

Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honouring Simeen Mahmud

7-9 January 2020, BRAC Auditorium

Conference Report



Inspiring Excellence

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Introduction

“Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honouring Simeen Mahmud” was an event of exciting research and inspired thinking to celebrate the life and work of Simeen Mahmud, with a forward looking focus. Simeen Mahmud began her career as a researcher in 1974. She joined BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) in 2007 and continued working there till the day she died in March 2018. She shaped the gender and social transformation research agenda of BIGD. She was a prolific writer and was a mentor, a colleague, a friend, a sister and a role model for many.

The three daylong conference brought together esteemed researchers who have worked with Simeen Mahmud, as well as those who work on similar issues, as a gesture of remembrance and respect for her. The objective of the event was to commemorate Simeen Mahmud and her work, and work collaboratively to shape a future oriented gender research agenda.

The conference was organized by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD), BRAC University, with sponsorship from BRAC, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Gender and Adolescence Global Evidence (GAGE) Programme led by ODI.

Day One:

Opening Plenary

Chair: Dr. Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate, The Population Council NY

Song by Dr. Nazneen Ahmed, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS)

The Opening Plenary of Knowledge, Power and Social Change: Conference Honoring Simeen Mahmud, consisted of a panel of eminent scholars, namely Dr. Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate, The Population Council, New York who was the Chair; Professor Naila Kabeer, Joint Professor, Gender and Development, Departments of International Development and Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); Dr. Hossain Zillur, Chairperson BRAC and Chairperson, PPRC; Prof. Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD); and Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Former Advisor, Caretaker Government.

The three-day conference kick-started with a mesmerizing song performance by Dr. Nazneen Ahmed, Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), in

remembrance of Simeen Mahmud's indomitable spirit, and the wonderful memories she had left behind.

Dr. Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate, The Population Council, New York, officially opened the session, by setting the context and outlining the agenda for the next three days ahead. The conference was designed to follow the evolution and trajectory of Simeen Mahmud's research – starting with women's fertility, to measurement of women's empowerment, to a broader exploration of the different aspects of empowerment from a multidisciplinary angle. She also pointed out how this trajectory parallels the evolution of Gender Studies in Bangladesh into a multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted area of research over time. She set the objective of this conference, as recognizing the contributions that Simeen Mahmud made to the Gender Studies field, and articulating a way forward for the future while commemorating her role as a mentor, a colleague, a friend, a sister and a role model for many of those who remembered her fondly.

Dr. Sajeda Amin, in describing Simeen Mahmud's rich body of work, acknowledged that in addition to the diversity in themes, there were two other elements that were essential in her research. To begin with, Simeen's careful attention to evidence, which constituted of detailed collection of good quality data – both quantitative as well as qualitative – paired with analysis through a multidisciplinary angle, was a key quality that was reflected in all of her work. This very quality played an essential role in ensuring that the field of Gender Studies received more rigor and attention that it normally would have, in the context of Bangladesh. She elaborated further on how Simeen spoke the "language of evidence", and how she embraced a maxim often quoted by Dr. Imran Matin, Executive Director, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) - "Always question your assumptions." The second element that was essential to Simeen's research, was how she embraced collaboration with multiple fields. Although Simeen's own field was Statistics and Demography, she collaborated with Economists, Anthropologists, Political Scientists and many others, and her most recent work was around emerging technologies.

Professor Naila Kabeer, Joint Professor, Gender and Development, Departments of International Development and Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), looked back at the impact that Simeen had made in her life – in both professional as well as a personal context. She remembered Simeen's contribution to the UNDP Commissioned 1989 Agricultural Sector Review of Bangladesh, where Simeen had ventured beyond the conventional definition of Economic Activity as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO), to explore and include the kinds of economic activities that women were generally involved with. Her findings, as expected, reported much higher levels of economic activity than were captured in the then Bangladeshi data, since agriculture had been primarily viewed as a male-dominant occupation and all Bangladeshi statistics had only exclusively collected data on men in agriculture. Professor Naila Kabeer further pointed out an additional conclusion that was drawn from this report – that it challenged the dominant image of farming households in Bangladesh which saw it as made up of a unified production system under male

headship. In reality, as the report pointed out, men and women had different sub-systems of production, characterised by different degrees of autonomy and different degrees of interdependence.

Professor Naila Kabeer went on to further to examine a more recent survey of 5000 women, completed by Simeen and her colleagues at BIGD to measure women's work across 8 districts. The team used the definition of economic activity as defined by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) and the ILO, and applied it rigorously ; they found a significant difference between the official estimates, which suggested that only 30 percent of women in Bangladesh were economically active, and the survey estimates, which suggested that it was closer to 70 percent. The survey was able to bring out precisely the kinds of work that Bangladesh's official labour force surveys were failing to capture. These were the home-based market-oriented activities carried out by women, mainly livestock and poultry-rearing, and various cost-saving forms of work.

Professor Naila Kabeer and Simeen Mahmud also shared an interest in processes of transformative change in the lives of poor people, and of working women in particular. She referenced an article written by Simeen which was aptly titled "Actually, how Empowering is Microcredit?" where she explored the impact of microfinance on women's empowerment. Her conclusion was mixed – while microcredit did not do much to expand women's material resources, but they did promote their agency in decision-making processes. Professor Naila Kabeer also referenced two other bodies of work they did together – one under the Citizenship Development Research Consortium led by IDS where they explored the impact of different kinds of development NGOs on how poorer men and women fared in terms of nascent citizenship. Here, they compared three categories of NGOs: those which took a minimalist approach to microcredit; those that combined microcredit and social development; and those that did not focus on micro-credit at all. The results were striking: development NGOs that took the minimalist approach to micro-credit were less likely to report political impacts than the rest, but also less likely to report economic impacts. The other research area was focused on women workers in the Post-Rana Plaza export garment industry – the report demonstrated how global buyers and Bangladeshi suppliers worked on keeping relationships informal, so that they could pass on the risks to those lower down in the value chain – meaning that women workers had to largely bear the costs of this strategy. Unfortunately, the research remained incomplete due to Simeen's untimely demise.

Professor Naila Kabeer then focused on some of the more unique aspects of Simeen's personality. She was free of an inflated ego and she got joy out of her work, enjoyed the collaborative nature of it and remained optimistic about the future of the country. She was generous with her time and knowledge; she nurtured her younger colleagues and invoked fierce love and loyalty in return; she was intellectually curious but also empathetically engaged. She was also often struck by the hypocrisy of a society that looked down on poorer women who were forced to do hard physical labour in fields, roads and people's homes, believing them to

lack honour, but gave status and respect to educated women from wealthier households who could work in the relative comfort of their homes, offices and schools. She was a devout Muslim who practiced her faith without ostentation, and was a constant reminder to those who knew her that compassion and mercy are central tenets of Islam.

Dr. Hossain Zillur, Chairperson BRAC and Chairperson, PPRC recollected the shock he had felt upon hearing of Simeen Mahmud's demise. He pointed out how their paths had crossed – as his colleague at BIDS, as his daughter's colleague at BIGD in her later years, and at regular morning walks at Dhanmondi Lake and wonderful gatherings at her home, and how Simeen left a lasting impression - supremely elegant in a simple, loving and caring way. He brought to attention the issue of knowledge asymmetry – how deeply it is ingrained and how it requires the addressing, analysis and extraction of data to create rich insights, which are so essential to evidence based policy making. To end his remarks, he mentioned a key takeaway from Simeen Mahmud and the late Fazle Hasan Abed's legacy – that behind everything that we do, whether we achieve it or not, we must have the intent to transform our realities and transform the world.

Prof. Rehman Sobhan, Chairman, Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) recounted his experience of recruiting Simeen Mahmud at BIDS as a member of the cohort of the post-liberation generation. He saw personally her transformation from a shy individual into someone who remained gently modest when pointing out big picture issues, and an individual whom a large number of young people accepted as their guide, mentor and friend. Simeen Mahmud viewed demography as a discipline which was merely instrumental in understanding what her interest at heart was – gender studies and women's empowerment. He pointed out the logical flow to her work looking at census and demographic data, trajectories of fertility and going on to the next phase of gender and labour markets.

Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud, Former Advisor, Caretaker Government, and late Simeen Mahmud's husband, pointed out that her approach to research was best reflected in her approach towards studying empowerment. She was not interested in just looking at the result of female wellbeing due to an intervention. She believed in a conceptual shift in looking at women empowerment; instead of looking only at female wellbeing indicators, she proposed a shift towards examining the intermittent steps with which the empowerment is gained in terms of women's choice and gender agency, as represented by variables such as decision making and status within the family which could quantify the emotional relationships within a family. She believed that empowerment was not simply a fixed issue – it comprised of multiple variables that would need to be defined and measured. He went to further highlight Simeen Mahmud's quest to acquire deeper insight, and how she focused on going into the field and enquiring after multiple perspectives. She always practiced and promoted getting a feel for ground realities through visits before embarking on any research and would refuse to design research questions without field experience. Being a statistician, she understood the importance of large numbers of observations and the degree of error. Prof. Wahiduddin Mahmud also expressed what her views were on randomized control trials (RCTs), in that she appreciated its logic but at

the same time she would not be satisfied with the singular way in which RCTs work to see the outcome of an intervention.

Dr. Imran Matin, Executive Director, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) then presented his remarks, identifying some of the key takeaways from Simeen Mahmud's legacy that he would like to carry forward in the research future of BIGD. To begin with, he focused on the importance of rigor in research methods in each and every research project, highlighting the indomitable integrity with which she maintained the rigor in her academic work, which is difficult especially with all the shortcuts available. Secondly, her deep commitment towards mixed methods of multidisciplinary research is something which he hopes to instil in the research future of BIGD as well. Furthermore, he elaborated on how her approach to research and knowledge had a very innovative element of praxis, and how this approach drives engaged excellence. Finally, a key lesson to be incorporated in BIGD's research future from Simeen Mahmud's way of work, would be to stay extremely clear about collaborative research, without losing sight of its own agenda; to drive substance and content-driven knowledge partnership with the global South, with solidarity and individuality. He also identified two other concepts that were very important to Simeen Mahmud –intersectionality beyond the singular approach of RCTs, and sticky gender norms.

Dr. Imran Matin closed the plenary session with a vote of thanks, and by highlighting some of the exciting projects that BIGD would be involved in, in the next 3-4 years – Strategies and actions regarding backlash and digitization with focus on Women's Economic Empowerment through Digital Finance (WEE-DIFINE).



Opening Plenary

Session 1: Re-examining Women's Fertility: Choice, Consent and Reproduction

Women's health, fertility, and bodily integrity have been crucial areas for development policy considerations over the years. In her earliest days, Simeen Mahmud researched the intersection between women's status, work, and fertility. She identified declining fertility as a crucial enabler of women's increased labour force participation, which has the potential to improve gender equality and women's agency. She explored adolescent girl's choices and constraints they face. More recently she also explored the politics around sex education for the Gender and Adolescents: Global Evidence (GAGE) policy and legal analysis research.

The session started with AMR Chowdhury (Adviser BRAC School of Public Health, BRAC University), remembering Simeen Mahmud's contribution in development of health economics through the platform "Essential National Health Research" back in 1990s. Through this platform, Simeen Mahmud trained and mentored many young health researchers.

In 1992, BRAC and icddr,b collaborated on researching the non-health interventions in health. Simeen Mahmud played a very important role in a conference organized for this purpose. One of the outcomes remains the Mahmud-Chen framework on how to measure empowerment.

Presentation: Revisiting the Fertility Transition in Bangladesh: Qualitative Insights

By **Naila Kabeer** (Joint Professor, Gender and Development, Departments of International Development and Gender Studies London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE))

Bangladesh started off with a poor track record in governance and lower per capita income than most other country. But, the country started to do considerably well on a range of social indicators, including rapidly declining fertility rate. These achievements appear more remarkable if one considers the low base from which Bangladesh took off in its first decade after independence. At that time, fertility and population growth were high, nurtured by the one of the least negotiable patriarchies in the world.

Prof Kabeer mentioned that combatting all these, Bangladesh has not only managed to reduce the gender disparities but also managed to achieve record fertility decline without resorting to female-selective abortion like neighboring India. These reductions in gender disparity mark a shift in patriarchal relations in this country and reevaluation of women in general.

Scholars have attempted to explain the "Bangladesh Paradox"— the successes have been attributed to policies of successive governments, role of civil society, donor support and so on. Examples of failed development interventions are plenty as well. But what makes up the success of these policies is people's positive responses towards them. Therefore, it is important to study people's reaction and what goes on at the grassroots level.

One of the domains where changes started to take place is in the domain of reproduction. Prof Kabeer pointed out the strengths of qualitative study which quantitative studies tend to miss out: variable-based approach often miss out studying the practices and processes of change. A great deal of research

on this area has been driven by donors and quantitative in number, lacking a wholesome understanding of the process of change. This is one main reason why the presenter focused on studying the rules and processes of changes.

Society is divided in the domains of production and reproduction, and same actors move between these two. Looking at the domain of reproduction, we can see reproductive behavior that govern marriage, child bearing, reproduction and nutrition. These were often rooted in the history of agrarian economy of Bangladesh relying mainly on labor, especially in the absence of any safety net program. It was then logical to have large families, high mortality rate being another contributing factor. Then the question becomes: how did those long-standing practices change? What made them change?

Prof Kabeer proposed a theory of this change composed of three key elements:

- 1) Material (technology, money, land)
- 2) Competency (information, analysis, knowledge)
- 3) Meanings (Significance of cultural aspect)

Changes occur when elements interchange and shift to another. To contextualize it in the domain of reproduction, it is imperative to understand those particular elements.

The presenter referred to scholarship from 70s explaining how changes started taking place at the grassroots. There were instances of women asking about birth control pills for various reasons. They were discouraged from pursuing birth control measures with the excuses of religion and were told that it was interference with the divine will. Some young men were also interested which led health workers to work further on this issue.

This was all possible as population growth was considered as the biggest problem of Bangladesh. There was a consolidation of political will—both national and international—in population control, as well as intent. Hence, there was a reorganization of family planning programs. Young women were trained to create awareness through door-to-door visits and sterilization was at the heart of the program then (which changed later in the 80s).

However norms had not changed yet in the 80s. More than religion, people were afraid of family members who were critical of birth control, fatwas and clergy members who discouraged birth control. The fear was more intimate. But it is also on the 80s, when trainers took charge of clarifying the misconceptions around the birth-control system. A great deal of change came about through women increasingly being able to make their own decisions regarding contraception.

