

# FOUR DECADES OF WOMEN IN BANGLADESH: CHANGES AND CHALLENGES IN EMPOWERMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

Bangladesh emerged as an independent state in 1971. Subsequent nationalist history of the state glorified 'men' as savior and the women as 'victim'. The issue of women empowerment has been in the public domain but the presence of women in decision making club has not yet resulted in active participation in nation's power centers. Patriarchal society creates consolation by establishing quota and the market force capitalized on the cheap and attractive labor of women. The traditional mores in the society further complicates issue of identity with predetermined notion of "Women's Ideal Role" and to choose among 'Bengali', 'Muslim', 'Hindu', 'Modern', 'Rural', 'Urban', 'Ethnic' and other categories of women determined by its own set of moralities and standards. This paper is an attempt to draw a general but comprehensive picture of the present situation of women in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Bangladesh, Empowerment, Gender, Equality, Women.

## INTRODUCTION

"Day passes, at night my eyes are shaded with tears. There is no one and no light in the evening in my hut. My husband says, what is the necessity of lighting a lamp, as there is no child in this hut? To him, spending fuel for a lamp is a waste of money for an empty hut. He remains in the mosque or roams around in the bazaar to pass the time. He comes back late at night. For me, only the darkness and loneliness remain as friends forever. No one realizes there is a person inside the dark hut; my existence diminishes with the darkness. Everyone forgets that I am alone in the dark."

Hiramon, aged 31, a childless woman in a village  
(Quoted in Nahar and Richters, 2011)

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“If a male construction sector helper earns Tk.220 a day, doing the same work a female construction sector helper would get Tk. 160–180 a day. We women workers receive 30–60 taka less than a man; we feel bad but can’t do anything. The sardars [leaders], contractors and male co-workers say women can’t climb stairs carrying heavy loads like men, can’t cut earth the way men do, so it is obvious that they would get less than men. However, the fact is this is an excuse to give us fewer wages.”

A female construction worker in Sylhet, aged 43  
(Quoted in Choudhury, 2013)

“Women’s participation in politics fully depends on the husbands’ attitude. Many husbands now allow their wives to get involved in politics, because husbands can be successful in business through the political connections of their wives. Besides, the position of the wives enhances the status of the family. After getting that, husbands do not let their wives work for politics.”

A female Member of Parliament  
(Quoted in Chowdhury, 2009)

“After my oath I went to the chairman and asked him to assign me some work. The chairman became annoyed and said the government has brought out the women from their houses to create unnecessary trouble in the Union Parishad. [He said] “What will you do in the Union Parishad? Go upstairs and sit with my wife and spend your time. I do not find any work for you. No specific work is mentioned in the manual for women.”

Hasnehena, a Union Parishad Member  
(Quoted in Mukhopadhyay and Meer, 2004; Mukhopadhyay, 2005: 33)

“A policeman asked another policeman to take off my blouse, so that I could not join in the procession again. Police poked different parts of my body with sticks. After viewing my pictures in the newspapers, I thought that I could never show my face to anyone. Once I thought to commit [sic] suicide.”

Moni Begum, a female activist  
(Jai Jai Din, 18–24 May 1999, quoted in Chowdhury, 2009)

In many ways the above comments reflect some significant aspects of women in Bangladesh. Since the independence of Bangladesh, especially in the last two decades, slogans of women’s empowerment are meme. From Union Council to the Parliament, from micro-credit program to national budget, from ready-made garments to the armed forces; the issue hogs the centre stage. The discussion on empowerment of women has entered the mainstream but the major limitations are found regarding women’s actual presence either ornamentally or turning them into victim except few high profile instances. Women have come to occupy some space in the political institutions either as the alternative of men or to beautify the space. Their issue is often raked up in media, but in most of the cases either as victim of sexual violence or as sexual object. They are in work force only to be used as cheap labor or as symbol of customer attraction.

Can a genealogy of this permanent subjugation of women be drawn? Exactly how true is the empowerment of women in Bangladesh? What are the impacts of national and international developing agencies which focus

on facilitating women empowerment initiatives, and often take political initiatives to bring them into decision making orbit or market driven demand for women labor?

