



Female farmhands engaged in weeding on a piece of land growing Boro season paddy in Kuptola village of Gaibandha sadar upazila recently. Here women get Tk 300 working from 8:00am to 5:00pm whereas men earn Tk 400 to Tk 500, a stark reminder of persistent inequalities between men and women in the workplace. According to UN Women, the gender pay gap stands at 20 percent globally, meaning women workers earn 80 percent of what men do. And the cumulative effect of pay disparities has real, daily negative consequences for women, their families, and society, especially during crises.

PHOTO: MOSTAFA SHABUJ

## Gender wage gap still persists in agriculture sector

MOSTAFA SHABUJ

Farmers in Gobindaganj upazila of Gaibandha are currently engaging labourers to weed their fields of Boro season paddy ahead of the upcoming harvesting period.

Interestingly, there are more women working in the fields than men, indicating a major paradigm shift in the once male-dominated agriculture industry.

But despite the narrowing gender gap, the significant wage gap between men and women in this line of work still persists, with male workers earning around Tk 450 per day while females make Tk 300.

As such, industry people say the prevalence of women in fields suggests that landowners have a financial motive to lower costs by hiring the comparatively cheaper female workers.

This is because the lower wages paid to female labourers allow landowners to enjoy the advantage of being able to hire a greater number of workers, thereby reducing the time needed to complete the work.

The wage discrepancy is not a new phenomenon as women have historically been paid less than men across all industries. And even when overall wages increase, the gap remains the same, they said.

Rina Begum, who works at a field in the Kuptola area of Gaibandha to support her family of five, said she was afraid to speak out against income inequality.

"If I speak against income inequality, then there will be fewer employment opportunities for me," she added.

Roshna Bewa, a 60-year-old widow, said she has been working in fields across Gaibandha for two decades since her husband's passing, with the stagnant wage gap not giving her any respite.

Abu Bakar, a landowner in Sadullapur upazila, employs four women for weeding. According to him, the wages paid to women are the market standard.



Although the wage gap is financially beneficial for landowners, it is not helping women make progress in terms of equality in the agriculture industry.

Halima Begum, who works for Bakar, said societal norms dictate that men's and women's wages cannot be equal as men are perceived to be stronger and more productive.

"This flawed perception is one of the reasons we get paid less," she added.

Rozia Begum, another worker at Bakar's field, echoed the same. "Our only option is to go along with this discriminatory practice as the alternative of having no work is even more bleak," she said.

Sadeka Halim, vice-chancellor of Jagannath University, said the agriculture sector employs the highest number of women although they do not have equal rights or control over land.

A portion of them look after land on behalf of absentee landlords and there is also a good portion of female-headed households, she added.

Sadeka, a former dean of the social sciences faculty at Dhaka University, said

women have made advances in the formal sector.

However, 46 percent of women still work in the informal sector, where there are no rules and regulations and it is mainly the employers who determine the terms and conditions, she said.

She said female workers do not take breaks like men but they are discriminated against as they lack a focal point to raise a voice in their favour.

"This is true for women agricultural workers too. They are very much voiceless. They do not have any organisation or group to raise their voice for them to protect and ensure their rights," said Sadeka.

"The labour ministry should engage all stakeholders and work for ensuring the rights of workers in the informal sector too," she said.

Sharminde Neelormi, professor of economics at Jahangirnagar University, blamed pay inequality on social norms that considered women's labour to be less efficient.

She said the wage disparity between male and female workers has narrowed

little over the decades.

"Previously, only meals were provided. The margin was over 50 percent before in the 1990s, but it is now down to 20-25 percent," she explained.

But the situation has changed as the use of manual labour has decreased thanks to agricultural mechanisation. If the use of such machinery rises, the gap will be reduced, she added.

Sadika Haque, professor of agricultural economics at Bangladesh Agricultural University, says women work in crop fields and play a major role in production and post-harvest management.