Presentation: The Onset of Child-bearing and Adolescent Empowerment: Some Insights from the BALIKA Program

By **Sajeda Amin** (Senior Associate, The Population Council, NY)

According to Sajeda Amin, education and women's work is rising in Bangladesh. While child marriage remains persistently high, the age of childbearing starts early although women are having fewer births. Over the years, fertility rate has declined in Bangladesh; however the fertility rate of adolescents (15-

19year old) has not declined that much. According to program BALIKA 2013, a large portion of 12-19 years olds are still in school, they are not married nor working. That happened because of the stipend programs that allows females to go to school and sit for the exams.

Country level data shows that, among many other countries, Bangladesh is the outlier for having 60% of women getting married before the age of 20. While the stipend program has had impacts on the schooling of the girls, it did not have discernable impact on child marriage. Stipend for poor boys and girls in rural primary schools and stipend for girls in secondary schools have closed gender gaps in schooling at early years; thereby improving the rate of educations; but child marriage rate has remained persistent. Poor parents still think that some marriage proposals are too good to be refused. The social pressure of not being married after a certain age and parents and girls feeling vulnerable having an unmarried girl at home have led to early marriages.

Knowledge about and access to contraception during the adolescent period are crucial. According to BALIKA program, 85% of the adolescents (12-19) ever used contraception while 65% are currently using it. Around 90% have knowledge about some sort of contraception. However, Sajeda Amin stated that family planning program cannot help much about preventing child marriage. The reason of child marriage and the rate of having child at early age is the absence of agency.

To conclude, Sajeda Amin emphasized that as much as attention we have given to the prevention of child marriage, not enough attention was given to onset of child-bearing. Therefore, further efforts at improving quality of services and effective access to contraception needs to focus on adolescents and the initiation of fertility. The focus should be redirected with some radical re-thinking about adolescent sexuality and why that is important.

Presentation: Are wives of migrants really “Left Behind”? A nuanced analysis of how spousal migration affects women’s healthcare utilization

By **Heidi West**, PhD Student, Health Policy and Management, Fielding School of Public Health, UCLA

Heidi stated that migration has an impact on empowerment and health of both genders. In 2017, over 1 million Bangladeshi migrated overseas for work, 90% of which were men. There is some literature on how healthcare utilization, health outcomes and education of the left behinds families of those migrant can be affected due to one member’s migration. The purpose of the study is to focus on the gender-impact of migration on women. The objectives of this research are:

1. Identify and describe any relationships between migration and healthcare utilization for women in a high out-migration setting
2. Analyze the effects of families and women’s empowerment on the relationships between migration and health
3. Provide evidence to inform migration and healthcare policies and practices in both sending and receiving countries

The main research question was: What roles do migration, families and gender equality play in healthcare utilization and outcomes for women in high out-migration villages in rural Bangladesh? The study used two data sets: Matlab Health and Socioeconomic Surveys: MHSS1 – 1996 and MHSS2 – 2012.

The measurement were on the women who have migrant husbands and the outcomes were health care utilization (frequency, access and barriers), health outcomes (Depression (CES-D), Self-rated health, BMI) and Gender Equality (Mobility, Decision Making, Economic Empowerment, Gender Equivalence).

The analysis took place on the 6,983 currently married women aged between 15-45 years.

The analysis of the data showed that when women have an international migrant spouse they face less barriers to healthcare utilization, mostly because they become financially able to access this. The women with co-residents spouses are very likely to be prevented from accessing healthcare to the. However, it did not show significant differences in self-reported health outcomes, BMI or depression.

Gender equity in terms of mobility and empowerment showed a different result. There was no significant improvement in economic empowerment, mobility, and gender equivalence. Also there were negative effects on decision-making.

There were significant interactions between migration status and household structure. If the women live with parents or in-laws, migration related improvement in economic empowerment and mobility are moderated.

The study indicated that potential benefits of a woman with a migrant spouse can be diluted by the family structures and such family structures actually perpetuate unequal gender dynamics. The research team aimed to further analyse the research with more data and more controls for selection, in order to measure the additional health and well-being outcomes in future.

Discussions and Recommendations:

Panelists and the participants drew on their experiences and understanding around the presentation. The reason to choose birth-control measures started off for very practical circumstances—low per capita land. Bangladesh adopted policies to target those reasons and successful targeting led to successful results. The key to this successful targeting remains listening to people and what they need.

One of the downside of the current policies remains the exclusion of men from family planning. As of now, there are not too many interventions for men. The need to normalize and simplify the reproductive knowledge for children and adolescent was also raised by the discussants.

On the inclusion of reproductive knowledge in formal education, Naila Kabeer pointed out that forms and elements of such knowledge matter instead of mere inclusion. Also, it is yet to see how element of education would affect behavior.



Session 1 Panelists and Chair

Session 2: Gender and Labour Markets: Negotiating Structures of Constraint

Women's economic participation is determined by economic structures and opportunities, gender norms and gender roles, skills, education as well as by macroeconomic and global factors. We know that women's empowerment is closely related to their economic activities, the value given by their families and society to their contributions and the ways it can strengthen their identity as economic as well as political citizens.

Simeen Mahmud extensively researched women's participation in the labour force from various perspectives. One of her major areas of concern was why women's participation in the labour market is low in Bangladesh. She explored the issue in various ways including looking at deeply embedded gender discrimination in household strategies and the role of gender norms in shaping women's choices and constraints. Implications of women's involvement in micro-credit, in informal labour markets, in garment factory work, particularly in relation to women's empowerment was a key research interest.

She also contributed enormously to the literature on the recognition and estimation of women's work and critically examined the under-reporting of women's economic work in official statistics.

The session explored the structural changes and constraints in the labour market that limit women's access, mobility (both horizontal and vertical). Women are negotiating gender norms, entering spaces that were previously closed off to them and making choices that were not possible before. How they are doing so needs to be better understood: the resistances faced, the negotiations being made and the results achieved. Younger women are entering the workforce and GAGE research and BIGD's Youth Survey have shown that adolescent girls have higher professional aspirations. The session also brought in the discussions and research on the 'U curve' trend we are witnessing in Bangladesh and India and other places which has important policy implications.

The Session was chaired by Dr. Selim Raihan, Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh and Executive Director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM).

Presentation: Women and Men in Informal Employment: Bangladesh in Comparative Perspective

By **Dr. Martha Chen** (Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School, Affiliated Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Design, Senior Advisor, WIEGO Network)

Dr. Chen started her presentation by emphasizing the power of data. She stated that the politics of future is around data, and data, in the hands of workers, is power. The WIEGO Network, since 1997, has had a core program dedicated to improving official statistics on informal employment and disseminating the data in user-friendly formats – which works closely with the ILO, the UN Statistical Commission and national statisticians and data analysts, including Simeen Mahmud. In 2013, Simeen Mahmud and Lopita Huq carried out an exploratory study for WIEGO of home-based workers linked to the export garment sector in Bangladesh. In 2018, the International Labour Organization published the first-ever global estimates of informal employment based on official statistics from around 120 countries, including Bangladesh. The study mainly focused on the first-ever global estimates of informal employment and saw where Bangladesh stands in comparative perspective. Later on, second round of estimates on home-based work in Bangladesh was collected. The International Conference of Labour Statisticians, in 1993, narrated informal sector as –“production and employment in *unincorporated enterprises that are also unregistered (with national authorities) and often are small*”. In 2003, the same organization defined Informal Employment as “employment without social protection (OR paid annual and sick leave) through work – both inside and outside the informal sector”. The ILO generated the first-ever global estimates of informal employment using cross-country harmonized criteria and found that 61% of all workers worldwide are informally employed, which is a total of 2 billion workers.

Dr. Chen stated that although both Bangladesh and India are emerging economies, the prevalence of informal employment in both countries is closer to the average for developing countries, than for emerging economies. If the regional perspective is considered, South Asia (88%) and Sub-Saharan Africa (89%) have the highest prevalence of informal employment in the world – followed by Southeast and East Asia. Reflecting upon the composition of informal employment, Bangladesh has 42% wage employment and 58% self-employment. Presumably, due to the garment industry, wage employment is higher in Bangladesh; but in India, the vast majority of informal workers are self-employed (86%). Among informal workers around the world, employers are the smallest group: representing only 3 per cent of informal workers globally and even less in India and (especially) Bangladesh. And own account workers, those who do not hire others, are the largest group of workers: representing well over half of informal workers in developing countries and as high as 70% of all informal workers in India. It is important to note that contributing family workers and wage workers represent a roughly equal percent of all informal workers: 22-21%, respectively. But that informal wage employment in Bangladesh is twice the developing country average and three times that of India. And that the percentage of women informal workers who are contributing family workers is at least twice that of men informal workers in all country groups – as much 3 times that of men workers in India and 10 times in Bangladesh.

Finally, in terms of sector composition by branch of industries, manufacturing sector comprises the smallest sector of informal employment globally and in both India and Bangladesh. Services and manufacturing sectors represent roughly equal share of informal employment in Bangladesh (25-26%). Turning to the home-based workers, the 2016-17 Labor Force Survey showed that a fairly high

percentage of the non-agricultural employment are home-based, especially for women. In this case, home-based work does not refer to care-work or domestic chores in other people's house, rather it refers to the production of goods and services for the market in or around your own home. In India, 33% of all women workers are home-based. In Bangladesh, compared to men informal workers, women informal workers are far less likely to be employers and far more likely to be contributing family workers. Looking upon the home-based worker in Bangladesh export garment industry, the two types of work—hand-stitching and hand embroidery can be done in a 3-stage sub-contracting arrangement: factory ► agent (mainly women) ► home-based worker (mainly women). These workers are at the lowest rung in the export value chain. From evidences around the world, it is seen that they are paid a very low amount and with this limited amount they have to bear the cost of equipment, electricity, work place all at once.

In conclusion, Dr. Chen stated that informal workers, compared to formal workers are poorer on an average. She also added that, compared to women informal workers in India, those in Bangladesh are less likely to be home-based workers and more likely to be unpaid contributing family workers.

Presentation: Why do Ready-made Garment Workers leave their job early? Aspiration of current workers and experience of former workers

By Dr. Nazneen Ahmed (Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS))

Dr. Nazneen Ahmed's presentation explored the key factors that lead workers of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector of Bangladesh, to leave the sector before the standard retirement age. She also discussed the socio-economic condition of women after they leave their jobs in RMG factories. Dr. Ahmed mentioned prior studies done in this area, one of them was the study by Center for Policy Dialogue (CPD) in 2018, which found that, on an average the expected length of the RMG worker is about 11 years and female workers leave job on an average 3 years earlier compared to the male workers. Reflecting upon the findings from the Labor Force Survey regarding the "Gender and Age Composition" in the RMG Sector, it was noticed that there was a sharp decline in the labor force participation after the age of thirty.

The findings of the study were based on a 2018 survey of 553 current RMG workers (268 men and 285 women workers) and semi-structured interviews with 80 former RMG workers (40 men and 40 women) and focus group discussions (FGDs) with those former workers. 6 in-depth case studies of former RMG workers were also conducted to understand in detail – their life as RMG workers, reasons for leaving the sector and status of life after they left the job in RMG sector. The workers were interviewed outside the factories.

From the findings, Dr. Ahmed focused on the age structure of the surveyed current workers, where both the male and female workers were aged between 20 to 29 years. In order to know their future job aspiration, the workers were asked a question, "At which age do you want to leave this sector?" From the answers, it was elicited that female workers had the objective of 8.2 years, which is higher for the male workers—11.3 years. The workers also expressed the reasons behind joining the RMG sector, which included pull factors like becoming independent and self-sufficient, receiving high salaries and

benefits. Alongside these, the need to meet the basic necessities of the family or to increase the number of earners in the family acted as the push factors.

Dr. Nazneen Ahmed also brought some interesting findings on the allocation of time to the fore—the female workers usually wake up one hour earlier than the male workers every morning, so that they can complete the household chores like cooking or looking after children. In terms of household work, female workers daily spend 3.2 hours on an average, whereas male workers spend only 1.7 hours. Added to that, they also enjoy more leisure time and sleeping time than their female counterparts.

The workers mentioned several reasons for leaving the garment industry earlier than retirement age. For male workers, switching to other jobs with higher salary or starting a new business was prevalent. On the other hand, women thought their children would not like them to work at RMG sector when they would grow up. Push factors behind leaving a job included forced retirement, violence/harassment, workplace injuries, work related stress and the pull factors were high living cost against limited salary, personal and family related problems etc.

Presentation: Structural Transformation and Female Employment in Bangladesh

By Dr. Sayema Haque Bidisha (Professor, Department of Economics, University of Dhaka)

Dr. Bidisha focused on the discrepancy in the female labor force participation rate, in the context of Bangladesh's structural transformation. Looking into female labor force participation rates, she found that, even though the rate has increased drastically in 2016/17 (36%) compared to the rate in mid 1980s (8%), it is still much lower than that of males. Especially, when the agricultural and service sectors are looked into, the fact that women are lagging behind in terms of capitalizing on the structural transformation can be clearly observed. Female participation in the agricultural sector (59.7%) is almost double the rate of participation for males (32.2%); while in the service sector, female participation rate (23.5%) is only half the rate for males (45.8%).

To investigate the probable reasons behind the phenomenon Dr. Bidisha examined the gender-based occupational segregation through both sectoral classification and skill-based occupational classes. She used the Labor Force Survey (LFS) dataset for 2016/17 and applied various methods of econometric analysis.

First, she estimated a Probit model of non-agricultural employment and used Blinder-Oaxaca decomposition. The results showed that education and training have strong positive impact for females' participation in non-agricultural. In addition, married and childbearing women have lowered probability of participating in non-agriculture while household income has positive and household landholding has negative effect on participation in non-agriculture. The decomposition results reflected dominance of discrimination between male and female in terms of non-agriculture participation.

Secondly, she estimated a Multinomial Logit model for the sectoral analysis. The results show that, apart from participation in service sector, training does not have any significant impact on sectoral employment probability. Increase in household income increases probability of employment in the service sector but decreases in the construction sector. Through decomposition she found that, if males were treated as females, their presence in the agricultural and manufacturing sector would rise to

around 45% and 22%, respectively, whereas presence in construction and service sectors would fall to around 1.60% and 31%, respectively. On the other hand, if females were treated as males, their presence in the agricultural sector would fall to around 29%, whereas presence in manufacturing, construction and service sectors would rise to approximately 22%, 11% and 39%, respectively.

Finally, she also used the Duncan's Index to measure the occupational segregation to show inequality in participation across sectors and found that sectoral segregation has increased in service and manufacturing and sectors and decreased in agricultural sector over time (2010 to 2016/17).

As policy recommendations to increase participation of women in high-skill sectors, Dr. Bidisha suggested that newer female-friendly sectors such as frozen food, leather, publishing, cottage industry, IT, catering and restaurant, fashion designing etc. should be sought. She also suggested the introduction of better Care service and finally wrapped it up by also putting emphasis on the importance of awareness raising programs in this regard.

