



# Different Dimensions of Women Empowerment: A study on Bangladesh

**Hasina Imam**

Post Graduate Student, Department of Government & Politics,  
Jahangirnagar University, Savar, Dhaka, Bangladesh  
Email: binamindu@gmail.com

**Major Md. Mizanur Rahman, G. (Retd.)**

Additional Registrar, Bangladesh University of Science and Technology,  
Saidpur Cantonment, Saidpur, Bangladesh  
Email: mizan4056@gmail.com

## Abstract

*Gender equality and empowerment of women were established as the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG3) by the United Nations. It has been realized that policies and projects without concerning the female position in the society have adverse impact on development. United Nations International Conference on Women in 1995, held in Beijing, stressed on the need to reduce gender inequality and to increase women empowerment. As Bangladesh turns 40, improvements in women's wellbeing and increased agency are claimed to be some of the most significant gains in the post-independence era. Various economic and social development indicators show that in the last 20 years, Bangladesh, a poor, Muslim-majority country in the classic patriarchal belt, has made substantial progress in increasing women's access to education and healthcare (including increasing life-expectancy), and in improving women's participation in the labor force. Political empowerment condition is better in Bangladesh as compared to china, India, Iran and it stands eighth among the Asian countries in terms of women's parliamentary representation with women occupying 20 percent of the seats in the national parliament. This paper comprises of IV sections. Section I is introduction followed by review of literature II. Section III highlights the data sources and methodology. Section IV identifies the different dimensions of women empowerment and the last section is the conclusion and policy options.*

## 1.0 Introduction

The term women empowerment has different connotation which depends on social, economic, and political context in which it is used. World Bank (2001) defines "the expansion of the freedom of choices and action, which could increase women authority and control over resources and decision regarding their life. Similarly, Women empowerment is a process through which women achieve the ability to control, take ownership over resources and make strategies of life choices (Kabeer 2001). However, the process itself depends on women, through education, capacity building, skills and trainings and changes in legal and structural framework. Women empowerment covers many dimensions including social, economic, cultural, political, legal and psychological (Malhotra et al. 2002). This explains a broad variation in the concept of women empowerment. Although, these definitions are clear but there are some constraints to measure women empowerment due to lack of standardized ways. Moreover, many researchers tried to construct set of specific questions based on Population Based Primary Survey for measuring empowerment at individual level, (Kishor and Subaiya 2008). Women empowerment is preferred not only for the development of a country but also required to minimize poverty and promotes economic growth. (Chaudryet



al.2012). According to United Nations Women Policy Division (2013), women empowerment need to be focused and all the development projects and policies need to be gender sensitized. In most of the developing countries, due to early marriages, high female unemployment rate along with limited investment in them compels females to depend on men. Early marriage is one of the crucial reasons of lower participation of females in the labor market compared as to developed nations [(World Bank 2007), (Doepke et al. 2012)].

In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, women empowerment is also very difficult to achieve as societies and communities are governed by strictly social and cultural norms. In a traditional society like Bangladesh, the entire major as well as the minor decisions related to inside and outside the house are taken by the men.

The worse situation has been reported for Bangladesh in terms of gender equality and women empowerment. According to MDG Report (2013), Bangladesh is still far away from the targets of 2015 MDGs in terms of access to education, gender equality and women empowerment which are reflected by child mortality, maternal health and nutrition (Government of Bangladesh 2013). Bangladesh ranks 121<sup>st</sup> as overall in the Gender Gap Index (GGI) 2014 out of 142 countries, and 146<sup>th</sup> out of 187 countries in Human Development Index (HDI) 2014. Furthermore, it stands 141<sup>st</sup> for economic participation and opportunity for women, in education attainment it ranks 132<sup>nd</sup>, in terms of health and survival 119<sup>th</sup> and 85<sup>th</sup> in terms of political empowerment in 2014.

Bangladesh, Inequality Human Development Index (IHDI) value for 2013 is 0.375, Human Inequality coefficient was 28.7%, Inequality in Life Expectancy at Birth is 29.9%, Inequality in Education was 45.2% and Inequality in income is 11%. Bangladesh GII value is 0.562 and rank is 126<sup>th</sup> out of 149 countries in the 2013 index. The Maternal Mortality Ratio is 260 per women 100,000 lives birth, Adolescent birth rate is 27.3, and female seats in parliament are 19.7%. Population with at least Secondary education for male is 46.3% and for female is 19.3%.

