

Women, work and the demography of development

FROM PAGE 23

POLICY GAPS IN SUPPORTING CARE AND FLEXIBILITY

Policy prescriptions regarding care work have at best been limited. On the books, labour laws have been implemented to guarantee 6 months of maternity leave for pregnancy. It is not clear that these laws are enforceable in the private sector. And with declines in children ever born these actions are only going to become less and

declined and more so in urban areas than in rural areas. Declining participation is undoubtedly related to the nature of work opportunities—urban employment is more often in the formal sector and away from home whereas rural women are more likely to engage in economic activities in and around the home. The growth of new economic opportunities is likely to further exacerbate the exclusion of women, the biggest gender wage

SNAPSHOT

Bangladesh's demographic transition with fewer births and longer life expectancy has occurred at unprecedented speed.

1. Despite major gains in female education, women remain under-represented and under-employed, especially in urban areas.
2. Unpaid care work, early marriage, and weak policy support continue to push women out of paid employment.
3. Without targeted investment in care, skills, and workplace flexibility, the demographic dividend may be lost.

less important components of care work. Women who are required to balance care responsibilities with career demands because of other forms of dependencies for the elderly and indigent, not to mention older children who need care and supervision are not supported by policy measures. Such policies could be focused around flexible hours and the option of remote work. Studies show that sectors of work that allow such flexibility in time and location of work are more likely to recruit and retain women workers.

URBANISATION, SKILLS AND THE RISK OF EXCLUSION

Rapid urbanisation and the need to acquire technical skills pose additional challenges for future work trajectories for women. National labour statistics suggest that for the first time in history the number of women working has

differentials exist in these sectors driven by technology led growth. The fastest growing sectors of work are information technology and finance. Labour force data suggests women's participation is lowest in these sectors because of the historical exclusion of women from technology-oriented fields.

Putting demographic change in context highlights the multiple ways in which women's issues are at the core, and policy action must address the needs of women. Addressing gender inequities—whether in access to opportunities or in the burden of care—isn't just a moral issue; it's a strategic investment with measurable returns. We need to shift our focus on smart policies that address the realities of men's and women's everyday lives and the centrality of unpaid care responsibilities.

Economic democracy in Bangladesh: Scope and realities

FROM PAGE 18

In ICT services, while three-fourths of the top quintile households have access to internet services, the comparable figure for the bottom quintile is only 9 per cent. In rural areas, only 3 per cent of the households have computers, and 78 per cent of the rural population do not know how to use a computer.

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT GAPS AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

In Bangladesh, there are gender-disparities in outcomes as well as opportunities. For example, the female enrolment rate at the tertiary level is 17 per cent, and the male enrolment rate at the same level is 24 per cent. The labour force participation rate among women is 36 per cent, compared to 81 per cent among men. The representation of women in senior and middle-management of the country is only 12 per cent. The gender disparity in the use of mobile telephones is 29 per cent. About 33 per cent and 17 per cent men and women use internet respectively.

GENDER, POVERTY, AND DEMOCRATIC DEFICITS

Overall deprivation of poor and marginalised people is a major obstacle to economic democracy. Today, about 36 million people live in poverty in Bangladesh, with 30 million new additions during the last three years. About 110 million people do not have access to safely managed drinking water. Only 59 per cent births of children under 5 are registered and only 47 per cent of children have birth certificates. After finishing primary education, 56 per cent of children cannot make it to class 10. There has been a steep rise in child labour in Bangladesh over the past 6 years, from 6 per cent in 2019 to more than 9 per cent in 2025. Today, the rate of child marriage is 56 per cent, implying that 1 in every 2 girls get married before they reach 18. In the political spectra of Bangladesh,

Without economic democracy, political democracy cannot endure. Inequality in access, voice, and opportunity undermines social cohesion and weakens the foundations of governance.

disparities are deep-rooted, a fact that has been observed again and again in the past and the near past. Any space for political discussion and discourse is monopolised by the rich and the educated segments of the society. Women are excluded from the process. Voice and autonomy, and freedom of expression do not mean a lot to the poor and the marginalised.

POLICY PATHWAYS TO DEMOCRATISE THE ECONOMY

There are clear opportunities to democratise Bangladesh's economic space. The core requirement is that economic policies be equitable and take account of all forms of human deprivation, with deliberate tilting towards those who are deprived and dispossessed where necessary. Accordingly, Bangladesh's economic policy matrix must be framed with economic democracy in mind. This would include policies to ensure access to basic social services such as health, education, and safe drinking water. Pro-poor monetary policy, equitable fiscal policies on taxation and expenditure, and targeted incentives for small-scale and informal-sector entrepreneurs can further widen equitable access to productive resources. In short, an inclusive growth strategy can advance economic democracy in Bangladesh.

Second, corrective measures with targeted interventions are essential for groups unable to care for themselves, including older persons, people with disabilities, children, and those living in ecologically vulnerable areas. Social assistance and a comprehensive social protection framework should form the backbone of these targeted interventions.

Third, the governance and the institutional structure of the economy must be non-discriminatory and equity-friendly. Economic institutions must hold the values of economic democracy. Such values would require a strong framework of transparency and accountability, which would hinge on a strong monitoring and evaluation framework and a robust credible statistical system. With a goal to democratise the economic sphere would require institutional reforms. One of such reforms should concentrate on credible, robust disaggregated data on poor and marginalised people.

In recent times, country's major political parties clearly indicated that if elected, the country's economy would be their top priority. This is a welcome news to all the citizens of Bangladesh. But at the same time, one major goal of that priority should be democratizing the economic space of Bangladesh. Without economic democracy, the country will not be able to have either a sustainable political democracy or a society free from discrimination. The next elected government of Bangladesh must take note these challenges of economic democracy seriously and include them in the future economic road map of Bangladesh. If the government moves forward in the correct direction with objective and honest policies and strengthened institutions, it will build a development trajectory which will ensure economic democracy with equality and non-discrimination, enhanced well-being of the people of Bangladesh.

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