Presentation: Gender and Labour Market Segmentation in Bangladesh: A Mixed Methods Approach

By **Dr. Naila Kabeer** (Joint Professor, Gender and Development, Departments of International Development and Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE))

Prof Kabeer examined why participation of women is still so limited in the Labor Market of Bangladesh and why most of the women are occupied in home-based self-employment. She shared findings from a study conducted on women in eight districts of Bangladesh in 2015, where she collaborated with Simeen Mahmud, Lopita Huq and Kabita Choudhury. A mixed method approach was used in the study.

There are three possible structural explanations to why women faced barriers to paid-employment in the 1970s. The first of these is the inside-outside dichotomy that a woman should work at home. Second, women should be working with and taking orders from their kin and not from complete strangers. Third is the distance of the workplace from home, since women are not considered to be able to travel far from home.

Naila Kabeer reported women and men, both prefer casual wage labor (agricultural labor) the least. Therefore, women who work there, do it because they do not have other choices and they are mostly divorced/separated, landless and illiterate. Education has significant impact on forms of work. Women who have taken education past the secondary level, are more likely to be in formal employment. Women with secondary education are likely to be in RMG sector. Women with no education are mostly in casual wage labor. Ownership of cattle, land has impact on whether a woman works from home or outside. She also discussed about the impact of women's subscription to traditional norms. Women wearing Burqah/Hijab were found to be more likely to work at home.

Finally, in explaining the inside-outside dichotomy and the kinship scenario, Naila Kabeer stated that these concepts are still prevalent because these have been stretched and made to include a wider range of possibilities. For example, the definition of "inside" which used to mean the "house" of a person now spans up to divisions or even in some cases, the whole country. The definition of Kin has also seen a similar outcome. Hence, even though the concepts have been stretched thin, the society is yet to break

out of these concepts. Breaking out might have enabled the gender-based segmentation in the labor market to decrease.

Discussion and Recommendations

As a discussant, Dr. Binayak Sen, Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), started the session with some remarks on the presentations. He suggested Bidisha incorporate the effect of shocks in the time periods of the data set used in her study, as the shocks should have impact on labor force participation. Both Dr. Selim Raihan, the chair of the session and Dr. Binayak Sen, stated that in terms of labor force participation of female, the 1999/00 data and the 2016/17 should not be directly comparable since the definition used in 1999/00 is not used in the latter version.

Dr. Sen, speaking on the presentation by Dr. Nazneen Ahmed, added that he conducted a similar study and found the share of employees over the age of thirty to be only 3%, which converges with the findings of Dr. Ahmed. He further added that intergenerational roles and patterns of marriage and dowry might affect female labor force participation and these factors should be explicitly modeled into analysis.

Ms. Taslima Akhter, Coordinator, Bangladesh Garments Workers Solidarity, the second discussant of the session gave some real-life examples from the RMG sector. For example, some RMG factories force their workers to take Iron pills in order to increase their energy. Agreeing with Dr. Kabeer, she said that RMG work is not considered respectable and hence workers always tend to leave the job whenever they are able to. Finally, she voiced some concerns over the arrival of automation and she was apprehensive about many of the current workers losing their jobs in near future if they do not receive proper training, which is unlikely to happen in most of the factories.

The final discussant, Ms. Jeneefa Jabbar, Director, Human Rights and Legal Services and Social Compliance, BRAC, stated that conducive environment to work is something extremely important to work on to ensure worker welfare. She added that if automation increases, female workers will be the ones losing out on jobs as they are the ones lagging behind in technological aspects.

Dr. Selim Raihan, the chair of the session, made some remarks. On Dr. Chen's presentation, he stated that the definition of informal sector is a debatable issue and handling the issue carefully should be the way to go. As for the issues regarding the RMG sector, he stated two paradoxes. Firstly, workers' productivity is expected to increase after working and gathering experience. However, in the RMG sector, due to the working environment, productivity tends to go down. The second paradox is that even though the wages are stated as very low, workers regularly leave the RMG sector after gathering enough savings (e.g. to buy cattle, poultry, land etcetera). The paradox is that if the wages are that low, how come they manage to save? Why do they save despite the high cost of saving? According to Dr. Raihan, solving these paradoxes with proper policy mechanisms should solve a significant chunk of issues regarding the RMG sector.

These discussions were followed by a question and answer session. The floor was opened and some of the participants from the audience also gave their view about the issues. For example, Dr. Desai stated that the phenomenon of so many women taking part in RMG employment might potentially root from

the fact that women and men have similar wages in the RMG sector while the pay gap in other sectors is much wider.

Dr. Selim Raihan concluded the session by thanking everyone.



Session 2 Panelists and Chair

Listener's Feedback on Day 1

Feedback by Firdous Azim (Professor, Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University and Member Naripokkho):

Prof Ferdous Azim stated that the opening panel had stimulated everyone, both emotionally and intellectually. She added that the conference was very absorbent, exciting and emotional day for those who have lived through these years. The first panel had presented very interesting papers. It had included Naila Kabeer's paper, which was a reflection during the 70's. It had deciphered an image of the nation being over populated and over ridden country, to where people have been able to console the rate of population growth. It must be observed that the overall change that is being witnessed and taken credit for, has an actual impact on the individual lives of women. Firdous Azim felt that the presentation was a wonderful breakdown of practises, norms, meanings and values, particularly as they change over time. Anticipating Naila's book, particularly in cognizance with her paper, she hoped that it would show how assets in the form of money, land, technology, and material are competent in analysing how people live, how they process given information, and the implication and affects of the cultural meaning and practices of the people.

The second paper by Sajeda Amin changes the direction of the conversation and turns it over its head. Referring to Sajeda, Prof Firdous Azim mentioned that despite the praise and notability of work that has been done, there are still serious matters and sticky points that have yet been resolved, and that is child marriage. The high rates of child marriage in the country negate the level of female education. A notably stunning aspect of the presentation was the discussion of how education can be brought in to offset such figures of child marriage. This suggests that government investment into the education of girls may

have reached a saturation point. Additionally, this has been reflected on the participation of women in the labour force. There is a mutual relationship between labour force participation, education and family planning, due to its correlation one is affected by another. Prof Azim reported that the two papers, by Naila Kabeer and Sajeda Amin respectively, had presented a through display of the reproductive, and sexuality trends that are observable in Bangladesh.

The third paper by Heidi West had introduced a completely new dimension to the conversation, in regards to migration and the 'women, who have been left behind in the households'. Prof Azim stated that an indicator that had stood out within the paper was the structure of the family, and where the family decisions were being made. It presented itself as an efficient way of looking at the effects of labour migration and people left behind. Firdous Azim had stated being surprised and fascinated due to the lack of mobility, and regardless of financial capacity, there was still a preference of women prioritizing household activities and duties.

She added that the second panel had presented an interesting and expanded understanding on definitions. Dr. Marty Chen's paper had discussed factors that constitute informality. This includes examining the definitions of the informal market, informal employment and where it takes place. There are disparities on how the ILO defines informality, and how it is generally defined. The whole notion of definitions had gone through the entire panel.

Feedback by Ratna Sudarshan (Trustee, Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), India):

Ratna Sudarshan stated that one thing that was emphasized throughout the day was "methods". She reported that we want mixed methods, multidisciplinary methods, focus on processes of change and we want rigour. She also stated that how we want to do the mixed methods is important, as there is qualitative and quantitative. Hopefully these will get clearer as researchers move along.

Another thing that was mentioned today was that data will be the politics of the future. So method, evidence and data was a theme that was discussed all throughout the day.

The papers that were discussed looked at the last 50 years experiences of Bangladesh, as well as looking forward. Reflecting on those, she brought up a few points. One, if Naila Kabeer could bring up a framework on the changes and practices. This could be something that could be applied in many different contexts. Education does not correlate very well with many things, such as the demographic area, but it comes up in regressions. So what is it that we correlate with education that actually explains the change, remains important to determine. She suggested that we have to resist coming to the easy policy conclusion that we need more education.

In discussing about the other theme on the shift of practices, Ratna Sudarshan added that there are certain rigidities in our structures, but we do see certain small changes. It is important to consider how we capture the value of these small changes, and how we see it in the larger roles.



Participants

Day Two

Session 3: Measuring Women's Empowerment

Empowering women and supporting gender equality are the stated aims of many development initiatives. Measuring women's empowerment has become increasingly important for assessing development projects aimed at supporting women. Many organizations particularly development agencies have come up with their own way of measuring women's empowerment. Many researchers working on women's empowerment have struggled and debated the indicators and strategies for measuring women's empowerment. Simeen Mahmud was intensely engaged in this endeavour and, together with Dr. Martha Chen developed the Mahmud and Chen Framework in 1995.

The aim of this session was to open up the debate by creating a platform for different perspectives and experiences. The session was chaired by Ratna Sudarshan, Trustee, Institute of Social Studies Trust, Delhi.

Presentation: Conceptualizing and Measuring Change in Women's Lives: Mahmud and Chen 1995 Framework Revisited

By Dr Martha Chen (Lecturer in Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School; Affiliated Professor, Harvard Graduate School of Design; Senior Advisor, WIEGO Network)

The presentation focused on the Mahmud and Chen Framework that was developed by Dr Martha Chen and Simeen Mahmud in 1995 and reflected their collaboration in the field of research. The framework focused on conceptualising and measuring changes in women's lives and work for a joint BRAC-ICDDR project, in the Matlab area of Bangladesh. The framework was presented in a set of 5 matrices. These matrices were designed to conceptualize how change happens and also to tabulate the findings from

the research. The first matrix focused on inputs. Another matrix classified women by economic class of the household: survival, subsistence and surplus and cross tabulated by the life cycle stage of the woman. There were matrices that looked at indicators of change and dimensions of change. These included pathways of change, dimensions of change and spheres of change.

According to Dr Martha Chen, the framework has certain strengths and limitations.

One of the strengths of the framework is that it specifies the different pathways, dimensions and spheres of change. It also focuses on relationships and power, both inside as well as outside the household, as it looks on women's economic empowerment and their relationship with the state and market. The framework was grounded in knowledge of lives and works of women from poor households of Bangladesh, from the prior research by Simeen Mahmud and Dr Martha Chen.

In terms of weaknesses, the framework was not embedded in an explicit theory or model of change. There was also no reference to the state to the wider legal policy or economic empowerment. Only individual officials in the government was mentioned, but wider economic and legal policy environment is extremely important.

Dr Martha Chen then turned on to discussing the WIEGO Network which she co-founded. The focus of the network is on the legal, policy and regulatory environment. This is because the rules and policies of empowerment are hugely important for informal workers; be it men or women. For instance, in case of rules, it is important to know if the city allows a female street vendor to operate where there are more customers, or if it allows a waste vendor to collect waste where needed. All these rules have a huge impact on economic empowerment. Therefore in the WIEGO network, the economic empowerment of women informal workers refers to the process of change that empower them as individual workers and as members of worker organizations. The focus is given on women gaining access to the resources they need, bargaining effectively in the markets and value chains they operate in and their ability to influence the wider policy, regulatory and institutional environment that shapes their livelihoods and lives.

The WIEGO 3V model was then discussed. The 3Vs stand for voice, visibility and validity. Voice is significantly important; particularly collective voice which comes through organization and representation of those organizations in policy making rule settings. This is known as "power with" others. Similarly, increased visibility is hugely important. This includes improved statistics, research and policy analysis to raise the numbers, the significance, the composition and the contribution of women in the informal sector. This provides women the "power to" influence change. Validity is legitimacy as economic actors. Women's work is often not considered work. Informal women workers have to face additional stigmatization that their work is illegal, criminal, underground and non-productive. The importance of making informal workers as legitimate economic actors that are subject of economic policy is huge. This is therefore validity. With the 3Vs comes the ability to influence the wider environment, and that is the "power over".

Increased voice, increased visibility, increased viability, changed mindsets, changed systems/models and practices, and the impact of workers are the indicators of change of the 3V model when impact is measured. Material change comes with all these changes. Material change is not political, but it takes all these politics and social justice action to secure and enhance livelihoods.

According to Dr Martha Chen, intersectional analysis is the key to the future of gender and women's economic empowerment. This is because, a working poor women has multiple identities, and each of these is a source of disadvantage and disempowerment. Particular groups of these workers are defined by class, race, ethnicity, or caste, and most of them are residents of underserved slums and that has implications for livelihood, particularly homebased workers. As women, the gender norms and relationships constrict the time they have available as well as their mobility outside their household. There is a low evaluation of their work. There is this micro reality of working isolated in their own homes and not being a member of any organizations which makes their work invisible. If the workers are living in underserved settlements, there is insecure tenure, the houses are small and of poor quality. Respondents from the research mentioned about holding the mobile phones in their mouths for the light of the phones while working. This shows the lack of infrastructure services. There is also limited access to transports between home, contractors and markets.

Dr Chen concluded the presentation with a number of reflections. Intersectional analysis is important and is the key to understand changes. Power within, with and over is required. Promoting change by and with women informal workers involves changing of mind-sets, the policies, the models and the system. This requires power within (self), power with others (other women informal workers), and power over (mainstream actors and systems). When measuring change, choice in indicators and methods should reflect the model of change, so one know what part of the model they are looking at and measuring. It is also important to know what dimensions of the project are being targeted; is the project targeting power or resources. Also important to look into the targeted spheres of change, and what is happening in the other spheres.

Presentation: All Dressed Up and No Where to Go: Low Return to Women's Education in India

By **Prof. Sonalde Desai** (Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Maryland)

Prof Sonalde Desai started her presentation acknowledging that education does not bring the kind of rewards that one might expect. Her presentation was based on two collaborative papers: "The Emergence of Educational Hypogamy in India," by Lin, Zhiyong, Sonalde Desai and Feinian Chen; and "Indian paradox: Rising education, declining women's' employment" by Esha Chatterjee, Reeve Vanneman and Sonalde Desai. The data of both the papers came from a panel survey of 40000 households in India, with roughly about 200000 members from the households.

Prof. Sonalde Desai mentioned earliest literature on women's empowerment which saw education as empowerment. In more recent literature, it is seen more as a form of resource, which enhances agency and empowerment. She also mentioned that gains to education can be far more limited for women than what people expect. In India, education does not translate in higher labour force participation of women. It is also interesting that education does not increasingly seem to translate in achievements in the marriage market. This means women are marrying men who are less educated than themselves.

Enrolments in India, both for boys and girls, have grown tremendously. The gap between men and women in educational qualification is rapidly closing; although women still remain behind men. However, India has this paradoxical situation where labour force participation rate of women are dropping with increased education. Women's labour force participation is decreasing with their

increased education, particularly in rural areas. In urban areas, women with college degrees are more likely to be employed, but they still remain behind the women in the rural areas with less education. This is particularly until they reach higher secondary education. Low educated women are more likely to be employed, than women with higher education.