This article is a humble attempt to draw the comprehensive picture of women in Bangladesh. This kind of effort to discuss about women is usually limited by generalization. In this article, we have followed mainly the secondary sources to bring out a comprehensive picture on women empowerment in Bangladesh.

#### WOMEN'S UNIVERSAL STRUGGLE AND THE BANGLADESHI NARI

The history of women in this world has its own dimension and continuity which includes their captivity, struggle, frustration, hopes, changes and challenges. The universal subordination of women is evidently found everywhere through the course of time. Either from the East to the West or from the North to the South, women have been following the ideals established within the precincts of male dominated society. Women had to win all the eligibility through their sacrifice. Although Bangladeshi women, as half of the total population, are equal to men in numbers; during last four decades of independence, they continue to face hurdles and harsh challenges. Somewhere, liberty in true sense is a mirage for them in the constrained societal environment and political structure. Bangladeshi women live in a patrilineal and patriarchal social system by custom. From birth to death; women, here have to go through restriction, suppression and domination which disable them from getting true freedom and rights. As a developing country, Bangladesh is trying to achieve basic development goals and expectations. But true achievements will come only when this significant half of population would get actual rights and access.

In Bangla literature, women are often compared with flowers. But how can the flowers bloom into spring if it is forced by various constraints? It is a flower that grows in a prison. They are guarded and tied up with the ropes of male dominance. They act and do as the society expects them to act and do. In a country like Bangladesh, society has established a standard for women where women are still treated as inferior. Historically, well-known patriarchy has manifested itself as a very invincible notion which regulates social, cultural, economic, religious, political and legal arenas of Bangladeshi women's life. As an independent country Bangladesh has left behind more than 40 years survival. In this journey, we have to see how many miles have been passed in achieving dignity, justice, rights and status of women. Society has got some positive changes in its approach and perspectives which has helped women to come out from their barriers and boundaries. Still, basic challenges are waiting to confront them where they are put to fight against so many problem oriented obstacles.

Writing history of women requires particular insight that is already best described in Joan Kelly's statement, 'Woman's history has a dual goal: to restore women to history and to restore our history to women' (Kelly, 1984:1). Women history is not a simple history; it is herstory- a fluid genre that consists of their extended journey, a historical expression of women's own being. The secondary position and subordination of women is universal in modern societies. It was not so during the early dawn of civilization. Historically, there were flourishing matrilineal societies. Remnants are still found among Garo from Mymensing, Khasi from Sylhet and Meghalaya, Bangladesh and India respectively, so are from Mosuo in Yunnan, China. But with the emergence of the notion of private property and family, women's responsibility started getting uprooted from their previous position and status. Friedrich Engels wrote, 'Destroying matrilineal system was such a global historical defeat of women. Men captured even the authority of household. Thus women became subjugated; as chained they became rather a machine of reproduction' (Engels, 2002:41). Well known feminist writer and philosopher Simone De Beauvoir noted, "the evolution of woman's condition is to be explained by the concurrent action of these two factors: sharing in productive labor and being freed from slavery to reproduction' (quoted in Stearns, 1978: 3). According to the philosopher Gerda Lerner, 'Patriarchy was not a significant event; rather it was a moment in the big historical canvas from where the male domination got started'. (Quoted in Barua, 2011:

77). August Bebel argues that during the transition from savagery to barbarism, matriarchy was replaced by patriarchy. Subsequently through the gradual stages of civilization, women were created as gendered subject with characteristics deprivation.

Historically, Indian sub-continent including Bengal had matrilineal systems in many places as well. In the province of early Rarho, Shukhna, Tamralipi, Harikel, Gourha, Samatat and Banga, there were different ethnic groups like Kol, Bheel, Munda, Shabar and Nishadas who used to follow matrilineal system in many ways of their lives (Falguni, 2010:20). Women were comparatively free. But the changing pattern of power applied by men began to push women into subjection. Women related concerns in Bengal got a new fillip during the British era and emergence of Bengali Bhadrakalok class. Much of the rare documents about women from society's subaltern classes are still to be retrieved and deciphered.

