

Gender Inequality in Bangladesh



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Bringing women into the mainstream economic activities and ensuring equal opportunity is one of the major targets of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as pursued by the government of Bangladesh. However, women in Bangladesh are dominated by a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, which enforces the social and economic dependence of women on men and prescribes the relative lower status of women. Although, there has been steady progress in reducing gender inequality in different sectors (education, health, employment etc.) but there exists a huge inequality in these sectors of Bangladesh and participation of women is very low compared to their male counterpart. Gender inequality has appeared as the major stumbling barrier in achieving the development targets.

Gender Inequality in Education

Numerous affirmative actions were also introduced to enhance the female literacy. However, there remains a considerable gap in enrollment. Literacy as well as the significantly higher proportion of female dropout from the system is still a major concern. The literacy of male children was 49.5 percent in 2000 at the national level, which has increased to 61.12 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.16 percent. Continuation of this rate indicates that the literacy rate of the male children may increase to 65.77 percent in the national level by 2014 which is 34.23 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. Whereas, the literacy rate of female children in the national level was 40.1 percent in 2000, which has increased to 54.8 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.47 percent. Under the business as usual scenario, the literacy rate of the female might be 60.68 percent at the national level in 2014, which is 39.32 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. There are also high rural-urban variations in case of the literacy rate by sex where the rural women are far behind than their urban counterparts and male counterparts as well. Gender disparity is significantly high in higher education (university level). In 2001, among the total students in the public universities, only 24.3 percent were female students whereas the male enrollment comprises almost three times higher (75.7 percent) than that of the female. It is also observed that over the years, both male and female enrollment in the university level is increasing with a slower rate. In the recent time, the rate at which the female enrollment in the primary level is increasing, the enrollment in higher education is not increasing at the same pace.

Gender Inequality in Health Status

Bangladesh has achieved some progress in the health sector and has been successful in raising the average life expectation of its population. However, the situation of female health is still poor. The difference of child mortality between male and female is very high, where female child mortality is higher than that of their male counterparts. The child mortality in case of male was 46.7 per thousand live births in 1993-94, which has decreased to 16 per thousand live births in 2007 with an annual average decreasing rate of 2.19 per thousand live births. On the other hand, for female, it was 62.3 per thousand live births in 1993-94, which has been decreased to 20 per thousand live births in 2007 with the average decreasing rate of 3.02 per thousand live births per year. Furthermore, the progress is occurring almost at the same pace as in the previous years

for both male and female. Inequality prevails in the percentage of underweight children for male and female. This percentage of underweight children has decreased from 58.8 percent in 1996-1997 to 42.1 percent in 2007 with an annual average reduction rate of 1.45 percent per year for female children. At the same time, in case of male children, this percentage has decreased from 54.6 percent to 39.3 percent with an annual average reduction rate of 1.34 percent. Furthermore, the reduction rate in the percentage of underweight children has occurred at a slower rate than the previous years both for male and female children.

Gender Inequality in Employment

There exists an immense inequality between the male and female in Bangladesh as far as employment status is concerned. However, although there are some progresses in the recent years but it is still low than that of expected. In 1993-94, employed male population was 57.5 percent and it was 10.6 percent for female at the national level. The percentage of employed population for both male and female has decreased to 44.2 percent and 9.7 percent respectively in 1999-2000. Again, the percentage of employed male and female has increased to 68.3 percent and 22.9 percent in 2007 from 67.5 percent and 15.2 percent in 2004 respectively at the national level. Furthermore, it is also observed that the increasing rate in the percentage of employed population has occurred with a higher rate for female than that of male. Although there is little progress in the percentage of economically active population, the number of population who are unemployed are still increasing. Unemployed population has increased from 1.3 million in 1995-96 to 2.7 million in 2009 with an average of 0.13 million per year. In case of male, it has increased with an annual average of 0.06 million and for female it was 0.05 million at the same period (1995-96 to 2009).

Reasons of Gender Discrimination in Bangladesh

Although there are some initiatives taken by the government to address the problems of gender inequality, the improvement in reducing gender inequality is not satisfactory due to several reasons.

