

“Suppression of Women in Bangladesh: A Demonstrative Scenario”

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to give a demonstration and make awareness about suppression that women are facing in Bangladesh. This article also argues that the socio-cultural values and norms have a strong influence on the issue of women discrimination. World-wide there is increasing recognition of the prevalence and magnitude of violence against women. It is increasingly seen as a violation of women's rights and a barrier to women's enjoyment of other rights. In this article a mere brief has been given on the four aspects of gender inequality that seems to be associated with the overall level in Bangladesh. Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women's ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men “gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of Article 1 of the Convention.” (CEDAW GR 19, para 7). “The definition of discrimination includes gender-based violence, that is, violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty. Gender-based violence may breach specific provisions of the Convention, regardless of whether those provisions expressly mention violence” (CEDAW GR 19, para 6). By ratifying the Convention, the Bangladesh Government has bound itself to implement its provisions (Baseline report, Naripokkho and BD Mohila Parishad, August 24, 1995).

Keywords: Suppression, Human Rights Of Women, Equality, Responsibilities of Government, Women Health, Gender Based Violence, CEDAW, Social Valuation Of Women, Patriarchal Structure, NEP

Introduction

As a South Asian country, Bangladesh is no different from its neighbors. Violence against women is amongst the most serious threats to overall development and progress in Bangladesh. Widespread violence and repression in numerous forms puts women's lives at risk in almost all parts of the country (Farouk. A Sharmeen, April 11 & 14, 2005).

On November 25, 1960, three Dominican sisters, political activists known as the Hermanas Mirabal, were brutally assassinated for opposing the Trujillo dictatorship. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women remembers this day and The Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was adopted by the United Nations on December 18, 1979. It is also known as the “Women's Convention” or the “Women's Bill of Rights”. The Convention is the most comprehensive and detailed international

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agreement, which seeks the advancement of women. It establishes rights for women in areas not previously subject to international standards (Barrister Afroz Tureen).

Bangladesh signed and ratified CEDAW in 1984 with reservations on Articles 2, 13.1[a], 16.1[c] and [f] on the basis of religious sentiments conflicting with religious Islamic Shariah laws in 1993. In 1996, the government withdrew its reservation on articles 13.1 [a] and 16.1 [f], still retaining reservations on article 2 and 16.1[c]. Article 2 commits states to ‘agree to pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating discrimination against women’.

Since article 2 is therefore critical to its fulfillment, the reservation of the Bangladeshi government is a considerable obstacle to achieve CEDAW. Bangladesh is obliged to report annually to the CEDAW committee on steps taken to combat forms of violence against women. The latter then makes further recommendations. Despite the existing legislation prohibiting violence and discrimination against women, several police and newspaper reports and hospital statistics indicated the widespread increase in violence against women in Bangladesh (Wiegand Caroline April 30, 2012), including domestic violence, rape, acid-throwing, dowry-related violence, fatwa-instigated violence and sexual harassment in the workplace (CEDAW/C/BGD/Q/7). All these contribute to the exploitation, deprivation and oppression of women in Bangladesh. In fact, those are violations of the fundamental Human Rights (World Bank, *Whispers to Voices*: March 2008).

The patriarchal value, norms and traditions make the scenario of Bangladesh. Women here have been subjected to exploitation and negligence for centuries. In the last two decades violence against women, (gender-based violence) has emerged as the most pressing and intractable social problem across regional, social and cultural boundaries. Bangladesh is no exception to that. Violence against women is a common and insidious phenomenon in Bangladesh (Bhuiya Abbas & Wahed Tania, April 20, 2007). Bangladesh’s socio-cultural environment contains pervasive gender discrimination, so girls and women face many obstacles to their development. Girls are often considered to be financial burdens on their family, and from the time of birth, they receive less expenditure in their healthcare and education. With the advent of puberty, differences in the ways that adolescent girls and boys are treated become much more pronounced. Adolescence is not viewed as a distinct phase of life; instead the onset of physical maturity is seen as an abrupt shift from childhood to adulthood. At puberty, girls’ mobility is often restricted, which limits their access to livelihood, learning and recreational and social activities (UNICEF, *State of the World’s Children*: 2007)

Discriminatory Factors

There are several discriminatory factors working behind suppression against women which is generally explicit in traditional socio-economic and cultural systems.

