

**ADVANCING WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND  
POLITICAL FIELDS : BANGLADESH CONTEXT**

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<https://doi.org/10.54922/IJEHSS.2023.0512>

**ABSTRACT**

Around 50 percent of the population in Bangladesh comprises women. Women have made direct and indirect contributions to men's successes in life struggles. Despite their significant contributions to society and the nation, most women are not involved in mainstream socio-economic and political activities. To promote women's development, they need to have a strong position at all levels of society, decision-making power, and freedom to live according to their own choices. This can be achieved through the process of empowerment. Empowerment ensures that women are recognized as human beings rather than just women and are capable of providing opinions and making decisions on all matters affecting their lives. Empowerment results in the sustainable development of women. The discussion paper reviews theoretical aspects of women's empowerment and its position in socio-economic and political contexts, considering indicators such as education, health, participation in decision-making processes, control and influence, constitutional recognition, legal initiatives, international action, ongoing initiatives, and recommendations.

**Key Words:** Socio- Economic, Political Activities, Empowerment.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The success achieved by men in all stages of life struggle in the patriarchal social system for ages is not the sole contribution of men. Women have always provided strength and inspiration at home or by their side. Although they are a source of endless energy and inspiration in the work of men, very few traditions or institutions recognize the contribution of women. It is good for the society and the state that women move along the same pace as men. Of the total population of 165,158,616, as many as 81,712,824 are males, while 83,347,206 are women. That is, almost half of the population is women (Dhaka Tribune, 27 July 2022). It is not possible to accelerate the overall development of the country without the socio-economic development of this large population. Due to traditional culture, values, meditation concept, anti-women view of traditional institutions, family responsibilities, giving birth etc., the home becomes the last refuge of women in modern Bengal. Women's talent and creativity are not developed due to lack of favorable environment (Hasan Uzzaman, 2002, p:43). Although women are forced to live a very neglected life in the male dominated society, the role of women in family life has exceeded the contribution of men, but it has not been adequately recognized in the society (Begum and Haque, 2004, p:77). A creative and enlightened nation of women is needed to create a new generation of children, raising them, raising them as beautiful citizens. But they are deprived of the opportunity to acquire higher-education and specialized skills (Khan & Islam, 2011, p:1). Due to their weak position in socio-economic and political fields, women are subject to multiple deprivations, oppression and

torture. Violence against women in Bangladesh can be found everywhere from inside the home to outside the home (Mannan & Meri, 2006,p:101).Due to the dependence of women in the socio-economic field and political powerlessness, women are subjected to deprivation and torture in all areas. Empowerment of women is possible in all fields if women can be involved in the process of development and empowerment. Moreover, if we analyze the real picture of our social system, it can be seen that women are dependent, backward, veiled, and bound by religious dogma, deprived of the light of real education, victims of child marriage and polygamy and deprived of modern medical facilities. They should be included in the process of protecting their interests through their participation at all levels of the state, influencing decision-making, policies, plans and laws. The process of empowerment makes women protestors in terms of rights, protection of interests, control etc. A woman herself can implement her life plan independently. In the present article, the theoretical review of women, empowering process factors such as social values, culture, traditions, customs, women's access to education and health facilities, women's position in the workplace, women's participation in political and administrative spheres, status and implementation of indicators related to empowerment, constitutional and Legal recognition and international initiatives are discussed. Despite the country's patriarchal societal norms and limited resources, women in Bangladesh have become increasingly visible and active in these domains, challenging traditional gender roles and stereotypes. The Bangladesh government has implemented several policies and programs aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, such as the National Women's Development Policy, the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Act, and the Gender Responsive Budgeting Initiative. However, despite these efforts, women in Bangladesh still face many challenges, including discrimination, gender-based violence, and limited access to education and employment opportunities. This essay will discuss the current state of women's empowerment in socio-economic and political fields in Bangladesh and explore potential strategies for further progress.