Structural and Social Institutions

Traditionally, women were often discouraged from participating in public life and were mainly recognised only for their reproductive role. The social forces, which are creating gender differentials, are based on the age-old patriarchal traditions and values that still prevail in most of the parts of Bangladesh. Traditional perceptions about the role of women as home-makers still persist.

Lack of Explicit Policy Initiatives

There are no effective policies to ensure women's security at home, educational institutions, road, organizations and the like. Increasing violence against women is now a grave concern. Under these circumstances, parents are more likely to keep their girls inside their home. Hence, they are not able to participate in education, health, employment or other sectors. Therefore, inequality is still persisting.

Preoccupied Mind-set

There are perceptions that men are better off than women are as far as the ability to work is concerned and only men can look after their parents. That is why girls are subject to discrimination from their births. In addition, son preferences in the traditional Bangladeshi society create gender discrimination. In the case of employment, the employers in Bangladesh still tend to employ men first rather than women.

Early Marriage

Early marriage of girls is a very common phenomenon in Bangladesh. Early marriage is one of the vital barriers to women's and girls' education, health and employment. Early marriage has historically limited young women's access to education and thereby to employment opportunities as well as creating a vulnerable situation to their health.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender inequality is a result of the persistent discrimination of one group of people based upon gender and it manifests itself differently according to race, culture, politics, country and economic situation. It is furthermore considered as a casual factor of violence against women. While gender discrimination happens to both men and women in individual situations, discrimination against women is an entrenched, global pandemic. The world today is characterised by rapid transformations in all spheres of life that is globalization. By this time of globalization, struggle for gender equality is a matter of concern also. Women's opportunities and public involvement have changed extensively in recent decades. For example, major progress has been made in closing the gender gap in school enrollments at both primary and secondary levels. The rapid growth of the garment industry has provided a large number of ceremonial sector jobs for women. Moreover, the society belongs to us is highly patriarchal and gender discrimination is common at all levels of community.

Women are reliant on men throughout the whole time of their lives. The range starts from father to husbands to sons. The constitutional affirmations of gender equality are also present in our country. However, the state legislation always overlooks the rights of women. From time to time, women, young girls and female children are more underprivileged than male in their access to education, employment, health care services etc. Traditionally, women are recognised only for reproductive purposes and are encouraged to do only household works other than outside works.

Empowerment of women and bringing them into the mainstream economic activities and ensuring equal opportunity are the major targets of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as pursued by the government of Bangladesh. The status of women in Bangladesh is the direct result of the patriarchal values embedded in the socio-culture pattern reflecting systematic subordination and inequality of women. Women in Bangladesh are dominated by a patrilineal and patriarchal kinship system, which enforces the social and economic dependence of women on men, and prescribes the relative lower status of women. However, there has been steady progress in reducing gender inequality in different sectors (education, health, employment etc.) but there exists a huge inequality in these sectors of Bangladesh and participation of women is very low compared to their male counterpart. As a least developed country, it is very difficult to achieve the expected development without addressing gender inequality in Bangladesh. Under these circumstances, an effort is made in this report to explore the gender inequality in Bangladesh.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted based on the data on various secondary sources like, Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES), Labour Force Survey (LFS) and other reports conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), Bangladesh Demographic Health Survey (BDHS), Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS) etc. Using these data, some projections were made by using the simple mathematical equation:

$$P_t = P_0 (1 + rt)$$

Where,

P_t = Value of the present year

P_0 = Value of the previous year

t = Time interval between previous and present years

r = Growth rate

Different statistical reports, relevant research papers, books and many national and international journals have also been reviewed for this study.

III. GENDER INEQUALITY IN EDUCATION

Global research has provided evidence on the critical linkage of educational status and it is being one of the key factors that deters women from equal participation in socio economic activities with men and strengthens inequality between sexes. In Bangladesh, women are still restricted within their home from the birth with the perception that they will go away to other home after their marriage. Hence, they do not need education. Traditionally, female education has been accorded a low priority in Bangladesh due to poverty, social directives for female seclusion and the low value of girls. However, the situation is changing in recent time. Since the world Declaration for All (1990), the government introduced various measures to intensify basic education for all with particular focus on female education. Numerous affirmative actions were also introduced to enhance female literacy. However, there remains a considerable gap in enrollment literacy as well as the significantly higher proportion of female dropout from the system is still a major concern.

