CHAPTER II

Women in Bangladesh
2.1. Social Position of Women

Traditionally, a woman in Bangladesh derives her status from her family. Her role consists of maintenance of her family as a social institution and as an economic entity and emphasis is given to child rearing and household management. Even in household decision making, women’s role and participation are more limited than men’s. Although decisions are most frequently (ranging from 39 to 79 percent of the time) made jointly by husband and wife, independent decision-making is more the prerogative of the husband than the wife.\(^1\) The life-style of most Bangladeshi women is governed and controlled by the patriarchal system bound by social, cultural and religious traditions and norms, which is based on class and gender division. Under this social system, women are still dependent upon the male members of the family.

Male superiority or female inferiority is an accepted social norm in Bangladesh. Female inferiority and dependence emanate from the social belief that a woman is physically weak, intellectually poor, mentally inconsistent, timid and irrational, and psychologically emotional.\(^2\) Woman’s position of inferiority is secured by a system of seclusion or *purdah*. To be an ideal woman she has to be in *purdah* and this has different implications for women of different classes. *Purdah* literally means ‘curtain’ or ‘veil’ and it represents the system of isolation of Muslim women from outsiders and imposes high standards of female modesty. The

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observance of *purdah* implies restrictions on the mobility of women and contact with men. Restrictions means that a woman stays within the family compound or *bari* which is usually surrounded by a wall of vegetation and sometimes has screens of woven rushes to protect the inner courtyard. Whenever possible, she stays within the inner courtyard. She is never seen by any but close males. This degree of seclusion requires access to water for bathing within the *bari* and the presence of servants. As one author observed in “Village Women As I Saw Them”,

Male guests and visitors and even male servants are attended by male members of the family. Not only do the women remain unseen, but often their voices are not heard by outsiders. For example, if food is being prepared for the men to serve male visitors, the women who are cooking may communicate and give instructions by gesture and posture.³

Although the practice of putting women in *purdah* is changing—mainly because of practical reasons—it is still socially valued. One of the worst forms of demeaning women is perhaps the practice of dowry—illegal in Bangladesh, but still practiced. Dowry is the giving of monetary and other gifts to the groom for marrying a person’s daughter. It is not known in Muslim law but is a social custom, accommodated rather favorably by a patriarchal society.

Gender discrimination starts at birth. According to predominant local customs, the birth of a boy is announced by a loud “azan” (call for prayer), whereas the *azan* is whispered in the case of a new born girl. In the naming ceremony “*akika*”, two goats are sacrificed for a boy and one for a girl. The birth of a daughter means a burden for most of the parents because of the heavy demands set by the bridegroom’s party. Dowry is not only paid at the time of marriage but demands also

continue after the marriage. Failure to meet the demands could mean physical and mental violence against the women. Marriage itself does not necessarily offer women security.4

Thus, the roles of women in Bangladesh are domestic in nature and they have been relegated primarily to play the role of a docile daughter, a compliant wife and a dependent mother. The husband is the lord and master of the household; he has authority over the domestic scene. The division of roles between husband and the wife is extremely clear although this could differ from class to class.

2.2 Violence against Women

Bangladesh is one of the worst affected countries in terms of violence against women and has recently been assigned the second place in the world in this respect.5 It is well-defined as "... any act of gender based violence that results or is likely to result in physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life."6

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993) to which Bangladesh is signatory, addresses all forms of violence, degrading treatment and abuse. Yet, violence against women remains one of the greatest threats to their well being and indeed to their development and stability. Existing research shows that the common denominator in all these phenomena is economic

marginalisation and their lack of access to resources which is usually controlled by male members. As a result, women are becoming vulnerable to various forms of violence, both in urban and rural areas. According to a report in 1995, the total number of incidents of violence against women was 710. In 1997, such incidents rose to an alarming figure of 1613. One of the objectives of the Five-Year Plan (1997-2002) is to reduce the insecurity faced by women and girls, and the "elimination of all sorts of violence against women and for the treatment and rehabilitation of violence survivors." Yet, many such acts, particularly within the home, are ignored as a private family matter or justified as socially acceptable. The laws to protect women are ill understood and under-used.

Gender based violence is perpetrated at different levels, at the family, community, and state levels, and in different forms. Family is the major site of violence. It was found that between 1990 and 1991, on an average, four cases of violence against women were reported in the papers daily. The nature of violence included wife battering, murder of wife, kidnapping, rape, physical assault, acid throwing and suicide. While physical dimension of gender violence may be most readily identifiable, psychological abuse, the deprivation of resources for physical and psychological needs and the commodification of women, through trafficking and prostitution, are also important dimensions of gender violence.

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7 Daily News, Dhaka, 1997
It can be observed from Table 2.1 that during the period 1995-2000, among the number of violent acts specifically against women, rape cases were more in number followed by domestic violence and dowry deaths. An alarming increase in

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rape</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>753</td>
<td>1,425</td>
<td>1238</td>
<td>348</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic Violence</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>273</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry Death</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acid Throwing</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


rape and dowry deaths has led to demands of more effective action by the state. It is felt that the increase in violence against women has taken place not due to an absence of law but due to the lack of proper enforcement of law. In July 2000 alone, the number of women acid-burnt were 4,15 raped and 17 murdered.\(^1\) In 1998, 596 cases of murder of women were reported in the national newspaper. Of these, at least 62 per cent were committed by husbands and in-laws in domestic and dowry disputes. Out of 368 murders, cases were filed in only 56 per cent. Murder at the hands of terrorists claimed 113 women's lives for which only three cases were filed.\(^2\) Up to fifty percent of all murders in Bangladesh are of women victims who succumb to domestic violence.\(^3\) The major reason of such acts of violence are

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\(^1\) Mitra, n. 5, p.12.

\(^2\) Ain O Salish Kendra, n. 8, p.143.

\(^3\) Ibid, p.147.
dowry demands, physical appearance, and inability to bear children or sons. It takes the form of murder, mental abuse and polygamous marriages. The incident of murder for dowry is almost a regular phenomenon in Bangladesh.

In Bangladesh, the main difficulties in tackling domestic violence is that communities do not have any concern for violation of a woman's right to equality. The social acceptance of inequality in gender relations allows violence within the home to be relegated as a private matter. The failure to include domestic violence as a crime in national legislature contravenes the constitutional principle of equal treatment under the law. Inequalities suffered by women in all arenas will continue so long as gender inequality remains institutionalized. The various governments of Bangladesh have introduced and are still introducing new protective laws for women, yet this seems only to create the illusion that women enjoy a protected position.  

Trafficking is a serious issue in Bangladesh. In recent years, there are cases of an increasing number of women being taken across to the neighbouring countries. Perennial poverty forces the rural women to leave the house and advance towards towns and cities to procure jobs for survival. The traffickers trap these unfortunate women and force them into prostitution, bonded-labour, cheap-labour, slavery and servitude in the guise of marriage. The extent of women trafficking is not known, but organizations active in the area have made estimates of the number of women and children involved. According to Non-Governmental sources and Bangladesh

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14 In order to protect women from various forms of violence, a number of laws have been framed. In 1980, the Dowry Prohibition Act was passed. The Cruelty on Women Act of 1983 was especially passed to enhance punishment against those who commit violence against women. The Women and Child Repression Special Provision Act of 1995 further increased the punishment for crimes against women.

Women's Lawyer Association Reports, about 200,000 women and children have been illegally smuggled to the Middle East in the last 20 years and another 200,000 stranded in Pakistan who are victims of trafficking. It is estimated by human rights activists that about 4500 women and children are trafficked to Pakistan from Bangladesh every year and 200-400 young women and children every month. The majority ends up in prostitution. UNICEF estimates that at present, some 40,000 Bangladeshi women are engaged in prostitution in Pakistan and a further 10,000-12,000 in Bombay and West Bengal in India. A statistical report of the Indian Social Welfare Board estimates that the percentage of Bangladeshi prostitutes serving in India is 2.7 per cent.

Physical abuse and other forms of violence are perpetrated against the girl-child in the form of trafficking for prostitution, and beatings by home owners when they are employed as domestic help and by relatives and neighbours. United Nations International Children's Emergency Funds has recently estimated that there are about 10,000 child prostitutes in Bangladesh. Other estimates have been as high as 29,000. A survey of 1,011 child domestic workers (in 1000 homes) found that 27 per cent of the girls and 25 per cent of the boys in domestic service are victims of both physical and verbal abuse. 40 per cent of the girls are abused physically and they work an average of 15-16 hours per day. The survey reports that 38 per cent of the girls are between the ages of 11-13. Many rural people migrate to the city to look for jobs due to poverty which is one of the means through which children find

themselves in domestic labour. The young girls are trapped in violent situations where they suffer from malnutrition and inhuman torture.

Violence such as fatwa in the guise of religion is another serious matter in Bangladesh society. Fatwas are now being pronounced at the shalish\textsuperscript{19} by people who have no authority or scholarship, and are being used to weigh up evidence, which is not the function of the fatwa-giver, (or fatwa –monger). From January 1993 to July 1995, there have been nearly 30 reported cases of fatwas passed on women who have dared to transcend the traditional and ‘normal’ submissive attitude women should possess, or who have been cruelly abused by members of the village elite.\textsuperscript{20}

There is an urgent need for an effective cross-boundary civil society activism. Programmes for awareness building within the country is another important task, which the NGOs have already begun. The fact that undocumented migrants get work opportunities in the receiving countries, suggests that there is a need for such labour. Therefore, by liberalizing migration procedures, legal migration may be encouraged.

2.3 Legal Status of Women

Although the status of women is determined by a combination of many factors, the rights, duties, capacities and incapacities of women are determined by law. Within Bangladesh, several parallel legal systems exist: law derived from religion, civil law, and law under the Constitution. When multiple legal systems operate, contradictions arise which hold specific implications on the rights and status

\textsuperscript{19} Shailish is an informal body constituted by the village elders on their own initiative where they accuse individuals of misbehaviour and punish them. These judgements have been justified in the name of customary practice and religious laws shari’a, but the meting out of punishments have in recent years become increasingly and dangerously illegal.