Later, when women become old then they are able to control over some domestic decision making, the situation is much better in urban areas due to exposure of education, electronic media. However, it cannot be stated that women are empowered in urban areas as the magnitude of women discrimination is different in urban and rural areas.

## 2.0 Objectives of the study

1. To examine the social dimension of women empowerment in Bangladesh.
2. To find the economical dimension of women empowerment in Bangladesh.
3. To scrutinize the political aspects of women empowerment in Bangladesh.
4. To discover the women's representation in politics of Bangladesh regarding women empowerment.

## 3.0 Review of literature

Nazneen et al (2011) investigate the women empowerment situation after post-independence era of Bangladesh. Several economic and social indicators show that the women empowerment has improved at significant level in the last 20 years. Although Bangladesh is a poor Muslim majority country however it had made extensive progress in increasing access to education and health for women and their participation in labor force. Women have a majority position in national politics and development. The authors have highlighted this concept of empowerment and identifies its use by different organizations donor agencies,



development NGOs and political parties. This paper also explores the discussions and negotiations regarding this term which are used for women empowerment and how these observations and narratives about women's empowerment has changed in Bangladesh from 2000 to date.

Many studies have been conducting on Asian countries in the contexts of women power and contraceptive use, lower fertility rate, and longer birth interval. Upadhyay(2010) tries to fill this gap and attempt to study African countries, where fertility rate of women is still very high. This study tries to explore that how women empowerment and ability to work affect the number of children they want. This study employs combine data from recent Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) in sub-Saharan Africa. Guinea 2005, Mali 2006, Namibia 2006-2007, and Zambia 2007 were selected. Women participation in household decision making and two indices of gender role has been used as measurement of women empowerment in sub-Sahara Africa. The results show that two countries have egalitarian gender role attitudes which were associated with small number of children however household decision making was not consistently associated with smaller number of children. Moreover, in Namibia, number of women empowerment were less as compared to those women who have more children than they desired. The result reflects that women has dissatisfaction regarding empowerment whose fertility rate are high and social norms but personally they value small family.

Recently, a research has been conducted by Murtaza (2012) in GilgitBaltistan on women empowerment through Higher Education Programme, a scheme of AghaKhan Development Network (AKDN). Higher education will improve the self-confidence and economic conditions of women and will significantly reduce their dependence on men on day to day works. While building their skills and abilities women can play an effective role in their society. Agha Khan Development Network helps not only women but also young girls to get higher education. Furthermore, this study highlights the current challenges while providing the education facilities for women in this region.

Aly(2009) examines the link between education of women with their economic empowerment by using Panel Survey of the Egypt Labor Market of 2006. The study estimates the role of education in improving their capability and capacity along with their earning capability. The study focuses young women with different categories of education. Results supports that there is significant impact of education on women's labor market in Egypt. Even due to higher female education women are participating as work force with higher competitiveness in labor market. Further results reveal the gender gap reduction in the labor market. On the other hand, it was also discovered that increase female education level was not sufficient to improve economic empowerment among young women.

Chaudhary (2012) examines how awareness and sensitization about women rights can help to achieve overall development in the society and improve women status along with economic empowerment. The paper employs data from 1996 to 2009 for Bangladesh. The findings show that consciousness or awareness of women about their rights, knowledge of the benefits of economic empowerment and overall development of women have positive and significant results on women's empowerment which was measured by Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) index. Furthermore Granger Causality Test proves that there is bi-directional causality between overall developments of women and women empowerment. However, there is unidirectional causality between women empowerment and sensitization of women.



Desai (2010) concentrates on the theoretical and practical issues of women's empowerment. Education, health, political and economic participation are the key areas which are being focused in empowering women for the last 20 years. Some short analysis of human development was discussed of the increasing theoretical agreement about empowerment for controlling over resources, a procedure and results. The practical issues is its measurement, how to measure women empowerment, particularly now gender empowerment index is being focused and it is being argued that reasonably this measurement is needs to change in term of its criteria regarding its urban, selected, and formal employment bias. The finding of the analysis shows that over last 20 years the condition of women in term of education enrollment in primary and secondary education, political participation in national level, in declining gender wage gap, declining in fertility rate, violence against women continue to be common and fluctuate across regions and countries. These areas are influenced according countries condition in term of urban and rural people, norms and traditions, young and older women. Moreover, a decline in gender gap did not interpret into gender equality and positive tendency were come with a negative trends resulting from unintentional cost of development. Finally, it highlighted various government policies for helping women, for intense, quotas in budgets, cash transfer plan, gender related budgeting, and microenterprises on community basis, society based planto fight against violence and HIV/AIDS and international exchanges and joint movement for decent work for Women and corporate practices.