3.1 Disparity of Literacy Rate (<7 years of age) by Sex

The percentage of literate children also varies according to the sex. The literacy of male children was 49.5 percent in 2000 at national level which has increased to 61.12 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.16 percent. Continuation of this rate indicates that the literacy rate of male children might be increased to 65.77 percent at national level by 2014, which is 34.23 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. Whereas, literacy rate of female children at national level was 40.1 percent in 2000 which has increased to 54.8 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.47 percent. Under the business as usual scenario, literacy rate of female might be 60.68 percent at national level in 2014, which is 39.32 percent lower than the National Education Policy (NEP, 2010) target of 100 percent. There are also high rural-urban variations in case of literacy rate by sex. This percentage of literacy was 45.5 percent and 64.9 percent in rural and urban area for male children in 2000

which has increased to 56.67 percent and 73.1 percent in 2010 with an annual average increasing rate of 1.1 percent and 0.82 percent respectively. On the other hand, in 2000 literacy rate of female was 36.1 percent and 55.3 percent for rural and urban areas which has increased to 50.21 percent and 67.67 percent in 2010 with an annual average increase rate of 1.41 percent and 1.24 percent respectively (Table 1). The annual average rate of increase in the percentage of female literacy at national, rural and urban level is comparatively higher than that of male. This might be due to the various education enhancing activities by governments and various NGOs.

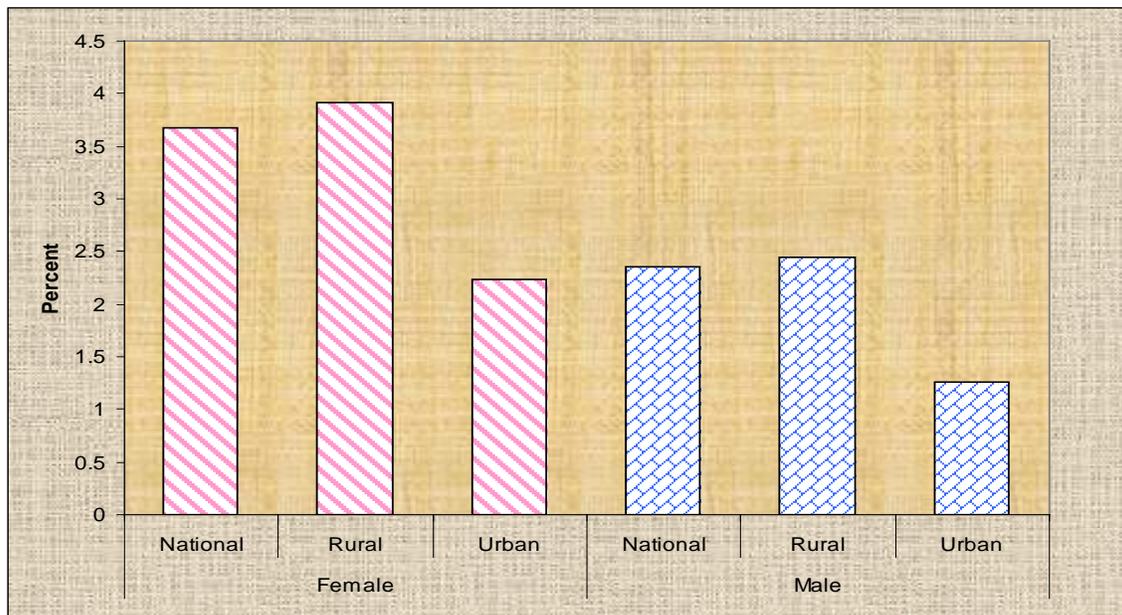
Table 1: Current situation and future projection of literacy rate (<7 years of age) by sex

Year	Female			Male		
	National	Rural	Urban	National	Rural	Urban
2000	40.1	36.1	55.3	49.5	45.5	64.9
2005	48.1	42.9	63.2	55.8	50.4	72.1
2010	54.8	50.21	67.67	61.12	56.67	73.1
2014*	60.68	55.85	72.61	65.77	61.14	76.38