With rising education, there is a substantial decline in people who are working in family farms or as manual labourers; and there is an increase in women as salaried workers. Rising education does not result in an increasing labour participation rate for women; particularly for an education level of class 10 or 12.

The expansion of mass education is also associated with poor quality education and lack of employability. There has been tremendous growth in distance education, rural/peri-urban colleges with poor training and in non-English colleges. All of these constrain job opportunities for both men and women.

Two separate surveys- the Indian Human Development Survey and the National Family Health Survey; both showed that the proportion of women who have husbands with less education than themselves, has been growing steadily. This is a surprise for India, because generally in Indian marriage markets, there are certain norms that are maintained. Women are supposed to be younger, shorter and less educated than their husbands. However, such a case shows a divergence. It came as a surprise to discover that educational superiority in the groom is no longer absolutely essential. Historically, women were expected to have less education than their husbands as there was a fear of marital asymmetry in favour of the bride. Prof Desai explored what happened to change such a scenario.

The only change that occurred is around education; unlike age, family and caste. There is a worldwide change in women, who used to prefer marrying men with more education than themselves, are marrying men with similar education. This is because women's education has risen sharply. However, this is not the case for India, where women's level of education remain lower than men. In her research, Prof Desai tried to look at multiple potential explanations to understand the change in trend. Education of women has grown in a particular type of degree. Growth of women's education is in arts and home sciences; but not in business or engineering. Women with these degrees are likely to get married to men below their education level, and they are probably the women who are not being able to get proper jobs. Therefore education is in some sense something that is acquired, but not necessarily valued. There was a tremendous expansion of college education via distance education and establishment of badly run and poor quality non-elite colleges which did not bring the rewards as expected; either in marriage market or in the labour market.

Prof. Desai concluded mentioning that here has been a growth in education, but the question was what kind of education. This is something which she felt should be looked upon in the upcoming research.

Presentation: Social Slippage, Indignity at Work, and Patriarchy Outcomes: Gender Norms in Rural India and Bangladesh

By Prof. Wendy Olsen, Professor of Socio-Economics and Head of the Department of Social Statistics, University of Manchester

Prof. Wendy Olsen started her presentation stating that in Bangladesh there is a noticeable change in norms around women. Norm is a socially accepted standard of behavior and these norms can be changed but the behavior regarding property and inheritance system have not changed yet. She suggested that future research would have to look at that structure of the property and inheritance system.

She pointed out that 98 percent of rural women in Bangladesh declared they were a 'housewife' while most of them were involved in domestic work in reality. According to International Labor Office system formal work and work through which goods are being produced at home for market are counted, but service production or domestic work is not counted. She added that when women are working as domestic maids that is counted in the system of national account.

Though women's tasks are seen as unimportant, their earning money is seen as critically important. A Marxist feminist viewpoint that women's valuable contributions were ignored by the typical capitalist who wants a cheap labour source. She explained that women's task is not valued because it is perceived as risking her and the family's honour specially when she goes outside for work, dealing with cash and exchange with men. The society perceives dealing with cash and exchange with men as a risk of touching men. Prof Wendy thinks that there is a slippage or false disapproval causing the women who return home from work to be seen as dishonoured and to bear the brunt of disapproval. Patriarchy is not a norm rather it is an existing system in society which gives power to the male gender over female gender. She also added that when a woman is working outside she is considered as a threat because her working outside questions the masculinity of her husband and breaks the unity of the family. In some cases the husband is accused of inadequacy which is considered to be her fault. This in further is causing a rise in divorce rate.

Prof Wendy explained that the male stereotyping of breadwinning is sexist and it is not necessarily a patriarchal norm. It causes the creation and perpetuation of the patriarchal system of man controlling the money decision. She further stated that the system should be distinguished from the norm and there should be a vision of a progressive view of future which would be a multi-earner household with egalitarian human rights. Moreover, there are some cultural grounding norms which do not change much and there are some social norms which are quite changeable. She suggested to reinterpret the social norms, for example: it shouldn't be male breadwinner role but only breadwinner role. She also suggested to have a respectful discussion about the work and sharing of the work. She concluded by saying that we need a strategic action to find out how to bring social reproduction to more into socially appreciated position.

Discussions and Recommendations

Prof. Naila Kabeer, Professor of Gender and Development at the Department of Gender Studies and Department of International Development, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) made a few comments on the presentations.

- In the WIEGO network, "power over" was generally used to talk about domination. What was missing was the "power to", which is about agency. This is also missing in the Chen and Mahmud Framework.

- The way people continuously create silos around economics is irritating. Material is both preconditioned and is part of the process and outcome. There is an uneducated understanding of the material.
- The intersectionality issue was not discovered by this generation of feminists. Thinking of WIEGO's work, she thought it would be interesting to look at the works around intersectionality. The discussion should focus on masculinity and femininity, in order to understand the set of relationships that positions men and women in different kind of relation with each other.
- Understanding education of various types is about is very important. Even if education does not translate to employment, higher levels of educate do translate almost linearly into better jobs.
- Why Muslims have higher fertilities across South Asia than Hindus? Bangladesh's fertility has declined, but the sex ratios have improved. It was less to do with religious beliefs, but more to do as how religion organises such kinship related practices.

Dr. Sajeda Amin, Senior Associate, The Population Council, NY made the following comments on the presentations:

- Theories change, so what is the advantage of going back to frameworks like the Mahmud-Chen framework would be interesting to know.
- Pathways, dimensions and spheres- where is it the most necessary to have the spotlight.
- What are the other factors that could be considered in terms of the returns to education? In order to be viable in the marriage market, is education of this level actually required?
- Among the Muslims, the notion that marriage is a contract is quite fundamental. In Hindu culture, it is like the Christian marriage, where marriages are seen to be sacrament. This could be one of the ways in which these difference play out.

Once the floor was opened for questions and recommendations, the following points were made by the participants:

- 88% person women working when 90% saying they are housewives. BRAC has a training. What men and women do and how do they value it. This is one are we need to explore more, as till today the whole connotation is women's work are not valued.
- In terms of India and Bangladesh, we are seeing a sharp rise on violence. Could this be a barrier to the empowerment of women? What could be the ways for us to then fight back this violence that arises due to the high visibility of women is to think of.
- Educated women are not necessarily doing well in the labor market. The graph showed that casual labor is going down and paid work is going up.
- Not necessarily agreeing to the point of educational benefit with marriage. Glorifying marriage is not somewhere we want to go.
- Would be interesting to see how education impacts violence. Does the curriculum in any way influence the behavior?



Session 3 Panelists and Chair

Session 4: Voice, Rights and Citizenship: Empowerment from Below

Citizenship and rights given from above can only bring about change if there is demand to actualize those rights and claim citizenship status. Women's voice and agency are important aspects of women's empowerment that need to be better understood.

Simeen Mahmud explored not only women's economic participation, but also their social and political participation. As part of a multi-country research consortium she studied the processes of mobilization and engagement of women in their exercise of rights and citizenship from various aspects over 10 years. She studied in particular women's involvement in accessing their right to health. The rights of garment factory workers was of particular interest to her and became a theme on which she continued her later work. She also studied deeply the role of different types of NGOs in mobilizing women around their rights as citizens.

The session explored women's strategies for developing voice and agency and how disadvantaged and discriminated women claim their rights as citizens. While social mobilization, organizing, demanding of accountability, using of existing forums and spaces for raising demands is recognized as important, it is also needed to understand how these processes work and how they contribute to women's increased empowerment and position in relation to others. Shireen Huq, Member Naripokkho, chaired the session.

Presentation: Empowerment from Below: What Nijera Kori's Experience teaches us about the Process of Empowerment

By **Khushi Kabir** (Coordinator, Nijera Kori)

Khushi Kabir stated *Nijera Kori* works with grassroots level people. Policies are made in a way that can impact people from grassroots level. She mentioned that Simeen Mahmud's work impacted Nijera Kori and Bangladesh as a whole during the agriculture sector review, on women's role in agriculture, and potential for growth, etc.

Her presentation highlighted landlessness in Bangladesh. Landlessness in certain studies is on the rise and sometimes debated. But according to HIES 2016, 74.6% of rural people in Bangladesh are functionally landless holding less than 0.5 acres of land. Also, 70% women have no ownership of land at all and most of them are deprived. World Bank shows that 12.5% of the households are female headed and according to their experience, this figure may have been underestimated.

Nijera Kori's works affect the marginalized in terms of economic, social and cultural, the most. And hence, there is corruption in local government and service distribution. They look at the matter of accountability and transparency at all levels, lack of access to justice particularly with the people *Nijera Kori* works with, lack of participation and decision making processes, unequal power relationship by gender, class, ethnicity, beliefs and customs. Bangladesh has a multi-ethnic community. They have multiple of occupations and most of them are selling their labor and they do not have the bargaining power to decide what their wage should be. Lack of control over production process especially in rural areas, agricultural production is now being controlled by the market forces that determine what is going to be produced or grown in a particular area. As the producer, one may be leasing in land, working as an agricultural labour in own little homestead. However, you are not the person who takes the decision what you want to grow and therefore, the rest of the production processes too.

They see empowerment beyond material and economic development, as addressing underlying structural factors including class and gender. They look at it as a very long term continuous process - it cannot be measured such that you will reach empowerment at the end of five years, etc. It is necessarily political. You are talking about structure, system and therefore, it is political. It encompasses multiple levels – from local to national level, from private and family sphere to the social or community sphere, and beyond. They look at empowerment as building one's own efforts and capacity for self-development and development of their own community and challenging the systems that exist.

They took a model which shows the process of empowerment. The first stage here is awareness about one's rights, way and awareness to organize and build solidarity. Once you build up the organization of solidarity, you need to build your critical consciousness of what the situation is which then hopefully leads to action through collective mobilization. They see these steps as being absolutely necessary. The process through which rural landless and deprived become agents of change through development of collective capacity and understanding. They look at awareness, voice and agency in the personal, social, political and economic spheres as being the spheres as being empowerment.

Ms. Kabir discussed how *Nijera Kori* works. *Nijera Kori* is a movement for awareness at individual and collective levels. They are an organization of marginalized and excluded people. They build collective ability of poor women and men to claim their rights as citizens rather than as clients, customers, consumers, beneficiaries or users. And it is a democratic system of participation and accountability in planning, evaluation, and overall management.

Each of the groups have their own democratic structures, after certain point they build village committee where 75% of the poorest are organized and then they have a committee because if you only have couple of groups, they do not have impact in the villages. So it important to have a mass group to have a strong voice. Then the same in union and after then in the upazilla level.

She mentioned about the works that *Nijera Kori* has done on equal wages for indigenous men and women, public hearing for recovery of illegally occupied *khas* land, ensuring formation of sexual

harassment complaint committees in schools, and formation of sexual harassment complaint committees.

Ms. Kabir felt that the lessons learned from *Nijera Kori* are as follows:

- *Nijera Kori*'s philosophy and process of social mobilisation has been critical in ensuring the well-being of the marginalised and the excluded people
- Social mobilisation can not only lead to increased agency and empowerment, but also to economic and material development
- Landless members are more politically aware and active
- Participation of women in decision-making is greater in member families
- Male members report higher participation in household chores
- Recent experience of working with adolescents show that girls, given the opportunity, are more active in participation in cultural programmes and other awareness raising activities
- Collective mobilisation and solidarity leads to increased acceptance and recognition
- Organisation's strategic decision-making can mean that social mobilisation is still be a viable approach to development and empowerment, especially for the landless and marginalised

Presentation: Exploring adolescent voice and agency in crisis: The Rohingya context in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh

By **Silvia Guglielmi** (Qualitative Researcher, Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE), Overseas Development Institute, Italy)

Ms. Silvia Guglielmi described how GAGE's qualitative researches focused on refugees in six countries. GAGE is running a longitudinal mixed method research program that finds evidence on the process that can help adolescence in these six countries. Gage believes that by identifying what methods works for whom, where and why and by generating new evidence on what can transform the lives of the adolescence, particularly adolescence girls, the program can create better support for both adolescent girls and boys.

Currently, GAGE is following the largest cohort of adolescent in global south. Guiding overall research on three Cs is Gage's conceptual framework. The three Cs are: Capability outcomes, Context, and Change pathways. It focuses on the capabilities and context that generate evidence in these domains. Capability is interconnected with individual and collective capabilities that can expand the capacity of individual's way to contribute in their own wellbeing and contribute to live a meaningful life. And the 6 capabilities Gage focuses on are: Education & Learning, Health & nutrition, Bodily integrity, psychosocial wellbeing, Economic Empowerment and Voice & agency.

The study looked into the Voice and Agency of the Adolescence in Rohingya Refugees in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Voice and agency implied the capability of Rohingya adolescents to meaningfully participate in their communities, as well as their mobility and ready access to age-appropriate information and digital technology. 915,000 Rohingya refugees are residing in Cox's Bazar Bangladesh; approximately 23% of which are adolescent girls and boys aged 10 – 19. There are studies/researches focusing on gender dynamics of the refugees, but not particularly on the adolescence Rohingya refugees. Also, while

Ukhia and Teknaf have populations that are 76% and 29% Rohingya, respectively, adolescents in host communities might face some impacts. The study looked into both.

The study took place from May to July in 2019. 2059 adolescent girls, boys and their caregivers took part in the GAGE survey and 149 adolescents, caregivers and community members were interviewed through in-depth qualitative methods.

According to the survey, only 28% of Rohingya girls leave their camp blocks compared to 80% of boys, whereas 31% of Bangladeshi girls leave their host community compared to 76% of boys. At night-time, only 26% of our sample felt safe in the camps and 33% in host community, compared to 95% feeling safe in the daytime, across locations. At the night time, they mostly fear of kidnapping. Older Bangladeshi girls usually face restriction based on gender norms emphasizing motherhood and maternity. For the refugee girls, as soon as they hit puberty restrictions emerges on their mobility. Older adolescent boys however can move more freely in the camps, but face limited livelihood opportunities and educational prospects which have repercussions on their psychosocial wellbeing and economic empowerment. In terms of decision making, the data implied that girls have limited decision making power in the households. Adolescent girls must obey their husbands' decisions if married, or their parents' if unmarried. Exception can be seen only in female headed households, the eldest girl and boy have the ability to influence decisions in those households.

GAGE will be continuing their research on voice and agency outcomes that shape the development of adolescents; some trajectories are : whether adolescents are able to negotiate with family members for outcomes that impact their lives—such as a more equitable distribution of household labour, access to public spaces for recreation and community participation, whether they have access to age-appropriate information, whether they are able to make decisions within the household and are moving towards becoming the ultimate arbiters of their own futures, whether they are developing a sense of themselves as members of a community, rather than merely their own families, and have access to school- and community-based venues for developing voice and agency.