## 2. THEORETICAL REVIEW OF WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Women's empowerment is a multi-dimensional issue that indicates the strong position of women in family, social, economic and political spheres. There is a deep relationship with the empowerment of women, their individuality, freedom to move according to their own choices and values, awareness of rights, etc. The concepts of women development and women empowerment are complementary and complementary to each other. If the development of women is ensured, the process of empowerment accelerates. An empowerment approach acts as a driving force in women's development. Modernization theory of development, basic needs theory, Structural readjustment theory etc. initiates fundamental and positive changes and multifaceted development of society. But all these theories could not play much role in ensuring the development and empowerment of women. Because all these theories revolve around activities. No indicator or variable of women development and empowerment process has been specified here. Various policies, procedures, strategies and programs have been developed over time for the overall welfare of men and women in third world low income countries. There are many debates about the interpretation and application of various policies and approaches to women's development and empowerment. Although there are various debates about the approach of women's development, national and international development organizations use these approaches. Notable among all these approaches is

1. Welfare Approach
3. Equity Approach

2. Efficiency Approach    4. Empowerment Approach

Welfare approach is mainly based on modernization theory where women are considered as good mothers. Food aid, prevention of malnutrition and provision of primary health care are ensured by ensuring women's active participation in family planning programs recognizing women as central to reproductive roles. In this approach, women are considered indirect beneficiaries of development and empowerment, not active agents of development and empowerment. In other words, it is believed that the women of the family will benefit indirectly through the money earned by the men. Men are considered to be the main labor force of the family and the representative of the outside world. The contemporaneous approach focuses on the inequality existing between men and women in both personal and social life. The contemporaneous approach provides an explanation and rationale for how conventional development trends adversely affect women. Here it is shown that all problems will be solved by following equality in market and home. Rights to land, inheritance, rights to marriage and divorce, guardianship of children, equality in family, income, control over reproduction and body, Issues such as moving into a decision-making position support a peer-to-peer approach. Through the skills approach, women's performance and productivity are acknowledged. Empowerment of women through education, training and technology will enable women to participate effectively in socio-economic, political, administrative and decision-making processes along with men.

Empowerment approach emphasizes women's participation in all spheres including establishment of self-determination, employment, politics, administration. Economic empowerment is key to this approach. This approach mainly focuses on increasing women's control over their own lives. Its aim is to empower women by gaining greater self-reliance, increasing confidence, so that they can play an active role in society. Not by imposing from above, but by taking initiatives from the bottom, the awareness of women will increase. So that they can challenge their inferior status in society. This approach ensures women's participation in decision-making positions equal to men. Because without the presence of women at the decision-making level, women's liberation will not be possible through patriarchal policies. Equality will be ensured only if empowerment is ensured. This approach seeks to empower women by redistributing power within a society and across societies. The empowerment approach is most prominently presented by a women's organization called Development Alternative with Women for a New Era (DAWN). DAWN's mission states that we want a world where there is no class, gender, or racial inequality within and between countries. We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eradicated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop their own potential and creativity and portray the values of caring and solidarity of women and human relationships. The reproductive role of women must be redefined in such a society, where men, women and the whole society will share in raising children. These can be achieved through women empowerment. The root causes of oppression of women in society are male-dominated laws, inheritance policies and customary institutions (Caroline, 1993, p:2). Theoretically, women's empowerment is analyzed from two aspects, Individual and Collective. There are some indicators of women's empowerment at the individual level, which if ensured, they can implement their life plans and live a dignified life while maintaining their own ideals, identity etc. In this process the individual acquires wealth, values, benefits and ensures a better and quality life in the long run. At the collective level (Collective level) the influencing indicators to ensure the empowerment of women under the institutional framework to ensure the planned life of men and women and through positive changes in the society build an impartial and fair society. Gender in society

through all these indicators. Equity and equality and social justice are strengthened (CWD, 2007,p:10-17). Gender empowerment is measured in three aspects: economic, political and professional. How much power a woman possesses depends on how much progress she has made in these areas. In this regard, there are five indicators of women's empowerment. Some important indicators are used in terms of control, participation, women's empowerment, free access to resource extraction and control, or rights and welfare For women empowerment some essential factor is used, such as appropriate education. Self-realization and observation through acceptance of women, living a healthy life through enjoying modern medical facilities and social security, ability to participate in decision-making, ability to acquire wealth, involvement in family financial transactions, ability to change and control one's surroundings, ability to take recourse to law, one's own decision in reproduction or birth control. Capacity to undertake and implement, the extent of migration corridors, etc. (Hossain and Masud uzzaman, 2003, p:10-11). If all these variables are properly implemented, it is possible to ensure the empowerment of women in socio-economic and political fields.