In an article on women in agriculture and their empowerment in a book titled "Bangladesher Krishi Orthoniti", she, citing research findings, said out of 23 stages from rice production to storing, women participate in 17 stages.

She, however, said women workers in agriculture face wage discrimination, getting Tk 42 lower than their male counterparts a day.

The daily average wage of a female farm worker is Tk 388, she said in the book published in 2022.

Talking to The Daily Star yesterday, Sadika said the government should form a policy for farm workers to ensure fair wages for them regardless of gender.

She said there was a perception among employers and men that women workers do less work than men.

"This is a wrong perception. Rather, women work sincerely as long as they stay in the workplace," said Sadika.

"Awareness of employers is also necessary, as is the need for change in social attitudes towards women workers," she said, adding that steps must also be taken to protect women workers from harassment.

Ensuring education for women is necessary to enhance their skills too, added Sadika.

## Who can be our Nandan Nilekani?

MAMUN RASHID

All of our important stakeholders, including those in the government, are now talking about reforms. I was very intrigued when the state minister for ICT on the second day of his joining the new cabinet asked me who could our Nandan Nilekani be.

In the past decade or so, we have witnessed some progress in terms of infrastructure development and technological advancement. However, in the coming years, Bangladesh needs to emphasise even more on increasing public sector efficiency as well as developing an ecosystem that is welcoming to innovations and digital transformation.

If we look into the digital transformation journey of India, the effort has been simultaneous in both the public and private sectors. The discussion of the private sector's contribution to the development of India can't take place without mentioning the name of Nandan Nilekani, co-founder of Infosys and a visionary whose legacy transcends conventional boundaries and symbolises the intersection of technology, governance, and social progress.

He has devised India's digital public infrastructure ecosystem, encompassing components like digital identification, payment infrastructure, and central data repository solutions.

The Aadhaar card, a sophisticated biometric identity system for all Indians, is the brainchild of Nilekani, envisioned under the stewardship of former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. The ramifications of this initiative have been profound with significant improvement in transparency, efficiency, and accessibility for marginalised communities to social benefits.

As of today, 1.3 billion Indians possess a unique ID, profoundly influencing identity verification and granting access to digital education, healthcare, financial services, and government facilities through e-KYC.

Additionally, Nilekani made substantial contributions to society in healthcare with projects like the National Health Stack and the Ayushman Bharat Scheme, leveraging technology to digitise health records and enhance healthcare delivery systems. All these platforms are integrated with the Aadhaar system.

Although we already have the smart card which is poised to be of similar use at some point in the future, it is nowhere near as integrated into various other utilities and services as the Aadhaar card.

Nilekani's vision was extended to financial inclusion through initiatives such as establishing the National Payments Corporation of India in 2008.

His most significant contribution to the realm of digital payments was the launch of UPI in 2015. UPI introduced an open architecture platform enabling banks to develop their own apps and services atop it. These platforms facilitate seamless digital transactions.

Somewhat similarly in Bangladesh, bKash and Nagad have made significant advancements in terms of wide usage of mobile financial services. However, the level of uniformity and alliance with the central bank and between other financial institutions achieved by UPI in India is yet to be realised in Bangladesh.

Nilekani continued his transformative journey with the creation of the Goods and Services Tax Network during Narendra Modi's tenure. This groundbreaking platform revolutionised India's tax ecosystem. Such a level of automation and innovative sophistication in Bangladesh's taxation system is still a distant dream.

Nandan Nilekani has also played a crucial role in India's digital transformation within the transport sector through initiatives like FASTag electronic toll collection. Such initiatives may also be strongly considered for Bangladesh as our own highway and expressway systems are gradually improving.

A solid foundation for Bangladesh's sustainable development journey requires improvements in areas of financial inclusion and healthcare. Bangladesh can address socio-economic disparities and empower marginalised communities by emulating Nilekani's emphasis on interoperable and inclusive digital platforms.