Source: Authors' calculation based on BBS data of different years

Despite considerable progress in the percentage of literacy rate, still it is lower than the expected. However, the percentage of the literacy rate both for male and female are increasing but it is occurring at a slower rate than that of the previous year. It is observed that the annual rate of increase in the percentage of female literacy was 3.99 between 2000 and 2005 whereas it was 2.79 percent during 2005-2010. On the other hand, this increase rate for male was 2.55 percent per year during 2000-2005 and 1.91 percent during 2005-2010. Additionally, the annual rate of increase in the female literacy was 3.67, 3.91 and 2.24 percent at the national, rural and urban level respectively between 2000 and 2010. At the same time (i.e. 2000-2010) the male literacy was increase with an annual rate of 2.35, 2.45 and 1.26 percent at national, rural and urban level respectively (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Annual growth rate in the percentage of literacy between 2000 and 2010 by sex

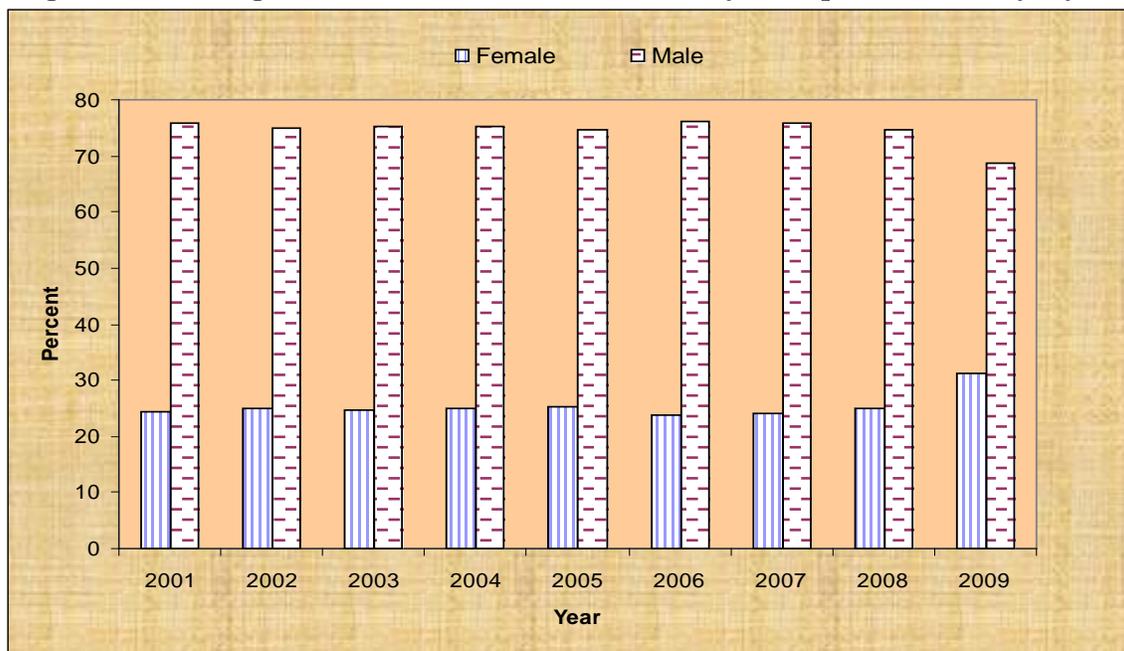


Source: Authors' calculation based on BBS data of different years

3.2 Enrollment in Higher Education (Public University) by Sex

In the recent years, the rate at which female enrollment at the primary level of education has increased is unlike the enrollment at higher education which has not been increased at the same pace. Various positive initiatives for female education (especially at primary level), taken by the government, might be responsible for that. But, their continuation with education is breaking down due to various socio-economic and cultural reasons. Socio-cultural attitudes in the form of growing fundamentalism, increasing incidence of sexual violence and harassment against girls are also identified as contributing factors behind girl’s dropout of the school system. Gender disparity is significantly high in higher education (university level). In 2001, among the total student at public universities, only 24.3 percent were female students whereas, male enrollment comprises almost 3 times higher (75.7 percent) than that of the female. It is also observed that, over the years, both male and female enrollment at university level is increasing with a slower rate (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Percentage of the enrolled students at university level (public university) by sex