### **3. SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE OF EMPOWERMENT**

Social empowerment is participation in the activities of various institutions of the family and society, influencing decisions, moving freely according to one's own choice, education, health, childbirth, lifestyle etc. Most people of Bangladesh live in villages. Most of these people are superstitious blind believers, socio-politically neglected and backward. Women are the most backward, neglected and oppressed despite being an important part of the society. Social attitude towards women is not positive. Men's negative attitude towards women is depriving them of all kinds of opportunities. The social system of Bangladesh makes it easy to see women as ideal, gentle, gentle, humble, housewives, housewives. The existing social system does not want to see women as independent beings. Sometimes she is known in the family and society as daughter, sometimes mother, sometimes wife, sometimes sister-in-law. The prevailing ideas about women in our society are that women will be the Lakshmi of the house, the beauty of the house, soft-gentle-tolerant and patisevak, the will of the woman will be surrendered to the will of the husband and the family, no matter how big the employer is, the main work of the woman is at home, the heaven of the wife under the feet of the husband. etc. (Ahmed & Rahman, 2002, p:43). These age-old ideas are hindering the process of women's empowerment. The status of women in Bangladesh's social system is low because men are responsible for providing food and sustenance for the family. Women easily accept their authority as the basic human needs of women are dependent on men's financial supply. Because most women are not involved in income-generating activities, women cannot provide money for the needs of the family. No matter how big a role women play in the needs of the family or society in various fields, it is not considered as an important contribution.

#### **3.1 Values and culture**

A person's position and status in society is determined based on education, participation in socio-economic activities, influence in decision-making process, etc. But considering all these criteria, women are far away from the mainstream of society. Again, in our social system, women are not given proper respect and value even though they surpass men in power and status with their talent, ability, thoughtfulness, perseverance etc. Women are degraded, underestimated. Belittling his success, ignoring his choices, opinions are part of our society's values and are permanently

ingrained. Various familial, social, institutional values have evolved in such a way that they protect the interests of men and recognize or prioritize their contributions. In our social system, although women have achieved success by facing thousands of problems or played a role in the development of the society, there is no proper evaluation and recognition. A woman surrenders all her wants and dislikes, likes and dislikes, wishes and opinions to a man. A woman is a servant of a man, a husband is a master and a master, a wife's heaven under the husband's feet, a woman's honor, etc. Ideas are constantly practiced and reinforced in daily life at home, at work, in love, in negative expressions, in the media, in art and literature, in music and in comedy. Patriarchy places women's role in family and social life at the lowest level. Because the rules, laws, religion, customs and institutions existing in the society are all helpful to the interests of men and against the interests of women. Male dominated social system existing family structure and patriarchal ideologies make women subordinate. And he re-institutionalizes subordination to perpetuate that subordination. Since patriarchal values want to see women as subordinates in all fields and men as dominant - therefore, various values are created with the need for male dominance and patriarchal state. Spontaneous participation of women in various socio-economic, religious, cultural institutions and events is very less in rural areas. Although women participate in these fields in the city, here women are used as consumer goods, entertainment media and commercially. Due to family backwardness, social fear and backwardness, women's intelligence, thoughtfulness and talent do not develop properly in the cultural environment. Moreover, the culture of child marriage and polygamy has not decreased much in our society. All these measures are hindering the development and empowerment of women.

### **3.2 Social customs, customs and rules**

The customs, customs, and rules that have evolved in our social system over the ages are not conducive to women's development and women's empowerment. In a patriarchal society, men's greed for wealth has given rise to the practice of dowry. This practice has left the women helpless on the one hand and on the other hand the birth parents are becoming burdened. Due to this custom, violence against women, unrest, divorce, polygamy, insecurity of women, suicide, child marriage are increasing. Moreover, the traditional veil system is keeping women away from modern, up-to-date, technology-based education. Veil and dowry system, discrimination against women is used as a means of subjugating women. Due to this, on the one hand, women suffer from inferiority and on the other hand, women's participation in socio-economic, cultural and political activities is hindered, which is a threat to the development of the empowerment process. Existing customs and policies provide a permanent framework for men's empowerment and development, but act as barriers to women's free movement, development of free thought, choice and opinion. Although childbearing, rearing, family management etc. are social responsibilities of women, it is established today not as a responsibility but as an absolute mandatory rule. It is the rule that a woman will give up all her likes and dislikes, wishes and opinions to men. Women's treatment, education, behavior, lifestyle are all determined and controlled by men. On the other hand, the mother also follows the ideals of patriarchy and keeps a sharp eye on the daughter to acquire the traditional feminine ideals of the society and feminine virtues. From the toys of the girl child to her clothes, the subject of education, the way of walking, the manner of speaking, the eating habits, the family-neighbors as well as the society teaches her about the prevailing customs, customs, and rules, mainly for the sake of sustaining the patriarchal values. All these customs and rules create discrimination against women, keep women confined in a certain condition and from the beginning



