Gender Issues and Democratic Order in South Asia: A Bangladesh Perspective

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Introduction
The resurgence of multi-party democracy worldwide has had profound repercussions in several countries of South Asia, viz., Nepal and Bangladesh. Both these countries entered a new era with the establishment of a democratic order in 1990 and 1991 respectively. While India and Sri Lanka had democratic governments since independence Pakistan on the other hand has been ruled by both autocratic and democratic regimes over the years. At present it has a democratic form of government.

Democracy in theory is based on a notion of equality of all citizens irrespective of race, colour, sex, etc. A modern democratic nation is supposed to address all its citizens equally without discrimination against any religion, ethnicity, birth or gender identity. Democracy is for all. Therefore, in a democracy various institutions are developed in order to ensure the right of the citizens to equality, such as legal institutions and bureaucratic structures that help to materialise this democratic ideal.

However, if one delves deeply into the democratic systems at working it will be seen that its ideal of equality is far from being practised, particularly when it concerns women. While this situation is more or less the same in some developed countries that practice democracy the problems women face are more pervasive in the Third World countries. Most of these countries have deep rooted traditions embedded in the society.

The objective of this paper is to bring into focus the fact that democracy by itself does not ensure the emancipation or equal
development of women. Enactments of law and executive orders are not enough rather a reorientation of values, attitudes and beliefs of both male and female in the society is required.

This paper is spread over four sections. It studies the relation between democracy and gender; tries to inquire into the questions as to the contribution of women in development in South Asia; highlights the constraints faced by women in the socio-economic and political arena with special emphasis on Bangladesh. In the process the paper evaluates the extent of the commitment of these countries to Women in Development and finally presents some recommendations and intervening strategies.

Democracy and Women: The South Asian Context

As is generally understood, democracy in theory implies equality for all the citizens of the state irrespective of race, colour, religion, caste, gender, etc. It purports people's participation through democratic institutions in the policy-making that affect their social, political and economic life. It also imparts on those elected by the people, as their representatives, to redress their grievances and to bring about substantial change in their lives. The term 'people' in democracy is not generally used to refer to any particular group in a society it includes every citizen within a state boundary. In practice, however, we see that the norms and ideals of democracy are usually distorted and implemented in a way that does not usually reach the 50 percent of the population especially the female.

Discrimination against women can be traced way back into the Athenian States where democracy first developed. Athenian democracy or classical democracy from which western political thought is heavily drawn did not recognise women as citizens and both their political and civic rights were strictly limited. Citizenship in an Athenian polis was only conferred to men. In their work the social contract theorists Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau were also antipathetic regarding the status of women and their participation in politics. Locke maintained that the subordination of women had its 'Foundation in Nature' and that she must submit herself to the decisions of her husband as he is 'abler' and 'stronger.'
Rousseau excluded women from all people i.e., the citizenry. To him women were not capable of sound judgment as it was clouded by ‘immoderate passions’ and therefore ‘require’ male protection and guidance in the face of the challenge of politics. Other writers of democracy such as Schumpeter while referring to Women’s enfranchisement stated that the exclusion of women from the franchise did not invalidate a polity’s claim to be a ‘democracy’, and Barber while giving an account of direct democracy in a Swiss Canton emphasized that although women’s enfranchisement was ‘just and equitable’ the cost was ‘participation and community’ as assemblies grew unwieldy and participation diminished.

The basic idea of classical writers on democracy was therefore evidently anti-women both in nature and content. Women as a distinct entity in the society was not only made obscure but their participation in politics and other societal activities was also considered invalid.

Discrimination against women violates the general norms of democracy. Protesting against the discrimination of women Mary Wollstonecraft and J.S. Mill gave their own views about the rights of women in their work. Mary Wollstonecraft is considered to be one of the proponents of developmental democracy. According to her women were pitiful creatures because of the way they had been brought up. Women learned a ‘feminine ideal’ which they were pressurized on all sides to uphold; they were taught to be delicate, well mannered and uninterested in worldly affairs. In short what women are and can become is a product of human and historical arrangements not a matter of natural differences. Both men and women are born with a God-given capacity to reason, a capacity too often denied ‘by the words on conduct of men’. She concluded that if women are to be effective in both public and private life (as citizens, wives and mothers), they must first and foremost, discharge their duties to themselves as rational beings. Among the practical changes Wollstonecraft sought were a national system of education, new career opportunities for women and a direct share for women in the deliberations of government.

