive use from eight percent at independence to over 62 percent, leading to a decline in the annual population growth to about 1.1 percent and an increase in their life expectancy to 74 years, three years more than men. The slowing population growth was vital in raising per capita incomes and reducing



Bangladesh women's football team celebrate their 3-0 victory against India in the group-deciding game of the SAFF Women's Championship at the Dasharath Rangasala Stadium in Kathmandu on September 13.

PHOTO: BFF

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and higher-income ranks without the enthusiastic participation of women. All advanced economies and societies (measured by income and social progress indices) – such as Norway, Sweden, Germany, Canada, the United States, Japan and Korea – rank among the top 10 percent of countries in the gender development index of the UN. Conversely, the 10 percent of countries that rank at the bottom are also the world's poorest.

But how do we know what is the cause and what is the effect? Could economic growth development lead to women's empowerment rather than the converse? Income growth of women indeed increases their ability to make decisions about their own and their families' welfare.

However, economics and evidence suggest that while causation goes both ways, the dominant direction is that women's empowerment leads to growth and social development.

First, let us consider the case of resource-rich countries, as in the Middle East, with high per capita incomes but limited women's empowerment. Their riches have not empowered women. On the other hand, every country that has grown rich without the benefit of oil and mineral resources has empowered women. These women make decisions about their lives and own assets, enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to leave their marriage, and have protection against violence.

The inference is that women need agency for countries without bountiful natural resources to grow. But why is that so? For at least three reasons.

The first is the sheer arithmetic of national income, which is the multiple of persons employed times

their productivity. In the case of Bangladesh, if women participated in the labour force at the same rate as Vietnam, i.e. at 69.6 percent rather than 34.9 percent, and produced with average labour productivity, our national income would jump by a whopping 27 percent in real terms. And that would mean that over five

combat this tendency. These policies need to include providing good childcare facilities.

Where lies Bangladesh in empowering women? Unfortunately, it lies in contrast to the spirit of our championship-winning women's football team and the legacy of millions of women workers in

worse in maternal mortality and better in adolescent childbirth. On average, East Asian countries do far better, with a maternal mortality rate of 82 and an adolescent birth rate of 22.

Bangladesh does better than other South Asian countries, except Sri Lanka, regarding education. More

than half of Bangladeshi women aged 20-24 were married before 18, while 13 million were married before the age of 15.

In addition to measures against child marriage, we need to provide opportunities to enable women to pursue education and work and avoid early marriage. Take, for instance, the high dropout of girls while pursuing secondary education. Evidence suggests that the lack of proper sanitation facilities, including for menstrual care, for female students, is a significant cause of high dropout rates. On the other hand, research has also shown that when women are hopeful of getting employed by garments factories, they tend to delay marriage and get more schooling.

Another factor that constrains women's agency is unequal access to credit. Only about one-third of women can access credit as opposed to two-thirds of men. Even in the case of micro credit, research suggests that while 91 percent of micro credit customers are women, male family members often utilise the funds.

Due to early marriage, unequal education facilities, and lower access to credit, women's empowerment suffers from the significant difference in earnings between men and women. On average, women's per capita income is USD 2,811 against USD 8,176 for men (adjusted for purchasing power parity).

The critical task for empowering women must be a vigorous implementation of existing government policies that discourage marriage before 18 for women. Although the National Action Plan to reduce child marriage by half involves 25 government ministries, only about one percent of the government's budget goes to the main implementing agency. Despite laws, news reports suggest that child marriages take place with impunity.

But the desired outcome will not come from laws alone. We also require a countrywide social campaign and media blitz led by political, cultural, social, and religious leaders. This campaign would be like the highly effective barrage of birth control messages and ads that came through radio and television in Bangladesh's first decades. Early marriage must have the same stigma and be as expensive as large families. Bangladesh will then have taken an essential step to become a country of champion women.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Send us your letters to letters@thedailystar.net

Ensure safe roads

Nowadays, it has become quite common to see drivers competing against each other on the roads of Dhaka, leading to severe accidents. Reportedly, reckless driving and unnecessary speeding cause most of the accidents while, in some cases, the faulty road designs that we have become used to, as well as other factors, are also some of its leading causes.

When it comes to reckless driving, often the drivers are found to be young and they have no drivers' license. Sometimes,

they are the children of powerful, politically connected people. Why is it that they are able to drive on the roads without proper documentation? The authorities should strictly monitor whether underage driving is happening, and make sure that no one is driving without having a drivers' licence.

Additionally, since unfit vehicles plying the roads is another leading driver of road crashes, such vehicles must be taken off the roads once and



for all. It is about time that the authorities took some meaningful measures to ensure safe roads for all citizens.

A concerned citizen from Chattogram

/Opinion

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Match in value
- 6 Comedy counterpart
- 11 Use foul language
- 12 Kick back
- 13 Very recognizable
- 15 Keats poem
- 16 Leather color
- 17 TV's Danson
- 18 Entrance hall
- 20 City-based
- 23 Last year's frosh
- 27 Enjoy the tub
- 28 Bride's wear
- 29 Scatter
- 31 Gerald Ford's wife
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- 34 Play division
- 37 Zodiac cat

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FRIDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

YOU LOOK TERRIBLE. I HAD NIGHTMARES ALL NIGHT. YOU KEPT "PHOTOBOMBING" MY DREAMS.

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

NOW THE KIDS ARE CALLING ME "GOODY TWO-SHOES". OH, SWEETIE... THEY'RE JUST JEALOUS BECAUSE YOU'RE A GOOD STUDENT. I MAY NEED YOU TO ROUGH UP SOME FOURTH-GRADERS. IT STILL HURTS. I'LL NEED TIME TO TRAIN.