\textsuperscript{20} Khan, n.18, p.176.
of women. Indeed, the provisions of the Constitution and those of general legislation sometimes differ widely from religious codes of conduct. The legal status of Christian, Muslim and Hindu women is sustained under both the Constitution and under law. However, the Constitution itself is contradictory, although it provides for equality between the sexes and equality before the law.\textsuperscript{21}

We now propose to discuss the legal status of women in Bangladesh under the headings below.

\textbf{2.3.1 Constitutional Law}

The Constitution of Bangladesh asserts the principle of equality for all citizens and grants equal rights to women, prohibiting discrimination on grounds only of sex. Further, the Constitution asserts that nothing shall prevent the state from making special provisions in favour of women and children, or for the advancement of any backward group of citizens. Thus, it is clear that women are considered at par with backward sections of citizens. However, there is an apparent contradiction in the Constitution: on the one hand, it provides for equality but on the other hand, the autonomy allowed to certain groups prevents the effective recognition of the rights of women. For instance, every religious group is allowed to be governed by its religious norms, so in personal matters like divorce, custody of children and inheritance, inequality exists in the status of women.\textsuperscript{22} Moreover there are different kinds of laws based on the different religions of the country, such as the personal laws of Muslims, Hindus and Christians. These laws mete out differential treatment between men and women, and women have been found to be discriminated. There

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Baden, n. 10, p. 75.
\end{itemize}
has been no attempt to remove the unequal status of women by way of promulgating a law acceptable to all sections of the society.

The Government of Bangladesh has been a signatory to the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) with reservations. Article 2 of the Convention relates to policy measures to be undertaken to eliminate discrimination and seeks to: embody the principle of equality in national Constitutions, codes or other laws and ensure its practical realization; establish institutions to protect against discrimination; ensure that public authorities and institutions refrain from discrimination; and abolish all existing laws, customs and regulations that discriminate against women. Article 13 (a) assures equal access to family benefits. Article 16 (c) provides for equality during marriage and its dissolution and Article 16 (f) ensures equal rights to guardianship and adoption of children.23 Other than this, the Fifth, Eighth and Tenth Constitutional Amendments are also relevant to this study.24

2.3.2 Personal Laws

Personal law means the law governing individual's marriage, divorce, custody and guardianship of children and of their property inheritance, maintenance, etc. Personal laws differ from religion to religion.

The study focuses mainly on Muslim law as more than 80 per cent of the population of Bangladesh are Muslims and their lives are guided by the Muslim Personal law, known as Shariah law which has originated from the Quran and

23 ibid, pp. 106-7.
24 For details on constitutional law please refer Khan, n.18, pp. 66-81.
Sunnah which is based on Hadith. Hindu and Christian laws are, however, incorporated wherever necessary.

Muslim Personal laws perpetuate gender inequalities by placing women under the control and authority of men. Further, the husband has the right of unilateral divorce, polygamy, and guardianship over wife and children, including the right of physical chastisement. There are several areas in the Muslim law where, despite some amendments, a woman does not enjoy much freedom which restricts her rights in areas of marriage, divorce, guardianship and custody of children and inheritance.

i. Marriage

The concept of marriage in Islam is similar to that of a legal contract. Like any contract, the consent of both the parties (man and woman) for a formal offer to marry and a formal acceptance is necessary and it may also be broken under certain conditions.

Muslim men have the right, under Islam, to marry either a Muslim woman or a woman of the Christian or Jewish faith (a ‘kitabiyah’ or one whose religious laws come from a divine book). However, Muslim women can only marry Muslim men. If a Muslim woman marries outside her faith, the marriage is considered void ab initio and the offspring illegitimate. Of course, she loses her dower as well, as the marriage is not per Islamic rites. A Muslim male may marry a woman of Hindu or Buddhist faith, but the marriage will be regarded as ‘irregular’ under Muslim law.

25 For example, a wife inherits only one eighth of her husband’s property if she has only one or more children and one fourth if she is childless; a daughter inherits only half of a son’s share; if there are no male children, a daughter inherits a fixed share and the rest of the estate is inherited by the agnate relatives, that is relatives only on the male side of the family, such as a brother or father of deceased.
Even though the children born of such marriage will be considered legitimate, the concerned parties will not be able to inherit from each other.\textsuperscript{26}

The Muslim Family Ordinance of 1961, which governs marriage and divorce, allows a Muslim male to have up to the four wives. The fact that there are specific conditions under which polygamous marriages are allowed in Islam seems to be scarcely remembered while taking a second wife.\textsuperscript{27} Muslim marriage, unlike marriages in Hinduism and Christianity, is considered to be a contract and has all the strapping of a civil contract. According to the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, the minimum marriageable age for women was fixed at 14 which was later raised to 18 and 21 for men, though violation of this does not render the marriage illegal.\textsuperscript{28} Thus, Muslim women never enjoy equal rights in marriage and remain vulnerable in marital life.

A Muslim woman can legally renounce her marriage if contracted without her consent (or guardian’s consent in case of minor) and the renouncement must be performed in presence of two witnesses. All Muslim marriages are requested to be registered though in practice more than half of the marriages are not registered.\textsuperscript{29} 

\textit{Bride price(Mehr) or Dower(Mohorana)}\textsuperscript{30} is an integral part of the Muslim Marriage Contract. However, since the early 1970s, the bride price system has been

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{26} Khan, n.18, p. 84.
\bibitem{27} It provides that a husband has to obtain permission from his wife before entering into a second marriage.
\bibitem{29} ibid, p. 19.
\bibitem{30} Bride price or Dower is a kind of security for the bride and is payable on demand. It is given by the groom's family as a consideration for the marriage and is a compulsory element in a Muslim marriage.
\end{thebibliography}
supplanted by the *dowry* system although this has no Islamic basis. Under the dowry system, money, goods or a job for the man are demanded from the woman’s family as part of the marriage agreement. It is well known that the ‘demand system’ (*daabi* or dowry), mobilized by men prior to marriage, is also used at intervals after marriage to make new claims on a woman’s family. If these claims are not satisfied, the wife may be mistreated, threatened with divorce, or even killed. A micro-level study of a village found that although the uptake of dowry cut across religious boundaries, the incidence was lower amongst Christians. As for the Hindus, the practice has a long standing. The legislation for the prevention of dowry was introduced in 1980 (the Dowry Prohibition Act) after a lot of pressure from women’s organizations. However, this Act had very limited effect.

**ii. Divorce and Maintenance**

Under the Muslim Law, divorce is a unilateral right of the man. He can exercise this right at any time during marriage. A Muslim wife can divorce her husband only if she has been delegated the power to divorce, or if both spouses are mutually inclined to a divorce or if he consents to divorce her at her request or she avails herself of the intervention of the court under the provisions of the dissolution of the Muslim Marriages Act, 1939. Sharia’t law permits divorced or widowed women to remarry. In regard to Hindu law divorce is prohibited. However, the Hindu widows are allowed to remarry though cases of remarriage are low. As for the Christians, divorce is allowed.

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31 Dowry is any money or property promised to the groom in consideration of the marriage. Though it is illegal under the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980, it is still practised by many in the guise of presents to the groom.

32 Baden, n.10, pp.76-86.

In the event of divorce, maintenance of the divorced wife, under Muslim law as interpreted and practiced in Bangladesh, is for three months ten days only, yet the Quran provides an injunction whereby a righteous Muslim husband is to provide maintenance for his divorced wife according to her status as long as she does not remarry. Muslim women are granted custody over the boy children until they are seven and over girls until puberty. Hindu women are also entitled to maintenance. However, in all cases, the potential for women to actually benefit from this right is limited. In Bangladesh, it is obvious that women will depend on their husbands, it being a patriarchal society. Men are regarded as the primary earners of the family and the head of a household.

iii. Guardianship of the Children

A Muslim mother is not entitled to the guardianship of her children. The right lies with the husband and, after him, his father and brothers. However, the mother is responsible for the care and custody of her children in the event of divorce and a father is responsible for the maintenance of the children while they are in their mother’s custody. However, a mother may lose custody of her children, if she remARRies a stranger, or neglects to take proper care of the child. But if the welfare of the child demands, the mother may be appointed guardian by the court even though she has married a stranger. 34

Under Hindu Law, the father is always the guardian of the children regardless of their age. A mother has rights, but inferior to those of the father. In a sense, the father by his will can appoint another person as the guardian of the child.

Thus, in such a situation the father deprives the mother from the guardianship of the child.

iv. Inheritance

The laws governing inheritance by Muslims in Bangladesh have originated from the edicts of the Quran. Under the Sharia’s law there are significant gender differences in the provisions regarding the inheritance of property. A woman without children can inherit a quarter of husband’s property, and women with children inherit one eighth. The daughters inherit half the share of son’s from their father’s estate. Women have the right of sale or transfer of the property inherited by them. However, ability to exercise rights over property by the rural women is constrained by inequitable social systems and by legal provisions which perpetuate gender differences and make women less able to act as subjects than men. Usually sons or male household intermediaries may take control over the women’s property.35 A woman does not have any claim to her inheritance from her father’s estate but usually exchanges it with her brothers for the right to visit her parental home once or twice a year. It is a sort of security for her as it works on the notion that when she becomes a widow or a destitute, she will be looked after by her brother.

For Hindu women, property is inherited only in the absence of sons and grandsons (up to the great grandsons). Christians have an equal share in each other’s property i.e. between the husband and wife. Sons and daughters too have equal shares in their deceased parent’s estate. The inheritance rights of Hindu women are

35 Baden, n. 10, p. 78.
limited consisting mainly of usufruct rights. Unlike Muslim women, sale and transfer of property inherited through the male kin is impossible for Hindu women.  