Wollstonecraft also put forward central questions that any theory of democracy, which was not simply to assume that ‘individuals’ were men, would have to address in the future. One
of the few who actually addressed these questions was, as previously noted, John Stuart Mill, who attempted to integrate concerns about gender into a new version of liberal democratic argument.

In the opening statement of his essay, ‘The Subjection of Women’, Mill states that the principle that regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other - is wrong in itself and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. He focused on two major points in this essay (a) To extend the enfranchisement of women and (b) to end the legal subordination of married women to their husbands. He argued that the domination by men is rooted in long-standing customs, and the idea that male supremacy is the proper order of things derive from deep feelings and sentiments rather than rationally tested beliefs. Mill also championed womanhood suffrage for the same reasons that he supported votes for men; because it was necessary for self-protection or the protection of individual interests and because political participation would enlarge the capacities of individual women. However, political participation of women is still comparatively lower than men. It is pointed out that low political involvement of women is the result of three factors: (a) socio-political; (b) situational; and (c) structural factors.

Although democracy through its stress on equality and human rights can bring about substantive change in the lives of women and prevent gender discrimination this intention becomes overshadowed by the greater interests of those forces that wish to maintain the existing status-quo. Moreover, the will of the majority does not always work in favour of women’s emancipation as they may reflect existing norms and biases based on tradition while addressing gender issues and relations. The patriarchal structure of the society also makes it difficult to improve the situation of the womenfolk. In developing countries like those of South Asia where traditional beliefs rule everyday life the situation of women, although improving recently, is still not up to the mark. This is mainly
because majority of the women of South Asian States are totally dependent on their husbands socially, economically and politically.

Global changes in the socio-cultural attitudes towards women during the twentieth century in the developed countries of the world have brought about important revisions in the status of women in developing countries as well. This called for proper assessment and changes in the status of women in SAARC countries. There is no single indicator for measuring the status of women in society, however, it could be assessed on the basis of the degree of access (and control) the woman has over material resources (like food, income, land and other forms of wealth) and social resources (including knowledge, power and prestige) within the family, the community and in society.8

The patriarchal, patrilineal societies of the seven SAARC countries depict a common picture, the second class status of women. The Constitutions in all SAARC countries embodies the fundamental rights of women and forbids any discrimination on the basis of sex. Laws and amendments in these countries sought to enhance the status of women but in practice there exists great inequalities in the status of men and women.

**Indicators of Economic Development and the Status of Women in Bangladesh and Selected Countries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Bangladesh</th>
<th>Nepal</th>
<th>India</th>
<th>Pakistan</th>
<th>Sri Lanka</th>
<th>Bhutan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population (millions)</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Growth Rate(%)</td>
<td>1980-90</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GNP Per Capita (US Dollars)</td>
<td>1990</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>380</td>
<td>470</td>
<td>190</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily Calorie Supply Per Capita</td>
<td>1989</td>
<td>2,021</td>
<td>2,077</td>
<td>2,229</td>
<td>2,219</td>
<td>2,277</td>
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<tr>
<td>Life Expectancy at Birth in 1990 (Years)</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Male</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Sex Ratio (Females Per 100 Males)</strong></td>
<td>94</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>98</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal Mortality (Per 100,000 births)</strong></td>
<td>600</td>
<td>850</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>600</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Low Birth Weight Babies (%)</strong></td>
<td>31</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>28</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Infant mortality 1990 (per 1,000 live births)</strong></td>
<td>160</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>183</td>
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<td></td>
<td>142</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>School Enrolment Ratio (% of age group)</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Primary School</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>69</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>55</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Secondary School</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Per 100 males)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td>54</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>34</td>
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<td>1986</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>63</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Female Labor Force (%)</strong></td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>25.6</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The women in Bangladesh are victims of tradition, social norms and religious misconceptions/interpretations. They are
subjugated to male domination. Men are the decision makers and the role and status of women is decided at birth. The discrimination that begins at birth crystallises when the women reaches adulthood.