From 16th to 19th centuries, various radical socio-political changes began to roll. With the industrial revolution in western countries, participation of women in societies increased. From the fifth to the seventh decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rise of nationalist and feminist women movements as well as writings on woman issues, opened a new chapter for their existential liberty. Particularly since 1970, feminist philosophical approach formed a distinct shape. This time women moved forward with theoretical analysis and explanation with their protests (Maytra, 2007:21). In the Indian sub-continent ideas regarding women began to gather steam since late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The participation of women in resistances against British colonial rule initiated a nationalist motivation (Begum, 2002:15-17). In the meantime, banning the practice of burning sati and remarriage of Bengali widow created milestones in positive thinking for women. In Bengal, the sacrifice of revolutionary Pritilata Waddadar and the enlightened voice of Begum Rokeya has become the milestone in discourse about women empowerment. Bangladeshi women took strong part in Language Movement of 1952, Mass Uprising in 1969 and in the Liberation War of 1971 against West Pakistan's brutal colonial regime; ignited flame that has brought courage and inspiration to today's women in Bangladesh. In 1971, large number of women in Bengal fought, suffered, got injured and became war-affected. Women's participation was extensive. Women from all places rendered support to the freedom fighters. With the joint collaboration of men and women, Bangladesh won liberty and established independence and sovereignty. But the nationalist history of Bangladesh silenced the voice of many women in protecting the honor and chastity of mothers and sisters. This self-assumed role of protector establishes the hegemony of men over women. Narratives of the war, while accounting for the death did not enlist the name of women who died or were raped. In the list of shaheeds, only the name of two women who were members of intellectual group was included. (Mohsin, 2004)

Struggle of women never ends. Women in Bangladesh continue to fight for establishing a regime of equality, rights and dignity. They have experienced changes and have tough challenges in their own land. In Bangladesh, concerns and thinking exclusively regarding women, were becoming more apparent at the beginning of 1980. National and international, both factors were quite influential in these matters (Muhammad, 2012: 105-111). Today, Bangladesh for women is no longer a compact notion.

#### WOMEN IN BANGLADESHI SOCIETY: UNDER THE VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE VEIL

When one talks about the women in Bangladesh, we usually think of veiled women in villages and modern women in urban centers. But the veil which stereotypes women in Bangladesh is much more than being a physical signification. Religion, nationalism, ethnicity, state, modernity-all in Bangladeshi context have their own determined set of moralities both for men and women. Therefore, a woman in Bangladesh is not just a woman; she is expected to behave as a Muslim women, Hindu women, Bengali women, Chakma women, modern women etc. Whoever she may be, she has to fit in a type and has to perform the roles set by moral authority.

From the existing literature on women's health, nutrition, education, economic activities, labor and empowerment, political and legal condition, matter of equality and status; they are seen comparatively inferior to men. Tied however, the changing pattern of women's role, participation, mobility and empowerment is getting visible. Changes in mentality, awareness and consciousness, supportive actions towards women demonstrated by social institutions, national and international initiative are having positive effects.

In spite of having made certain achievements in women's life, these are yet not satisfactory for building a gender- equitable society. Gender discrimination is widespread in all features of society. Bangladesh's constitution though guarantees equal rights to every citizen, in the issues relating to family, marriage, divorce, inheritance and conservation- traditional laws are followed which are often discriminatory against women. Women are disadvantaged at receiving proper healthcare. The maternal mortality rate is still high. The progress in enrollment of female children at primary and secondary school level is still slow. In political engagements of society, women face threatening challenges. Poverty usually affects majority of poor women, children and women- headed families. Empirical data, taken from surveys across developing countries including Bangladesh show, households below the poverty line is suggestively higher for female-headed families (ADB, 2001:x). Economically, a huge number of women are working in numerous sectors in both rural and urban areas, but their security, wages and rights are not properly granted. Bangladesh also faces challenge of insecurity of refugee women. Problem regarding the insecurity of minority and indigenous women is also in the radar of policy makers.

#### FOUR DECADES OF PAID AND UNPAID LABOR: WOMEN WORKERS IN INFORMAL AND FORMAL SECTORS

Marxist philosopher Rosa Luxemburg in her *The Proletarian Woman* writes,

“The woman of the people has always worked hard. In the savage horde, she carried heavy loads, collected foods; in the primitive village, she planted grains and ground them, and she made pottery; in ancient times, as a slave, she served the masters and suckled their offspring at her breast; in the Middle Ages, she labored in the spinning room for the feudal lord. But since the establishment of private property, the woman of the people has, for the most part, worked separately from the great workshop of social production, and therefore also of culture, cooped up in the domestic constriction of a miserable familial existence. Capitalism was the fast to rip her out of the family and put her under the yoke of social production, forced into other's fields, into workshops, into buildings, into offices, factories and warehouses.”