Economical Discrimination: The status of women has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to health, marriage, children, education, employment and social equality. Women in Bangladesh are victims of inequality, abuse, oppression and exploitation, social customs and traditions, illiteracy and face a lack of employment opportunities which have hampered the total integration of women in the mainstream development activities in Bangladesh (Akter Marufa, December 10, 2007). Fundamental rights of women, including the rights to life and the security of the person, to equality before the law, to freedom of expression, of association and religion, have over the past months been repeatedly violated by various groups in Bangladesh.

The value of women's unpaid work in Bangladesh has never been addressed. The patriarchal society or male dominating society always treat women inferior to them in every sector and make themselves judgmental from the beginning that women are not qualified to take decision or give decision. They are less creative than men. They are only born to abide by the words of either their father or husband or brother or any other male person of the family. Another area which needs to be examined is how the traditional structure of Bangladesh strongly upholds patriarchal values, norms and traditions which define the men's role as primary breadwinner of the family, and restricts women's role as mothers, wives, daughters and primary care givers in the family without recognizing their other labour values eg. household work, community work, etc. Without this recognition, women's contribution inside the home will remain valueless (Bhuiya, Abbas; & Wahed, Tania; April 20, 2007).

For economic development it is extremely necessary to identify and give recognition to the reproductive and productive roles of women which they perform for their family, society and their country. Ultimately, this social valuation of women would give them self-reliance, internal strength as well as greater bargaining power through which they would be able to overcome sources of their vulnerability (Akter Marufa, December 10, 2007). Women have globally less economic opportunities to improve their lives. They are often restricted in terms of education, ownership of wealth, monetary return for their work, financial opportunities, and opportunities to influence the decision making at the level of the family and the society. Casual observation indicates that those countries in which women and men have more equal economic opportunities, are also the more affluent ones.

Globally women's lives more than men's are centered at home. They tend to be more excluded from the society at large. This exclusion can be external as in some developing countries or Arab countries or internal created by the women themselves. The societal norms and rules may exclude women from particular types of paid employment or leadership positions. On the other hand men may be excluded from childcare and the home sphere, which is considered to be the woman's territory.

Discrimination of Literacy of Girls: Women's education in Bangladesh lags far behind than that of men. The fact that women are less educated than men is largely due to ancient tradition and common mentality. The reasons why women are seldom as well educated as men lie outside the education system. Ideas about the appropriate roles of women in the labour market or in the society and about the biological unsuitability of women for some activities and the gender based division of work in the household and in the farm influence decision about schooling of the girls.

Numerous affirmative actions were introduced to enhance the female literacy in Bangladesh. However, there remains a considerable gap in enrollment. Literacy as well as the significantly higher proportion of female dropout from the system is still a major concern. The literacy of male children was 49.5 percent in 2000 at the national level, which has increased to 61.12 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.16 percent. Continuation of this rate indicates that the literacy rate of the male children may increase to 65.77 percent in the national level by 2014 which is 34.23 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent, whereas, the literacy rate of female children in the national level was 40.1 percent in 2000, which has increased to 54.8 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.47 percent. Under the business as usual scenario, the literacy rate of the female might be 60.68 percent at the national level in 2014, which would be 39.32 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. There are also high rural-urban variations in case of the literacy rate by sex where the rural women are far behind than their urban counterparts and male counterparts as well. Gender disparity is significantly high in higher education (university level). In 2001, among the total students in the public universities, only 24.3 percent were female students whereas the male enrollment comprises almost three times higher (75.7 percent) than that of the female. It is also observed that over the years, both male and female enrollment in the university level is increasing with a slower rate. In recent times, the rate at which the female enrollment at the primary level is increasing, the enrollment in higher level is not increasing at the same rate in the same place (Ferdaush Jannatul, & Rahman Mustafizur: October 2011)

It is a strong belief that a son should be educated because, unlike a daughter who after her marriage shifts to another family, he has need to support his aged parents and other family member. For such beliefs, most families prepare the girls for marriage and they are taught to be obedient and quiet, to respect the leading roles played by males, and to take on the responsibility for bearing and rearing children. Such responsibility not only hinders them in attending school but also precludes them from external jobs.