Many government platforms operate in silos, leading to a fragmented user experience and offering minimal value. Smart Bangladesh requires integration between all these platforms, making them open to the private sector while ensuring the privacy of the people. Moreover, his advocacy for open data ecosystems and digital innovation hubs can serve as a catalyst for Bangladesh's burgeoning startup ecosystem.

The author is an economic analyst

## Japan likely avoided recession: poll

REUTERS, Tokyo

Revised data for Japan's fourth-quarter gross domestic product will likely show that the economy avoided a technical recession thanks to companies' stronger-than-expected spending on plants and equipment, a Reuters poll showed on Friday.

October-December GDP is expected to be revised up to show an annualised expansion of 1.1 percent, according to the median forecast of 21 economists in the poll.

Preliminary figures released on February 15 had pointed to an unexpected fall of 0.4 percent. The second consecutive quarter of contraction met the definition of a technical recession for Japan - now the world's fourth-largest economy behind Germany.

"Fears of entering a recession have disappeared," said Atsushi Takeda, chief economist at Itochu Research Institute.

Evidence of economic growth, if realised, could provide the Bank of Japan with more confidence to end negative interest rates as early as this month, paving the way for Japan's first rate hike since 2007. The central bank will meet for a two-day policy-setting meeting on March 18-19.

Capital expenditure probably rose 2.5 percent in the fourth quarter, much better than the initial reading of a 0.1 percent decline, according to the poll.

However, private consumption, which makes up about 60 percent of Japan's economy, is expected to show a similarly weak reading in the revised data after a preliminary 0.2 percent drop, analysts said.

## China consumer prices rose in February for first time in six months

AFP, Beijing

Chinese consumer prices rose in February for the first time since August, data showed Saturday, bucking a months-long stretch of deflation that compounded the country's myriad economic woes.

The world's second-largest economy posted some of its lowest growth in decades last year and is battling a prolonged property sector crisis and soaring youth unemployment.

But in a rare bright spot, official statistics Saturday showed the consumer price index rose 0.7 percent last month, according to Beijing's National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) - the first increase since August.

The figure was higher than a 0.3 percent rise analysts surveyed by Bloomberg had expected and a sharp increase on the 0.8 fall seen in January, their sharpest drop in more than 14 years.

The positive data comes as senior officials meet in Beijing for the annual "Two Sessions" of China's parliament and its top political consultative body, in gatherings that have been dominated by the economy and national security.

On Tuesday, Premier Li Qiang told that gathering the country would seek five percent growth in 2024 - an ambitious

goal that he acknowledged would be "not be easy" given the headwinds facing the economy.

High among those issues has been deflation, which China entered last July for the first time since 2021.

Apart from a brief rebound in August,

prices had not risen until last month.

Consumer prices traditionally see a boost during the Chinese New Year period, also known as Spring Festival, which fell in February this year.

"It was primarily food and service prices that rose more," NBS statistician

Dong Lijuan said in a statement.

"During the Spring Festival period, consumer demand for food products grew, in addition to rainy and snowy weather in some regions affecting supply," Dong said.

China's sinking prices are in stark contrast with the rest of the world, where inflation remains a persistent bugbear, forcing central banks to ramp up interest rates.

While deflation suggests goods were cheaper, it poses a threat to the broader economy as consumers tend to postpone purchases, hoping for further reductions.

A lack of demand can then force companies to cut production, freeze hiring or lay off workers, while potentially also having to discount existing stocks - dampening profitability even as costs remain the same.

Given the holiday factor, one analyst cautioned against seeing Saturday's figures as suggesting China was no longer struggling with deflation.

"I think it is too early to conclude that deflation in China is over," Zhiwei Zhang, president and chief economist at Pinpoint Asset Management, said.

"Domestic demand is still quite weak. Property sales of new apartments have not stabilised yet," he explained.



A woman walks past shops selling decorations ahead of the Lunar New Year in Hong Kong on February 2.

PHOTO: AFP