(Cited in Hudis & Anderson, 2005: 243).

The concept, Labor of woman became an international phenomenon. Women confronted ups and downs by following the changes in global economy and politics. Coming through different events and from the various fields of financial stages, uncounted and undocumented women came out to take financial responsibilities for their survival and family. Before Bangladesh's independence, during the 1960s, numbers of landless family increased. Sometimes they were reduced into acute rural proletarian families. In spite of having unequal wages and pattern of hard work, they became engaged into diverse working sectors. Similarly, from 70's and 80's in the national and international market, cost of livinghood suddenly became high. In many ways, women from middle class families began to start engaging themselves in various professional working sectors in urban areas. Increase of number of Bangladeshi women in labor market was also the outcome of domestic economic hardship and the integration of Bangladeshi economy with global economic order. Expanding activities of national and international organizations to some level, influenced labor of women. In this process, they brought women in different development scheme and microcredit programs. On the other hand, Bangladesh began to

provide comparatively cheap women labor in industrial market.

The rural women of Bangladesh are ruthlessly disadvantaged. 80% of women used to live in rural areas in the late 80's. Among them, 70% of rural women were small cultivator, tenant, and landless households. Some of them worked as day laborers, part time or seasonal laborers. They used to provide labor in post-harvest activities and other small tasks. 15%-20% of women, mostly in poor landless households, depended on casual labor, collecting, begging, and other irregular sources of income. Their income was vital to household survival. The other 10% of women were in households mainly in the professional, trading, or large-scale landowning categories, and they usually did not work outside the home (Wikipedia, 2013). In fact, women are fulltime workers in their families and households where their contribution is unacknowledged most of the time. In rural agricultural society, patrilineal ideals seem to be very strong. Major portion of rural women never get introduced to education in formal. Though investment of women's labor makes a sizeable contribution in total agricultural production; they do not have legal or social recognition for their labor. It is notable that men are addressed as peasant because they have ownership of lands. On the contrary women are never addressed as peasant as legally they do not own lands (Parvez, 2000). In agriculture, during cultivation, women play the vital roles in pre-harvest and post-harvest activities. But these are considered as extension of women's regular household responsibilities. On the basis of the economic activities of rural working women, their labor is divided into two segments. Labor for own household and outside home. In families, rural women are ensuring all the existence of succeeding generations from childbearing to rearing. In attending to it, they are also doing the other necessary extended activities. Additionally, at the same time they are doing socially recognized outer economic activities like serving as day laborers, working in road constructions, small business within micro-credit scheme etc. The rural women who do not work outside, their activities are divided into two parts as well. One is making incomes through rearing livestock, selling vegetables, sewing products, making cloths and processing dry foods etc. Another one is cooking, maintaining household jobs, gathering-collecting-making dry foods etc. (Muhammad, 2012:126-129). This is amply evident. Women in rural sectors share much of the workload. They are visible and invisible workers in our economy. It is seen somewhere that indigenous women workers are less paid than majority of women laborers. They face work and wage related discriminations in various other ways. Often their payments are delayed, they are paid partially and sometimes even they face physical harassment (Chakraborty, 2004:64). Changes in working pattern have come but in matter of recognition, Bangladesh has to work hard.

Due to the changing pattern of the economy, women came out from their house and sought employment outside their home in urban areas. Before independence there were 0.8 million of working women (Begum, 1988:56). Liberation war was the most significant breakthrough as these men-women equality was enshrined in constitution, and official recognition was extended for women's labor. Because of the rehabilitation of women, quota for freedom fighters family, development schemes for post-war affected people; gradually women were engaging themselves in outer working spheres. Besides, poverty, famine and starvation also compel them to work outside. In a report, Female Status in Bangladesh published in 1980, it was mentioned that in 1975, just after the famine, under foreign authorized food for work project, 30% of included workers were women. Without any kind of encouragement or campaigning, women came willingly to do hard physical labor like digging soil and canals for sanitation and irrigation, road construction, constructing dam for flood management etc. Undoubtedly, these women's economic demands were so acute that, this left the previous socio-cultural bindings behind (Casters, 1992:104). In the last two decades, particularly employment of younger women has been on rise. Poor women found their job scopes in various informal sectors along with brick fields, building roads, construction sites, glass and electronic factories, tobacco and chemical factories, garment factories, shrimp factories, small handicraft sectors and tea gardens etc.