Eeshani Kandpal(2012) study shows the impact of community level female participation program in India. These programs improved the women participation in physical mobility, political ground, and employment opportunities. These programs support groups of women on literacy camps and high education classes, even in professional training. They used truncation-corrected matching and instrumental variables on survey data to separate the mechanism of all programs. It separately considered its result on two types of women, one who works, and who does not work. They also found imperative excess effects on non-participants as compared to those women who belong to in untouched districts.

In most of the developing countries, women are disempowered as compared to developed countries. The high rate of youth unemployment and early marriages are limiting investment on human capital and increasing their dependence on men.

Oriana Bandiera et al (2014) attempts to evaluate young women's empowerment in Uganda which is the world's second youngest country in the world. In this two-sided involvement, teenage girls were simultaneously offered professional training and knowledge on marriage and after marriage life issues. After two years of contribution increase in the probability that 72% income generating activities were increased by young girls mostly due to participation in self-employment, their monthly expenditures raised by 41%. Teenage pregnancy rate was dropped by 26%, and marriage on early ages also declined by 58%. The results indicate that women social and economic empowerment can make better through the combined effect to professional and life skills knowledge.

Yahya Rashid (2013) women participation is important in corporate sector of Bangladesh for the economic development because women population is more than men in Bangladesh. But it was noticed that women empowerment was uncommon in corporate sector in Bangladesh as compared to the other part of the world where women are participating along with men equally. Although there are many cause behind this however, women empowerment in corporate sector can be improved in by adopting some imperative steps. He further explains



that mostly women in rural areas are engage in agricultural sector actively, (Sustainable Development Department (FAO), 2006) However, female participation is low in the urban areas. There are many barriers for women in corporate sector because the generally business environment depends on many factors which are economic, social, educational, cultural and psychological factors. He identifies cause for which women has some fear to be part of corporate sector, for instance low literacy rate in women, mostly women has lack of confidence in order to achieve senior managerial positions,, different cultural obstacles, not much support from side of the family, females are mostly scared to taking the risks and disappointment, due to unavailability of formal credit system etc.

Maharaja (2013) mainly deals with women empowerment in India by analyzing three different perspectives. He analyzes the agency approach in order to measure women empowerment. First he explores the modern approach to empowerment. Then in second part of the study is consist on general idea which India is adopting for empowering women. In the part he studies the level of attainment of empowerment by implementing several of recent indicators. This paper is based on secondary sources of data which is related to India, and published by National Family Health Survey, National Sample Survey Organization. Now a day the link between women empowerment and sustainable economic development are major issues regardless of any country or society and policy maker tries to make polices while focusing female participation in economic activities .Although it is not sufficient but necessary condition for sustainable development process.

Omprakash Sridevi(2005)tries to attain a systematic measure of empowerment by characterizing the women empowerment. The current study uses qualitative and quantitative analysis, which makes sure the magnitude and the direction of every factor which influences the women empowerment. For qualitative analysis he applied a Logit model and for quantitative purpose he used Weighted Average Method to measure the degree of empowerment. According to him, for measuring women empowerment independence and the economics equality are the main indicators by which women status can evaluate easily, further he explained the role of society. That society should understand the ability and the skill of women and their contribution on sustainable development process.

Kabeer (1999) tries to construct the indictors by using three dimensional conceptual frameworks for measuring women empowerment. First he explains those resources ,which are the elements of the requirement of empowerment, second he figure out the concept of 'agency' for explaining the aspect of process of women empowerment and in the last he mentioned those indicators which could explained the 'achievement' in order to measure the results measure of outcomes. Thestudy illustrates the most feasible indicators of empowerment of women which are: family composition, marital benefit, financial independence, self-determination, and experience of participation in jobs and other economic activities in the sectors.