Inequalities persisting in the laws especially the Personal Laws of the Muslims are considered great obstacles to women's development in Bangladesh. Often lack of resources leads to slow and ineffective implementation of laws. Promulgation of new laws or modification of legislation for the protection of women's rights can be meaningful only when simultaneous steps are taken to improve the economic situation of women.

2.4 Women and Poverty

Bangladesh is one of the most densely populated and economically and industrially backward countries in the world with a per capita income of $253. At least 70 million people live in absolute poverty, and of these, 35 to 50 million form the extreme ultra poverty group. There is evidence to suggest that the economic condition of some of the rural poor may have improved in the last decade. The proportion of people living in poverty fell from 57.5 per cent in 1987 to 51.7 per cent in 1994. An important factor behind the improvement in rural economic conditions has been the drastic reduction in the growth of rural population due to rapid rural-urban migration and reduction in natural growth of population. However, although the incidence of poverty in Bangladesh has declined over the years, fifty-six per cent of the population in urban and fifty-one percent in rural areas are still estimated to be living in absolute poverty.

While poverty is identified as an overwhelming feature of Bangladesh, it affects the women more than the men. Among the poor, women are the poorer. Poverty is a multidimensional phenomenon. It is indicated by the family structures, dependency rate, money incomes, level of education, nutritional intakes, access to pure drinking water, health care services, dwelling houses etc. Women are behind in almost all these counts. For poverty alleviation and improvement of women’s lives, all these factors need to be addressed.

Women’s poverty is partly determined by overall household poverty. But the level of poverty is different from that of men by gender inequalities within the household and beyond. The proportion of women is higher in disadvantaged households, such as wage labour households, those facing food shortage, and those with lower income. Taking into consideration that the sex ratio in Bangladesh is in favour of males, this indicates that in absolute terms more women than men are poor.

Female-Headed Households (FHHs) is another indicator of women’s poverty which constitute nine percent of all households and 30 percent of all poor households. While 47 per cent of all household members are female, in the case of de jure female-headed households, the proportion is as high as 62 percent. Among all the households living below the absolute poverty line, a significantly higher proportion of women headed households are found to live in extreme and ultra poverty relative to the members of male headed households (see Table 2.2). It

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39 FHHs are defined as those with no male over 18 years of age present in the household. These would include widowed, divorced and abandoned women who are solely responsible for their own and their children’s survival.

40 De jure female-headed households are those households where the women is the main bread­­earner.

41 Hamid, n. 9, p.86.
is interesting to note that more FHHs live in the rural areas than in the urban areas.

The implication is that women in rural areas are much harder hit.

**Table 2.2**


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residence</th>
<th>Ultra Poverty Women Headed</th>
<th>Men Headed</th>
<th>Extreme Poverty Women Headed</th>
<th>Men Headed</th>
<th>Absolute Poverty Women Headed</th>
<th>Men Headed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: Ultra-poverty line: 1600 K cal per person per day

Extreme Poverty Line: 1805 K cal per person per day

Absolute poverty line: 2122 K cal per person per day

Poverty is not equally experienced across gender. In most cases it is biased against women. In various estimates gender specific inequality is evident. The nutrition index shows that the female scores 80 as against the 100 of the male; wage index also shows gender disparity because female scores 48 as opposed to 100 of the male. However, the estimation of the poverty level of male-female disparity is not very wide. Among the poor and non-poor category households, seventy six percent women belonged to the poor category households compared to the 74.5 among the male.42

### 2.5 Women in the Economy

Women’s work are of two kinds: ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’. Visible work is counted and invisible work is not counted in the concept of economic activity. Thus

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the concept of ‘economic activity’ is criticized not only for its limitation, but also for the non-recognition of women’s multiple activities. This, in effect, institutionalizes the unequal relations between men and women.

Women in Bangladesh are not just housewives, they are the major contributors to the economy of the country. Women make direct contribution to the economy through their participation in agriculture and non farming activities and indirect contribution through their work in the household. According to UNDP Report, Bangladeshi women on an average work for a longer time than men do – 545 minutes per day as opposed to 496 minutes for men. The time allocation for market activities is 35 per cent for females and 70 per cent for males, whereas non-market activities for females are 65 per cent and 30 per cent for males. An estimated 21 million women in Bangladesh are economically active.

2.5.1 Labour Force Participation Rate

Women in Bangladesh are, by and large, dominant in the informal and unrecognized sectors, where their work has been invisible in and around their homes. Particularly in the poorer sections of the population, women are seen to be increasingly joining the labour force in order to augment the family income. Under-reporting of female economic activity is a serious problem in Bangladesh. The recent Labour Force Survey (LFS) 1989 has gone some way in rectifying this, by including all economic activity of more than one hour a week, including that done within the home. This has led to a huge increase in the official statistics on labour force participation generally, but particularly on female labour force participation.

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44 Such categories of women are those who are aged over 10 years and work for pay or profit including household economic activities such as poultry and livestock rearing, crop threshing, preservation of food.
However, even in this modified approach, housework is excluded from the definition of economic activity, and as such multitude of women’s household maintenance tasks remain unaccounted.45

Table 2.3 presents the distribution of civilian labour force by sex and area. At the national level for both the sexes, the total civilian labour force has increased from 21.9 million in 1974 to 56.0 million in 1996. The male labour force has increased from 21.0 million to 34.7 million and female labour force from 0.9 million to 21.3 millions in the same period. The change in the total labour force is due to an unbelievable increase of female labour force. Due to under-developed nature of the economy and socio-cultural pattern of Bangladesh, women’s participation in the labour force is not visible and until very recently their contribution to the traditional economic activities was hardly recognised. While the labour force has increased from 2.1 million in 1974 to 10.2 million in 1996 in the urban area, it has increased from 19.8 million to 45.8 million in the rural area during the same period. The male-female ratio in the labour force is more balanced in the urban area than that in the rural area. In 1989 the number of civilian labour force was estimated to be 50.7 whereas it was 30.9 million in 1985-86. In 1989, females comprised 21.0 million (29.58 percent) and males 29.7 million (41.42 percent). It is worth mentioning here that in 1985-86, the number of female labour was only 3.2 million. This rapid growth in female labour force owes much to the inclusion of some activities including domestic animals, poultry, threshing, boiling, food processing and preservation etc in the list of economic activities. Interestingly such activities were not included in the previous LFS.

45 For details on changes in the reporting of women’s economic activity, please see Baden, n.10, appendix p.3.
Table 2.3

Civilian Labour Force by Sex and Area in Bangladesh, 1974-96 (in million)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National Both Sex</th>
<th>Urban Both Sex</th>
<th>Rural Both Sex</th>
<th>National Male</th>
<th>Urban Male</th>
<th>Rural Male</th>
<th>National Female</th>
<th>Urban Female</th>
<th>Rural Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1995-96</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>45.8</td>
<td>34.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>18.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990-91</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>50.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>29.7</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>25.9</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>24.4</td>
<td>33.1</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>21.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>21.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>21.0</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>19.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The reasons for the increase in female labour force participation is related to poverty. It has been found that 90 percent of the female labour force in rural areas come from poor households.\(^{46}\) The female percentage of labour force in 1997 was 42.\(^{47}\) The workforce participation of Bangladeshi women is changing in numerous ways, affording some of them new opportunities, others reinforcing pervasive trends. Under the new definition, the female labour force has grown at an average annual rate of 16.7 per cent in the last twelve years, which is more than four times the growth rate of the total labour force and more than six times the growth rate of the male labour force.\(^{48}\)

We will now look into the sectoral distribution of labour force of women.

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\(^{46}\) Hamid, n.9, p.76


\(^{48}\) ibid, p. 58.
i. Agricultural Sector

The economy of Bangladesh is predominantly based on agriculture, which accounts for 40 percent of the Gross Domestic Product. About 67 percent of the rural households mainly live on agriculture. Nearly 60 percent of the total land area is under cultivation. Women comprised more than 40 percent (41.7 percent in 1996) of the total employed population in the agriculture sector, 17 percent in field agricultural work on their own farms, 12 percent as agriculture wage labour, and the remaining 10 percent in homestead production of vegetables, livestock and fisheries. Table 2.4 shows that about 42.6 percent of women reported agriculture as their primary occupation and another 15.4 percent as secondary occupation.


50 Human Development Centre, n.47, p.58
### Table 2.4

**Women’s Involvement in Agriculture Labour Force in Bangladesh, 1989**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Primary Occupation</th>
<th>Secondary Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Agricultural Production</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direct Involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working in own land</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homestead agriculture</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture wage labour</td>
<td>12.32</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisheries</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub total</strong></td>
<td><strong>39.5</strong></td>
<td><strong>12.1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Processing Involvement</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice Husking</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Processing</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sub total</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.1</strong></td>
<td><strong>3.1</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Involvement</strong></td>
<td><strong>42.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>15.4</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Although rural women are intensively engaged in agriculture, it is not reflected in the official statistics. Earlier the labour force survey did not recognize women’s role in agriculture. As a result in 1984-85, the LFS reported that men accounted for 98 per cent of the total agriculture employment while the

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51 Specific activities such as ploughing, irrigation, planting, weeding and hoeing, harvesting, threshing/cleaning, husking/drying/boiling, growing vegetables, processing and preservation of food, livestock raising, poultry raising etc., were not included as economic activities.
corresponding figure for women was 1.2 per cent only. However, due to the revised definition of LFS in 1989, women's participation in agriculture has seen a marked increase, from 11 per cent in 1985-86 to 90.3 per cent in 1989 (Table 2.5).