of life, women learn to think that she has no movement without men and women are less important than men. And that's why the rules and regulations of the society are too much for women rules.

#### 4. ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

Economic empowerment refers to women's participation in work and income and having the ability to control and spend the money earned. Health, education, training, technical education, information, employment and earning opportunities, inheritance, wealth, credit, technology and women's economic empowerment is dependent on giving women full and equal opportunities and control rights in terms of wealth acquired through market management and rights over land etc. Men get earning opportunities by working in various public and private institutions which increases their authority in society and family. On the other hand, women are engaged in household management, child bearing and rearing, husband service, small household and cottage industries which are not considered as productive economic activities. But their responsibility is very helpful in nation building. Women who work in addition to housework have more responsibilities than men. Yet their contribution is not recognized economically (Mannan and Mary, 2006,p:161). Deprivation of education and wealth ownership is one of the causes of women's disempowerment. A woman's young mind does not expect possession of property but love and security from family and husband. Such traditional instincts of women have historically and traditionally disempowered women.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), a government agency, in 1974 women were only 4 percent of the workforce in the country. This rate increased to 8 percent in 1980 and 23.9 percent in 2000. However, the labor market participation rate increased to 36 percent in 2010. In 2013, however, it decreased slightly to 33.5 percent. In the latest labor force survey of BBS 2016-17, the share of women is said to be 36.3 percent. According to that survey, the size of labor force in the country is 6 crore 35 lakh. Out of this, 6 crore 8 lakh work for wages. The total labor force is 4 crore 22 lakh men and 1 crore 87 lakh women. According to the latest survey published by BBS "Survey of Manufacturing Industries' (SMI) 2019" Women employment is increasing in the country and especially in the industrial sector. The participation of women in this sector is 44 percent. According to the number, it is 24 lakh four thousand people. Most of these women 54.92 percent are working in large industrial establishments. If we talk about the empowerment of women in the country, the name of the garment sector comes first. At present, According to the Export Promotion Bureau (EPB), the contribution of the garment sector to the total domestic product (GDP) is 11.17 percent. About 4 million people work here. About 83 percent of the total export earnings come from the apparel sector. According to 2021 Asian Center for Development data, 4 million workers are working in the garment sector. 59.12 percent of them are women. More than 23 lakh are women who work in this sector. In the last 50 years, women have been playing an important role in the development process of the country. According to a study last year by the private research organization Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD), the contribution of women to the gross domestic product (GDP) is about 20 percent. However, if the value of work inside and outside the family is taken into account, the contribution of women will increase to 48 percent. This means that the contribution of men and women to the overall economic development of the country can be said to be equal. According to the latest BBS survey, 1.87 million women are working in the three largest sectors of the economy—agriculture, industry and services. However, despite the increase in the participation of women in the production system, the majority of women workers are laborers. The rest are involved in various professions including teaching,

medicine, banking, business and commerce. Women are also serving in various high positions including the top executives of various organizations. However, a large proportion of women in the labor market are engaged in informal work. For example, more than half of working women are engaged in agriculture. Another large section works in the garment industry. A large proportion of women in the labor market are engaged in informal or low-income and risky work. Women's participation in decision-making spaces is low.

## **5. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

The history of Bangladesh is a long history of movement and struggle. This country has a glorious history of participation and contribution of women in various social and political movements and struggles. Although women have contributed to the political process throughout the ages, their empowerment has been very little. Empowerment of women is not possible only through the participation of women in the political process and voting. This requires women's representation at all levels of the power structure, participation in the decision-making process, the ability to make independent decisions and make their position, work and presence clear and known to all. Therefore, representation of women in the legislature, cabinet, city corporation, municipality, upazila and union parishad is necessary in the political process.