The existing population of Bangladesh is officially estimated to be 110 million, 48.9% or over 53 million of which is women. 90% of the female population live in rural areas. They work from dawn to late night performing multiple roles. The female literacy rate was 19% (1981 census), against 40% to 45% achieved by men. Women constituted 10.4% of the total civilian labour force in 1985/86. They accounted for 28% of the industrial employment in 1989. There exists disparity in the opportunities for employment and remuneration of women. Women theoretically enjoy equal political rights with their counterpart. Both the present head of state and the leader of the opposition are women. It is not, however, a true reflection of status of women. Most women in society have no voice in decision making.

The status of women is paradoxical in Indian society too. Religion places women both at the pedestal as well as at the lowest rank in society. Indian society is inter-woven with cultural-cum-material patriarchy ruled by the ideology of the subordination of women by men - father, brother or son. In this backdrop the rural women who constitute the majority of the population are worse off. The rate of illiteracy among women is higher than male (the general rate of literacy is only 36%). Women suffer from high rate of fertility due to early marriage, malnutrition or undernutrition and face difficulty in getting employment. Women are paid lower wages than men mainly in agriculture sector but in other sectors as well. However their labour force participation rate (LFPR) is as high as 40%. Social and economic disabilities suffered by Indian women prevent them from exercising their human rights. Legislation passed meant to enhance the status of women instead succeeded in eluding them.

Only recently the principle of equal wages for women and men for the same kind of work for the same period was accepted. Still, in large number of enterprises, lower payments to the women worker for the same type of work persist. Dowry though prohibited since 1961 is still in practice and there are
numerous reports of torture and death related to dowry. It is simply an indication that overwhelming majority of Indian women are not enjoying the rights and opportunities granted to them by Constitution.

The women in Pakistan have to practice 'Purdah' which restricts their mobility. They are secluded and dominated by men. The rate of literacy is poor among women. In Pakistan labour force rate of participation of female is 6.80%. Women's share of total labour input in the rural economy ranges between 25-40%. The degree of access and control of Pakistan women over material and social resources is manifolds less than men and their participation in politics is yet to be at par with their male counterparts.

In Nepal women constitute almost 50% of the population and 90% of this population is rural based. The LFPR of Nepalese women is 45%. Life expectancy of women is very low like Bangladesh. Political changes of 1991 ensured equal rights for women but lack of education, prevalent social values and norms, low participation of women in politics have not aided in changing the status of Nepalese women significantly to date.

The rate of literacy in Sri Lanka is the highest in this region. It is 88.0%. The rate of literacy among rural women is 80%. It has not, however, succeeded to enhance the status of women. Religion, attitudinal stereotypes and 'traditional concepts determine the status of women in Sri Lanka too. They are victims of male chauvinism and lag behind in economic and social standings. Dominated by men the plight of Sri Lankan woman is no different than other women in the region.

Maldives has a high rate of literacy too, 80% of women are literate, and labour force participation for women is 50% but economically or socially they are no better than women in other SAARC countries. The status of women in Bhutan echo those described above.

International thinking on the role of women which permeated through the UN Decade for Women as well as constant focusing on social justice, equality, and eliminations of gender-based discrimination have led to recognition of the need for improvement and enhancement in the status of women in SAARC countries. SAARC cannot achieve its goal
of sustainable development, if half of its population remains afloat or untouched by overall progress. Acknowledging the significance of the need for improvement, SAARC members incorporated the issue in the main SAARC agenda and took certain action plan. Though Women in Development (WID) was not a part of the areas of cooperation it was incorporated on the basis of decisions taken in the First SAARC Summit of 1985. A Ministerial Meeting on Women in Development was held in Bangalore in 1986.

It was proposed in that meeting that a Women Cell be set up in the SAARC Secretariat. This was approved in the second meeting of the Technical Committee on WID. Further recommendations made were that other Technical Committees particularly those dealing with agriculture, health, rural developments, science and technology and sports, arts and culture give due emphasis on matters relating to women.