GAGE recommends that more interventions should be focused on adolescents' gender transformation integrated with parents and community leaders. These interventions should highlight the risks of social isolation that the adolescent girls face. Proper safe spaces, dedicated to girls and boys, should be created so that adolescents can make their voices in communities, spend time with others. Marketable vocational training for adolescents should be promoted in this regard. Host communities and the refugee camps need safety and security; multiplied law enforcement and improved environment. A medium to long-term vision is required to be designed to support both communities adolescents and study as such can help inventing evidence-based interventions.

Presentation: MEJNIN for safe city for girls in Bangladesh (GJD) & Lessons from women-led grass-root organizations of Community Empowerment Programme (CEP)

By Hasne Ara Begum (Lead Gender Mainstreaming, Gender Justice & Diversity Programme) and **Rita Roselin Costa** (Programme Coordinator, Community Empowerment, BRAC)

Hasne Ara Begum started her presentation with some statistics on incidences of harassment of women and girls of different age groups at different places and phases in Bangladesh: 94% of women and girls

have experienced sexual harassment at public place. Among female internet users, 73% faced cyber harassment. There are also incidences of rape, murder, sexual harassment in front of school. Some have committed suicide as a result of all these incidences.

In view of the negative impact on girls such as dropping out of school, discontinuing from formal education and getting married at an early age, BRAC launched MEJNIN programme. This is a neighborhood based campaign which creates awareness among students, teachers, parents and community by making them aware about sexual harassment of girls and its negative impact on girls' participation in education and their right to freedom and choice. It also enhances confidence of students to prevent and protect sexual harassment and child marriage against girls and promotes self-esteem, leadership and creativity of secondary school students.

The "MEJNIN Model" depicts different MEJNIN components at school/madrasa, community, and national levels. At school/madrasa level, the components are Student Watch Group (SWG), Community Safety Mapping, promotion of hotline number (109 and 999), promotional campaign IEC/BCC material, survivor support and referral linkage, teachers training, and awareness raising. At the community level, the components are Community Watch Group (CWG), awareness campaign, community gathering with local police, community leaders, GOB officials, promotion of hotline number (109 and 999), training and capacity building of local police and journalists, community mobilization for prevention, protection and integration, survivor support and referral linkage. Finally, at the national level, the components are networking for survivor support, advocacy with local administration, police and journalists, learning and sharing (local and national), and partnership with MoWCA. She also presented a "community safety mapping" which shows the student watch group identifying the sexual harassment prone areas in Jashore Sadar sub-district.

The key achievements of the MEJNIN programme are playing active role by the students to inform about any discussible incidents to the stakeholders mentioned earlier, increased awareness among the stakeholders, development of leadership and self-defense skill among girls in combating the negative incidents, capacitating the teachers with primary psychosocial counselling capacity to assist sexual violence survivors, and finally, fighting against negative incidents through neighborhood connectivity, solidarity and networks. However, there are some major challenges of this programme:

- Influence of local and political leaders in favor of perpetrators create insecurity to survivors and families and increase risk of girls suicide
- Patriarchal attitude and behaviour of teachers, parents and SMC regarding girls empowerment and rights
- Less cooperation from administration, law enforcing agency
- Absence of SH Law and special provision in Child Marriage Restraint Act reinforcing SH incidences and child marriage

Lessons from women-led grass-root organizations of Community Empowerment Programme (CEP)

Rita Roselin Costa presented the works of *Polli Shomaj*, which is a ward-level institution. Under this platform, the poor people, particularly marginalized women in the communities, can raise their voice, claiming their rights and entitlements.

The main roles of *Polli Shomaj* are:

- Assisting the poor in their local communities to access government and non-governmental organisations' services and resources.
- Securing position for women in rural power structures
- Participating in local governments' development activities as well as in local social initiatives
- Preventing conflict and violence, particularly violence against women and children

The major achievements of *Polli Shomaj* include sizable amount of empowered women, participation of the members in the local power structure, being elected as *Joyeeta*, prevention of domestic violence, child marriage, and dowry, and mobilization of social safety net resources for the poor, particularly for the poor women.

Presentation: Local Governance and Social Accountability: People's Participation at Grassroots Level

By **Dr. S M Zulfiqar Ali** (Senior Research Fellow, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies)

Dr. S M Zulfiqar Ali discussed the problems faced by local people related to RTI (Right to Information), CC (Citizen Charter) and GRS (Grievance Redress System). He found limited participation of people in UP activities, Ward Shava, and in open budget sessions. He mentioned the lack of ward shavas, Chairman and members not wanting local people to know about the budget and development planning, people being unaware about their rights due to lack of education and motivational programmes, etc.

The limited participation of people results in the wrong selection of projects and very poor quality infrastructure development, problems in receiving VGD, VGF and lactating mother card by the most deserving ones, and requirement for bribing at the time of obtaining birth registration and death and inheritance certificate.

He mentioned that politicization might have played some role in limited participation of local people in UP activities. As possible ways-out he suggested the following:

- Arrangement of more motivational and skill training for UP elected bodies related to NIS, GRS, RTI and CC,
- Awareness training for citizens,
- Meeting and campaign for budget from the UP,
- Monitoring mechanisms for ward shava meetings to be held regularly,
- Engagement of local NGOs and clubs in the campaign and training programmes.
- Separate cell set up for RTI and GRS.

Discussion and Recommendations

Dr. Rounaq Jahan (Distinguished Fellow, CPD, Visiting Scholar, Columbia University) started the comments with the first presentation "Empowerment from below", presented by Ms. Kabir. Ms. Kabir looked at mobilization by two types of actors: One is *Nijera Kori* - a community based local health watch group. The other on the readymade garment workers. In both of these areas Simeen Mahmud had also

done research. Simeen's conclusions resembled those of Dr. Jahan's, although the local health watch group improved women's voice, but they were facing lots of resistance from the providers, and there was a lack of political commitment. In the final analysis, the impact was found to be limited. Simeen Mahmud's conclusion about the RMG workers and their limitations for mobilizing women's collective action noted some of the social and economic structural obstacles.

Dr. Jahan found some contradictory findings on the adolescents' mobility between the Rohingyas and the hosts; differences being very small. Rohingyas have lots of opportunities in Bangladesh. In terms of decision making, there was some differences among the two groups.

Dr. Jahan raised four broad questions:

- 1) The sustainability of NGO-organized local level groups. She asked if the NGOs withdraw themselves, are these local level communities strong enough to carry on their activities.
- 2) The second question was about replication and scaling up. If these type of voice raising and local organizations give improved economic return as per the findings, then why are these not replicated or scaled up, such as like microfinance programmes.
- 3) The third question was about the type of relationship between the local government and NGO initiatives. In some areas NGOs running successfully take the initiative to collaborate with the local government. But the question is in some other areas whether the local government institutions will look at all or take the initiative or even find out what the NGOs are doing or what local communities are doing. Dr. Jahan mentioned that many other countries such as UK, USA, the local government elections are party line. There people of the parties know that they have to show something to the mass people. They have to work for people to get nomination either for the local government or for the Member of Parliament. Therefore, the problem is in the way our political parties work.
- 4) Dr. Jahan's fourth question was related to how we link up the micro and macro levels. In an ideal world it is supposed to have a push from below that would create impact at the macro level. But the political parties do not care about NGOs. If looked at the garments sector, 60% of the MPs are business people of whom many are garments industry owners. Therefore, it is a question how to make the local people matter in the national level.

Dr. Jahan made final two points. One, we need to look at the relationship between civil society and political society. There were good alliances among civil society, social movements and political movements in the 1950s and 1960s. It should be found out from when the difference started to arise between civil society and political society and what the consequences are. Without political pressure, women's empowerment will not move forward.

Finally she mentioned about the title of the seminar "Knowledge, power and social change" and asked BIGD to think about generating knowledge and find out how that knowledge can create some power that would really lead to the mechanism that would then lead to social change.

Dr. Abbas Bhuiyan (Visiting Professor, University of Portsmouth), appreciated the philosophy of the initiation of the organization *Nijera Kori*. He then mentioned about Ms. Sylvia's paper on forcefully displaced population to be very well designed in terms of survey and having fruitful evidence. He

mentioned Dr. Zulfikar's paper which looked at local governance and tried to see the extent of local level participation of people, their troubles in an undeveloped political system. It has many challenges for participation at local levels. He mentioned that Dr. Zulfiqar is in a good position to share his findings with government ministries so that they can do something to improve the situation.

Dr. Bhuiyan then moved to the two BRAC studies. One on urban city girls, and school based interventions on various issues. There some methodological issues which he addressed. About the community empowerment presentation, he mentioned that the kind of indicators they used to measure impact earlier, are at loss. Because community empowerment activities empowered people to do various things that was not in the original objective of the interventions. It is not only the output, but outcome, and should be alert and flexible. It should be placed in a way such that it has effects and people get interests.

Dr. Bhuiyan ended his discussion remembering Simeen Mahmud.

Open Discussion and Closing of the Session

Questions and comments came from the audiences during the open discussion session regarding various issues related to the presentations.

- In discussing political participation and leadership of women, concerns were raised on how work is being done on the small number of reserved seats for women in the *Union Parishads*, with no voice in local interventions and with the local government. It is important to engage with the government and operationalize all the findings and data available. This will help in bridging the gap.
- Importance of lights in the camps and separate spaces for adolescent boys and girls were raised. It is also crucial to discuss about education and access to skills.
- It is important for women to organize themselves in building the strategies to get rid of domestic violence and child marriage. We need to include these in the mainstreaming by designing in a mass scale. It is also important to decide whether the data related to domestic violence and child marriage, are seen as outcomes for scaling up interventions, or use these as evidence for prevention and awareness.



Session 4 Panelists and Chair

Session 5: Making Women Count

Economic justice for women implies that their contribution to the family and to the national economy would be recognized and valued instead of being unrecorded and undervalued, leading to discrimination and inequality. Therefore making women count is making what they do and what they stand for, count and be valued. Recognition of the care economy, gender budgeting with analysis of allocations planned and actual expenditures made on what is needed for women and men, are some of the strategies used to promote economic justice or equity.

Simeen Mahmud was engaged at several stages of her career in trying to bring about recognition of women's activities, both paid and unpaid, productive, reproductive and personal, so that the extent of their contribution to their families and societies is recognized and valued.

The session tried to explore how far research and theory have been able to address the above issues and identify what are the remaining issues, questions and challenges that need to be addressed through research, interventions or policies.

The session was chaired by Professor Wahiduddin Mahmud (Former Advisor, Caretaker Government).

Presentation: Women's agency, the social organisation of production and unpaid care work

By Ratna M Sudarshan (Trustee, Institute of Social Studies Trust (ISST), India)

This presentation focused on a number of qualitative studies to discuss the issues of unpaid care and women's agency. The study wanted to find in what ways the exercise of women's agency influence the social organisation of production and the distribution of responsibilities for unpaid care work. According to official statistics, there has been a constant declination in women's participation in the labour force.

In general, unpaid work refers to the responsibility generally of women in the household. Ratna mentioned about Recognise, Reduce and Redistribution in her presentation where “Recognise” suggests that, data from time-use surveys as well as national labour force and other surveys allows some assessment of time spent on unpaid work. Recent research has shown, even if the amount of time spent by different income group does not differ that much, the composition of work changes a great deal. When it comes to “Reduce”, the primary concern has been around child care – who uses, who doesn’t use, what would be outcomes of universal full day care. The positive outcomes noted include improved health and nutrition, cognitive development and easier transition to schooling, increased income of mother, lower stress etc. Ensuring better domestic structure such as – water, electricity (and acquisition of gadgets), and cooking fuel will reduce the time needed on certain activities. Although the United Nations High Levels Committee (HLC) on women’s economic empowerment defines redistribution as ‘Foster social norms change to redistribute care from women to men and ensure that care is their equal right and responsibility’, it has a different connotation in India, where the advocacy focus of redistribution has been on shifting the burden from private households to state provided facilities with a focus on low income households. Considering the households of the poor, where the working adults are included in the informal economy, the practical possibilities of female to male redistribution on a daily basis may be limited due to irregular work, long hours, seasonality, lack of benefits, low earnings; with men, often involving migration, long commutes.

Reflecting on redistribution from an on-going research with Mala Khullar, Ratna pointed out that educated middle class women may or may not work but there are new norms around parenting that lead to new forms of care work and women’s agency is reflected in choices that enhance time on such activities. Usually, educated women’s first jobs include : corporate; small enterprises; full-time; high achievement, but later they search for work with different trajectories – part-time, flexible home based , less ‘corporate’, so that they can take care of their children and family. Among poor households, women exercise their agency [which may be limited] by simply managing – lives organised around unpaid work, with paid work whether at home or outside undertaken in whatever way is possible given the former.

The policy implication that might emerge from here is the reduction in burden of unpaid work. In case of the non-poor, there is an equality in marriage and agency may be exercised to make choices that reflect aspirations for the next generation. The presence of fears about safety and supervision of children mean that women begin to substitute their own capabilities to make up for gaps in schooling, other learning or mentorship. If two types of households are considered, households with informal work has limited outreach of social security. Women in this household will look for work near home and the production front is matched by irregular hours, where the agency comes from personal characteristics, education, family support, solidarity of a collected group, own income etc. The formal work’s scenario is much secured, well-paid and they get benefits but again, it is fairly rigid in its requirements. In this case, the agency from personal characteristics, education, own income are again directed towards adaptation, which takes the form of occasional, part time or home-based work, getting domestic help to share burden of work etc. It is opening a whole new trajectory which would allow a different type of participation and if that doesn’t happen, the two types of households will remain separated. So, if we could enhance choice and there were much more availability of part-time, flexible home-based regular work with benefits, which is different from informal work, it would enable women with education to enter the workforce. Ensuring universal child care is absolutely essential, but we do not actually know

what this would do to women who are in paid work. A lot of small scale qualitative studies are required which would shed light on these issues in order to get a better sense of this.