Malhotra et al (2002) provides the methodological approaches in determining and investigating women's empowerment. He mentions several indicators by which empowerment of women can measure. In his study he uses decision-making by female members. the decision of resource and finance distribution , matters related to social and domestic issues, children issues , access over resources, lack of restrictions for physical movement and so on,



#### 4.0 Data, Variable and Methodology

The data used in this study for the period of 1975–2015. This data has been collected from the various issues of Social Policy and Development Centre and World Development Report, Labor Force Survey (various issues), Economic Survey of Bangladesh (various issues) and Global Economy (online source). In this Paper we adapted the qualitative and quantitative approach in order to highlight the catalysts for empowerment. There are three dimensions of Women empowerment –viz social empowerment, economic empowerment and political empowerment.

#### 5.0 Different Dimensions of Empowerment

##### 5.1 Social Dimension

**Table 1 Social Factor Effecting Women Empowerment**

Year	Literacy rate of female	Mean year of schooling	Gross enrollment rate	Fertility rate
1975	12.6	0.59	27.8	6.61
1980	15.1	0.5	31	6.5
1985	18.3	0.8	35.8	6.4
1990	22.4	0.95	38.5	6
1995	27.5	1.13	41.3	5.3
2000	38.6	1.31.	56.7	4.4
2005	40	1.98	72.4	3.7
2010	45.2	1.99	87.01	3.4
2012	46.3	N/A	86.3	3.35
2013	48	N/A	N/A	3.26

Social empowerment covers the various aspects of the social wellbeing of women like female literacy, health, equal opportunities and equal access to justice. There is a positive correlation between primary school education and women’s wellbeing as female education minimizes gender differences and improves household earnings .(HDR-2003 and Kabeer 2003). The importance of primary education is highlighted by its inclusion in the Millennium Development Goals as the second objective. In Bangladesh, female primary literacy rate has increased from 12.5 in 1975 to 39.2% in 2004. And in 2012-13 it is 48%. Even the women s gross enrollment rate at the primary level has drastically improved to 70. %.This improvement reflected in their increased contribution in the labor market. Women s poor health status on the other can be seen from the maternal mortality rate, infant mortality rate weight babies and multiple pregnancies. MMR was 230 in 2005 , 190 in 2010 and 170 in 2013per 100,000 live births and infant mortality rate was 80 in 2005, 73 in 2010 and 60 in 2013 per 1000 live birth (WorldDevelopment indicators).whereas the fertility rate is seven per women during the last thirty years however it is declining .Hence the social factors are not playing their desired role in the women’s health status in important as it lead to higher productivity, greater income potential and improves the social status of the household. As all these indicators improves over time economic and social development takes place.

##### 5.2 Economic Dimension

Another dimension of women empowerment is economics empowerment that includes less poverty, access to credit, remunerated work and sustainable development. In Bangladesh the



currents statics reveal that women are among the less privileged segment of the society. This is being reflected in various pointers – for example in female labor force participation. its rate was in 2003-2004 (LFS 2003-2004)Female labor force participation is extremely low because of early marriages , strong social and cultural influence on outside movement, low human capital, less opportunities ,over burden of household work. Even after the inclusion of the new methodology adopted in the Labor Force Survey 1990-91 the labor force participation now includes fourteen specific agricultural and non-agricultural activities which are classified as economically active work. Women participation in the formal sector is under 10%. However their employment rate in the informal sector in much greater which is almost around. In Bangladesh, 60% of home-based workers belong to households that are below the poverty line (NCSW 2004). These home – based worker mainly include women and children in both urban and rural areas.

**Table2: Economic Factors Effecting Women Empowerment**

Labor force participation rate		Unemployment rate				
Year	Urban female	Rural female	Total	Urban female	Rural female	Total
1975	3.5	7.6	6.4	1.8	0.6	0.7
1979	5.3	14.3	11.8	14.6	6.4	7.6
1985	4.1	10.7	8.7	4.1	0.8	1.4
1991	8.6	14.8	12.8	27.7	13.7	16.8
1995	7	13.3	11.4	22.6	11.7	13.7
2000	8.8	16.1	13.7	29.6	14	17.3
2002	10	16.8	14.4	24.2	14.1	16.5
2004	9.4	19.51	15.9	15.9	10.9	12.1
2006	13.68	19.8	21	16.2	10.18	9.8
2010	10.65	27.5	24	20.65	6.44	8.8
2013	10.8	27.2	25	19.23	6.85	9.3

In Bangladesh the female participation in the urban sector on an average remained around 4.0% during 1970S and 1980s a(Table-2) although it did improve in later years, reaching around 10.8% in 2013. In the unemployment attain the urban areas is approximately 19%. In the rural sector female participation is greater than that of male which is 67% as compare to 43% for men (UNDP report). Women, s involvement in the rural sector had, however, been invisible for many members without any remuneration. Rural female participation rate has averaged around 14.5% to 27.2% during 1974 to 2012-13. The total female unemployment rate is currently 6.8% indicating that more women want to enter the labor market while the available job opportunities are not adequate.