Table 2.5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>89 85-86</td>
<td>89 85-86</td>
<td>89 85-86</td>
<td>89 85-86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>62.1</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>69.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>90.3</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>92.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Though the agricultural harvest is seasonal, the post harvest activities continue well beyond the season. The activities involve a number of stages, some of which are to be carried out simultaneously, and keep women extremely busy during the peak season. The rest, however, continue all through the year and keeps them occupied partially even after the season is over. In addition to post-harvest activities, women are also largely involved in food processing, horticulture, pisciculture, basket and kantha making as utility items. However, in official statistics, women are found to work fewer hours in labour force activities than men in virtually all agricultural and non agricultural activities. In aggregate women spend 21 hours per week compared to 53 hours for men. However, in a study by Mead on the amount of time rural women spent on various aspects of production activities, it has been found to vary between 10-14 hours a day; the study noted also that women spent less

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52 Salahuddin, n.49, p. 78.
53 Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, n. 1, p. 60.
time on recreation than men, on an average about 0.24 hours less per day.\textsuperscript{54} As revealed in Table 2.6, in rural areas women spend as many hours, if not more, at work, including home production as men up to the age of 64 years.

Table 2.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Income earning</th>
<th>Home Production</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13-19</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>3.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-24</td>
<td>1.24</td>
<td>6.29</td>
<td>6.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-49</td>
<td>1.53</td>
<td>6.75</td>
<td>6.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>5.98</td>
<td>3.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>1.20</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td>1.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Women dominate in activities such as husking, drying, boiling vegetables, food processing, preservation and poultry farming. They not only dominate the process of food production, but are also extensively involved in producing cash crops and other agriculture related activities. The vast majority of women involved in agriculture not only work as unpaid family labour but also do the most repetitive and the hardest labour chores. As one source puts it, "rural women in Bangladesh are major, but, largely unrecognized contributors to agriculture and economic activity."\textsuperscript{55} 97.7 per cent of women in rural area and 95.3 per cent in urban area are


unpaid workers compared to 90.2 percent of men in rural area and 44.7 percent in urban areas (Table 2.7). Both men and women percentage of unpaid workers in agriculture are more in rural area.

Table 2.7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>97.6</td>
<td>44.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>55.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Women as unpaid family helpers are forced to move into the wage labour market. Adoption of high yield variety technology has substantially increased the demand for female wage labour. Fifty percent of paid labour opportunities for women come from crop processing for other households. Women in farming households play an important decision-making role in agriculture production regarding the use of input, types of crop to grow, rearing of livestock, hiring of labour and selling of land. However, the larger the land holding of the household, the more marginalized becomes the role of women in decision making. Women participate extensively in homestead gardening and perform all tasks including land preparation, sowing, fertilizer application, irrigating and harvesting the homestead produce. The extent of their participation depends on the level of the technology adopted in agriculture production and on the presence of institutional mechanism, such as the support provided by Government and NGO programmes. The greater the
use of technology in large farm households, the greater is the participation of women in homestead cultivation and other related activities.\textsuperscript{56}

\textit{ii. Non Agricultural sector}

According to the 1978 Land Ownership Survey, nearly 29 per cent of the rural families have no land except their homestead and 50 percent families have less than 0.5 acres of cultivable land, which makes nearly 79 per cent of the families virtually landless.\textsuperscript{57} The work opportunities have shrunk in agriculture due to the introduction of modern technology and the seasonal nature of cultivation. Such a situation leads to an increase in landless families and decline in work opportunities in agriculture, and non-farm occupations assume the most important source of livelihood.

In non-agriculture sector, with the loss of employment opportunities, men moved into self-employment. The proportion of self-employed men increasing from 39 per cent to 46 per cent. Women on the other hand moved from self-employment to paid employment, and were engaged in part-time employment in non-agriculture sector at a higher proportion (14 per cent) than men (9 per cent).\textsuperscript{58} The reasons for greater participation by women in part-time employment was the need to balance income earning with household responsibilities and chores.

Poor women with less demanding domestic chores and greater mobility to seek wage employment, are mostly found engaged in non-farm activities outside their homes. According to the Manpower Survey of 1980 about 47.77 per cent of the women workers were engaged in non-farm activities in the categories of non-

\textsuperscript{56} Hamid, n.9, pp. 82-83.
\textsuperscript{57} S. Khan, n.28, p.38.
\textsuperscript{58} Hamid, n.9, pp. 78-79.
agriculture, self-employed, non-agriculture labour and domestic service compared to 30.0 percent of men. An important area of non-farm employment for women is the traditional ‘specialized family-trade’ performed by caste or class of people where both men and women of the family are involved in the trade. This includes kumar (potter), tati (weavers), dhopa (washerian), etc. Women play an equal role as the men in these professions but remain unpaid for their work.

iii. Industrial Sector

The industrial sector is smaller and constitutes some 16 per cent (1991) of the GDP and 13 per cent (1990-92) of employment. Males dominate the industrial sector. Participation of women in industrial labour force is a recent phenomenon in Bangladesh mainly due to slow growth of industrialization and partly due to the socio-economic pattern. With increased urbanization and limited opportunities of employment in farming and other informal sectors, a large number of women from landless and lower income families have started joining the ranks of industrial work force as unskilled labour. Female employment in public sector is extremely peripheral at 2 – 3 per cent of the total labour employed, with most of the women occupying low level and low paid positions. Only the Bangladesh Small and Cottage Industries Corporation records female employment as high as 59 per cent since it has many projects dealing with handicrafts traditionally manufactured by women. These women are mostly found working in small-scale industries such as coir rope, food processing, textile and handloom where they form 40-60 per cent of the total labour force. Women usually perform the onerous and tedious unskilled and semi-

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59 S. Khan, n. 28, pp. 38-39
60 Rosa n. 4, p. 13.
61 Hamid, n. 9, p. 84
skilled part of the manufacturing and are normally not paid for their labour. Of all the workers in rural industries, 37 per cent are women. Of these, 77 per cent are unpaid family helpers and only 23 per cent are paid labour. Of all the workers in rural industries, 37 per cent are women. Of these, 77 per cent are unpaid family helpers and only 23 per cent are paid labour. Women's representation tends to be highest in the rural industries. It is also observed that the majority of the hired workers are men. In these industries unskilled and semi-skilled activities having low productivity, rudimentary technology and lower wages are generally given to women. In 1995-96 the female employees in Bangladesh constitute only 13 percent in the public formal sector and 22 per cent in the private formal sector. Of the female formal sector workforce, 31 percent hold professional positions. While 24 per cent are employed in the production and transportation sectors, 59 per cent are in the service sectors. Since the overall female share in the employed labour force is only 18 per cent, women are under-represented in managerial jobs.

In large-scale industries, women work mainly in export-oriented production such as garments and shrimp processing. There has been a large increase in the number of women working in a narrow range of urban-based industries, particularly garments and textiles, and to a lesser extent pharmaceuticals and fish processing. Of these the export oriented readymade garment industry provides the largest employment to women where they constitute nearly 90 per cent of the total 800,000 workers. However, women's employment in other industries (e.g. tea, sugar, food and allied industries) has been falling. Even though Bangladesh is one of the newest

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62 ibid, p.85; see also, n.42, p.26.
63 Human Development Centre, n.47, p.63.
entrants in the ready-made garment industry, low wage labour has made Bangladesh one of the fastest growing garment exporting countries. Women are unorganized relative to men among the industrial workers in urban areas. Their participation is minimal in unions as these are considered essentially a man's domain and women, therefore, remain ignorant of labour code provision.

2.5.2 Wage Differentials, Unemployment

There are striking differentials in wages and earnings by gender in Bangladesh. Women's average weekly earnings in 1989 were 202 taka compared to 477 taka for men. These differentials may be partly accounted for by differences in the number of hours worked, but the differentials are such that there is clearly marked wage discrimination, upheld by highly segmented labour markets. In the absence of adequate localised opportunities, female labour for unskilled jobs is abundant which brings down their wage rate. However, the gender gap in the urban manufacturing sector is decreasing. In 1985-86 women earned only 45 percent of what men earned while in 1995-96 this figure increased to 58 percent. This trend echoes across all sectors. In particular women in agriculture earn over 71 percent of what men earn. The only sector in which women's wages continue to be extremely depressed is the service sector where women earn only 29.4 per cent of what men earn.

One of the major factors contributing to low female wage rates is the lack of bargaining power of women. This arises out of a low level of education and training, low level of skills and lack of demand of skills developed in their roles as housewives. Gender differentials in the wage of day labourers fluctuate by season;

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66 Human Development Centre, n.47, p. 65.
the wage rates of women are much more subject to seasonal variations than those of men.

Not only women’s wage rates are lower than those of men, but their terms of employment are also biased in favour of the employer, especially in the case of wage labour. A mode of wage fixation in rural areas reveals that whereas 79 percent of male wage labour receive the market price, only 36 percent of women’s labour receive market rates, the majority of women (64 per cent) being forced to accept on the employer’s terms. These terms include payment wholly or partly in food, unspecified hours of work, employment on a daily basis, and termination of job without notice and at the convenience of the employer.\footnote{Hamid, n. 9 , pp. 80-81}

Unemployment rates for female graduates are strikingly high (17 percent) compared to those of the male graduates (2.3 percent).\footnote{Baden, n.10, p. 15} The problem tends to be higher among those in unpaid family labour than in those working for a wage, and also higher in rural than urban areas. Specific policies are needed to address the employment problems of women.

\textbf{2.5.3. Major Issues Affecting Women’s Participation in the Labour Force.}

\textit{i. Sexual Division of Labour}

Bangladesh being an agrarian country with a low stage of economic development, segregation of roles based on sex is strictly enforced, and the activities of male and female are explicitly divided. Therefore, the labour market is highly segregated. Sharp occupational segregation of women in Bangladesh has contributed to the persistence of male-female wage gap. Possession of land and other means of

\footnotesize{\textit{67} Hamid, n. 9 , pp. 80-81\textit{68} Baden, n.10, p. 15}
production—the key to social and economic hierarchy in Bangladesh, are controlled by men and as such the work load is divided in their favour. Females under such circumstances are pushed indoors. Seclusion restricts, their economic mobility and enforces their dependency on men. Discriminatory hiring and advancement policies leave little options for women but to accept traditional jobs of lower ranking.69

ii. Child Care Facilities

Women in Bangladesh mostly take up employment due to economic necessity rather than for self-actualization or for filling up their leisure times. Child care has been an important issue for all working mothers. In Bangladesh institutional child care is absent and is hindering female participation in the labour force. One must remember that a great advantage of the increase in female employment in a poor economy is that children become the direct beneficiaries of the mother’s income. Several studies indicate that working mothers raise healthier children as they can afford to supplement the poor family diet with their extra income.

