

# **Progress in Female Education, Gender Norms and Female Labour Participation in the Bangladesh Manufacturing Industry**

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## **Introduction**

The government of Bangladesh committed to the Beijing Declaration and adopted the Platform for Action (BPfA) signed in the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. The country has been integrating the strategic objectives relating to the critical areas of concern and reviewing the trends and achievements in gender equality and women's advancement at the national level over the periods (Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA), 2019; UN Women, 2015). Human development activities, especially female education is one of the priority areas that the Bangladesh government emphasise to enhance gender equality in the country. Women's employment and economic participation are also one of the preferences to progress women's empowerment in Bangladesh. The government is keen to incorporate key global agendas including BPfA in its national policies and strategies.

Bangladesh has a growth trend both in female education and women's employment, with satisfactory progress in gender equality in girls' education in the last two decades. Bangladesh has made commendable success in primary and secondary level female education. The adult literacy rate for females has been increased from 32 per cent (2002) to 70 per cent (2017) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2019; BBS & UNESCO, 2008). The female labour force participation has increased from 26 per cent (2002) to 36 per cent (2017) (BBS, 2017; Rahman & Islam, 2019). With the emergence of the labour-intensive manufacturing industry, the Ready-Made Garments (RMG) industry generates large employment for low-income women and contribute to the growth rate of female employment in Bangladesh (Solotaroff, Kotikula, Lonnberg, Ali, & Jahan, 2019). Though the numeracy and literacy skills from primary and secondary education enable women to get more scopes for entry and later promotion in manufacturing jobs, the sector is mostly occupied with illiterate and unskilled women workers.

The role of gender norms in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh are crucial to determining women's entry to work. The government's initiatives made a significant contribution to eliminating socio-cultural barriers and gender norms in girls' education. However, there are concerns about the impact of these barriers on women's labour market participation. It is anticipated that female educational developments will be helpful to eradicate gender norms and socio-cultural barriers to women's employment, especially in the manufacturing sector.

This paper aims to study whether the advancement in women's education at primary and secondary levels has any impact on gender norms about female labour participation. In particular, this study aspires to investigate the impact of girls' education in reducing gender norms around women's job engagement in the manufacturing sector in Bangladesh. As women in Bangladesh are mostly engaged in the garments manufacturing jobs, the RMG industry has been chosen as the case for this study.

This paper is presented in five sections. First, it starts with an analysis of the female educational developments, gender norms, and female labour market participation in Bangladesh; second, it presents the theoretical framework and the methods adopted for this study; and third, it reports the interrelationship among educational attainment, gender norms, and the Female Labour Market as the findings of this analysis. Finally, a discussion and conclusion are presented to identify the significance and implications of the topics for women's labour market participation in Bangladesh and future women rights research.

## **Female Educational Developments, Labour Market Participation and Gender Norms in Bangladesh**

### *Female Educational Developments*

Quality education, training, and life-long learning for women and girls are some of the priorities of the Bangladesh government for accelerating the progress of gender equality. The report titled '*Comprehensive National Review Report, for Beijing + 25 Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action 1995*' prepared by the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) in 2019, outlined the achievements in regards to all priority areas including female education in Bangladesh. With the alignment of strategic objectives of Platform for Action (PoA) on Education and Training of Women, the Bangladesh government incorporated equal access to education, non-discriminatory education, and training policies and programs to eradicate illiteracy among women (Falkowska, 2013; MoWCA, 2019). The process started with the inclusion of gender parity measures in Education for All programs (Falkowska, 2013) and the Free Primary Education (FPE) program in the 1990s decade (Chisamya, DeJaeghere, Kendall, & Khan, 2012).

Different programs by the government of Bangladesh contribute to success in female education. The government prepared the National Education Policy (the current one is 2010) which has provisions for stipends to female students up to the higher secondary level; free textbooks among students up to the secondary level; food for education and stipends for primary school children (GoB, 2018). The Prime Ministers' Education Assistance Fund (under a Trust Act 2012), Mass Literacy Program, Education for All, Free Primary Education (FPE), food and stipend program for primary student, Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program (condition means girls have to a minimum rate of attendance at school) under the Female Secondary School Assistance

Program (FSSAP) have brought success in achieving a higher enrolment rate in primary education for girls than boys and an upward trend in girl's secondary school enrolment rate (Chisamya et al., 2012; Falkowska, 2013; Hong & Sarr, 2012).

Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education enrolment. Girls have a higher enrolment rate in primary and secondary education than boys (World Economic Forum (WEF), 2020), though girls have a higher dropout rate than boys in secondary education (BBS, 2019). Table 1 presents the enrolment and dropout rates of both boys and girls at different levels of education in Bangladesh. Girls have 98.3 per cent and 60.8 per cent enrolment rate respectively at the primary and secondary education level in 2017, which is higher than boys (BBS, 2019). However, females have a lower rate of enrolment in tertiary education, 14 per cent of relevant age group (generally above 18 age) than similar age of male enrolment, 21 per cent in 2017 (World Bank (WB), 2019).

Table: Gender-wise Enrolment and Dropout rate in 2017

Level of Education	Female (%)	Male (%)	Dropout rate (%)	
			Female	Male
Primary	98.3	97.7	1.6	3.6
Secondary	60.8	48.9	38.4	36.0
Tertiary (% of relevant age group)	14	21	-	-

Source: BBS 2019 and the World Bank 2019

Female education advancement in the primary and secondary indicates a low level of gender inequalities exist in socio-cultural context as well as in government initiatives for education. Studies suggest that no tuition fees, free textbooks, and above all stipends up to secondary level increase girls' education at these levels (Behrman, 2015; Chisamya et al., 2012; Falkowska, 2013; Hahn, Islam, Nuzhat, Smyth, & Yang, 2018; Hong & Sarr, 2012). Conditional cash transfer through stipend may have a significant influence in removing the socio-cultural barriers and gender stereotypes for girls' education, as it encourages parents to send their daughters to school (Begum, Islam, & Smyth, 2017; Behrman, 2015). The female education rate is lower at the tertiary level as there is no government assistance program at this level (WB 2017).

#### *Gender Norms in the Bangladesh Society*

Gender relationships are hierarchical and influenced by the patriarchal structure in Bangladesh society. Men and women in family and society have power distance. Men as a social group are generally considered more powerful than women. In a patriarchal structure, the senior male member becomes the head of the family, makes key decisions among all the members, and women are subordinated under men (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2018). Traditional gender roles dictate men as the breadwinner and women as the caregiver of the family. Women's

economic participation is considered as secondary or substitution to financial support for the family (Heintz, Kabeer, & Mahmud, 2018). The cultural norm is that women should be confined to their reproductive roles and domestic works and should not engage themselves in economic activities outside their domestic domain (Akhter et al., 2017; Mahmud & Kabeer, 2003). Men in a family are considered responsible for completing all jobs outside the home and providing all financial support to women. Women's primary responsibility for household works includes cooking, cleaning, all household-level daily chores, taking care of children, husband, and elderly members of the households.

Mobility constraints are often imposed on women through misinterpreted religious directives in Bangladesh society, especially in a rural community. *Purdah*, using extra cloths to cover the head and body of a woman, is used as a tool to restrict women's movement in the public domain in society (Asadullah & Wahhaj, 2016; Kabeer et al., 2018). Family and society often value *purdah* as the symbol of honour and protection of women (Naved, Rahman, Willan, Jewkes, & Gibbs, 2018). Religious directives and guidelines on women's roles in households and society are often misinterpreted by the religious or community leaders, often to restrict women's mobility outside their home or private domain (Ahmed & Sen, 2018).

#### *Female Labour Market in Manufacturing Industry in Bangladesh*

Female labour force participation in the non-agricultural sector has increased significantly since the emergence of the RMG industry in the late 1970s in Bangladesh (Feldman, 2009). Growth in women's employment was then no longer limited to formal sectors for women with higher/medium levels of educational attainment but expanded to industrial jobs for low-income women workers (Heintz et al., 2018). Large-scale job creation in the RMG industry has been contributing to women's employment growth in the country. The Ready-Made Garments (RMG) accounts for 65 per cent of manufacturing jobs in Bangladesh (BBS 2012).

The RMG industry generates employment for a large number of women who have low skills, minimal or no education, and are the poorest in society (Kabeer, 2004). The job status or positions of these women workers are often helpers (the entry-level), operators (responsible for sewing) and quality control checkers, and rarely supervisors (Heath 2018; Kabeer 1991). The RMG industry has provided opportunities to many women's access to formal, salaried jobs for the first time (Asadullah & Wahhaj, 2016). Women who are already in the rural workforce consider garments jobs preferable as the real rural wage for women workers is considerably lower than the urban manufacturing industry (Khan & Wichterich, 2015).

Though the labour force participation rate is significantly associated with educational attainment with an increased level of education positively to increased labour participation, however, the situation is not the same for the female labour force in Bangladesh. More than ninety per cent (91.8 per cent in 2017) of the total female workforce is employed in the informal labour

market, which requires minimum or no education (BBS, 2017). The rest of the women workforce is engaged in formal employment where a minimum level of education, for example, in public sector employment the secondary level of education is essential for an entry-level position. The factory jobs do not require formal education (though a minimum level of education increases employability skills) and therefore is considered as low quality or informal employment in the female labour markets.