For last three decades, the number of women workers in the garment sector increased very fast. In fact garment industry is the most important working sector for working women now. The major part of export income comes from this sector. But in this sector workers are facing unsecured working atmosphere. Recent tragic events at Tazrin Fashion and Savar Rana Plaza killed more than thousand garments workers most of them being women. These garment factories do not pay proper wages or provide proper job environment, trade union rights, facilities and necessary human security. Even thence, more and more women laborers join the sector each day. As per government statistics, almost 1.8 million new laborers join workforce every year, majority of them are women. In Bangladesh, 90% of working women came from the process through economic marginalization. There are no such effective legal organizations or institutions who can talk in favor of them (Jamali, 2012:78). In Bangladesh, participation of women in national-international organizations, teaching, health care, research sectors has increased in last two decades. In fields of business and commerce, emergence of women entrepreneur is picking up pace. In numerous urban areas including big cities, women are joining white collar jobs. Positive changes in women empowerment are quite significant in urban areas of Bangladesh.

#### WOMEN IN POLITICS: WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AND THEIR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT IN THE CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

Politically, Bangladesh is a very dynamic state. For many years of colonial dominance and oppression, as well as historical ups and downs, people of this country upholds unique political features in their worldview. History of political empowerment of women in Bangladesh does not hold a long period of time but it has always been demonstrated in a qualitative way. In the past, women luminaries like Begum Rokeya, Sufia Kamal, Ila Mitra, Pritilata Waddeder showed immense courage. The British era had stages of movements for independence and revitalization of society. Women's movements during Pakistan period and post-independence age had socialist philosophical influence and effect of nationalist ideologies (Guhathakurata, Begum & Ahmed, 1997:186-187). Later, these practices paved out for democratic rational. Many small organizations of women stood against socially discriminatory class related issues and exiting patriarchal practices. Call for equality, approaches to weakening gender discrimination, protests against violence, torture, and against fundamentalist's activities in society has been effective in crystallizing women issues and solidarity.

Women's right to political participation is a universal recognized phenomenon. But still there are gaps between official formal politics and meaningful exercise of solid political implementation. Patriarchal attitude in society, cultural factors, religious and economic factors, legal, political, organizational and psycho-biological factors are equally responsible for this lagging behind. Since independence, Bangladesh achieved unique political changes, though effective degree of participations are needed to build further participation. Presently, the Prime Minister and the leader of main opposition party and even the speaker of the national parliament are women. When we estimate degree of general participation, it is quite low. Bangladeshi women got their voting rights in 1972. The Constitution of Bangladesh proclaims equality of all citizens before law (Article 27). It noticeably affirms that: (1) steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life, (2) women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life (Article 28(2)). (Khanam, Khanam & Khan, 1996:91). Besides, in other big political parties of Bangladesh, presence of women leadership is comparatively low. National parliament is the highest institution for adoption and implementation of law and rights. There must be suitable formation of parliamentarian structure where women representatives can ensure their seats and participate in meaningful policy deliberations on equal basis. With this objective, after independence of Bangladesh, to ensure female participation, Article 65(3) was added in the Constitution by reserving 15 seats for women for next 15 years. In the year 1979, reservation of seats had been expanded with 30 more seats which were to expire on 14th April, 2001. This law has been abolished again (Begum, 2002:99).

Table 1 reveals that during the year 1972 -75; there were 33 full male ministers while none from women. The number of male state-ministers was 17 and for female it was merely two. Between the years of 1975-82, number of full male ministers was 63; where female ministers were again two only. During same years, number of male state-ministers was 38 and female ministers only four. During the years 1982-90, number of full male ministers was 85, while that of females only three. Male and female state-ministers were 48 and one respectively. During the year 1991-96, male and female full ministers were 20 and one, whereas male and female state- ministers were 16 and two. The respective figure for the year 1996- 97 were 14 and 3. From this numbers it becomes clear that participation speed of female members was slow (B.B.S Report, 1997 in Begum, 2002:101).