In Bangladesh there are a few centres run by voluntary and private organizations that take care of children. However, their number is inadequate to the need. To a limited extent, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and Social Welfare provides care for the children of working mothers. The establishment of proper child care centres are essential pre-requisites to enable women to take up wage employment.

iii. Differential Wage Rate for Women

(Refer 2.5.2 Wage Differentials, Unemployment).

iv. Transport and Accommodation Problem

69 ibid, p. 66.
Another acute problem, especially in the urban areas, is the lack of transportation to and from the office. Women who observe 'purdah' cannot avail of the public transport system without violating norms. As regards accommodation, the situation is even worse in urban areas. Single women (including widows and divorcees) especially those from the rural areas, who have jobs in the urban areas have to stay with relatives or in hostels. Landlords at the same time are very reluctant to rent out accommodation to single women.

v. Women and Technology

Of the large number of people who live below the poverty line in Bangladesh, the majority of them are women. The introduction of modern technology is already threatening the productive employment of a large number of people, with its variable impact on women. Since the majority of women are suffering from an unavoidable technological change, the overall welfare criteria involved should be examined carefully.

vi. Domestic Work-Load and Condition of Work

One of the biggest disadvantages working women have to face is the double burden of work. Due to economic reason as well as cultural practices, even a full time job does not excuse Bangladeshi women from their regular domestic chores. With regard to conditions of work, female labourers and office employees face a number of problems. A healthy and congenial work atmosphere is not only necessary for better productivity, but also a prerequisite for occupational safety. Legal provisions relating to conditions of work and the protection of worker while engaged in their work are mostly overlooked.
2.6 Women and Health

Health is of utmost importance to the individual and family. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1948 recognized the right of having good health as a part of the fundamental human right ensuring a reasonable standard of living with food, clothing, housing, and medicare to the poor. The Declaration also emphasized the need for special care and assistance for motherhood and children. Although the objectives have not yet been achieved in Bangladesh, health care facilities have improved along with proliferation of medical and family planning institutions. However studies show that facilities for women’s health in Bangladesh are still lacking behind and are disadvantaged as compared to the male counterpart.

The status of health enjoyed by the people depends upon the overall socio-economic development of the country. In Bangladesh where majority of the people has an extremely low income, health care is put to low priority. Women in Bangladesh are more disadvantaged than men in terms of health and nutrition. The average weight of a Bangladeshi women is about 40.90 per cent less than the average weight of women in most third world countries. The low weight is a reflection of food deprivation. Serious health problems for women occur due to frequent pregnancy, prolonged breast feeding and food taboos, limited availability of nutritious food etc. Most of the causes for the imbalances are entrenched in the social and cultural practices of gender discrimination. Many aspects of such discrimination are visible at different levels of poverty of the households.

Women in Bangladesh have a lower life expectancy at birth than men. Morbidity rates among female are also higher than those of males. As shown in

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70 S. Khan, n. 28, p.12.
Table 2.8, the recent (1998) life expectancy at birth for female was 60.5 years whereas for male it was 60.7 years, and both women and men live about four years longer in urban areas as compared to rural areas. The data presented reveals that the life expectancy, both in the urban and rural areas is higher for males. Poverty, illiteracy, and gender discrimination combined with violence within and outside home contribute to the adverse effect on women's health. During the last decade in 1981 life expectancy was 54.5 years for women compared to 55.3 years for men. The table shows the trends of life expectancy at birth by sex and area in Bangladesh that reflect a much lower life expectancy for female.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th></th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th></th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>55.3</td>
<td>54.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>55.9</td>
<td>54.4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>55.7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>58.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>59.1</td>
<td>58.6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>59.9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>60.7</td>
<td>60.5</td>
<td>62.7</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>59.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


We now concentrate on some of the important indicators of female health status.
2.6.1 Female Mortality

The world average of women per 100 men is 99.71 In Bangladesh, it is 94 females for every 100 males. In developed countries, females normally outlive males by five years whereas in Bangladesh it is the males that outlive females. The female-male ratio in Bangladesh is 49 versus 50.72 This is due to the quality of the food intake of the women at the household level, lack of poor health care and the deprivation in access to medical facilities; for instance, men receive 94 percent of the minimum caloric requirement compared to women who receive only 78 percent.73 The prevalence of extensive under nutrition among adult women is indicated by the fact that over 80 per cent of the babies born in Bangladesh have low weight (below 2 kg) at birth which is indicative of the poor maternal nutritional status.74

The mortality rate of female children and mothers are high and this explains the fact that males outnumber females in Bangladesh. It is not surprising to find that as many as six of every hundred women (28,000 women annually) die from pregnancy related causes. Only 25 per cent of pregnant women receive antenatal care, and trained relatives attend only 14 per cent of the births.75 More than half are anemic, that is 58 per cent as of 1975-91.76

73 Hamid, n.9, p. 69.1
75 Ahmed, n.37, pp. 1-2.
The Maternal Mortality Rate (MMR) per 100,000 live births in 1993 was 850.\textsuperscript{77} Bangladesh ranks very high in the world table on maternal mortality with estimates of 4.4 compared to 3.4 in Pakistan, about 3.5 in India, and 2.4 in Sri Lanka. A major factor contributing to such a high rate of maternal mortality in Bangladesh is the prevalence of childbirth at home, largely outside the purview of the formal system of health care, with very little assistance from the trained birth assistants (TBAs). Only ten percent and 45 percent of urban births are attended by trained medical personal, reflecting a lack of available case in the event of obstetric complications.\textsuperscript{78}

Although it has declined over the years (as shown in Table 2.9) the infant mortality rate in Bangladesh is one of the highest in the world. Infant mortality rate in rural areas is 180 per 1,000 live births; almost three out of every five infant deaths occur during the first month of life. The mortality rate for females under the ages of five in Bangladesh is 184 per 1,000 compared to 145 for India, 170 for Nigeria, 100 for Indonesia, and 43 for China.\textsuperscript{79} Infant mortality rate per 1000 live births among male is higher (Table 2.9). But child death rate (1-4 years) among females is higher (Table 2.10). It can be seen from the table 2.9 that the infant mortality rates are consistently higher in one rural area than that of the urban area. The fact that the infant mortality rate is 66 in the rural area as compared to 47 in the urban area may be due to mother’s low level of education. The major cause of infant death is tetanus, due to unsanitary conditions at childbirth. A rapid increase in immunization

\textsuperscript{77} UNDP Report on Human Development in Bangladesh 1996, n.38, p.15
coverage is thought likely to make a major impact on infant and child mortality, particularly measles and tetanus-related deaths. There are now over 100,000 Expanded Programme of Immunization (EPI) outreach sites, although their lack of integration with other health facilities has been criticized. Some drop out occurs following the first vaccination, which undermines the effectiveness of multiple doses of injection but this is decreasing.

Table 2.9

Infant Mortality Rate by Sex and Residence in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Infant deaths per 1000 live birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>111</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2.10

Child Mortality Rate (1-4 years) by Sex and Residence in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Child (1-4) deaths per 1000 population of same age group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>13.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It is also interesting to note that female child mortality rate per 1000 has decreased from 13.9 in 1991 to 6.6 in 1998 (Table 2.10). Maternal mortality has been reduced from 6.5 in 1986 to 3.5 in 1997 per thousand lives birth (Table 2.11). Maternal deaths are mainly due to abortion, eclampsia, postpartum and tetanus. However, though a slow decline has been occurring, overall mortality rates are still high.

Table 2.11

Maternal Mortality Ratio by Sex and Residence in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>MMR per 100 live births</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>National</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.6.2 Nutrition

Malnutrition is one of the major problems affecting most people in Bangladesh, especially children under five and pregnant and lactating women. The reasons are many: low and unstable family incomes, unequal access to productive resources and social services, traditional dietary practices, repeated illness and habitually low food intake.

The preferential intra-household food allocation to males exacerbates malnourishment among females, who eat last and least throughout their lives. Problems of malnutrition start before birth, with one third to one half of babies born underweight. A marginally higher proportion of female than male children are underweight (36.5 per cent compared to 34.6 percent). The average food intake of a lactating mother is only 874 gm per day (according to conservative estimate it is deficient by 40 percent) compared to the average intake of an adult male (20-39 years) of 1047 gm per day. The deficiency of vitamin A, iron foliate and iodine are other important factors affecting the nutrition situation. The latter two may particularly affect females, especially pregnant and lactating mothers. Nearly 85 percent of the women suffer from iron and protein deficiency. Thus, the prevalence of undernutrition among adult women is extensive. This is indicated earlier by the fact that over 80 percent of babies born have low birth weight. The nutritional status of young children is equally poor, with 59 percent of the children in the twelve to twenty-four months category being classified as moderately or severely

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80 S. Khan, n.28, p.12.
81 ibid.
malnourished. An estimated 30,000 children under six years of age become blind each year due to vitamin A deficiency.\textsuperscript{82}

Due to lack of knowledge of nutritive values of various available foods, the parents having inadequate access to food often fail to provide proper food to infant and young children. Source of water supply, by contrast, was not significant, probably reflecting much improved access to tubewell water. The nutritional situation of women deserves special emphasis. Along with the involvement of the Government, non-governmental efforts must be made to improve the situation. Nutrition education programmes should be designed with more involvement of and focus on women.

