

## INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

## Driving equality

Gender-responsive finance has been on the rise in Bangladesh for years

MD ASADUZ ZAMAN

Gender responsive finance in Bangladesh has increased significantly over the last decade in both the public and private sectors, portraying a favourable shift toward ending the gender gap.

It is strategically included into the budget process, which incorporates planning, allocation, and monitoring of budget execution.

In the public sector, the country's gender responsive budgeting has increased by around tenfold in the last 15 years since the 2009-10 fiscal year, according to the finance ministry.

In the fiscal year of (FY) 2023-24, the government allocated Tk 261,787 crore which was only Tk 27,248 crore in FY 2009-10.

Although it was started from four ministries in FY06,



now 44 out of 62 ministries and divisions have developed their gender sensitive budget.

The increasing focus on gender budgeting and the rising share of gender-related budget allocations have coincided with notable improvements in gender equality in Bangladesh.

However, there is a lack of proper monitoring to track the spending which raises a big concern for the country, according to analysts.

"Over the last 15 years or so Bangladesh has been providing a gender responsive budget and it is now well anchored in the budget making process," said Former Governor of Bangladesh Bank Dr Atiur Rahman.

"However, only the allocations may not be enough to end the gender gap," he said.

The qualitative aspects including how to reduce restrictive patriarchal behavioural constraints ought to be addressed simultaneously through various advocacy programs conducted by both public, private and non-governmental organizations, he said.

"The manner of governing is frequently subjective. The pattern is that the government's budget for women is not accurately reflected," said Prof Sayema Haque Bidisha of Dhaka University.

"Effective ministry-wide monitoring and evaluation are required to make it effective."

Prof Sayema Haque Bidisha of Dhaka University, said the gender budget is not a budget for women but is a way of disaggregating the national budget based on its impact on women.

**The banking sector can play a significant role in reducing the gender gap. Fortunately, Bangladesh Bank with support from the government initiated financial inclusion strategy including more bank accounts to the farmers, women, small and medium entrepreneurs, students, beneficiaries of social safety net programs and providing new lines of credit to the farmers and MSMEs.**

"Besides targeted projects are needed," said Bidisha, who is also the research director at the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling (SANEM), a think tank.

Atiur Rahman also said Bangladesh is a well-known country for steering women empowerment as a central objective of its inclusive development strategy. Both fiscal and monetary policies have been focusing on this policy agenda for many years.

About the private sector's role, Rahman said the banking sector can also play a significant role in reducing the gender gap.

Fortunately, Bangladesh Bank with support from the government initiated a financial inclusion strategy including more bank accounts to the farmers, small and medium entrepreneurs, students, beneficiaries of social safety net programs and providing new lines of credit to the farmers and MSMEs.

The number of women entrepreneurs grew from 56,706 in 2019 to 151,314 in 2023. This nearly threefold growth in the number of beneficiary entrepreneurs has also witnessed a similar growth in the outstanding loans for them.

The figure increased from 8,512 in 2019 to 19,755, according to Bangladesh Bank.

Besides, banks, the regulated microfinance institutions, mobile finance service providers and agent banking entrepreneurs have also been providing a huge support and finance to the grassroots level entrepreneurs who are mostly women.

Together, the banking and quasi-banking sectors are playing significant roles in enhancing the level of empowerment for women who are now emerging as successful entrepreneurs, said Rahman.

He pointed out some major constraints on development of this sector and access to finance including lack of proper business plan and financial record keeping; lack of marketing and supply chain management skill; lack of skills in technology adoption, innovation, diversification and designs and lack of networking and common cluster facilities.

"Despite this impressive growth in number the share of women entrepreneurs to the total MSMEs sector still remains around 10 percent."

Bangladesh Bank has, however, been providing credit guarantee facilities to small and medium enterprises

including the women entrepreneurs.

But, the number remains low 632 out of total 7,869 entrepreneurs.

Shaila Abedin, Head of Women and Affluent Banking at Prime Bank, shared, "In rural areas, women entrepreneurs used to rely on small loans from NGOs. But now, banks are stepping up their game, offering training, workshops, and loans to boost financial inclusion. Prime Bank even hosted a Capacity Building workshop for 384 women entrepreneurs in 2023, keeping their business portfolio on a steady upward trend for the past 5 years."