### **5.1 Women's participation at the ministerial and national levels**

Although there are many obstacles, challenges and crises in women's participation in the political process, many women are walking on the risky path of politics due to their indomitable will, mental toughness, maintaining family traditions, etc. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1973, the first national parliament election, no woman won a general seat. However, 15 seats were reserved for women. In 2008, a total of 60 women elected general seats and won 19 seats in the ninth parliamentary election in 2008, and the reserved seats for women in this election were 45, which were increased to 50 through the fifteenth amendment of the constitution. That is, there are 72 women out of 349 members in the current parliament. In 2001, 6 women were elected MPs by direct vote and in 2008, 19 women were elected. During the general elections held in December 2018, 22 women were elected under the 300 general seats. This is a significant progress in women's political empowerment. 6 members of the cabinet formed in 2008 are women. The Ninth National Parliament was a significant breakthrough in the history of women's political empowerment in Bangladesh. Because this is the first time in the history of Bangladesh that women have been given the responsibility of ministership in the Ministry of Home Affairs and Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Deputy Leader of the Parliament. There are currently five women serving as ministers in the parliament. Women's participation in local or national political processes is not the end of women's political empowerment. Not the reserved seat but the dignified victory of women in direct voting and the protection of women's rights and interests in various committees and meetings after the victory, the predominance and implementation of the opinions and preferences of women members in the decision-making process is the ultimate political empowerment of women.

### **5.2 Participation of women at the local level**

In 2009, upazila elections were held for the third time in 481 upazilas nationwide. According to Upazila Parishad Ordinance-2008, 1 Chairman, 2 Vice Chairman are directly elected by the people. Out of the 2 vice-chairmen, 1 woman is directly elected as the vice-chairman by popular

vote. The post of First Vice Chairman is held to promote women's empowerment at the local level by developing women's leadership, maintaining women's representation. A total of 481 women were elected vice chairpersons in 481 upazilas. Also, two women were elected as Upazila Chairman competing with men.

After independence in 1976, women's participation in the political process began by providing for the nomination of 2 women members of the Union Parishad through the Local Government Ordinance. Although women were involved in Union Parishad first through nomination and later through indirect election, their opportunities to play an effective role were limited. The law introduced in 1997 on the recommendation of the Local Government Commission provided for the direct election of women to three (one third) reserved seats in the Union Parishad. It adds a new dimension to women's political empowerment. In this election, 44134 women contested for 12828 seats reserved for women in 4276 Union Parishads, that is, there were an average of 4 candidates in each seat. Apart from reserved seats in many unions, women also became candidates for general seats. They are also elected chairman after winning the voting battle with men (Mizan and others, 2006, p:163, 165, 171).

## **6. WOMEN IN ADMINISTRATION OR DECISION-MAKING PROCESS**

For ages, most women were deprived of the opportunity of higher education, so they could not come to the higher positions of administration and policy-making process. Although women could reach a certain level through various quota facilities, their access to the highest level was very limited. In recent times there has been an increase in the opportunities for women to hold high positions in the administration. In 2006, out of a total of 4,492 officials in the civil service in the Ministry, 676 were women which was 18 percent of the total number. In 2008, this rate decreased sadly. Out of 4419 officers there were 673 women which is 15 per cent of the total number of which 1.89 per cent and 1.14 per cent women were in the posts of Secretary and Additional Secretary respectively. First, third and fourth class women officers and employees in the Ministry and Directory were 13.5 per cent respectively. The Bangladesh Police force had 15,163 women officers as of January 2021, which accounts for just 7.92% of the total number of personnel. This represents an increase from 13,402 and 2,520 women officers in July 2019 and September 2008, respectively. According to the Public Administration Ministry, currently 1,447 out of a total of 5,447 women, which represents 26.56%, are employed as first-class officers in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) administration. This represents an increase from 22.56% in 2018. According to the Bangladesh Bar Council, There are 1,636 women lawyers out of 10,373 members in the Supreme Court Bar Associations members. Moreover, There are currently seven female justices serving to the Supreme Court is a paradigmatic advance in women's empowerment in the history of Bangladesh.