Table 1: Women's Representation in Parliament, 1973–2013

Parliament	Reserved/ quota seats for women	Women in elected / general seats	Total number of women MP
1st Parliament (1973–75)	15	0	15
2nd Parliament (1979–82)	30	2	32
3rd Parliament (1986–87)	30	5	35
4th Parliament (1988–90)	0	4	4
5th Parliament (1991–95)	30	4	34
6th Parliament (1996–96)	30	3	33
7th Parliament (1996–01)	30	8	38
8th Parliament (2001–06)	45	7	52
9 <sup>th</sup> Parliament (2009 -2013)	50	19	69

Source: [www.ecs.gov.bd](http://www.ecs.gov.bd) ; Pandey, 2008.

Women's participation in local government is also showing some signs of change. There are reserved seats for women in every municipal and local government sector. Local government has two way systems. These are Union Parishad and Zilla Parishad. Before 2000, the number of reserved seats was 4,434 and 64 respectively. At city level, there were 6 city corporations and 119 municipalities. In every sector, the number of reserved seat for women is three. In the year 1997, government opened a new chapter to establish direct election system containing women leadership with adding "Ka" dhara of Union Parishad Ordinance 1983. It was the implementation of women rights even at grassroot level. This step was very encouraging for all. Women candidates during local elections rose to about 45000 for 12,882 seats. Direct election was conducted on these three seats under each Union Council. This event was very inspiring and had positive influence in favor of ideas regarding leadership of women and their consciousness of political rising. From the report of election commission it is clear that in this election, 85% women voted (Begum, 2002:101).

Union Parishad chairman is the primary source of power and authority at village level. The UP chairman acts as administrator, judge, leader, representative, development implementer and the authority of certification. But presence of women is extremely low in the position as indicated in Table 2. Even the elected female chairwoman is called chairman which indicates the power of male dominated society.



Table 2: Women as the Elected Chair of Union Parishads

Year of election	Total no. of Union Parishad	Total no. candidates contesting for the post of chair	Women candidates contesting	Women elected as chair
1973	4352	-	-	1
1977	4352	-	-	4
1984	4400	-	-	6
1988	4401	18566	79	1
1992-93	4451	17444	115	24
1997	4479	-	102	23
2003	4223	21376	232	22

Source: Sultana, 2000; Pandey, 2008 and [www.ecs.gov.bd](http://www.ecs.gov.bd)

It is to mention that activities like election designs, formulating rules and regulations, decision making and other procedures are mainly made by male. To determine welfare steps for women requires women policy makers. Therefore, in every sector of society, whenever planning or implementing for women issues are required; we need men and women equally.

#### DAUGHTERS OF THE SOIL: WOMEN'S' RIGHTS ON LAND AND PERSONAL LAWS

Issues and questions regarding women's rights are now getting more attention than general concerns and focuses. In 1995, it was recognized during the Beijing Women's Conference that women's rights on land and agricultural issues are virtually issues of national economy and politics, not only the judicial problems (Parvez, 2003:57). Women of Bangladesh face competition for land ownership, control, administration and its judicial managements. The insufficiency of land makes it sharper. The existing law and patriarchal values are not suitable for women to have proper rights on immovable property like land. The accurate land policy, rights and its valid application for women is required in our laws. Frequently, women loose rights in all kinds of land. Among the landless people of Bangladesh, majority are women. At the same time, somewhere women are owner of their lands legally, but the production and security are controlled by male members. For last several decades, women are losing rights in huge amount of wetlands too. Even ethnic women are losing their rights over lands. Through construction of dams, hydro-electricity project, plantation of rubber, commercial forestry; indigenous women are being uprooted from their places. In the name of development and donor-driven policies, ethnic women are often put in vulnerable life situations. To ensure developments of women in society, their rights on land must be appropriately designed and mentioned in our Constitution and legal frameworks. The participation and representation of women and their leadership must be ensured in land-related areas. Recognition of women's due welfare in land rights is not simply empowering them in society but also necessary for holistic women development.