Presentation: Unpaid Care Work: Recognizing and Valuing

By Shahida Islam Khondaker (Research Associate, BRAC Institute of Governance and Development)

Ms. Shahida Islam Khondaker's presentation focused on recognizing and valuing unpaid care work. She started her presentation by defining care work as reproductive activity and domestic/household work. The presenter explained that women are primary contributors to care work but their contribution is not recognized by the policy and economy as work. The result from a BBS time-use survey conducted in 2012 shows that employed women spend on an average 3.6 hours whereas unemployed women spend on an average 6.2 hours for household work and care work. She pointed out that compared to employed women, unemployed women are spending two times more hours to do household work and care work. She added that urban women spend less hours than rural women but compared to urban men, urban women spend more hours for care work. She also pointed out that time needed for care work is 'non-negotiable' to avoid welfare loss of family members which further creates less flexibility in allocating labor time for women. She also mentions that both urban and rural women spend two to three times higher hours for care work than men so there exist unequal gender division of household work. Additionally migrating men put additional responsibility for productive work on women. She mentioned that under existing gender division of care work, women cannot devote more time for productive work, especially outside home, without cutting into leisure time which results in welfare loss for women. She added that, prevailing gender norms and gendered roles prevent men from devoting more time to care work. She suggested that women's care burden should be reduced and men's care work should be recognized to involve women more in productive work. In addition, the recognition of men's care work will promote redistribution and reduction of care work for women and girls. Technological improvement like solar lighting, bio-gas, improved stoves, providing of healthcare or agricultural advice through mobiles will increase men's availability at home or community and increase their involvement in care work. She also added that in order to sustain women's labor force participation, the government and NGOs have a very important role to play by providing day care facilities, water sealed latrines and tube wells with concrete bases. In addition, infrastructure development such as raising of roads to above flood levels, building small culverts and bridges, better boat services etc. will reduce care work for women and increase their flexibility in allocating labor time.

Presentation: Counting and Conceptualization: Estimation of Head Count Rate of Poverty among Women

By Rushidan Islam Rahman (Executive Chairperson, Centre for Development and Employment Research (CDER))

In her presentation, Rushidan Islam wanted to reiterate studies on empowerment of women that require both concepts and data are gender sensitive and geared to specific social contexts of women's deprivation. In this respect, the important steps forward are – research on inclusion of women's unpaid work in the national GDP estimates, conceptualization and data on female LFPR and Gender budgeting analysis. Although there are many other indicators and concepts which deserve similar attention, this

paper specifically focuses on the following two: poverty incidence and working hours and other features of labour market. Explaining the poverty experience of women, Rushidan Islam said that data on poverty incidence obtained from last two rounds of HIES of Bangladesh (2010 and 2016) show lower poverty incidence among female-headed households. This stands in sharp contrast to the experience of neighboring countries and the social reality in Bangladesh, and there has been criticism on the data from BBS whether the data is accurate or not. Rushidan remarked, it's time to look at whether it is the fault of data or it's the concept that is inappropriate for analyzing female poverty. BBS takes all female headed households whether they are effective ones or just nominal heads and gives an average figure of poverty incidence. The estimated result shows that female poverty incidence is lower by at least 5 percentage points every year compared to male headed households. In 2016, it was 19.9% for female headed households and 24.8% for male headed households. Therefore, we must classify the female headed households in such a way so that it tells us a better story.

When the female headed households have male earners overseas and receive remittances, they are likely to be above poverty threshold. In contrast, female-headed households which do not have male earners in the household or remittance senders living abroad are likely to be poorer.

Econometric analyses can help isolate these effects. Multiple regression analysis on determinants of income has been conducted on the basis of unit records of data from the HIES. This regression analysis uses explanatory variables including – household's resource endowments, head of the household's age and education, dummy variables for region (administrative division), a dummy variable for remittance receiver and a dummy variable for male-headed households. The coefficients reveal that all types of assets and human capital have positive and significant effects. Male-headed households have higher income even after controlling for assets and human capital and thus would be less poor.

She further classified two major categories of female-headed households: first, those who receive remittance income and are actually "residential female-headed households," (RFH) and male head does not reside within the same village/city. The other category has been termed as "Effective Female-Headed Households" (EFHH), who do not receive remittance.

To make the EFHH comparable with similar social strata of male-headed households, all male-headed households have been divided into two groups: those who receive remittance inflow (RMH) and those who do not (EMHH). Later, these four types of households were compared in terms of poverty, income, expenditure, human capital and asset. Male-headed households with remittance were the highest income group in both rounds of surveys, with an income of 15,174 taka per month. On the other hand, female-headed households without any remittance are in the lowest income bracket (6,850 taka per month), whereas the female-headed households with remittance earns 12,516 taka per month. While calculating poverty incidence for these four groups in terms of cultivable land owned and homestead land owned, similar patterns were observed. Shedding light on literacy rate and school enrolment rate, the study found female-headed households to be extraordinarily promising. In this way, Rushidan highlighted that –we need to use official data, but not in the form they present it in their reports. Rather, we can build our concepts and then highlight what is inside the story, not looking merely at the average data provided by the BBS. Later on, she focused on the two features of labor market outcome –hours of work and structure of employment. Looking back on a labor market based World Bank report, Rushidan asserted, women's labor force participation is low because they only take up part-time work which only requires smaller working hours. But, the real picture is, women's working hours are

equal to men, especially in urban areas. While showing the contrast between her findings and World Bank's report, she pointed out, urban female workers work quite high number of hours and this has been fluctuating for the last few surveys. In 2013, they were found to work 47 hours every week, whereas male workers had worked 55 hours per week. A stark difference in hours of work is seen in rural areas, where the women are self-employed and they choose their hours of work which makes the average smaller than men. Focusing on other areas of data and conceptualization where gender dimensions need review, she highlighted on studies that mentioned, in developing countries a significant number of women are missing. In Bangladesh even if women are not missing there may be other types of biases in population related data. For example, in case of youth employment, teenage girls' proportion is less than that of teenage boys. She concluded her presentation by underscoring the importance of research on wage inequality and women agriculture in Bangladesh.

Discussion and Recommendations

The first discussant of this session was Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury, Director, Preventing violence Against Women Initiative at BRAC. Ms. Chowdhury started by mentioning that in our society there is a grand narrative of women who will never want to be counted at all, who would do all care work without any recognition. She added that women having equal educational qualification and financial background as their partner choose care work over productive work. This picture came up in Ratna M. Sudarshan's presentation very well where women choose to take care of their children and prefer to protect the security of their children. Ms. Nobonita raised a question, is it her choice or is it gender stereotype or gender norms of the household that actually in the end puts women at the position which does not allow women to explore the opportunities other than taking care of their households. From Ms. Khondaker's presentation she suggested to monetize women's work or to economically define the cost of unpaid work. She mentioned, if unpaid work done by women was included in the budget then the status of the work would change and would make men to value care work more. She added, prevailing gender norms are keeping women behind and not making women count. Recognition of care work and incentivizing it is very important. She also suggested to find out how recognizing women's contribution to domestic work and care work will benefit men. Lastly, Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury commented on Rushidan Islam Rahman's presentation and mentioned that the data was very gender disaggregated. Women led households face much more barriers to come above poverty line in this patriarchal society but only those female headed households are doing better which are receiving the remittances as well.

Aasha Mehreen, the senior deputy editor of Daily star was another discussant of the session. Rather than making comments on the presentations the discussant asked some questions to the presenters. From Ratna M. Sudarshan's presentation she wanted to know what kind of agency do poor household have in terms of managing the households and are there any difference in the agencies between rural and urban scenario. She asked to elaborate social organization of production and how the concept of redistribution was seen in India. From the second presentation Aasha wanted to know how inclusion of unpaid worker can be done practically to make it a part of the policy. She added that unpaid works are putting extra burden on women and the burden is heavier for the employed women. Aasha was curious to know the impact of this extra pressure on women's health and how the presenter planned to analyze that impact. Finally she added some questions from the last presentation. She said that the differences and discrepancies between the official data and the research that the presenter have done, is very

revealing and it needs to be explored more. She was interested to know about the dynamics of the households where females are sending remittances. She also added that whether these households have agencies and how much of it is recognized should be addressed.

Open discussion

Dr. Naila Kabeer expressed her concern about the comment that came from Ms. Nobonita regarding gender norms which make women do the care work. Dr. Kabeer thinks it is very important not to deny the spaces from where women are making certain choices. There is a spectrum and it is very difficult to know where women are located on that spectrum that goes from complete socialization to completely free choice. She emphasized that a lot of women will find it preferable to stay at home rather than getting involved in paid work. From Rushidan Islam's presentation Dr. Kabeer suggested not to analyze poverty from household data as it can be misleading.

Ms. Maheen Sultan responded to a question raised by Ms. Nobonita Chowdhury regarding monetization of care work. GST has been advocating for recognition and valuing rather than monetization. Including care work in the GDP will not work because the policy makers and many of the economists are not supportive to it and there exist a shadow accounting whether it will work or not. The latest ILO Future of Work report suggested a separate national indicator to measure the value of care work. She suggested the need for an alternative to putting a monetary value on care work which has non-monetisable aspects

Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud, chair of the session explained that, there are unintended consequences of changing that are happening. Female members of the households are getting education more than before. He added that unintended consequence of female education is that women have to take the burden of the family both in middle and lower middle class family. He asked Rushidan Islam Rahman to recommend BBS to redefine the definition of household head in perspective of source of income. He suggested that the household head should be the person who is the breadwinner among the household members. He also suggested that workload in terms of hours is very concrete and that will have some effect and should be discussed in forums attended by both male and female attendees.



Session 4 Panelists and Chair

Listener's Feedback on Day 2

Feedback by Dr Sajeda Amin (Senior Associate, The Population Council, NY):

The day had started with measuring empowerment. Ms Amin spoke from her experience of attending meeting where the agenda included un-boxing the dynamics of measuring empowerment. This had been initiated by Sonalde Desai, looking into the components of measuring economic empowerment with the use of survey data. An additional initiative taken by a Canadian university, measured empowerment in the context of health outcomes. The session had touched on the framework of measuring empowerment. It had recognized that empowerment is a latent concept, which is not directly observable, and thus resort to proxies. Ms Amin stated that Simeen Mahmud's early work was significant and had contributed greatly in articulating and thinking through some of these frameworks and concepts.

The session had taken a turn from empowerment being a latent concept and the tricky aspects that come along with it to Sonalde's exploration into the happenings of education, workforce participation and its implications. The session addressed whether education is reflecting returns in the workforce and the marriage market. A theme that Ms. Amin and Simeen Mahmud had worked on was trying to explain the non-existence of the expected association of education's return in the workforce.

The session had continued into Wendy Olsen's wide ranging and complex ideas centred on measuring patriarchy and provoking thought about it.

The following session had been about civic engagement and empowerment at the community level. This presented an interesting diversity of themes. Khushi Kabir had presented an eloquent description of significant work at Nijera Kori, which included the topic of citizenship and its mandate.

Ms. Amin spoke about Silvia's presentation which was based on the Rohingyas in the camps and the local community. Ms. Amin highlighted the importance of the Rohingyas, refugee displacement and how it effects the host environment. It was noted how the absence of an emphasis on the access to education, in regards to voice and agency was an important point to consider. She highlighted the importance of the rights of displaced non-citizens and access to education. As Ms. Amin mentioned there have been interesting descriptions of alternative initiatives around safe citizenship for girls and the different approaches to legal activism. It had been further discussed on how legal activism had been conceptualized by the groups that perform them. Ms Amin hoped to gain more understanding on how civil society in the country acts on reports of violence, rape and the thinking of the people who are associated with it. She further wanted to understand the situation of prevention of child marriage, domestic abuse and sexual abuse. She addressed the amount of thoughts that go behind such public discourses.

Moving on the session titled, Making Women Count; which included very thought provoking presentations, she reflected on herself of living in a community in the US, where most women do not travel for work. However, as she has to travel for work, she emphasized on the power of guilt and discourse that is associated it in regards to her own children. This guilt is in reflection of the 'unseen emotions' that are associated with not staying at home and focusing on a career.

Day 3

Reflections: Getting Gender on the Agenda

One major aspect of promoting women empowerment is to get institutions to address the gender-related issues and to allocate resources accordingly. A key aspect of doing research on women's empowerment and development has been getting institutions to address these questions, give them priority, allocate resources and personnel to them and allow researchers to give priority to such research. The struggles of the women and men who sought to do so should be acknowledged and lessons learned from how this was done. The session was meant to hear and learn from the experiences of women and men who put gender on the agenda of their respective research institutions and benefit from a critical analysis of their lessons learned so that research addressing gender discrimination and inequality becomes the norm.

This session was a platform for the participants to share their personal stories and experiences which they gathered in the process of putting gender on the agenda of their respective institutions. The session was chaired by **Ms. Rasheda K Choudhury** (Executive Director, CAMPE and former Advisor, Caretaker Government).

Ms. Choudhury initiated the session by paying homage to Sir Fazle Hasan Abed and Simeen Mahmud. She then stated the importance of learning from the people who worked relentlessly to bring gender on the agenda and learning about how, when and why the participants decided to start and go on with such an ever-challenging vision and how they managed to succeed. She then referred to men as allies of women and of equal importance in bringing women empowerment on the horizon. She then invited the first speaker to share his story and asked him if he were to start afresh in the conquest for getting gender on the agenda, what would he have done differently

Dr. Abbas Bhuiyan, Visiting Professor, University of Portsmouth

Dr. Bhuiyan started off with sharing his experience of working in icddr,b in 1980. At that time, there was scarcity of good quality gender-segregated data. The available data was retrospective in nature and hence had a lot of instances of misreporting (such as lower childhood mortality rate of female compared to male). However, icddr,b followed a demographic surveillance system and collected weekly data of 200,000 people and this was a good representative of the reality. But, icddr,b only reported the data and did not act on it. So, in the early 1980s they hired an Indian demographer and with Dr. Lincoln Chen in the lead, initiated a study to find out what were the mechanisms that could have resulted in higher mortality rate for female children, especially after the first 6 months of life. Digging deep into data, Dr. Chen found that there was discrimination in food and health services offered and the male children received much more than the female children.

Even though such a discriminating picture was observed, there was not much opportunity to institutionally do anything of significance to solve the problem by mitigating the loopholes exposed through the research. Dr. Bhuiyan's workplace – icddr,b did not have much organizational capacity or intent to have a gender focused lens. The then researchers of icddr,b along with Dr. Bhuiyan kept on pursuing this. In the late 1990s, international donors started to apply gender centric conditions to their donations and at that point, icddr,b had to develop a gender policy – giving in to external and internal pressure. Due to lack of organizational capacity, icddr,b consulted the NGO named Naripokkho, to help

them come up with the policy. There is now a sexual harassment policy, maternity leave policy, gender focal points etcetera in icddr.b now.

Answering the enquiry of the chair, he stated that the world is a much better place to work on gender issues now compared to the times he started out. And hence, if he started off now, it would have been a much easier job for him to bring gender on the agenda

Finally, Dr. Bhuiyan concluded with a small anecdote. His family was fairly large and there used to be discrimination in food distribution. He noticed this in his student life and one day, he purchased small cups for each and every member of the family and told his mother to split everything equally into those cups regardless of male and female. Practicing what he believes at home has also helped him to become more attached to the concept of women empowerment at a personal level.