## **7. CONSTITUTIONAL AND LEGAL INITIATIVES FOR EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN**

The Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh has constitutionally recognized the right of women to receive education, Article 17 of the Constitution of Bangladesh. Although education is made universal constitutionally, A significant number of women do not get the opportunity of higher education due to religious dogma, child marriage etc. Access to medical care is a fundamental right of every man and woman. Article 18 of the Constitution of Bangladesh recognizes the right to medical care. Although constitutionally committed to providing health care,



poor and helpless women are deprived of modern and adequate medical facilities. Article 20 of the Constitution of Bangladesh recognise for protecting women's interests, protecting rights, employment and providing fair wages. Although constitutionally and legally women's right to work is protected in Bangladesh, in practice women's access to income-generating work is very limited. Article 9, 10, 11, 12, 19, 27, 28, 29 and 65 of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees the protection of the rights and interests of the backward women and their participation in the political process (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, 2011).

Through legal support and obligations, provide protection of women's interests, provision of facilities, ensuring rights. The Hindu Women's Rights Act of 1943 and the Hindu Women's Property Rights Act of 1937 gave women the right to enjoy property, albeit in a limited form. Property ownership is part of the empowerment process. Marriage, conjugal relations and women's rights, opinions, safety etc. in conjugal life of Bangladeshi Muslims are governed by Islamic Shariah law. Muslim Personal Law (Shariat), 1937, Child Marriage Prevention Act, 1929, Muslim Divorce Act, 1939, Muslim Family Law Ordinance, 1961, Muslim Marriage and Divorce Registration Act, 1974, Muslim Family Court Ordinance, 1985 etc. Obtaining women's opinion and consent, determining and paying dowry to ensure security, marriage registration system, child marriage (groom's age should be 21 years and bride's age should be 18 years minimum), maintenance, wife's ownership of husband's property, divorce by the wife and the right of remarriage after divorce etc. have been established. Dowry Disputes Act, 1980, Torture against Women (Prevention and Punishment) Act, 1983, Suppression of Torture against Women and Children (Special Provisions) Act, 1995, Suppression of Torture against Women and Children Act, 2000 have been enacted to facilitate the security, development and empowerment of women. The Torture against Women (Remedial and Punishment) Act-1983 and the Suppression of Torture against Women and Children (Special Provisions) Act-1995 were enacted to prevent abduction, trafficking, rape or death, grievous bodily harm and aiding and abetting of women for dowry (Islam, 2008). If all these laws are properly implemented, it will help in empowering women.

## **8. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INTERNATIONAL AGREEMENTS OR CONVENTIONS.**

Freedom, justice, and peace are universal rights of all people, regardless of gender. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is the first internationally recognized document for the liberation, development and empowerment of women. In 1945, the United Nations Charter was adopted for the purpose of creating principles of equality between men and women. In 1946, the Commission on the Status of Women was formed to promote the political, economic and social rights of women. On December 20, 1952, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on Women's Political Affairs. The first World Conference on Women was held in Mexico in 1975 to develop women as one of the driving forces of sustainable development. CEDAW Charter was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 1979. The principle of CEDAW is to establish women's rights in all political, economic, social, cultural, civil, etc. on the basis of equality between men and women in all fields, and at the same time to call for the end of discriminatory behavior by enacting laws at the national level. The CEDAW Charter is the first Charter of women's emancipation. It has been adopted in Bangladesh. In the Copenhagen conference of 1980, it was proposed to formulate a national budget, accept and implement development programs for the development and empowerment of women (Mizan and others, 2010). In 1985, the World Conference on Women in Nairobi adopted some strategies for

the advancement of women. Elimination of discrimination against women, equal rights under the law, equal rights in marriage and divorce, women will have the right to independently buy and sell property and other assets, women will have a place in the ruling seats of all political and legal organizations, etc. were recognized at the Nairobi conference (Akhtar, 1995: 150-153). The United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) is a voluntary fund. UNIFEM provides financial and technical support to innovative programs aimed at advancing women's human rights, economic and political empowerment and gender equality (Mizan and others, 2010, p:235-239). All these measures taken at the international level have played a role in the implementation of indicators of women's development and empowerment, but their implementation in Bangladesh is very low.