There is a U-shaped relationship between female education and labour force participation in Bangladesh. Women with no education or with post-secondary level education have higher labour force participation rates (Bridges, Lawson, & Begum, 2011). Women with secondary education have the least labour force participation, 32% of the total female labour in 2017 (BBS, 2019). Therefore, a significant number of the working-age population (age 15 or above) are unemployed, almost 35 million women out of 55 million working-age women (BBS, 2017). They remain inactive though they are neither in school nor in employment. The vast majority of young women in Bangladesh are unemployed, only 14.9 per cent of the young female is working, compared to 64.3 per cent of young men (Toufique, 2014). These young women have to be engaged with family and housework responsibilities.

## **Theoretical Framework and Methods of this study**

### *Theoretical Analysis*

Feminist views on gender roles, relationships and women's work in low-income manufacturing jobs are the basis of the analysis of this study. Feminists, thoughts, specifically radical feminism considers that men as a social group oppressed women as another social group. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy provides the structure of this oppression (Eisenstein, 1981; Hartmann, 1976) and emphasise the patriarchal roots for gender inequality (Rowland & Klein, 1996). Patriarchy refers to the male-heads family and rule of the father, where women, junior men, children, domestic maids are under his dominant control. Walby (1989) defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby, 1989, p. 214). Patriarchy is a set of social relations and the hierarchical relations between men and women where men control over women (Hartmann, 1976). Feminists explain gender relations under a patriarchal structure is mainly power relationships between men and women. Masculinity, which is socially constructed in a patriarchal system, reinforces the power imbalances between men and women. Gender roles are distinguished and identified to maintain the patriarchal structure. Women's domestic labour and caring jobs to the elderly and children are described as the emotional responsibilities which are termed as the '*labour of love*' by Rowland and Klein (1996, p. 15). Scholars believe that the patriarchal system is maintained through marriage and the family as well as the gendered division of labour (Eisenstein, 1999).

### *Methods of this Study*

This paper has been prepared using secondary sources, like document analysis and the knowledge from the researcher's own experiences working with the industry. This study has used documents such as a wide range of scholarly journal articles, research reports, evaluation paper, government reports, books, relevant statistical reports, related websites as the sources of data collection. Besides, the researcher's previous experience working with the industry sector has been applied as insightful resources.

### **Findings from the Analysis: The interrelationship among educational attainment, gender norms, and female labour participation in the RMG industry**

Drawing upon analysis of a wide range of research, academic literature, development reports and justifying with personal work experiences, this paper identifies several normative issues relating to gender as the drawbacks to the female labour market. The study has analysed the impact of educational developments on gender norms in Bangladesh society and the female labour force participation.

The developments in education were not able to decrease gender norms in the socio-cultural context in Bangladesh. It is anticipated that educational attainment reduces gender stereotypes and cultural norms in a society. Our analysis found that midlevel education, in particular, completion up to secondary level education may increase girls' demand in the marriage market as a bride, however, there is little impact in the labour market participation (Farole, Cho, Bossavie, & Aterido, 2017; Tanakam, Takahashi, & Otsuka, 2020). The reasons are many. This may be caused by intra-household decisions, for example, women in the garments job, in many cases, are forced to leave jobs once they are married, either to protect social status or to serve their increased reproductive role.

The study found that there is a social stigma in Bangladesh society that garments jobs are not suitable for women as these are casual, vulnerable, poorly paid, and time-consuming. Therefore employment in the RMG industry is socially less acceptable. Kabeer et al. (2018) explain social attitude towards garments job as '*people say bad things*'. The typical social belief is that garments jobs are for illiterate, ultra-poor, socially abandoned, and low-income women who do not have any other options for work in rural society. Therefore, it is a disgrace for a woman, who has a minimum family income and a certain level of education, to chose a garment job as a profession (Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019). Social expectations about the educational outcome and employment of women are high, even if the young women who have a secondary level of education. A typical social belief is that women should involve in a job that allows them to pay less attention to work and more time for domestic works at home (Kabeer, 2012).

Gender norms in society impact the choices and options for female labour markets in Bangladesh. As women are subordinated, get less or no access in family decision making under

the masculine family and society, their choices and preferences for labour market participation are often not accepted by the male head of the family (Asadullah & Wahhaj, 2016). Conversely, these women, under a patriarchal structure, exhibits less autonomous behaviour, the ability to enter labour market and select the right options for employment (Bridges et al., 2011). Cultural factors affect tastes and preferences concerning women's work. Women with low education, even if at a secondary level, prefer knowledge-based jobs than the jobs that require physical labour.