Source: BANBEIS, 2011

IV. GENDER INEQUALITY IN HEALTH STATUS

Bangladesh has achieved some progress in health sector and has been successful in raising the average life expectation of its population. However, the situation of female health is still poor. Health care for women is still restricted to their reproductive health and that is why, their general health remains quite neglected. Poverty, illiteracy and limited access to health services coupled with early marriage, absences of premarital counseling, pressure for early child bearing and poor nutritional status are the more influential factors for the overall lower health status of women. Social structure of a patriarchal society like Bangladesh deprives women and girl child from improving their nutritional status. They are getting less diet than their male counterparts and remain malnourished. The prevalent institutions such as norms, existing values and traditions

have been prevailing from generation to generation, resulting in malnourished mothers giving birth to malnourished children (Titumir and Rahman, 2011). Health programmes for poor people, especially for poor women, are limited and most of these limited services are not pro poor or women friendly. Widespread absence of doctors (especially female doctors), lack of sensitivity towards female patients, distance and poor access, rising cost of services etc. discourage women to avail of health services. Addressing gender equality in health services is really a big challenge for the country.

4.1 Child Mortality by Sex

Child mortality is largely varied according to sex, where female child mortality is higher than that of their male counterparts. The child mortality in case of male was 46.7 per thousand live births in 1993-94 which has decreased to 16 per thousand live births in 2007 with an annual average decreasing rate of 2.19 per thousand live births. On the other hand, for female, it was 62.3 per thousand live births in 1993-94 and it has decreased to 20 per thousand live births in 2007 with the average decreasing rate of 3.02 per thousand live births per year. However, the progress at reducing child mortality has occurred at a faster rate for female than their male counterparts but, the overall incidence of child mortality is higher for female than that of male. Furthermore, the progress is occurring almost at the same pace as in the previous years both for male and female (Table 2). This indicates that the policies and programmes may not be implemented effectively in reducing child mortality. The rate of decrease in the incidence of child mortality was higher between 2004 and 2007 both for male (11.11 percent) and female (10.34 percent) compared to other years (Table 2).

Table 2: Child mortality per thousand live births by sex

Year	Male	Rate of Decrease (%)	Female	Rate of Decrease (%)
1993-94	46.7	-	62.3	-
1996-97	36.9	7.00	47.0	8.19
1999-00	28.4	7.68	37.7	6.60
2004	24.0	3.10	29.0	4.62
2007	16	11.11	20.0	10.34

Source: Authors' calculation based on BDHS data of various years

4.2 Underweight of the Children by Sex

Inequality prevails in the percentage of underweight children for male and female. The percentage of underweight female children is higher than their male counterparts. This percentage of underweight children has decreased from 58.8 percent in 1996-1997 to 42.1 percent in 2007 with an annual average rate of 1.45 percent reduction per year for female children. At the same time, in case of male children, this percentage has decreased from 54.6 percent to 39.3 percent with an annual average rate of 1.34 percent reduction. Furthermore, it is also observed that the reduction rate in the percentage of underweight children has occurred at a slower rate than the previous years both for male and female children (Table 3). In fact, improvement in the reduction of underweight children is occurring at a lower rate for female than that of male.

Table 3: Percentage distribution of underweight children by sex

Year	Male		Female	
	Underweight Children (%)	Rate of Decrease (%)	Underweight Children (%)	Rate of Decrease (%)
1996-97	54.6	-	58.8	-
1999-2000	45.8	5.37	49.6	5.22
2004	48.4	- 1.42	48.7	0.45
2007	39.9	5.85	42.1	4.51

Source: Authors' calculation based on BDHS data of various years

V. GENDER INEQUALITY IN EMPLOYMENT

Empowerment of women and bringing them into the mainstream economic activities and ensuring equal opportunity are the major targets of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as pursued by the government of Bangladesh. However, there exists an immense inequality between the male and female in Bangladesh as far as employment status is concerned. Participation of female in the labour force can change the dynamics of the entire labour market which can steer the economy of the country toward growth and development. Still, women are considered as physically weak and their work is very much restricted within the house due to socio-cultural and religious conservation. Furthermore, there is a huge lack of women friendly employment opportunities in the country. Under these circumstances, there is a huge gender inequality in employment sector which is growing as a grave concern. Although, there is some progress in the recent years but it is lower than that of expected.