In the Kathmandu Summit, the SAARC planners recommended special efforts for the upliftment of women through the provision of equality of opportunity in education, health, employment and all spheres of national life and also participation of women in family welfare and population control programmes. The year 1990 was declared the “Year of the Girl Child” with the aim of improving substantially the plight of the female child. In the proposals presented in the Second Ministerial Meeting on WID emphasis was mainly given on integrating Women’s development programmes with “SAARC 2000 - A Basic Needs Perspective.” Despite all these, women still suffer from discrimination in opportunity, income and treatment. Moreover, government policies are inadequate, viz., governments in these countries try to create job opportunity for women to raise their economic status. But what has happened in reality is that these jobs and income generation schemes have still confined women in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka to traditional ‘female occupations’ which are characterised by low productivity, low technology and low income. “Such an approach implies perpetuation of the marginal role of women in economic activities.” In SAARC countries most training schemes are confined to ‘women specific’ trade. In Nepal, the schemes concentrate on sewing, knitting, weaving and carpet making:
in Bangladesh they are limited to paddy husking, cane and bamboo handicrafts, and fishnet weaving; in Sri Lanka despite high literacy rate of women they learn dress-making and sewing skills. Such gender bias schemes and training programmes will not make the desired contribution.

The Case of Bangladesh

In Bangladesh women have always been the most deprived section of the society. They are the disadvantaged of the disadvantaged. Socio-cultural attitudes and prejudices, religious influence, ‘pardah’ exclusion of women from productive work and inaccurate evaluation of the significance of the role played by women are the chief factors responsible for this predicament of women. This gave birth to disparity that is prevalent in the legal, social, economic and political status of women.

The patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal nature of the social system determines the shape of the life of a woman. Women as a result are forced into dependence on men. Low level of literacy restricts their employment opportunities. The rate of literacy in general is low being 36% and the rate of female literacy is worse. According to 1981 Census, literacy rate of women 5 years and above was only 16.0% as against 31.0% for men. The rate of female dropout is higher than male dropout. Productivity of women also suffers as a result of malnutrition or undernutrition. The incidence of malnutrition and undernutrition suffered is more prevalent in girls (14%) than boys (5%).

As women’s potential for earning are hindered by the factors outlined above women earn less. This leads to parents investing less in their daughters, education or otherwise, thus women produce and earn even less. They do not have much participation in decision-making as it is and are pushed even further away as a result of their economic dependency. Trapped in a vicious circle women in Bangladesh find it difficult to change their predicament.

Legal Status of Women

Apparently the status of man and woman in Bangladesh may be at par but in reality there is systematic difference.
between the position of men and women and the discrimination is distinct.

The State forbids any discrimination on the basis of sex although the Constitution assumes that women are weak and need preferential treatment. The Constitution provides for special provisions for women bracketing them with children and backward section of the society. It reserves the right of making special provision of women in employment and other areas. The chief consideration for providing reservation of seats for women in the parliament was to guarantee women representation in a fixed number of seats as in the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions of women very few would be elected in general seats.

According to Muslim law and laws of the country women are to enjoy noteworthy legal rights. In a marriage the consent of the bride is required but it is not practised, even when practised it is a mere formality. The father or male guardian makes the decision. A woman has no say in her future.

A man in Bangladesh is permitted limited polygamy under Islamic law provided he treats his wives with perfect equality in material and immaterial things as well as in his affection. Such perfect equality of treatment is probably unachievable and, therefore, one can read Islam discouraging polygamy. The Muslim Family Law Ordinance was promulgated in 1961. In accordance with this law a man is permitted to contract a second marriage not without the permission of the Arbitration Council and this permission may be withheld even if the first wife consents. Moreover marriage without permission is punishable with fine and imprisonment and he is bound to pay the entire dower money. If he does not pay then the money is recoverable under Certificate Procedure as arrears of land revenue. Leave alone illiterate women, even educated women are not aware of such legal rights. Moreover, because of the complexities involved in bringing about any legal redress usually women shy away. Financial expenses involved also contribute towards inaction. Society plays a discouraging role and a women usually being in a fragile emotional state under the circumstances withdraws instead of taking her due. Majority of the polygamous marriages therefore never make it to the Arbitration Council. The Arbitration Councils lacks
effective institutions through which to enforce this legal provision.

The inheritance laws as far as women are concerned are discriminatory. The daughter, according to both Islam and Muslim Law,\(^\text{27}\) inherits half of the son’s share of the father’s property. The wife (or wives taken together) receives one eighth of the deceased husband’s property. If she is childless she will only receive one-fourth of that property. But a husband is eligible for exactly double from the estate of a wife.