2.6.3. Fertility

The fertility rate (FR) in Bangladesh appears to have declined appreciably from the rate of about 6.3 children born to every married women in 1975 to 4.30 in 1990. The causes of high fertility include low socio-economic development, low literacy and status of women, perceived economic utility of children, strong son preference, high level of infant mortality, and the cultural and traditional values and beliefs. Table 2.12 presents the trend in fertility rate in Bangladesh. It can be observed from the Table that rural women are affected more than the urban women.

\textsuperscript{82} Lovell, n. 79, p. 13.
Table 2.12

Fertility Rate for Women in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>5.50</td>
<td>3.01</td>
<td>5.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>4.91</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4.65</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>4.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>4.57</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993-94</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2.12 shows that between 1993-1994 it was found that the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) in Bangladesh was approximately 3.4, down from about 6.1 in the 1980. It further declined to 3.1 in 1998. It is believed by many researchers that the recent reduction in fertility rates in Bangladesh is due to the success of increased use of contraceptive methods and the rising age at marriage. A few years of primary schooling does not make a serious impact on fertility behaviour, but at higher levels of education fertility declines sharply. The important implication is that investment in schooling for girls would have, in the long term, a profound impact on fertility behaviour.\(^{83}\)

2.7 Women and Literacy

The level of women's literacy is a matter of grave concern. Three-fourths of global illiteracy is accounted for by women. Between 1970-1985, statistics has shown that various interventions in many countries could reduce male illiteracy from 247 million to 233 million but in contrast, the number of adult female illiterates has risen from 390 million to 418 million.  

Recently, Bangladesh ranked 115 out of 131 countries in its literacy status. In Bangladesh only one-third of the population over 15 are able to read and write. Of rural women, 85 per cent are illiterate but in a functional sense most of rural female literates are also illiterates. The educational attainment of women in Bangladesh is among the lowest in the world, because of the concept of women's role in the society and economy. In Bangladesh one in three school age girls is in school, only 2 per cent of the women in the age of 20-34 are in the universities and only three out of thousand women are in professional jobs. In Bangladesh (previously Bengal) female literacy was only 1 per cent in 1911 census and has always been half of male literacy figures. It is noteworthy to mention that for every 250 male literates, there are only 100 female literates aged five and above. Despite the educational efforts and investment, the entire population remain only marginally literate. In 1999 the

87 Hug, n.84, pp.79-80.
overall adult literacy rate in Bangladesh was estimated to be 40.8 per cent only,\textsuperscript{88} of which two-thirds of them were women.

Bangladesh is still staggering behind in achieving universal primary education and literacy. The traditional values, religio-cultural norms and institutions of patriarchy have cumulatively disadvantaged women and kept them confined to their households. Patriarchy and its ideology have a dominating influence on governance including education policies.

2.7.1 Trends in Female Education

The Constitution of Bangladesh lays down that no citizen can be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to admission to any educational institution on grounds of sex. The Constitution further empowers the state to make special provision in favour of women. But in practice the women are much behind men in achieving minimum literary rate.

\begin{table}
\centering
\caption{Gender Disparity in Education in Bangladesh, 1997}
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Types} & \textbf{Male (%)} & \textbf{Female (%)} \\
\hline
Literacy rate & 55 & 27.4 \\
\hline
Enrolment in School & & \\
Primary & 87 & 69.6 \\
Secondary & 58 & 15.6 \\
Post secondary (1987)* & 12.2 & 2.3 \\
\hline
\multicolumn{3}{l}{\textit{Source: UNDP, Human Development Report (New York, Oxford University, 1999).}}
\multicolumn{3}{l}{* This refers to 1987 data.}
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

Table 2.13 shows that the literacy rate for males is 55 percent whereas it is only 27.4 per cent for females. It is only half the rate attained by men. At all levels the enrolment ratio reveals that the females are lagging far behind their male counterpart. Gender disparity is also detected in spending on primary, secondary and university education in a specific year of 1987; expenditure for girls in primary education was 44 per cent, in secondary education it was 22 per cent and in universities it was 13 per cent of the total.\textsuperscript{89} It is obvious from this statistics that the expenditure declines as the girls move up higher in the educational ladder. This may be due to the fact that girls drop out soon after they finish their higher secondary education as parents try to marry them off before they can enter the universities. Poverty, unconducive social norms, values and insecurity are some of the factors contributing to the dismal condition of female education. As can be seen from Table 2.14, the drop out rate among boys is due to the lack of enthusiasm and the need to support parents financially. For females, marriage is an important reason for dropping out. For both the sexes, the majority are for financial reasons. This may be due to the poverty that limit equal education to both sexes.

\textsuperscript{89} World Bank, n.86, p.51.
Table 2.14
Reasons for Drop-outs by Gender and Residence in Bangladesh 1987

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Rural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Boys %</td>
<td>Girls %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Financial crisis</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Financial support to parents</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Lack of enthusiasm</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Failure in examinations</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Lack of Interests of parents</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Asfia Duza and others eds., *Education and Gender Equity* (Dhaka: Women for Women Research and Study Group, 1992).

In Bangladesh, only 2.1 percent (1986-87) of the national income has been allocated for education.\(^90\) This has resulted in the low rate of literacy which is obviously insufficient especially in the age bracket of 15 years and over. Here also we find a very low percentage of females. In 1991 the adult literacy rate for males was 51.7 per cent whereas it was only 29.3 per cent for females (Table 2.15).

---

\(^{90}\) Asfia Duza and others, *Education and Gender Equity* (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1992), p.12
Table 2.15

Adult (15 years and over) Literacy Rate by Sex and Area of Residence in Bangladesh.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>National</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Urban</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974 census</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981 census</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>39.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991 census</td>
<td>25.5</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Again, the Inter-Censual comparison of male/female literacy ratios in Bangladesh (Table 2.16) shows that the female literacy has always been halfway throughout all the census years under consideration. It depicts the fact that despite efforts, illiteracy among females has been appallingly high. It shows that it took about 60 years for females (in 1974) to catch up with the male literacy (in 1911). This depicts a serious malfunctioning of the efforts towards promoting female literacy and points to the need for a thorough reconsideration for basic education planning and literacy efforts. Although some differences are attributable to definitional changes from year to year, this rising trend appears to be real. Rural-Urban imbalance remains acute. Improvement in literacy gain by the rural women

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91 The concept of literacy used in various censuses in Bangladesh has not been consistent. The 1961 census defined a literate person as one who could only read any language with understanding. The 1974 census defined literacy as the ability of both reading and writing in any language while under the 1981 census, a person is regarded as literate if he/she could write a letter in any language. As cited in Hug, n. 84, p. 81.
over 1975-85 period is very insignificant (0.5 per cent only),\textsuperscript{92} despite launching the successive Five Year Plans in the country.

Table 2.16

Intercensal Comparison of Male-Female Literacy Ratio (%) in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>18.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>29.3</td>
<td>10.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>29.9</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>31.0</td>
<td>16.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>25.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>51.7</td>
<td>29.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


2.7.2 Constraints to Female Education

There are various constraints to female education in Bangladesh. In the traditional society of Bangladesh where customs such as purdah and seclusion are still prevalent, co-education is disliked by most parents even at primary levels, specially in the rural areas. The absence of separate girls schools and lack of female

teachers induce the impoverished parents to encourage their girls to drop out. The predominance of male teachers, particularly at post primary level, discourages female attendance because of parental concern about young women coming into contact with older men. In rural areas *purdah* often acts as obstacle to female education. Many minor girls are confined within their houses due to such tradition.

Due to the appalling levels of poverty, many households are not able to have their girls enrolled in schools. Traditionally, girls are not considered productive members and if a choice is to be made, boys generally get the preference. Investing in a girl’s education is not considered worthwhile as daughters are married off at an early age. Girls have to leave the family upon marriage whereas the male children are expected to look after the family and parents. In poor households, both rural and urban girls are required to help with household chores like cleaning, sweeping, tending cattle, fetching water and fuel from an early age. As a result of this, a majority of them stay away from school.

Educating boys is perceived as having a high return both in terms of securing better employment, attracting dowry and providing security for parents, particularly mothers, who are likely to depend on sons in later life.\(^93\) Inadequate physical facilities such as separate toilets for girls, lack of space in classrooms and poor maintenance of school buildings further discourage parents from sending daughters to school.

Female participation is severely restricted by the negative attitude of the society towards female education. Generally, the position of girls in Bangladesh is secondary to that of boys. This needs a mobilization of public opinion and creating

\(^{93}\) Baden, n.10, p.55.
awareness among women about the values of education. The Government needs to come forward and take necessary action. Others reasons are:

- absence of proper planning on the part of the Government
- Insecurity on the way to school
- Lack of educational awareness of parents in backward societies
- Constant changes in the political situation
- Population pressure

2.7.3. Recent Education Programme

There is increasing recognition of the importance of female education in improving women's access to employment, their productivity and also in influencing the health and nutritional status of children and controlling fertility levels. Various policies have been introduced recently in Bangladesh to encourage female enrolment and reduce the drop out rate. However, there are no focused evaluations of such interventions. More focused research is needed in these areas.

As a step towards increasing the literacy rate, Universal Primary Education has been made compulsory. Considering the high level of illiteracy, the Fifth Five Year Plan incorporated the objectives of universal primary education and non formal primary education to reduce mass illiteracy. The allocation for education sector expenditure was increased in the plan.

The Government also took special measures to promote girls' enrolment and retention at the primary level. Partly as a result of the global commitment to “Education for All”, and partly due to considerations of development imperatives, the Government's education policy at primary level has been targeted to bring and retain girls in the classrooms. Many NGOs working at the grassroots have projected
components of education for children, including girls, coming from the poorer sections of society in their programmes. Besides, the National Action Plan (NAP) includes the elimination of gender disparity, expansion of non-formal education and undertaking of social mobilization programmes.