5.1 Employment Status by Sex

In 1993-94, employed male population was 57.5 percent and it was 10.6 percent for female at the national level. The percentage of employed population for both male and female has decreased to 44.2 percent and 9.7 respectively in 1999-2000. This might be due to the beginning of the global recession at that time period. Again, the percentage of employed male and female has increased to 68.3 percent and 22.9 percent in 2007 from 67.5 percent and 15.2 percent in 2004 respectively at the national level. Furthermore, it is also observed that the increasing rate in the percentage of employed population has occurred with a higher rate for female than that of male (Table 4). It might be due to current price hike of essential commodities in the recent years, which makes it difficult to handle the situation only with male income. However, female participation in employment sector still very low as compared to male. Gender inequality also exists in employment status by residence. It is found that gender inequality is quite severe in the rural area than that of the urban area while, the growth rate of the rural employed female population is higher than that of urban area. Both in rural and urban areas, female participation in employment sector are very low. In 1993-94, the percentage of employed male and female population in rural area was 57.7 percent and 9.8 percent respectively which has decreased to 41.5 percent and 8.5 percent respectively in 1999-2000 and then it starts to increase (Table 4). However, the growth rate in the percentage of employed population is increasing for male and female during 1999-2000 to 2007 but, it is increasing with a decrease rate than that of the past, especially for male. There is also a huge difference in the growth rate of the percentage of employed population between rural and urban areas both for male and female.

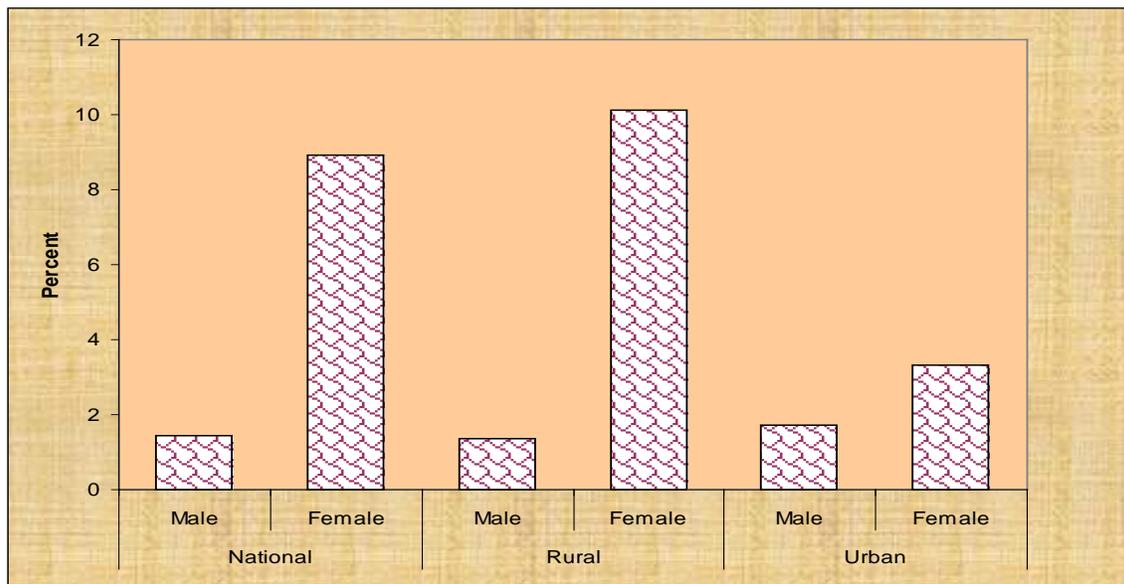
Table 4: Employment status by sex and residence

Year	Male					
	National	Growth Rate (%)	Rural	Growth Rate (%)	Urban	Growth Rate (%)
1993-94	57.5	-	57.7	-	56.6	-
1999-2000	44.2	-3.86	41.5	-4.68	55.5	-0.32
2004	67.5	13.18	67.2	15.48	68.4	5.81
2007	68.3	0.40	68.0	0.40	69.2	0.39
Year	Female					
1993-94	10.6	-	9.8	-	16.5	-
1999-2000	9.7	-1.42	8.5	-2.2	14.5	-2.02
2004	15.2	14.18	13.8	15.59	19.9	9.31
2007	22.9	16.89	22.7	21.49	23.6	6.20

Source: Authors' calculation based upon BBS and BDHS data of different years

Although, the female participation in employment sector is comparatively lower than that of male but the annual growth rate between 1993-94 and 2007 of female population is more higher than the male (Figure 3). Similar results are also found in case of rural and urban area. One of the possible reasons is that the women are more aware and the society is becoming more liberal from the conservative points of view.