Aside from inherent discrimination in inheritance law women are known not to have exercised their rights to property for practical reasons. Taking into consideration the uncertain future where she may be divorced or separated she gives up these rights. Till she remarries she is under the guardianship of her father or brother, as she usually has no independent source of income. Even if she had it would not be socially acceptable for a woman to live alone. Again if a woman is widowed she comes under the guardianship of father-in-law or brother-in-law, otherwise father or brother. To ensure protection from them at the time of need she forgoes her right to inherit.

The plight of women in the Hindu community of Bangladesh is no better. They are governed by the archaic Dayabagha School of Law. In Hindu community a woman lives to serve her male guardians and bear children, mainly sons. Men are responsible for maintenance and the possibility of a woman maintaining herself is hardly contemplated. Under estate system she may enjoy her inheritance as long as she is alive but she can not “alienate … or give away absolutely”\(^{28}\). If a widow remarries she loses all the interest she inherited from her deceased first husband.

The disabilities that a Hindu women is confronted with and discrimination suffered by her arise mainly from the importance attached to marriage in orthodox Hindu society. In emancipated Hindu societies also there has not been much change regarding marriage.

Some important legislative measures have been taken recently, although these have also failed to be effective. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 has not been able to reduce, leave alone completely remove, the taking of dowry or crimes relating to this practice. The Cruelty to Women (Deterrent Punishment)
Act of 1983 has only been able to draw public attention to the growth of violence against women. The Act has made little impact.

The situation is exacerbrated by women’s lack of understanding of their rights. They face difficulties in pursuing their rights within the legal system. Promulgation of law has not necessarily meant its effective implementation, and women have not benefitted from it. At best it has been successful in reflecting the position of the state regarding women.

**Economic Status of Women**

In principle, men and women are equal in terms of their rights to employment and pay. But in practice there exists discrimination in family, in marriage, in working life, in regard to their right to work, and to remuneration. Once the economic activity of Bangladeshi women was confined to homestead. Increase in landlessness and persistent poverty, fall in family support, rapid migration and urbanisation have caused women to seek jobs outside the homestead in areas other than agriculture. Women participate in agriculture and industrial labour in addition to cooking, cleaning, collecting firewood and water, washing, rearing of children and caring and nursing of the old and infirm. It is difficult to put a price or value on such work and they are invisible. Moreover, the society has taken it for granted that it is a woman’s job to perform these duties.

There has been notable increase in the participation of women in agriculture and non-agriculture sector. In 1974 female labour force participation was 4.2% which doubled to 9.2% by 1984-85. In manufacturing industry, the official participation rate of women is 36%. Today women are contributing greatly in the growth of export oriented industries particularly garments. 90% of employees in this industry are women. The number of women in the construction industry is also on the rise.

Women are making a substantial contribution to the economy of the country. This has not succeeded in changing the prevalent disparity between women and men in the economic field. Women have less access to paid employment than men. When they have access they are frequently paid less than men. According to the 1983/84, Labour Force Survey (LFS) a
female worker in agriculture was paid 48% of the wage paid to male agriculture workers. A recent study found that women workers receive about 60 to 67 percent less than the male workers in the agriculture labour market. Also the majority of the women workers were hired against piece rated contacts. In the formal industrial sector gender disparity is evident. In the garments sector majority of those employed are women. As shown in the following table taken from a study conducted on randomly selected garment industry workers the average wage rate for women workers was about two-thirds of the wage rate received by male workers.

**Gender Differential of Wages in Garments Industry, 1990**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories of Workers</th>
<th>Female Workers</th>
<th>Male Workers</th>
<th>Wages for female workers as percent of that for male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>2,426</td>
<td>2,317</td>
<td>104.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operator</td>
<td>1,069</td>
<td>1,238</td>
<td>86.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cutting &amp; finishing</td>
<td>603</td>
<td>846</td>
<td>71.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sewing helper</td>
<td>439</td>
<td>598</td>
<td>73.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ironer</td>
<td>868</td>
<td>985</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Categories</td>
<td>886</td>
<td>1,345</td>
<td>85.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The study also found that wage differential is marginal for skilled and semi-skilled job, and substantial in unskilled jobs. Mostly women are employed in unskilled jobs. Therefore, the gender differential is noteworthy. The same conclusion is reached when wages are estimated for workers with different levels of education. The gender differential in wages for illiterate workers in 25%, but lower for workers with primary and secondary education. For highly educated women the case is different they receive the same but their ratio is negligible.