### **Ongoing initiatives for empowerment of women**

The government has taken steps to promote women's education and increase their participation in socio-economic activities. This includes providing stipends for female students at secondary and higher secondary levels, financial assistance for buying books, and paying fees for public examinations. Additionally, salary waivers have been granted to girls up to the 12th standard, and scholarships for meritorious students have been increased. The government is also providing free books and gradually expanding free education up to the degree level. These policies have led to an increase in the enrollment and performance of female students at secondary and higher secondary levels, as well as their participation in higher education and various professional fields. This has helped to empower women and improve their social status and dignity. Government steps to ensure women empowerment: National helpline 109 services for women, Formulation of Women's Policy, Social Security Allowance, Acknowledgment of the mother on the child's identity card, 6 months maternity leave, Establishment of 13 thousand maternity centers, Legislation to stop violence against women.

In addition to government activities, NGOs have been playing an important role in achieving economic independence of women for the last two decades. Microfinance activities of NGOs have increased the flow of money within the women's community. Although the interest rate is high, it has helped in the creation of women entrepreneurship, women's economic self-reliance, small businesses, women's ownership of assets and increased equality. Apart from this, there are some organizations that protect and realize the rights and interests of women such as Ain Salish Centre, Women Lawyers Association, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, Women for Women etc. to solve women's problems, prevent violence and torture against women, conduct research, realize women's legal and constitutional rights, It creates pressure on the government to provide health facilities, education etc. which play a helpful role in the development and empowerment of women. Palli Karma-Sahayak Foundation (PKSF) conducts broad-based microcredit programs to enhance women's empowerment and productivity. Major NGOs in the country such as BRAC, Prashika, Asha, Shakti Foundation, Swanirbhar Bangladesh, Thangamara Mahila Sabuj Sangh (TMSS) etc. not only provide small loans to rural poor women but also have multifaceted service activities such as poverty alleviation, medical facilities and health awareness. , providing education, creating income and employment opportunities, developing leadership, promoting development, making them energetic and enterprising, reproductive health, child and pregnant mother care, awareness about family planning. The Ministry of Women and Child Affairs funds a variety of programmes and policies aimed at promoting the advancement and strengthening of women. Some initiatives of these programmes include:

- Jayita Foundation Scholarship for Women Entrepreneurs from primary to secondary level, Jayita Bridging Program (2nd Phase), Jayita's Product Diversification and Quality Improvement Training Program, Jayita's Food Business Strengthening Program and Women by setting up Fashion Design Unit (Aparajita).
- Ending child marriage and shaping future generations by establishing adolescent health and rights. Multisectoral Program for Prevention of Violence against Women (Phase 4).
- Promotion of health awareness among women and children of Harijan class, provision of health army and ensuring education of children. Women ICT Freelancer and Entrepreneurship Development Programme.
- Awareness raising program Construction of academic and residential buildings to improve the quality of life of orphans and helpless girls through technical training and Day care center for children of women workers in garment factories.
- Establishment of working women hostel and training center, Construction of Working Women's Hostel and Child Day Care Center in Kaliganj Upazila of Gazipur District, Mirpur & Khilgaon Working Women Hostels Upward Expansion Income Generating Activities Training of Women at Upazila Level, Training of unemployed women in various trades in the upazila to develop women entrepreneurs in economic empowerment, Urban based marginalized women development program.
- The program entitled "My Internet My Income" is a skill development training for grassroots women entrepreneurs at the upazila level. Enhancing early talent development skills, Program on Skill Development Training of Rural Women Entrepreneurs (Upazila Level), District wise women's computer training project (64 districts) information and communication technology with the aim of building Upper Digital Bangladesh.

### **Obstacles to women empowerment**

Instances of violence and torture are making this achievement rather dull. For example, the topic of high rate of child marriage comes up again and again. Child marriage has declined worldwide but is on the rise in Bangladesh. According to UNICEF, the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh is 59 percent, but the government's claim is not more than 52 percent.