Anna Minj: Director, Community Empowerment, Integrated Development, Gender Justice and Diversity

Anna Minj shared her story of how she had arrived to the field, the work she has done, the challenges she has faced and the achievements she was able to make. Adaptation to varying setups and arrangements had resulted in different kinds of experiences and stories as she had moved up to the position she has now. The session had provided an opportunity for her to reflect on her career, her experiences, and her arrival to the field and how she would implement putting gender equality on the agenda of organizations. She had started her career in the 90s. The NGO sector at the time was booming with a lot of activity within the country. After her graduation, she wanted to participate within the development sector. Coming from an indigenous community located within a rural and remote village, her motivation to work in development had sourced from her willingness to serve her community and its people. However, as she started to work, she had realized that among the poor and vulnerable, women were the most negatively impacted group of people. This had resulted in gradually focusing on women's empowerment. Subsequently after, she had the opportunity to join different organizations. She had participated with three organizations, having started with Caritas Bangladesh, then had moved to CARE, and finally had joined BRAC. Caritas had been planning to develop 'Integrated Women's Empowerment Initiative'. At the time most focus in development had targeted women's empowerment, micro-finance and well fare approach.

Rasheda K Choudhury raised the question of whether gender became part of a project component, rather than a conscious agenda.

Anna Minj replied that Caritas had focused on empowerment. This included giving women agency, having control over resources in regards to income generating activities, possessing leadership roles, Initially, Ms Minj did not have experience working on women's empowerment, but had been able to 'learn by doing'. Regardless of not having enough experience, she had wanted to take the challenge. There was an integrated approach in Caritas, but the question was how women could actually access those services, and how they would be able to influence decision making. That was the beginning where Ms. Minj had been able to realize that targeting and bringing women on board would not transform their lives. Through this program, it had dawned on Ms. Minj that transformation would work only if both the practical needs as well as the strategic needs were met. That was the beginning of her

journey. The most notable and successful aspect was that Caritas realized women empowerment elements and its learning can be integrated into other programs within the sector. As mentioned by Mr. Abbas, including gender policies into organizational structures would promote a gender equality agenda. At the time, another realization was that within integrated mechanism there were savings and credit mechanism. Like others, there was a focused target on women. As a leader it had occurred to Ms. Minj that unless the women were provided with technical skills and understand its capacity, they would not be apt to understand IGA and receive credit. The provision of IGA required looking into the control over resources, and the distribution of earning from the initiative. It was nice to see that the organization had come up with gender policies, and looking into the areas where the organization could promote the gender equality agenda among staff and work environment.

Subsequently after, Ms. Minj had moved to CARE, her position seemed to be more 'institutionalized'. Here, Ms. Minj had envisioned that having a position within the policy level would allow her to have more influence, particularly based on her practical experience which she aimed to contextualise and put into the organizational agenda. At the time, the organization was creating their strategic planning for the upcoming 5 years, while focusing on how to implement the gender agenda into the programming. This was purposely done during the design stage of the program, in order to avoid having to forcefully integrate it later on. This was seen as an opportunity that enabled the operationalization of gender policy. The existing gender policies, programs and departments were not enough and yet required to be operationalized. She was successful in putting the gender equality agenda into their next 5 year plan. At the time, the organization was going through transitions, particularly changes in management. Thus, within the whole agenda of gender transformation, Ms. Minj had highly appreciated the ability to be able to contribute and prioritize on behalf of CARE of highlighting the importance of gender equality.

After CARE, Ms. Minj had joined BRAC. She had been interviewed twice, by Abed bhai. She had been in awe of the kind of work that BRAC did, and was encouraged by the possibility of a bigger horizon. She had joined as the Community Empowerment Director, and had witnessed massive coverage from corners of the country. This was depicted by her as a great opportunity to be able to work for BRAC. She proclaims that BRAC had targeted working with women and improving their empowerment from the start. What is notable, is how their approach had been evolving.

In answer to the question by Rasheda K Choudhury whether were there moments where she was disappointed, or moments where she was encouraged Anna Minj described that there were many encouraging points. Especially at BRAC, she had witnessed two strategic periods. During the first strategic period, gender was placed as one of the eight priorities. The organization was committed to provide resources to promote the gender equality agenda. Gender focused programs were initiated without gender mainstreaming, as a result the program would only reaching a few people. Mainstreaming gender across all sectors and departments, it would be possible to have huge coverage and impact. Such steps had been of great encouragement to Ms. Minj. While working on an additional project, senior management has presented a strong commitment to focus on gender equality. Within several occasions, Abed bhai had mentioned a dream that he had, that that he had made significant achievements in different fields. However, developments in gender equality, women's empowerment and violence against women and children, these were aspects that had yet been followed through.

On the other hand, definitely there have been challenges. This includes that that promoting gender equality is a thankless job. The numerous tasks that are being done, it is not appreciated or

acknowledged by the people. Thus, in order to be a gender advocate, qualities of patience and commitment are required to do the work.

Jowshan Ara Rahman, Former Chief of the Program Planning and Monitoring section UNICEF Bangladesh

Jowshan Ara Rahman provided a brief overview about how gender issues were incorporated in the national macro plan of Bangladesh. Incorporating these issues were challenging.

She shared her experiences from the decades of 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. She started her journey with Unicef as the Chief of women's development in 1979. She felt that was a critical situation and it was like an isolated island among all other development programs and sectors of Unicef. The Women's Development department did not have any link with the other sectors of Unicef, there were no scope of entry in the other sectors, as well as no coordination with implementation and monitoring. She had to play a role of gender advisor without any instrument in hand. She thought it was necessary to establish relationship with the government, otherwise entry in other sectors would have been challenging.

There was no line ministry for women's development back in those times, except the Women's Affairs ministry. Since there was no connection with the government, Jowshan Ara Begum started communicating and building relationship with the women's affairs ministry. Together, they started developing projects.

This created scope for working with the government and development agencies and led to having a common platform for women's development. It was realized to work in collaboration with the other agencies. A network for donor agencies was established. Meetings were conducted to share experiences. It was decided not to duplicate each other's work and work together for the common issue.

In one of the meetings, Jawshan Ara Begum mentioned her willingness to incorporate macro gender issues in the upcoming 4FYP. Some of the agencies and donors were very enthusiastic. But one who represented the World Bank thought it was not possible. But she took it as a challenge, as she had an experience of working with the government for 8.5 years. It finally happened, and the program was gradually scaled up. Work was done in WID, and technical and financial support was given to the government.

In the LCG, there was scope to work in a better way, as there was broader scope with the government. A multidimensional approach was adopted and they started working with anybody and everybody who could provide support. With that support NGOs also joined. WfW called a planning meeting where they recommended the Five Year Plan. Among the donors, many reports were produced. There was tremendous social mobilization, where everyone came together and were determined to bring the macro issue in the 4FYP.

Men and powerful allies were also ready to listen and support the agenda. NGOs and women's movement came together and produced the FYP. At one point the member of the planning commission felt that everyone should work together on this issue. He (Kazi Fazlur Rahman) was very supportive and formed a foreign development agency task force. There was establishment of WID focal points in all ministries. TORs were made.

Ultimately there was a big conference in which six senior secretaries were present and as well as the minister of women’s affairs. In the closing session, the planning minister he committed that women’s issue must be incorporated in the macro framework of the FYP.

Jawshan Ara Begum mentioned that everyone had to work together. The ball was on the fort, and key actors like her had to play with it. Together they prepared the chapters and submitted to the planning ministry. The overall process took 7.5 years, from the day it started and then it finally came out. Everyone had to work continuously, and the lesson was to never give up.

Discussion and Recommendations

Ms. Selina from Gender Justice and Diversity program of BRAC asked Dr. Bhuiyan, how was the experience to work on gender issues from the perspective of a male and in reply Dr. Bhuiyan said since his childhood, the idea was very deeply rooted in him and spiritually there has not been any difficulties to pursue this agenda. He then shared a light anecdote to show what an important role his wife has played and how much the field was saturated by women. Once, he was invited to a meeting at ICRW where every other participant was female. So, he decided to take his wife with him. He instructed her wife to inform him whenever he behaved like a “man” in front of women and sat next to her.

The chair of the session, Ms. Choudhury stated that, to effectively ensure women empowerment, the organizations need to work with the government. She also suggested engaging the young people as the next step towards empowerment.

She wrapped the session up by sharing an example of the power of movement in combating violence against women. Once, in a coastal village in Bangladesh, a husband beat his pregnant wife mercilessly. As a protest to this, every women in the village stopped cooking and this kept on for three days. The men at this stage apologized and since then, there has not been any such incident reported in that locality.



Reflection Session Panelists

Closing Session: Emerging Opportunities Uncharted Terrains: New issues and Challenges for Gender Justice

With the passage of time there are new trends and developments which can provide both emerging opportunities for greater equality between women and men if rightly used or can further reinforce inequalities. One such area is digitalization and another is globalization of the economy. Two other trends which are often seen as negative for freedom and choice are rising religiosity and shrinking civil space.

Simeen Mahmud had a great interest to explore the reasons behind the shrinking of space for women. In informal discussions with her colleagues, she always underscored the importance of studying how women's spaces are shrinking through new practices of religion (increasing numbers wearing burqa and hizab), sexual harassment in public places, the digital economy (gender equality gains in pay and job status are at risk of being reversed by automation-led job displacement in various sectors), and global economy.

The session tried to explore what the upcoming opportunities and challenges are for gender equality and justice in the face of new developments and global trends. Also, what has recent research shown and what are the pressing research questions that need to be addressed at this point in time

Presentation: Feminist Futures amidst Shrinking Spaces

By **Dr. Firdous Azim** (Professor, Department of English and Humanities, BRAC University and Member Naripokkho)

The presentation focused on two eras: early 20th century and mid-20th century, when feminist movements played a big role in shaping the feminist futures in Bangladesh. Throughout there has been a lot of stress on the woman's body. Early 20th Century Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's book *Sultana's Dream* reflected on the women's feminist movement back then. She focused on education and her writing was secular scientific. Her vision for women may have been utopian, but to this day it still has the power to drive us forward. Given that she grew up at a time when the Muslim bourgeoisie was rising and she herself belonged to that class, yet she wrote as a feminist. Her writing focused very little on religion and any mention was only to challenge the prevailing notions of women's repression. Early 20th century was a time of modernism, rational thinking and feminist thinking.

The second era identified was the War of Liberation. In writing women are portrayed as victims and rarely as contributors to the liberation movement. At the Liberation War Museum the absence of the story of women martyrs (Birangonas) is particularly striking. There is an apparent struggle as to how to incorporate or address their role or honour them. A recurring theme or predominant struggle has been violence against women and the politics around women's body. Firdous suggested that the task for the feminists today should be to rewrite the role of the women and how they featured in our national emergence. This should include the centrality of women's body, their struggle and suffering in our national history.

Experience shows that feminist groups have helped mobilize protests on violence against women. Naripokkho has also been working to broaden the definition of violence so it includes not only the actual incident of violence but also the events leading up to the incident. At present the definition of violence has been narrowed to only include physical assault so it could be gauged statistically. But there are

patriarchal dynamics at work which instigates more violence against women in this society. As such feminist groups need to continue their work on broadening the definition and mobilizing protests.

So despite the fact that patriarchal norms and religiosity have been shrinking the social space for women, women's activist groups have actually expanded it through protest activities. Their involvement encourages other groups to join in. When it comes to student protests, the role of women's groups is still not very strong. Citing recent rape incidents, student groups are calling for capital punishment, or asking for conditions that may not be the most proper. What is more appropriate is to demand proper justice: this is a huge process which needs thorough medical examination, thorough police examination and thorough evidence collection. The role of women's groups need to be forged so they can guide activists and protests calling for extra vigilance, better monitoring capabilities and strong civil groups through which proper justice can be attained.

One of the discussants (Sushmita Preetha) held a different view regarding student groups: It is worrying and also promising at the same time that there are a lot of angry young people. But their anger may be valid given that the state is violent, many apparatuses are violent and that the space to express their frustration is shrinking. This anger can be taken to be a good sign: While everyone else has sort of adjusted into the system, these young people are the ones who get frustrated with the system because they want immediate results and that is a legitimate demand. And those of us who have various agendas should really engage with these young people and help them to channel their anger in constructive ways, giving them a theoretical lens but making sure not to "de-radicalise" them.

The presenter (Firdous Azim) countered that values of fairness and due justice are values that feminists should promote. She felt that voices these days are revenge driven, and not justice driven. Power equality and justice she felt should be the focus.

Firdous mentioned that feminist group activism actually puts a positive spin on shrinking spaces. Violence has become a part of life. People need to be taught how to distinguish between formal justice and real justice so the latter can be achieved.

Regarding secularism she felt that the "seculars" today are different from the seculars in the 1980s because of the growing visibility of religious practice and the visibility of women's activities in religion. Secularism needs rethinking too. Among the different education systems in the country, there is the madrasah system too and many girls attend these madrasah schools but very little is known about how it impacts their lives. Incorporating secularism into the madrasah curriculum is necessary if we want to help these girls.

Also, more women are joining universities/ in education/tertiary education. More and more people from all over the country are coming into the city to go to universities, and they live in hostels. We need to think about how to better accommodate everyone especially the young women and how to better facilitate their movement around the city.

Firdous concluded that it is time to go back to the drawing board and try to bring back the spirit with which 80s and 90s feminist movements shook the society. And this should be done in a diffused manner which was a successful strategy in the past.

Presentation: Opportunities and challenges of women's economic participation in Bangladesh in the contexts of new developments and global trends

By **Dr. Selim Raihan** (Professor at the Department of Economics, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh, Executive Director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modeling (SANEM))

This presentation focused on how women's economic space is shrinking and to what extent has the structural transformation that is taking place in the country has affected women's participation. There has been a recent stagnation in the labour force. Supply side issues can be detected from existing data. However, demand side issues cannot be detected as easily since we know very little of the firms' perspectives.

There has been some positive development regarding women's labour force participation but there is a high level of unpaid family labour, where 30% of women are employed. The unpaid labour rate is going down but it is still very high. In terms of youth needs, majority of the youth with needs is female, and without proper training they fall into the informal sector.

There are three growth drivers which have an impact on women's economic participation:

- RMG, which helped the wage employment of females. However in recent years there is rising concern around the "defeminization" of the sector as it becomes increasingly technology driven, further shrinking women's economic space.
- Microfinance where there is some controversy but one side believes that it has contributed in generating some level of growth in Bangladesh which has helped to increase women's self-employment, especially in the rural areas.
- Migration/remittance has also contributed greatly to women's leadership roles.

There has been a huge structural transformation over the last 3 to 4 decades and women have progressed greatly in terms of wage employment and self-employment and leadership.

At the macro level, the country is experiencing a high growth rate from 6 percent to 7 or 8 % percent now. But there is concern over the extent to which this economic growth is inclusive. This can be indicated by poverty, inequality and employment, in short form PIE. Poverty rate is declining slowly, inequality is still rising and employment generation is also losing pace. Point of concern is that all of these (PIE) have a disproportionate effect on women.