Considering women as a vital force, it is appropriate to consider women’s literacy and education vis-a-vis the total development matrix and the entire dynamics of development. The linkages between women’s basic education with literacy must be established. Women’s exclusion will make “Education for All” and “Health for All”, a sheer rhetoric and therefore meaningless. Unless the measures suggested in the different Five Years Plans are efficiently pursued, the status of women’s education at the primary level is not likely to improve in the near future.

2.8. Women in Politics and Administration

2.8.1. Women’s Political Participation

Conventionally, women are identified with domestic life while politics is regarded as a male dominated public activity which is typically masculine in nature. Even after the completion of the UN Declared Women’s Decade 1976-85, politics in Bangladesh remains male-dominated with respect to numbers, position in the party hierarchy, presence and effectiveness in the national legislature and other formal political structures or whatever other criteria set for measuring the extent of participation in this particular activity.94

It is generally agreed that political power is a key to gaining control over the community’s resources. Political participation is a means of gaining access to the

power-structure where decisions with regard to the allocation of resources amongst people and other issues of community’s concern are made. Political participation therefore becomes a crucial issue for women, mainly because it is one of the most effective instruments to improve their condition in society. It should, therefore, be considered as one of the most powerful indicators of the status of women both in the social and economic spheres of life.

Bangladeshi women have remained outside the domain of power politics. Their visibility in popular struggles for democracy, in election campaigns and in community work has not transformed into greater influence in the public arena. Only a small number have been able to enter positions of public decision making. Their dependence on traditionally powerful structures within the national political system has constrained their role as able leaders. This is a reflection of the political system as well as of women’s isolation. Since a large number stayed away from the structures and processes of governance, the very few who ventured in were excluded and deterred from building a women’s constituency. As a result, women’s concerns and perspectives have been put on the burner.95

Bangladesh has made formal commitments to women’s political participation in several important international strategy documents starting with the Plan of Action (Mexico 1975), the Programme of Action (Copenhagen, 1980), the Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (Nairobi, 1985) and the Plan of Action (Beijing 1995). The Country’s Constitution also re-affirms this commitment and provides for formal political equality between men and women. There is no legal barrier to women contesting or voting for any elective office,

including that of the head of state. Generally, citizens are entitled to their rights without any discrimination on grounds of race, religion, or sex. Thus, women are entitled to the fundamental rights of freedom of speech and expression, association and assembly which form the basis of political activity in a civil society. However the equality of participation by women in all spheres of national life and of their rights in all spheres of the state and public life are more ideal than real. Socio-cultural factors shape and limit the nature of women's political engagements, Constitutional safeguards notwithstanding.

2.8.2. Constitutional Parameters of Women's Political Participation

It has been realized and recognized by the Government that the objective of improving the status of women in Bangladesh is likely to be achieved if women get their rightful representation in the national Parliament (and the local self-governing institutions). This, it was thought, would ensure their participation in the formal decision-making process at the national and local levels.

For a greater political representation of women, the Constitution provides for equal representation of men and women to political and public representative institutions, such as, the Parliament and the local government bodies. Women are entitled to the political right to vote for public representative offices and, in view of the reservation provisions for women in Parliament and local government bodies, enjoy 'dual' right of representation. Article 10 stipulates: "Steps will be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life." Further, Article 9 promotes women's role in local Government institutions: "The state shall encourage local Government institutions composed of representatives of the areas concerned and in such institutions special representation shall be given, as far as possible, to
peasants, workers and women.\textsuperscript{96} Articles 27 and 28 of the Constitution of the Peoples Republic of Bangladesh enunciate the principle of equality of all citizens. Article 122 lays down the qualifications for registration as voters for Parliamentary and presidential elections and does not discriminate citizens on the basis of gender. Articles 50 and 66 lay down the qualifications for election as president, vice president and member of Parliament and does not discriminate on any ground such as race, religion, sex etc.\textsuperscript{97} Further, the Constitution under Article 65 (3) provides for the protection of reservation of seats in order to ensure a minimum representation of women in the Parliament or Jatiyo Sangsad. It consists of 300 members, elected in accordance with law from single territorial constitution by direct election. In 1972, 15 seats were reserved for women for 10 years. An amendment in 1978 increased the number of seats to 30 and extended the period of reservation to fifteen years. The provision of reservation ceased to exist in December 1987 when H.M Ershad dissolved the Parliament. Ultimately, however, the 10th amendment by the Parliament in 1990 reincorporated the reservation provision and provided for 30 reserved seats for ten years.\textsuperscript{98} This special representation notwithstanding, women are eligible to contest for the general seats of the Parliament.

At the level of local governing institutions, women's representation is secured by nomination of three women members in the union and upazila parishads and the paurashava, under the relevant local government ordinances. In addition to enjoying special representation, women have the right to stand for election to the office of chairman or member of the local self-governing bodies. While the

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{97} Report of the Task Forces, n. 64, p.349.

Constitution delineates the parameters of women's political participation basically in terms of equality with men, realities, however, reflect the subordination and dependence of women that is inherent in patriarchy. Moreover women representatives not required to contest in polls directly and are selected by the majority party. Thus, they are not accountable to their constituents. This constitutional provision for reservations expired in 2001, the year of Parliamentary elections and a debate is going on either to extend the time limit or to change the system to direct voting as demanded by women's lobbies.

Though women have been active in the political life of the country, they remain by and large unrecognized. For instance, in the war of liberation in 1971, and in the democratic movement against the Ershad Government (1982-90), women have played a significant role. Despite the premiership of Bangladesh being twice held by women, very few women are members or activities of the political parties of Bangladesh. Due to lack of the political activism and money, they cannot even compete in the election.99

We now examine the nature and extent of women's participation in politics and try to identify the factors which marginalise the presence of women at different levels of the political sphere.

2.8.3 Women's Representation in the National Parliament

Women's representation in the national Parliament has been dismal in Bangladesh. In pre-liberation Bangladesh, there was no woman elected to the National or Provincial Assemblies in general elections under adult franchise. In post-liberation Bangladesh only two women were appointed as state ministers in the

first cabinet in 1972. Their number has increased to four in 1996. Women constitute an extremely small proportion of the membership of the Parliament. Table 2.17 reveals that women’s representation in Parliament has registered a slow increase over the years though it still remains below two percent. Column two of the Table below represents the number of seats won by women in the general seats in by elections and column 3 represents the proportion of those elected directly from single member territorial constituencies. The number of reserved seats for women in the Parliament is indicated in column 4. The reservation provision was not operative in 1988.

Table 2.17
Number of General Seats Won by and Reserved Seats for Women in Parliament in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Election Year</th>
<th>No. of Women Members (by Election)</th>
<th>% of general seats</th>
<th>Reserved seats For women</th>
<th>Overall %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>0+2</td>
<td>.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>4+1</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


100 Hossain, n.95, p. 180.
As discussed earlier, under a Constitutional provision, 15 seats were reserved for women in the Parliament in the first election held after independence in 1973. This quota was further raised to 30 in 1979. But the women representatives were not required to contest in polls directly and were selected by the majority party and thus they were not accountable to their constituents. Women's groups since 1973 demanded that political parties nominate more women to contest in the elections. They have also recommended that constituencies for reserved seats should be demarcated and their elections held on the basis of adult franchise. Women have argued that since their number is small, and the system so well controlled, they have been ignored both in Parliament and in public services. Women have actively engaged with the electoral process as voters and as campaigners. In the 1996 elections to the national Parliament, it was estimated that almost 70 percent of women voters had gone to the polls. In 1996, only 37 women contested out of which only seven were successful. Leaders of the two main political parties were women. It is interesting to note that though 119 political parties participated in the general elections of 1996, only 16 had nominated women candidates.\textsuperscript{101}

The election to the seats kept reserved for women is done by system of indirect election and it is the directly elected members of the national Parliament who elect the women members in the reserved seats. But there is no bar for women willing to contest for the general seats from the territorial constituencies. The provision of reservation of seats for women was made in consideration of the socio-economic and cultural constraints faced by women in the society of Bangladesh, which are mainly responsible for their inability to secure adequate representation in the national Parliament. About a fifth of all parties nominated women candidates

\textsuperscript{101} The Daily Star, 11 June 1996.
during the 1991 general elections, putting up a total of 47 women candidates. It can be noted that women's participation in the electoral process has shown a slow increase. The number of women candidates for the year 1973 was 2, that is 0.3 percent of the total number of contestants (Table 2.18). In 1991 and 1996, they came to constitute 1.7 and 1.44 per cent respectively of the total. As shown in the Tables it can be concluded that in both the electoral and representative arena of politics, women's participation is meagre: less than 2 per cent. This shows that the level of women's political status is low, not only in terms of individuals but in terms of social category. It is stated that women's political identity is often linked to male kinship ties.\textsuperscript{102} The Table gives an impression that though compared to previous years, the number of women candidates as competitors in the general elections has increased, yet their numbers are not at all significant. It is also evident from the fact that only five parties put up women candidates in 1986. The number of women contestants rose to 16 in 1996.

### Table 2.18

**Women Politicians Electoral Participation in Bangladesh, 1973-1996.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Member of candidates</th>
<th>Member of Contesting Parties</th>
<th>Number of parties with women candidates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1083</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>2125</td>
<td>2108</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>1429</td>
<td>2409</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>978</td>
<td>971</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>2774</td>
<td>2727</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>2569</td>
<td>2532</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


\textsuperscript{102} Najma Chowdhury, "Women in Politics," *Empowerment*, vol.1, 1994, p.41.
Women previously received a negligible amount of votes, but results of the 1991 elections reveal that women candidates received 30 percent of the votes in 16 seats and only in five seats, they received more than 50 percent of the votes. Female voting behaviour deserves mention in this respect. First, generally, the turnout of women voters is low in any election in Bangladesh. But during the general elections of 1991, the rate of women’s participation was quite overwhelming compared to that in the past. Secondly, gender issues generally do not influence the voting behaviour of women. In fact, societal factors do not permit them to go beyond family and community considerations. But the 1991 elections saw many instances where females demonstrated their independent choice.