This study finds that the increased number of female labour force participation does not diminish socio-cultural norms on women's employment in manufacturing jobs. The millions of women's entry in the RMG industry have little influence to eliminate gender norms against garments jobs in Bangladesh (Heintz et al., 2018). As stated earlier, the majority of the women workers in the RMG industry are compelled to enter garments jobs because of their extreme poverty. Most of them have no education. Family or society do not recognise the significance of their economic contribution. These socio-cultural norms hold back women, who are from middle-income families and with mid-level (up to secondary) level education, to consider garments jobs as the least preferred jobs in the market. Therefore, the absence of acute needs and the presence of social stigma associated with female employment are responsible for the least participation of these women workforce (Heintz et al., 2018; Rahman & Al-Hasan, 2019).

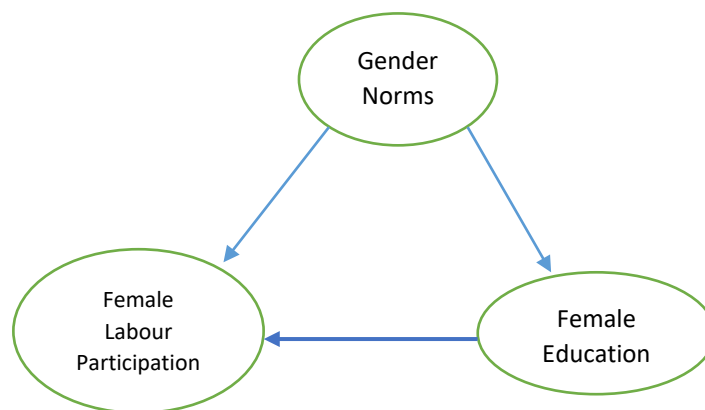
Gender stereotypes and employers' perceptions in the context of socio-cultural norms create barriers for female labour force participation in Bangladesh. Studies suggest that employers in the RMG industry are against employing married women considering a potential conflict between their childcare responsibilities and work duties (Bridges et al., 2011; Heintz et al., 2018). Therefore, married women find it difficult to select their labour market options autonomously. The gendered division of labour (women are for household jobs, and men are for outside or income-generating works) and women's mobility constraints also restrict women in terms of engaging in labour market activities that are outside their locality (Kabeer et al., 2018).

Progress in female education generally positively impacts female labour force participation. Success in women's education has a contribution to increasing women's capability/employability skills. In the Bangladesh RMG industry, it has been proved that there is a demand for women with a low level of education than women with no education. This is because better jobs within factories require education to increase workers' productivity. The study conducted by Heath and Mobarak (2012) shows that in the RMG industry, the illiterate workers are hired, but they cannot advance beyond entry-level positions as they do not have an education. Women workers with educational attainment are less likely to be deprived or exploited in the working environment.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The above discussion depicts the interrelationship among female education and gender norms not as reciprocal and collaborative, meaning increased education does not decrease gender norms in Bangladesh. The growth in women labour in the RMG was unable to make any changes in prevailing gender norms, rather, this job is marked for the women of poor, powerless, and with no education. Family and society, as a whole, disrespect and disregard this employment sector for women. Therefore, gender norms affect the female labour market in low-income manufacturing jobs. Gender norms also held back female students to participate in post-secondary or tertiary level education.

The findings and discussion portray the interrelationship among these three factors where gender norms in the socio-cultural context play a significant role in determining female educational development and labour force participation. The government of Bangladesh had made remarkable success in girls' education through its effective support activities to promote female education at the primary and secondary levels. However, the absence of these types of assistance at the post-secondary or tertiary level exhibits gender inequalities in women's higher education. Besides, gender norms also impact the labour market decisions for women with secondary education in the RMG industry. Therefore, gender norms influence both female education and labour participation, though none of these has a great impact to change gender norms in the socio-cultural context. The relationships can be presented in the following way:



The significance of this study is immense as this paper identifies the gap of guidelines in eliminating gender stereotypes in ensuring women's rights in different areas of concerns, especially in female education and labour market participation. There is an absence of effective strategies and directives from international platforms, specifically from global women's forum on how to tackle traditional gender norms in a given society. This issue also requires in-depth research in women's rights context as gender norms vary in different regions and societies regarding women's economic participation. This study implies that future women's rights research should include the agenda on



how the policy initiatives from national and international platforms will be adequate to address gender norms and socio-cultural barriers on women's participation in various kinds of jobs.

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