Figure 3: Annual growth rate in the percentage of employed population between 1993-94 and 2007 by sex



Source: Authors' calculation based upon BBS and BDHS data

5.2 Unemployed Population by Sex

Although there is little progress in the percentage of economically active population, the number of population who are unemployed are still increasing. Unemployed population has increased from 1.3 million in 1995-96 to 2.7 million in 2009 with an average of 0.13 million per year. In case of male, it has increased with an annual average of 0.06 million and for female it was 0.05

million at the same time period (1995-96 to 2009). Under these circumstances, providing employment status for the country’s population remains a big challenge for the government.

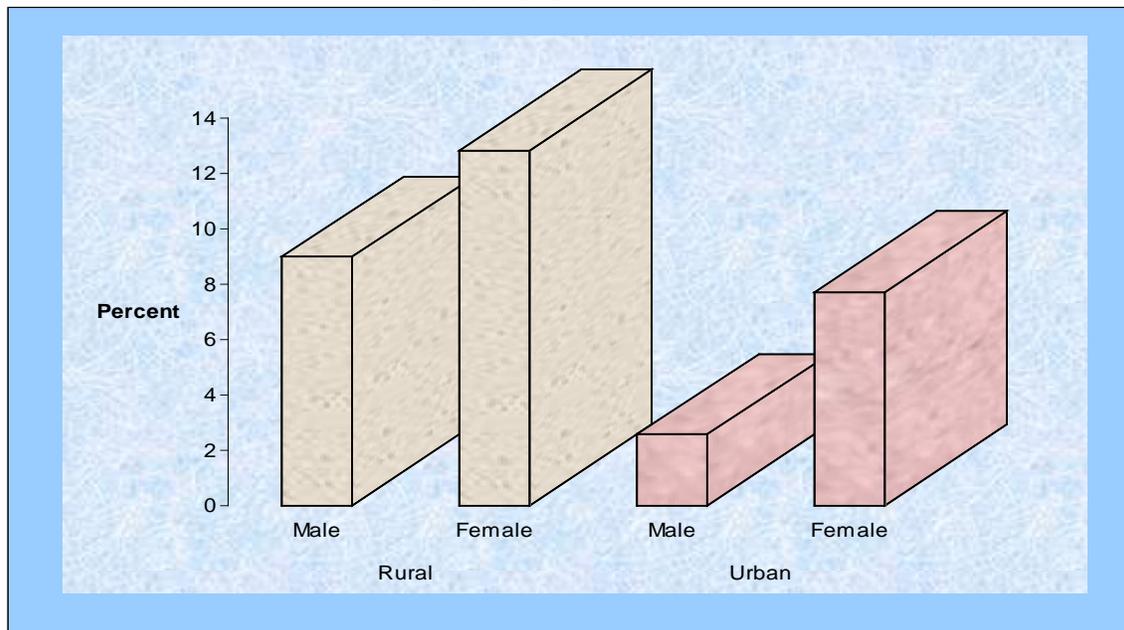
Table 5: Unemployed population by sex

Year	Total	Male	Female
1995-96	1.3	0.9	0.4
1999-2000	1.8	1.1	0.7
2002-2003	2.0	1.5	0.5
2005-06	2.1	1.2	0.9
2009	2.7	1.7	1.0

Source: Data compiled from BBS of different years

It is also observed that unemployed population in rural area was higher than their urban counterparts both for male and female. One possible reason responsible for that is that in the rural areas, there are no available job opportunities and people are mostly restricted to agriculture sector. In this situation, balance development is badly needed, which remains quite overlook by most of the governments. In 1995-96, male unemployed population was 0.6 million and has increased to 1.3 million with an increasing rate of 8.97 percent per year at rural areas whereas, it was 2.56 percent per year at urban areas. On the other hand, female unemployed population has increased from 0.3 million in 1995-96 to 0.8 million in 2009 with an annual increasing rate of 12.82 percent in rural areas whereas it was 7.69 percent per year at urban areas (Figure 4). It is also observed that female unemployed population has increased at a faster rate than their male counterparts in both rural and urban areas.