At the domestic level, despite the high growth rate, we are observing almost stagnant private sector investment, crisis in the financial sector, especially banking, and a very high cost of doing business, all of which hamper women entrepreneurship and employment generation for women.

At the global level, challenges are emerging that have important implications for Bangladesh. Many global economies are yet to recover from the global financial crisis 10 years ago. Slowdown of European economies is also a matter of alarm for Bangladesh's exports to these countries. The growing protectionism in the US-China trade war is an opportunity worth exploiting that Bangladesh missed but Vietnam gained. There are challenges regarding SDGs and the LDC graduation, especially regarding Bangladesh's competitiveness. According to competitiveness indicators Bangladesh is not ready to take up the challenges that might come from LDC graduation or global economic trends. The country is not competitive in every front but it has pockets of efficiency and one of those is the RMG sector. This has

made Bangladesh the second largest RMG exporter in the world, competing with China, Vietnam and other countries. In order to stay in competition Bangladesh has started to rely more on automation. This will have a major impact on women's economic participation as majority of RMG workers are women.

When we talk about SDGs and gender perspectives, we immediately focus on SDG 5 calling for gender equality. However, there are many other areas in the SDGs which are important for women such as decent work, inclusive growth, health and education. Bangladesh falls among countries with the lowest spending on public health and education.

Looking at the policy paradigm in Bangladesh: Bangladesh is facing a "policy paralysis" in three areas. First there is a huge focus on high growth rate, in which the elites live very comfortably but not everybody. Hence this creates a policy paralysis given that this is a diversified economy, which has serious implications for women's economic participation. Next there is the quality of institution, which has not improved but in fact has deteriorated in some places. SANEM is conducting a study on the institutional diagnostics of development looking comprehensively into 6 areas: banking sector, taxation, land, judiciary, education and export diversification in order to better understand Institutional binding constraints. Despite having some pockets of better performing institutions, like RMG or migration/remittance or microfinance, overall most institutions are very restricted, not satisfactorily diversified and do not have women friendly environment. Third area of policy paralysis is the low spending on social safety net sector. This is happening due to weak state capacity in mobilising resources, reflected by the very low Tax-GDP ratio (9%). Spending on health and education is also low (below 2% each). Standard practice is keeping these expenditures at 4 to 5% at least. Also there is a serious problem in prioritization. The focus is mostly on highly ambitious projects, whereas it should be on some of the low hanging fruits, which can be achieved through very little effort.

Unless the country addresses these issues of policy paralyses, unless there is creation of meaningful opportunities for women in the economic sphere, many of the development targets will remain unrealized. Future looks bleak if the domestic and global challenges are not met.

The presentation concluded by saying that Bangladesh has managed to get people to go beyond basic salvation with very little spending on human beings but we have not equipped the population and the labour force to meet the challenges of the future, which are health and education. Doing so with very little spending will not be possible. PIE needs to be looked at from a gender perspective but this will bring in its own challenges. Considering the need for training, question is how to combine education that equips people to be good citizens, to respect each other and co-exist in a tolerant way but also equips them for the market. In this case basic education has to be the building block and to put on top of that we need to think very carefully about further education and the needs of the economy. This discussion has brought out these challenges very well but leaves us the challenge to find out how to address these as researchers.

Discussion and Recommendation

The audience (Imran Matin) wanted to know what would be the shape and nature of mega human development projects in Bangladesh. One of the panelists (Binayek Sen) said that the human development expenditure that is happening in Bangladesh is out of pocket expenditure and that is a major driver. Further there is a need to discuss the taxation space, the ineffective wealth taxation which is not merely the inability of the state, unwillingness of the non-poor and the middle class and the rich

to share their new found wealth. Thus, there is a nexus between the taxation and the spending capacity. The presenter stated that Bangladesh is going through a phase of “demographic dividend” which is not going to last for long and could turn for the worse. The dividends from whatever little we have invested in education and health so far, is actually going down. Hence the urgency for further heavier investment on human capital.

Presentation: Is digitization going to lead to social transformation? A new research agenda

By **Lopita Huq** (Research Fellow, BIGD), **Maria Matin** (Research Associate, BIGD) and **Mehnaz Rabbani** (Programme Lead, Research, Policy and Governance, BIGD)

The presenters started with stating that digitization is something new and inevitable and will affect everyone which researchers need to think very seriously about.

The government has been promoting “Digital Bangladesh” since 2009 which has four pillars covering human resource development, connecting citizens, digital government and promoting the ICT industry. This is a movement across the whole nation and it is transforming our life as we know it: the way that we learn, way we work, the way we share and we communicate, the way we perceive the world and the future, the way we do business and the way we interact with the state. Digitization can reinforce the existing divides or it can act as an equalizer- there is an emerging literature on the “digital divide”. In this transforming world, digital literacy matters because it is the key to this new world and this will help us ride on this new wave that is coming.

At BIGD, some of the researchers are working on digitization. The presentation was based on some of the initial insights from two projects. For the first one, a nationally representative survey on digital literacy of the rural population in Bangladesh has been conducted by BIGD. The second project is a research on adolescents and how ICT and digitization shape their lives, their norms and attitudes.

From the digital literacy survey, the presenters found that in the case of access to phone internet and computers, there was as expected a gender divide: The proportion of women who have no access was higher than the proportion of men. The gender divide was most pronounced in regions such as Rangpur or Rajshahi and less apparent in regions such as Dhaka or Chittagong. Interestingly in access to smartphones, the gender gap was wider between ages 10 to 19 and narrowed from 20 and above.

Out of 6,500 households, 2,400 households had a digitally literate person who used internet. 32% of these were female. They sat for a digital literacy test and among those who passed the test, 74% were male and 26% were female, 60% were between ages 15 to 24 years old and mostly from Dhaka Chittagong area. In terms of using the internet, the most popular activities among both men and women were namely using social media, watching Youtube videos etc. which are entertainment based.

The presenter stated that there is a long way to go with digital literacy. There was gender digital divide in terms of access. Not only were women less digitally literate, but the level of digital literacy was lower among women compared to men. The gap was wider among the poorer and there were significant regional variations, significant for policy implications.

The second project looked at the new generation growing up in the digital world. It tried to understand adolescent’s voice and agency through the use of ICT. In adolescents, cognitive changes are shaped and

identities and norms are formed. These work in either strengthening or questioning the pre-existing gender norms. The research showed ICT to be a huge “influencer” in shaping adolescents’ decision making abilities and future aspirations.

In order to get access to adolescents from different socio-economic groups, the researchers selected students from an English medium school, a mainstream Bengali medium school, a slum-based school and a rural school, assuming that in Bangladesh, different socio-economic groups determine the type of schools children get to attend.

The government has mandated that all schools be equipped with a computer lab, but in the initial study we have found that there is significant variation in access to these labs: the lab maybe locked, computers may not be working properly or teachers/instructors may not know how to use the computers. There is marked difference in terms of ownership of devices (such as smartphones) by both gender and across different socio-economic groups. However nearly all the adolescents in the sample had access to and used internet: through their siblings’ or parents’ phones, including slum school students.

Respondents identified that growing self-confidence was a change that occurred through the use of ICT. Secondly there was a change in aspirations. Thirdly, every single child in every single school spoke about how they are blackmailed, how they are sexually harassed. Issues like body-shaming, people glorifying depression and watching porn also came up. A striking finding included slum adolescents listening to *waaz* (religious preaching/lectures), which has a significant impact on their way of thinking. Lastly, adolescents have a space to express their opinions on controversial issues.

Discussions and Recommendations

One of the discussants (Perween Hasan) appreciated that children are using the internet for different activities and that difference is what gives hope. But question is what is being said in those *waaz*, what is being taught in madrasahs. There was a call for more active engagement in finding out what is being taught in madrasahs. Suggestion was made to include Hannafi texts in the madrasah curriculum because these texts describe rational behaviour.

The Chair (Naila Kabir) appreciated how the worlds open up when all people move into literacy. At present times, we are seeing what happens when we move from literacy to digital literacy. It becomes worrisome seeing what people make of internet. Fact of the matter is that the concern about body-shaming, glorifying porn and the level of abuse that women face, is not just limited to Bangladesh, but a global issue.

Presentation: Emerging Opportunities, Uncharted Terrains: Economic Aspects

By Dr. Binayak Sen (Research Director, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS))

The development in Bangladesh compared to development in West Bengal or even India, proves to be positive and optimistic. India has been experiencing a severe slowdown in growth rate from 8% in Manmohan Singh’s time to 4% now in Modi’s time. During the same period Bangladesh has accelerated from 5% to 6, 6 to 7 and finally 7 to 8%. The point is that in the earlier years Bangladesh has been the victim of some pessimistic labelling and the country is still trying to cover for it. There are two or three

things we hear very often that call for some sort of response. One is that poverty is declining. From BIDS research it is seen that poverty convergence takes place between Bangladesh and West Bengal in higher states of development. There was a debate regarding the real wage and whether it was falling or rising or stagnating. When comparing the annual wage income for different class of workers between 2010 to 2015, there has been a sharp improvement in real wages: earlier people worked 8 to 5, earning 500 taka. Now they work 8-2 and earn the same 500 taka, but using the remaining time to engage in other income activities. So unless we look at the compositional shift behind the trend, we will overlook the improvement.

Composition is particularly important because it is only when you look into the trend that you see how people are moving. It is troubling to look at women's unemployment and unpaid labour work: given the variations in numbers from one survey to another, it seems nobody is measuring it right. Trends can be misleading but composition can lead us to uniformity and more structure.

Similarly when we say that female labour force participation is stagnating- on the face yes, but when we look at the compositional shift, there has been a drastic decline in the share of unpaid work from over 50% to 30%. So this decline has to be taken into account when we make adjustment about female economic opportunities and participation. Nevertheless, there are issues, for instance, recent rounds of DHS have found flat rates for infant mortality and child mortality rates, same as West Bengal. But stunting rate and underweight in children have definitely been declining, indicating both negative and positive developments, but overall the development is positive. True there are dis-equalising influences which we have to unpack, but if we sustain a growth rate of 6% in the next decade, we will be able to meet our SDG goal of removing extreme poverty by all projections.

There will still be challenges because Bangladesh is one of the countries with the highest population densities in the world, making it difficult to forecast based on textbook models. The structural transformation that is taking place is no longer manufacturing centric but is also increasingly service centric. Again comparing with West Bengal, their manufacturing sector share in state GDP is 20% and ours is 30%. But their service sector share is 61% and ours is 53%. So those men and women getting educated may not ever go into agriculture and are more likely to go into the service sector and we have to think about the space for women in the service sector. This is the sectorial change we have to focus on apart from the challenge of "defeminisation" as mentioned in one of the earlier sessions.

In terms of women's political participations, previously it was thought that women's political participation would lead to better local trust, lower corruption, better allocation of public goods etc., However, recent works show otherwise. Panchayet women do not necessarily perform better than men in allocation of public goods. This means that this framework of resistance, negotiation and outcome can only work so far as the macro constrained structure is permissive.

Discussions should be on intersecting feminist discourse such as violence against women, issues on transport, nutrition, which are common platforms for both men and women, but have a stronger impact for women.

On conservative outlook, given the constraint we need to go beyond the materialism of hijab and look at ideology. It makes one wonder whether it matters if somebody is conservative or liberal? A household value survey can be done. Lastly, there should be more studies on horizontal and vertical mobility.

Then, as has been stated, poverty is declining but inequality is rising. Whatever our investment it should lead to greater convergence. Given the risks and uncertainties, the only thing we have is human resources and whether it is capable of adjusting to the challenges. For that we need digital literacy and citizenship awareness. The view is mostly optimistic given that the country has achieved a great deal but the concern is whether all of it can be sustained.

Again it can be argued that there is development without state and also development with state. Development without state is giving us 5% growth rate, main part of which is agriculture and microcredit and it does not require handholding or cash incentives. It is happening because of the crop sector, agriculture, poultry, fisheries which are our strengths. The economic role of the state that we see is the firefighting role of the state- the state funding goes wherever there is a fire.

Discussion and Recommendations

A recurring theme of this session was new face of religiosity. Seeing the young women in hijabs and burqas these days, Simeen Mahmud was very concerned as to why these spaces are shrinking. Simeen herself was both religious and secular such that piety was private. But the way of practicing it now is more visible and contributing to shrinking spaces for women. All religions are exclusive and as they become more exclusive, mosques/temples become larger. Outer manifestation of religiosity is the problem. And this is not happening in Bangladesh only, but also all over the world. We need to find out why.

Religiosity acts as an outlet for frustrated young people who look for something bigger than themselves and who feel alienated. This is worrisome because while we as a society cannot reach out to them, it is the misogynistic religious leaders who can. Religiosity is becoming everyone's business because of the rising intolerance. Secularism is misinterpreted to mean non-religiosity whereas in our constitution it is about how all religions coexist. But it is no longer about peaceful co-existence. Islam has always accommodated painters, artists and philosophers, but now it has narrowed down into something very austere and this is not spontaneous, rather it is all a managed political movement. Much thought has to be given regarding the growing disappearance of tolerance, respect, recognition of each other humanity

Another theme discussed was violence against women: Simeen Mahmud took interest in studying sexual harassment in public places. In recent incidents of rape there is a trend where some of these cases capture the public's attention and there is outrage; within 72 hours or so the culprit is caught and the protests die down. The general public do not have the bigger conversations about justice or do not know the sort of justice they want because the conversations that do take place are in conferences and seminars and not on the streets. As the incidents of violence become more visible, it is time for the women's movement to take a long hard look within and see what has worked and what has not worked.

Yet another theme discussed was the prioritization of public expenditure in health and education: why we want public expenditure is because we want equity. The base for inclusive and equitable growth should be an egalitarian provision of basic services which are health and education. Education is needed not only to build a labour force but also to create critical citizens. The focus globally is on creating an economy of well-being. Bangladesh needs growth but the focus should also be about our human resources and how we can increase its capacity and capability. Given that we have achieved so much with so little investment, that means we can achieve so much more if we could invest a lot more in freeing people from fear of illness and fear of other expenditures.

The participants raised the issue of urbanization which should be a major point to think about, as in how the urban-rural divide plays out in a lot of the thinking. Panelists noted that urbanization is very important given that Bangladesh is one of the fastest urbanizing country in the world. But decentralization in Bangladesh is merely geared towards the rural, not in urban areas. There is need for urban decentralization, urban strengthening and urban infrastructure in Dhaka city because the wards or counties here are not strong on their own.

Finally it was also pointed out that there should be more discussion on how digitization affects the labour market and given the increasing automation, how it affects the gender gap; more on the precarious work and new types of employment that women are involved in and the vulnerabilities that go with it; how the opportunities for organizing are changing with time, given globalization and the opening of digital spaces, and what it means for women in employment.



Closing Session Panelists

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