"It's encouraging to see positive strides in gender-responsive budgeting in Bangladesh over the last 15 years, but the real impact depends on how efficiently these funds are used to tackle the root causes of gender inequality," she added.

**HOW THE GENDER RESPONSIVE BUDGET WORKS?** Gender considerations were formally introduced into the budget process as part of the adoption of the Medium-Term Budgetary Framework (MTBF) in Bangladesh.

Alongside it, the core instruments of the gender response budget (GRB) in Bangladesh are: the RCGP model and the government report.

Of them, the Recurrent, Capital, Gender, and Poverty (RCGP) database was created by Bangladesh's Finance Division in 2003 to improve the monitoring and reporting system.

Bangladesh first engaged in GRB initiatives in the early 2000s through several small-scale initiatives and background work.

According to the RCGP database, gender-related budget allocations increased from 24.7 percent of the total budget in FY10 to 34.4 percent in the latest FY24 budget. While some of the increase over time is likely attributable to more comprehensive reporting of gender-related expenditure across ministries and divisions, these sizable numbers reflect the government's commitment to directing budget resources to advance women's well-being.

**CHALLENGES OF PREPARING AND IMPLEMENTING GRB**

The gender budgeting (for all relevant ministries) should be carried out with a view to attain the goal of women empowerment, instead of in a quantitative manner through numerical disaggregation.

In Bangladesh, there are fewer directly targeted projects and there is a lack of information on the development projects to conduct a gender segregated analysis, said Prof Bidisha.

"The sex-disaggregated data of RCGP are not available and the GRB involves ex-post analysis of projects and is not linked to the planning process."

Prof Bidisha also pointed out some challenges including smaller share of gender specific programs of larger ministries, lesser budgetary allocation for the ministries with greater allocation in gender sensitive programs, lesser representation of women in high salaried jobs of the ministries.

To end the challenges, she said that at the end of each fiscal year, a detailed evaluation of each of the development projects of the ministry/division on the basis of predetermined criteria should be carried out.

Given the lead role of the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MOWCA) in case of gender equality, it is extremely crucial to strengthen its capacity and budgetary allocation, she added.

Formation of a cell with gender specialists at the MoF can be an important step in this manner, she added.

International best practices ex-ante analysis, gender audit can be carried out. Need to have more gender specific projects under each ministry, she suggested.

## Coding a new path

The inspiring journey of Bangladesh's first female programmer

PRIYAM PAUL

"If anyone possesses the three qualities of sincerity, integrity, and professional ethics, they can overcome any hurdle in life," shares Shaheda Mustafiz, the first woman programmer in Bangladesh.

As a pioneer for women in the IT sector, Shaheda Mustafiz had to carve her own path and navigate numerous challenges through sheer determination. Following her studies at Dhaka University, where she majored in economics, Shaheda embarked on her IT career in 1975 after successfully completing the City & Guilds exam in London.

During a period when Computer Science and Engineering (CSE) education hadn't taken root in Bangladesh, Shaheda immersed herself in IT companies and polished her technological skills at NCR in London. Upon her return to Dhaka, she continued her pioneering journey in the male-dominated field of IT by working at the Bangladesh branch of NCR. In 1976, Shaheda Mustafiz initiated her career as a system manager in the Bangladesh branch of the organization.

Shaheda played a pivotal role in automating banking software in the country, establishing herself as a key figure in the field. She is the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from BASIS in recognition of her immense contributions to the field of Information Technology.

"I was determined that I had to



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

earn the respect of my colleagues and clients, and I succeeded. This determination led us to work with great care, ensuring that no negative discussions arose. Achieving this goal spared me from many difficulties," she affirmed.

The programming workplace stereotype was inherently biased against women, but Shaheda Mustafiz defied these norms. Once she firmly established her position, she proactively recruited women from diverse backgrounds, providing them with comprehensive training and

transforming them into proficient programmers. These women not only excelled but also actively contributed to numerous successful projects.

Shaheda Mustafiz, who has devoted over four decades to the software sector, is now 75 years old. Despite her extensive career, she continues to strive for impactful contributions. Her current focus is on providing software solutions to government hospitals, aiming to achieve a level of service that has already been accomplished in developed countries.

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