### 5.3 Political Dimension

Women’s empowerment has been a major theme in Bangladesh’s national development policies ever since the inception of the country. The Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees non-discrimination against women and advocates full participation of women in all spheres of national life. (Article 25, 26 and 27 and 32 of Bangladesh) Political freedom is necessary for human development and is an integral part of empowerment. The purpose of women empowerment is to enlarge the scope of women's role in decision-making. The most



fundamental basic right is the freedom to make decision rather than hand it over to someone else.

Political rights are as important as economic and social rights. The gender gap in women's political participation is the most visible phenomenon in Bangladesh. In most developing countries small proportion of women are found in the legislative assemblies or other political institutions.

Men monopolize the political world. It is considered that politics demands masculine qualities like assertiveness, activeness, not feminine characteristics of passiveness and docility; hence women are kept out of the political field. The house of politics is built with the bricks of patriarchal norms; therefore, women are not allowed to enter in it. Like state and community levels, they are somehow, considered ineligible for the leadership of household as well. (*Farooq Muhammad, 2002*)

Political dimension of empowerment model is a vital facet of gender empowerment. The outcome of active and assertive participation by any group or class in politics would determine their role and influence in decision-making process that lead to political empowerment.

To assess the Bangladeshi women's level of political participation, two variables are used in this study: right to vote and representation in national, provincial legislatures as well as local levels.

Right to vote, as feminist suffragists perceive is the first step towards the greater political participation. All three constitutions of Bangladesh (1956, 1962 and 1973) endowed women right to vote. It was expected that it would provide an opportunity to women to articulate their issues through this process. Though, it was not expected to eliminate the forces of oppression, it provided a channel through which the government could integrate women into existing political structures. Yet, women faced problems in exercising the right to vote. Region-specific and socio-cultural barriers determined women's participation in the electoral process and neutralized the gains which women otherwise could receive. However, it is common for political parties or rival candidates in some areas of Bangladesh, particularly in the rural areas of NWFP and Baluchistan, to mutually agree not to let their women to vote.

#### **5.4 Women's representation**

Representation in political parties and political institutions is another variable to measure the level of political participation of women. At the level of political parties and legislatures, the participation of women can be judged from their numbers at the ordinary membership level, their representation in decision-making bodies of the political parties and the number of tickets given to them in general elections and their representation in provincial and national legislatures. Since independence, women although were in few numbers have been consistently represented in federal and provincial legislature. (*Farooq Muhammad, 2002 ;*)

Women representation in the political process determines their political empowerment. In the Parliament, 50% representation of women represents absolute gender equality.

Women are given reserved seats in all three constitution of Bangladesh. Women gained political strength since when the law mandated that the National Assembly reserve 50 seats



out of its 350 for women. Though many observers endorse the idea of setting aside seats, some would like to reform the system for assigning such seats.

**Table 3:**

Year	Women in parliament percent
2003	2
2004	2
2005	14.8
2006	15.1
2007	0
2008	6.3
2009	18.6
2010	18.6
2011	19.7
2012	19.7
2013	19.7
2014	19.8
2015	20

Source: Global Economy.com

According to world economic forum report (2014) Bangladesh rank is 85 in economic empowerment, women in parliament are 71, women in ministerial positions are 138, and year with females as head of the state is 23 years.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

The study strongly supports the contribution of the economic, social and political factors in empowering women. In the era of globalization, there is a dire need to enhance the role of women in the economic development like Bangladesh.

For this purpose, deliberate efforts are required to focus the social sectors specially health and education. As a healthy and educated has a high productivity both at home and outside the home. Education improves the earning power of women as well. Primary education must be compulsory for all girls. Future employment and even running a business definitely require that the women have at least the basic education.

In fact in Bangladesh, women are not aware of what they are capable of and of the opportunities that exist for them. On the part of the government, there need to be coordination among different government departments like Women division/ ministries, local government, Rural Development institutions, which should provide adequate consultation to promote the micro and small enterprises. These institutions should realize the gender related challenges and try to accommodate or minimize these challenges.

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