Since 1971, Bangladesh's laws is applicable to all citizens without discrimination based on religious beliefs or sex, with only exception: its personal laws. Some reforms, particularly laws against domestic violence and acid attacks, have addressed family issues and apply across the religious field. Personal laws on marriage, divorce, separation etc. remain stringent. In Bangladesh, Muslims, Hindus, Christians have separate personal laws. The personal laws discriminate against women with respect to marriage, separation, divorce and maintenance. Women frequently fail to identify marital property and its division on the equal basis after separation or divorce. Through this practice, men actually get benefitted and women remain deprived. Though the Muslim personal laws have some positive aspects, but it is still discriminatory when it comes to involvement of women issues.

Hindu personal law is minimally codified with discriminatory elements. Similarly, personal law of Christians also discriminates against women. Thus, discriminatory personal laws of Bangladesh harm women and their dependents during marriage and upon separation or divorce, with contribution to violence against women and poverty in female-headed households (Human Rights Watch, 2012:4-12). Many poor divorced and separated women confront severe economic hardship, loose marital homes and lack all kind of resources to deal reality of life. One can see that family courts have some primary duties for enforcing personal laws of Bangladesh. But these are plagued with procedural, judicial and administrative problems. People, especially women are most of the times not conscious about the procedures and knowledge of this court. Government of Bangladesh has taken small but important steps toward addressing the problems through approving supportive initiatives to improve and reform personal laws. With the collaboration of national and international organizations, services are being provided to eliminate discrimination against women. More comprehensive study and exploration are to be made to strengthen mechanisms for implementing laws and to pave out the ways regarding these issues.

## CONCLUSION

Since the Liberation War of 1971, for more than forty years, Bangladesh has witnessed lots of ups and downs in many ways. Progress in women's life is coming but still they have a long way to go. When women risks taking active role in powerful position of society either in family or in the politics or business, they are depicted as out of natural place having lost the 'ideal' position. Society accepts working women only when they are in womanly jobs. At the same time, working women coming from unprivileged section of society has to face greater difficulties. True liberation of women demands holistic development of women's existence and livelihood where it shall include qualitative development for every woman of Bangladesh.

Across the cultural, socio-economic and political level, empowering women requires conviction in dignity and recognition of women at similar pedestal that men have. Women's participation in formal and informal working sectors, either in rural areas or urban places and in the field of taking decision or policy making has to be increased in a secured socio-cultural atmosphere. At present time, the peak of Bangladeshi politics is occupied by women leaders. Both Prime Minister and opposition leader are women. But this fact does not mean that women are politically empowered comprehensively. Most of the times women political leader and MPs came to politics either in reserved seat or as the alternative of male member of a politically well-connected family. (Chowdhury, 2009). There is a miniscule presence of women in the committees of various political parties. Participation of women politically has to be encouraged emphatically. In economic sectors, export industry facilitated the employment of millions of Bangladeshi women. This is undoubtedly a positive development as the women workers who come mainly from village would otherwise work as domestic worker or end in underage or exploitative marriage. But the rate of female employment is not satisfactory if one compares with other countries, as Choudhury (2013) argued 'the statistics reveal that the country has one of the lowest female employment rates in the world. In Bangladesh, the economically active population is approximately 57 million, of which only 17 million are women (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Also, it should be wrong to assume that export industries help to empower women. They employed women as women are available as cheap, non-demanding, loyal workers. Female garments workers work hard from early morning to night at a very low wage. We only notice their suffering when they die in hundreds in man-made disasters which in fact is equivalent to 'murder'. Thousands of national and international development organizations have grown all across Bangladesh, most of which have a focus on gender equality. Their success is mainly seen due to the growing consciousness on women's rights and facilities such as education, health, economic empowerment etc. Much celebrated success of micro-credit is equally debated. But development organizations are also criticized as an extension of neoliberal project and accused for creating and maintaining

a new kind of patron-client relationship (Karim, 2008).

We opine that patriarchal society, dominant nation-state and profit-mongering market is a deadly cocktail which cannot ensure the radical change in the situation of women until and unless women themselves do not rise. Exploitation of women is universal and any change can be possible only through universal sisterhood which may come from local struggle linked up with regional and international solidarity, resistance and active participation at all level. It requires increasing the vigorous involvement and growing consciousness among women from all sections of the society. Effective cooperation and support from men and society is necessary. Bangladesh is looking forward to welcome the new light of the fresh dawn in which women shine equally with men.

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