2.8.4. Women’s Political Participation at the Local Level

The presence women members in the national Parliament does not reflect the level of political consciousness of women of the country. Women’s involvement in the political process at the local level is needed to make them familiar with the problems of the local community in general and women’s needs and issues in particular. The activities of the local level women politicians, their constant interactions with the women of the local community go a long way in raising the political consciousness of women around them. Unfortunately as in the case of national level politics, of the local level women’s role in the election of chairman and members of the union, upazila parishads and paurashava (municipality) is also very insignificant.

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103 UNDP Report on Women Development in Bangladesh 1994, n. 64, p.34.
104 ibid.
The system of nomination was introduced by Ordinances promulgated and laws framed by the Parliament. Under these Ordinances in 1976, a provision was made for two nominated female members in addition to nine elected members and one chairperson in each union parishad, which was later increased to three nominated female members in 1983. Similarly, upazila and paurashava parishads had three nominated women members (the number of nominated women members of city corporations depend on population). The nominations system in local government was changed in 1992 to indirect election and now three women members in each local government body will be elected by the chairperson and other elected members. Women were first elected in local bodies in 1973.\textsuperscript{106} Thus women enjoy the right to vote as well as the right to contest, and further enjoy the safeguard of nomination to these bodies. Under the nomination, more than 15,000 women are associated with the local bodies. However, available case studies indicate that a marginal role was played by women in the deliberations and decisions as well as in the discharge of functions of these bodies. The enactment of the Local Government Representation (Union Parishad) Act 1996 and the Gram Parishad Act 1997 had set up four tiers of local government. For the first time it has stipulated that women contest for the reserved seats. This has led to a considerable increase in women’s participation as candidates, voters, and campaigners.

Records show that for the total elective positions of 4352 chairperson, of Union Parishads in 1977, 20898 men and 19 women contested. The results showed that 4348 men and only four women were elected as chairpersons of the Union Parishad. In 1988, there were 18,566 contestants for chairpersonship of 4,401 union parishad out of which there were only 79 women contestants constituting only 0.4

\textsuperscript{106} UNDP Report on Women Development in Bangladesh 1994, n. 64, p.31.
per cent of the total and only one was elected as chairperson. Again, in 1992 the
election of chairpersons for the 4,450 union parishads, women constituted only 0.6
per cent of the contesting candidates, i.e. 115 out of a total 17,444 and 12 were
elected chairpersons (Table 2.19). In 1997 union council election, 17 female
chairpersons were elected out of 101 women contestants.  

Table 2.19

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>No. of Unions</th>
<th>Female Candidates</th>
<th>No. of elected Female Chairperson</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1973</td>
<td>4,352</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>4,352</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>4,400</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>4,401</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>4,450</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


At the upazila level in the 1990 election, only seven women contested for the
chairmanship of 423 upazilas, of which only one was elected.  

No woman was
ever elected as pourashava chairperson. However, in each of the elections of 1977,
1984, 1993, a woman candidate was elected as a member of pourashava parishad
(not the same woman). In 1994 city corporation elections, women contested for the

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four mayoral positions. Seventeen women contested for 192 ward commissioner seats. However, no one was elected. Studies done on women representatives of local government show that the majority have come from families with political backgrounds and, in the case of six out of twelve female chairpersons, their positions were previously occupied (in different periods) by their husbands. The women candidates faced difficulties from conservative groups who questioned their right to become leaders of the community on the basis of religion.109

2.8.5. Women in the Government (Cabinet)

Since independence very few women have held cabinet positions in the successive cabinets formed in Bangladesh. During the period 1979-1982, a total of 89 appointments as minister were made, of whom only one was a woman, being only 1.1 per cent of the share of the total seats. In the same period, 34 Ministers of State were appointed, of whom only three were women, the percentage being 7.1. Again the total number of Deputy Ministers was 11, of whom four were women, the percentage of female Deputy Ministers among the total appointees stood at 36.36 only.110 Thus it is evident from the figures that the number of women at all these decision-making levels was very low.

Table 2.20 reveals that the proportion of women in the cabinet ranged between a meagre 3 to 6 percent over the years. As shown in the Table the periods roughly corresponds to the Awami League-BAKSAL regime (1972-75), the army take over and subsequent civilianisation by President Zia, the Bangladesh National Party (BNP) rule (1975-82) and, the army coup with President Ershad’s and his Jatiyo party government (1982-90). In recent years more women are appointed in

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109 UNDP Report on Women Development in Bangladesh 1994, n. 64, p. 31
110 Salahuddin, n. 94, p. 15.
ministerial positions. However, women could hardly make their presence felt even though they were associated with decision-making at the top levels. It is said that women ministers were found suitable mainly for the Ministry of Women Affairs which is regarded as feminine. These include Social Welfare, Women's Affairs, Culture, Health and Family Planning, Cooperative and Local Government. The only ministry that came with a full cabinet rank before Khaleda Zia came to power is the women's affairs.

Table 2.20

Female Participation at Government Ministerial Levels in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Full ministerial Rank</th>
<th>State/deputy Ministers</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-75</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975-82</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-90</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Thus, it is evident that in terms of numbers, women have a very low position in policy making at the higher levels because of their lack of popular base and also lack of orientation in public and political activities. Further, the male dominated network and support mechanism works have led to the marginalisation of women.

2.8.6. Women in Civil Administration

The Government of Bangladesh in 1972 first initiated the process of women's administrative empowerment by integrating women in the mainstream of

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111 For example Khaleda Zia formed her first cabinet in March 1991, there was no other woman in the cabinet. She allocated for herself important portfolios such as Establishment, Information, Energy etc. She was the only exception because of her political strength in the party.
development and at the decision making level. A ten percent quota was reserved for women to ensure women’s participation in the government service by withdrawing restrictions on the appointment of women in the same.

However, in the civil administration, there are hardly any women at the top decision-making level. Table 2.21 shows how in 1988, out of 55 Secretaries and Additional Secretaries, 88 Joint Secretaries, 168 Deputy Secretaries and 594 Section Officers, only one position of the Joint Secretary and one position of Deputy Secretary were held by women. It is evident from the Table that women’s participation in the top administration is very low. There is no doubt that the education level of women is quite low compared to men but such micro-mini representations of women in decision-making is more a result of the attitude of the employers than non-availability of qualified women.

Table 2.21

Representation of Male-Female Distribution in Higher Administration in Bangladesh

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secretary and Add. Secretary</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joint Secretary</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deputy Secretary</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section Officer (Assistant Secretary)</td>
<td>594</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2.8.7. Women in Political Parties

Over the years very few women could hold leadership position in the party hierarchy. But the number of women members and party workers are gradually increasing as a result of membership drives of the political parties for electioneering and organizational purposes. During election campaigns, women party workers are utilized to mobilize women voters. Still, gender disparity at the lower levels is highly wide. It is even wider at the upper levels. Table 2.22 shows that there is limited female involvement in party hierarchical structures. Women hold the party positions which are exclusively reserved for women. However, there are two women at the top leadership positions in two main political parties.

Table 2.22

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the Party Organ</th>
<th>Name of the incumbents</th>
<th>Total no. of incumbents</th>
<th>No. of Female Party</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Awami League</td>
<td>President and Secretary</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Awami League</td>
<td>Working Committee</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Muslim League</td>
<td>Central Committee</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh National Party</td>
<td>Standing Committee</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh National Party</td>
<td>Executive Committee</td>
<td>114</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jatiyo Samaj Tantrik Dal</td>
<td>Central Committee</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Communist Party</td>
<td>Central Committee</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


112 It is difficult to determine the number of women members of the various political parties due to non-availability of statistical records. The little information available indicates that participation of women in political parties is highly unsatisfactory.


114 Both Begum Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina came to the top leadership under special circumstances through inheritance.
2.8.8. Obstacle to Women’s Political Participation

Several factors hamper women’s effective political participation. Major factors include cultural, socio-economic and political. The concept of a separate world and the seclusion of women, which the system of purdah implies, limit women’s participation in politics. Politics, national or local, deals with public affairs and it is concerned with issues outside the home.115 The patriarchal and patrilineal social systems, and also women’s reproductive and family roles make it difficult for women to be fully involved in politics. Economic dependence, lack of political socialization, and women’s domestic responsibility are key factors that limit the political participation of women. In Bangladesh women’s inferior economic status, their unequal access to economic opportunities offered by state and society coupled with their unequal access to existing educational and skill training opportunities keep them economically dependent on men. This dependence is also an important factor that limits her freedom in politics.116

Women’s meagre presence in the cabinet, Parliament and local government, political party and administration reflects the pathetic situation of women in the country’s politics. Successive governments in Bangladesh have not done much to bridge the gap that exists among male and female representation in politics in terms of numbers and opportunities. Increase in the representation of women in politics has not reached the desired level. It results from their low socio-economic status


stemming from social norms of a male dominated society. Under such circumstances, it is imperative to adopt a policy that not only improves the status of women through education and training but also firmly commits itself in terms of administrative measures and reallocation of financial resources for the integration of women in development.

It is evident from the preceding discussions that women's status in Bangladesh is socially, economically, politically and culturally inferior to that of men. They are poorer, less educated and the state of their physical well-being is worse than that of men. In spite of these handicaps women are being forced to participate in the formal labour market and are restricted to the least productive self-employment occupations, the least favourable terms and conditions, and unpaid labour in family enterprises.

On most indicators (nutritional status, life expectancy, maternal mortality, etc.) women's status is very low compared to men. This is due to the low investment in women's human resources which is a major factor inhibiting their well-being, productivity and development. More concrete and concerted strategies are needed for mainstreaming gender in development planning, including the reconsideration of broader policies (e.g. on liberalisation, industry, employment and human resources development) from a gender perspective.