Research suggests that the presence of more educated children in the household and community acts as a restraint on violence against women (World Bank, *Whispers to Voices*, 2007). In addition, educated girls tend to delay marriage, are more likely to seek help during childbirth and are more likely to give birth to healthy babies who will survive and grow into adulthood.

Child Marriage: Child marriages occur when one of the parties is below 18 years of age and are a violation of human rights that disproportionately affects girls. Child marriages also violate other human rights including education, freedom from violence, reproductive rights, and access to

reproductive and sexual health employment, freedom of movement, and the right to consensual marriage (Child Brides Denied Education: October 10,2012)

Though the practice of child marriage has decreased in Bangladesh over the last 30 years, it remains common in rural areas and urban slums, especially among the poor. The age of legal marriage is 18 for girls, however three-quarters of women aged 20-49 were married before 18. The practice of arranging child marriages remains common, especially in rural areas and in urban slums, where many families believe that the onset of puberty signifies readiness for marriage. Although the practice is illegal, it is common for the bride's family to pay a dowry to the family of the groom. There is evidence that the practice of dowry is becoming more common. In one study, women aged 46-60 reported that dowry was practically non-existent when they married, while 46% of women aged 15-25 reported that they had to pay dowry (World Bank, *Whisper to Voices*: March 2008). Child marriage almost inevitably disrupts girls' education and exposes them to domestic violence. Human Rights Watch reports that it came across so many Bangladeshi girls who did not know how old she was but thought that she might be 15 or 16. They were forced to marry soon before finishing primary education. After the marriage, they could not satisfy her husband's demands for money from her family (dowry demands), and faced hardship of mental and physical torture and eventually her husband poured acid on her face, eyes, and back. (Child Brides Denied Education: October 10,2012)

Malnutrition: Malnutrition is widespread and has been recognized as a public health problem in Bangladesh. People living in absolute poverty are more susceptible to infection, disease and malnutrition. Women are often first to suffer malnutrition in the family. This has repercussions on their health, productivity, quality of life, survival (Babul Parvez, October 22, 2010).

Nutritional status was assessed by measurement of body mass index (BMI) and hemoglobin concentration. Anthropometric measurements included weight and height. Anemia was assessed by hemoglobin measurements with HemoCue photometer. Stool samples were examined for worm infestation by 'Direct Microscopic Wet Mounts' method. A dietary survey was conducted using the 24-h dietary recall method. Chronic energy deficiency was highly prevalent among women, 56% had BMI <18.5 kg/m. Mean body weight was 40.3 kg. Even though the mean body height was 148.3 cm, about one third (29%) were less than 145cm. Prevalence of anemia was detected in 48% of the women. The average per capita total energy intake in women was calculated as 1609 kcal/day. Almost 90% calorie came from cereals. Overall parasites infestation prevalence was 66%. The most common parasite was ascaris with prevalence of 52%, hookworm and trichuris trichiura were 23% and 14% respectively. Less than 3% had any formal schooling.

Only 15% women used sanitary latrine and 19% women took iron tablet during the last months of pregnancy. Significant association was found between BMI and reported illness, perceived health status and signature capability ($p<0.05$). Anemia prevalence was found to be associated with signature capability, iron tablet intake and total number of pregnancy ($p<0.05$). A significant deterioration of women's nutritional status was observed in relation to age, women aged 35 years and above were more malnourished compared with younger women. One explanation, the association between age and nutritional status, can be the cumulative impact of gender inequalities in intra house food distribution and work load over the life cycle. Another

explanation for this age relation is the hypothesis of maternal depletion, where repeated reproductive cycle is thought to be the reason of deterioration of nutritional status. Number of pregnancies is considered as an indicator of maternal depletion. The associations between hemoglobin concentration and parity and age have been observed in other low-income societies. (Haseen Farhana, March, 25)

Recommendations

In most countries, women receive second class status, and their rights severely being restricted in many cases. Even in more advanced countries with laws to prevent gender discrimination, women still earn less than men and receive less respect. Reducing gender discrimination is a lofty goal with many obstacles. Though government regulations certainly help the situation, the real method to reduce gender discrimination is through education and changing the ways that people think about gender roles. Discrimination is a negative judgment toward a person's gender, age, religion, race, nationality, sexual preference or height.