- The society's general attitude towards women is still discriminatory. The question of women's safety has become more complicated. Women's vulnerability to various types of violent crimes, including rape and sexual assault, has not diminished.
- On the one hand, women are being harassed in the workplace, educational institutions, in vehicles, on the other hand, even the home is not safe for them. About 77 percent of the cases of violence against women and children in Bangladesh are within the family. And in most cases it is the husbands who abuse the wives. 87 percent of women are victims of harassment at home, 94 percent of women are victims of sexual harassment in public transport.
- Many NGOs involve women in their programs, but some rights-based NGOs have a commercial motive. Despite providing microcredit to women, they often hand over the loan to their husbands, which increases their dependence on men and adds pressure on them instead of promoting their development.
- Despite having women as leaders of the two main political parties in Bangladesh, they have not taken sufficient steps towards women's political empowerment. Political parties have not been supportive of women's entry into parliament, considering them unreliable

candidates with less public connection and ability to win seats. This is due to societal constraints such as conservative values, women's family responsibilities, and economic dependence, along with the influence of religion-based political parties that do not believe in women's leadership.

- Although the constitution and laws in Bangladesh show support for women's development and empowerment, their practical implementation is lacking. Despite laws to prevent issues such as dowry, child marriage, kidnapping, and trafficking, authorities are slow to enforce them and can be influenced by criminals with money and power. Government initiatives are insufficient in implementing international measures for women's welfare and empowerment, and women's awareness of their rights under CEDAW, UNIFEM, and the Beijing Conference is also limited.

## 9.RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Achieving women's socio-economic and political empowerment cannot be done by the government or any single organization alone. It requires the involvement of various entities such as families, society, state, women's organizations, NGOs, and local and international organizations. This entails a permanent and positive shift in the feminist perspective of every institution in society. Multiple integrated steps and activities are needed to make women's empowerment comprehensive and long-lasting.

- To uphold women's human rights and fundamental freedoms in all areas, including political, economic, social, and cultural, there should be equal rights for men and women. Women should be involved in law-making and the legal process, while campaigns and education should be conducted to raise awareness about women's rights. The state should not act against women's interests based on religion or any other grounds. Women should have access to quality education, employment with equal pay, technical training, as well as adequate health care and social security.
- Education is a key tool for empowering women, and efforts should be made to eliminate disparities in education opportunities between men and women. Clear policies should be adopted to mainstream women in development, and formal and non-formal education and training programs should be strengthened to enhance women's skills and achieve economic independence. Measures should be taken to keep girls in school, including scholarships and stipends, and to eradicate child marriage and provide security. Education should be made life- and work-oriented, with a curriculum that promotes women's empowerment.
- Women's empowerment requires achieving economic liberation, ownership of assets, and self-reliance through their active participation in all economic activities and decision-making. It is essential to consider women's needs in macroeconomic policies, create an economic safety net, ensure equal opportunities and participation, provide favorable working conditions and recognition of women's contributions, improve transportation, establish day care centers, and offer maternity leave and other benefits. These measures strengthen women's position in the social and economic fields.
- Women's true empowerment requires political empowerment, as it raises their awareness of their rights, encourages their participation in development and strengthens their social status. To achieve this, there should be more active participation of women in politics, political parties should nominate more female candidates, and women's organizations

should campaign for women's political involvement. This can be done by increasing reserved seats for women in Parliament, ensuring at least one woman is directly elected from each district, electing more women to Parliament and local government, and increasing women's representation in the cabinet.

- Having a strong presence of women in administration is crucial for them to exercise long-term power. This can be achieved by appointing women to high positions in various institutions, such as state embassies, the university grant commission, and the judiciary. It is important to increase the quota of women in public and private institutions and ensure their long-term appointment. Women should also be appointed as state representatives in international organizations and given opportunities to participate in decision-making, including policy-making positions. The UN recommends appointing women to 30% of positions in government.
- Various global initiatives have been taken to promote women's development, in addition to national efforts. To ensure sustainable development and women's empowerment in line with global standards, it is important to urgently implement policies and measures such as the National Women's Development Policy, Millennium Development Goals Women's Policy, Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, United Nations Convention on Women-1952, and policies from conferences on women's development such as those in Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing.

In order to create a progressive society in the current era of globalization, it is crucial to involve women in all aspects of the state and society. This involves promoting women's rights and empowerment, as well as creating a work-friendly environment. NGOs and organizations working to protect women's interests in both rural and urban areas have had a positive impact on the relationship between men and women in various spheres of life. With greater education and awareness, women are beginning to question traditional values and their social status, and their participation in decision-making processes is increasing. However, despite these positive developments, many women in this region have still assimilated patriarchal values and accept their situation rather than protesting or seeking freedom from it.

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