Figure 4: Annual growth rate of unemployed population by sex and residence from 1995-96 to 2009



Source: Authors' calculation based on BBS data of different years

VI. REASONS OF GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN BANGLADESH

Although, there are some initiatives taken by the government to address the problems of gender inequality, the improvement in reducing gender inequality is not satisfactory due to several reasons.

5.1 Structural and Social Institutions

Being a highly patriarchal society, gender discrimination is omnipresent in every sphere of life in Bangladesh. While there are constitutional affirmations of gender equality, state legislation and institutions frequently overlook the rights of women. Traditionally, women were often discouraged from participating in public life and were mainly recognized only for their reproductive role. The social forces which are creating gender differentials are based on the age-old patriarchal traditions and values that still prevail in most of the parts of Bangladesh. Traditional perceptions about the role of women as home-makers still persist.

5.2 Lack of Explicit Policy Initiatives

There remains a lack of explicit policy initiatives on the part of the government for enhancing women's participation in different sectors like education, health, employment etc. There are no effective policies to ensure women's security at home, educational institutions, road, organizations and the like. Increasing violence against women is now a grave concern. Under these circumstances, parents are more likely to keep their girls inside their home. Hence, they are not able to participate in education, health, employment or other sectors. Therefore, inequality is still persisting.

5.3 Preoccupied Mindset

There are perceptions that men are better off than women as far as the ability to work is concerned and only men look after their parents. That is why girls are subject to discrimination from their births. Also, son preferences in the traditional Bangladeshi society create gender discrimination. In the case of employment, employers in Bangladesh still tend to employ men first rather than women. The employers prefer to continue employing men for jobs since they think that men have traditionally performed well and there is a feeling that they would not gain anything by employing women. Moreover, employers believe that men's experience contribute to higher productivity, and that in many activities, including crop agriculture, women have less experience (Rahman, 1990).

5.4 Early Marriage

Early marriage of girls is a very common phenomenon in Bangladesh. Early marriage is one of the vital barriers to women's and girls' education, health and employment. Early marriage has historically limited young women's access to education and thereby to employment opportunities as well as creating a vulnerable situation to their health. Thus, most young married girls are disconnected from the education system and employed in home-based or other types of informal employment. Thus, early marriage is very much responsible for creating gender inequality in different sectors.

VII. CONCLUSION

Although some sporadic steps have been taken at the policy level to reduce gender inequality in different sectors but fruits of these steps have not been translated into reality because of the lack of proper monitoring and implementation. Women consistently find themselves in low-status, low-paying jobs with few opportunities for advancement. The results of this study indicate not only the degree of gender inequality in different sectors (education, health and employment) but also its pattern, which should be considered in formulating effective policies. The study reveals that the progress in reducing gender inequality is occurring at a slower rate than the previous years. The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are crucial to the development of sound population and development strategies and essential for sustainable development. It will also be difficult to reach the MDGs targets unless serious efforts are undertaken on the part of the government. It is quite evident that without addressing gender inequality, the desired development may be unachievable. Traditional attitudes and gender-stereotyped roles of women often prevent society as a whole to recognize women's equal rights in both private and public spheres. The underline structural factors include not just poverty, but also a culture of acceptance, lack of effective community structures, harmful practices, inappropriate and ineffective allocation and utilization of resources in the context of a strong patriarchal society. Women are subjected to inequalities in the family, in the community and in the work place. Discrimination against girls starts at birth and continue through the lifecycle.

However, over the past few decades, much has been achieved to reduce the impediments to women's development. The government has demonstrated strong commitment to achieve gender equality through policy reform and programme development. There have been some efforts by non-governments organizations to increase women's participation in socio-economic activities and enhance their economic ability. While there are some progresses, challenges still remain critical to achieve substantive equality between women and men. In order to achieve the target, the government needs to be creative in renewing and revising strategies and approaches. Otherwise, the aims of achieving gender equality might remain elusive and a distant dream.

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