1. State parties should ensure in every sphere of life that women enjoy all the human rights and fundamental freedom.
2. Demand women's participation in decision-making at all levels.
3. Equality of women and men under the law; protection of women and girls through the rule of law.
4. Demand security forces and systems to protect women and girls from gender-based violence.
5. Ensure that women's experiences, needs and perspectives are incorporated into the political, legal and social decisions that determine the achievement of just and lasting peace. (<http://www.gnwp.org>)
6. Pay attention to the ways to form gender in children's upbringing.
7. Reduce gender discrimination in the educational institutions.
9. In the institutions, organizations, corporations and various companies it is required to include anti-discrimination policies under employee policies. There should be clear examples of workplace discrimination to clarify any questions the employees may have.
10. Required policies to be reviewed annually. Let the employees read the policies and take an examination annually to keep the information fresh. This will ensure employees don't lose sight of the importance of stopping workplace discrimination. (<http://www.ehow.com>)
11. Hold special diversity training for managers. Managers and executives should receive a higher level of training. They should be trained in fostering diversity and preventing discrimination in the workplace.(<http://www.ehow.com>)
12. Resolve allegations of discrimination quickly. All claims of workplace discrimination should be investigated quickly. If the offender is found to be guilty, punishment should be delivered immediately. This can include termination or probation. All consequences should always be documented in writing to protect the company from legal action.
(<http://www.ehow.com>)

13. Provide adequate health care to all people. Without health care, women are at a higher risk for death due to complications from pregnancy. This is especially true in developing countries.
14. It is required to strictly maintaining the provisions of Bangladesh Labour Act (2006) regarding female workers in workplace including wage, maternity leave, work between sensitive machineries, etc.
15. Encourage men in the fight against gender discrimination. Gender discrimination happens because people think that men are better than women. It seems obvious that women would want to change the system, but men are less likely to want to give up their positions of power. However, when men take part in resisting gender discrimination--by treating women with respect, by paying female employees the same rates as men and by encouraging their sons to express feelings, for example, the movement towards gender equality is strengthened.([http:// www.gnwp.org](http://www.gnwp.org)).
16. Government should repeal the reservation of Article 2, 13,1(a) & 16, 1(a) & (f) for full implementation of women rights in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

The demonstration of the scope and nature of violence against women in Bangladesh leads one to conclude that there are certain critical gaps in our knowledge and policy. One of the main reasons is that the policy makers either do not feel it necessary, or do not make public its failure to provide necessary protection to women. In this article a finding comes out through various references and certain literature reviews that suppression of women is the most obvious gender-specific violation of Human Rights, and is a form of discrimination against women. It reflects women's subordination and patriarchal structures throughout all stages of society, leading to issues such as the undervaluation of women's economic contributions. Violence against women is not only embedded in gender norms but also constructed through violence against women.

Although some sporadic steps have been taken at the policy level to reduce gender inequality in different sectors, yet the fruits of these steps have not been translated into reality because of the lack of proper monitoring and implementation. This article concludes that in developing countries like Bangladesh socio-cultural influence is a major source for women's discrimination. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are crucial to the development of sound population and development strategies and essential for sustainable development. This article suggests that in order to bring equal opportunity between men and women, the traditional attitudes and gender stereotyped roles of women need to change in both private and public spheres. It is also important to change parents' ideology to give preference to son than to girl. Education can play an important role in changing parents' ideology. In the same way the society can come out from traditional patriarchal thinking. Government also needs to be aware of effective implementation of the existing laws in favour of women empowerment.

Bangladesh has many laws for the protection of women, for example, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act 1933, the Family Court Ordinance, the Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment) Ordinance, the Trafficking in Women and Children Act 1993, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the

Prevention of Women and Child Repression Act (2000), etc. In order to achieve the target, the government needs to be creative in renewing and revising strategies and approaches. Otherwise, the aims of achieving gender equality might remain elusive and a distant dream. (Ferdaush Jannatul & Rahman Mustafizur, October,2011)

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