Women are exposed to extreme economic pressures as a
result of a number of factors. Landlessness and poverty are causing men to migrate in the hope of employment leaving women to run the family. Her income is no longer supplementary but is critical for the survival of the family. Families are breaking up, familial support system is on the decline, and female-headed landless household are expanding (estimated in the LFS of 1984-85 at 7.2% of rural household), as a result of divorces and desertion when men move away in search of work. The increase in divorces are said to be caused by the system of dowry which is a means of acquiring cash, goods and land or a ticket to middle-east for men particularly rural men. Women find it difficult to find work. They face more constraints than men in obtaining employment. But to ensure their own survival and that of their families women have joined the race for employment outside the homestead. An estimated 8 million women (40% of whom are in rural areas) are seeking employment in labour market where access has been difficult. In male headed households with female wage earners (which may be 25% of all households in some areas of the country) female earning contribute one fourth to one-half of family incomes and is responsible for food security in 25% households. The different policies and measures that have been undertaken by the government relating to women and their integration into mainstream economic development have been inadequate.

To promote female employment the government has reserved 20% of positions in officers and 15% in staff ranks in the public sector, raised the age limit for women entering public service to 30 years from 27 years, and permitted women's entry into public and defence services. It has also undertaken credit and skills development programmes, set up an employment information centre and established working women's hostels and children's day care centres. To expand female education, the Government has supported scholarships for females, earmarked 50% of vacant primary teacher posts for females, nationalised girls college in larger districts, and emphasized non-formal and vocational education and skills training by setting up a National Women's Training Academy and an Agriculture Training Centre for Women. It has also promulgated laws to ensure the legal rights of women and to
stop violence and repression against women. State measures described above have, however, been able to achieve very little. Torture and death of women relating to dowry are reported every other day in the printed media. Discrimination in wages continue, female workers continue to work in appalling conditions without provisions to meet their basic requirements. They are most often harassed than not, forced to quit first in the incidence of layoffs and so on. In a society where women’s role is predetermined by men, religion and age-old traditions, decree from above can expect to achieve very little in enhancing the status of women. Society must change its notions, attitude and values which are pivotal in the status of women. Only a reorientation and re-education of both men and women relating to the role and capacity of women may achieve substantial results.

Politics and Women in Bangladesh

Political participation is a key issue for women because it is both an indicator of their status as well as a tool to improve their condition in the society. Although the process of transition to democracy has been more or less attained in Bangladesh with the establishment of a democratically elected government with a woman as the Prime Minister, mainstreaming women into the political process for their upliftment will take time as this achievement does not indicate that the existent limitations pertaining to the participation of women in politics will diminish or just go away.

In Bangladesh women have always been regarded as economically inactive as they were confined to the household and excluded from the corporate life of the community. Moreover, they usually refrained from participating in any decision-making even in their family. Therefore, participation in politics and other decision-making in the community was out of the question. Over the past few years women, although a few in number, have gradually begun to participate in the socio-political and economic activities of the country. They have become more aware of their rights and the need to be economically independent. Scope for their participation in the political field along with other fields have been provided for in the constitution of Bangladesh.
In matters of political rights the constitution does not make any distinction between man and woman. Gender is not a discriminating factor for any public or representative office and the same voting criteria are applied to both man and woman alike. Accordingly Articles 27 and 28 of the Constitution of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh enunciate the principle of equality of all citizens. Articles 10 and 28 advance the rationale of affirmative action for the advancement of women and for ensuring their participation in all spheres of national life. No distinction is made in matters of political right. Articles 36-39 grant freedom of movement, assembly, association and speech to all citizens. Women also enjoy the right to contest in public representative offices. Articles 50 and 66 which lay down the qualifications for election as President, Vice President and Member of Parliament do not discriminate on any ground such as race, religion, sex, etc. The constitution further advances and incorporates the principle of ‘special representation of women’. The tenth Amendment of the constitution enacted in June 1990 restores the provision of reservation of seats for women in the Parliament under article 65 and provides for 30 reserved seats for 10 years from the commencement of the next parliament. This special representation notwithstanding, women are eligible to contest for the general seats of the parliament. At the local governing institutions, women’s representation is secured by nomination of three women members in the union and upazila parishads and the paurashavas under the relevant local government ordinances. In addition to enjoying special representation, women have the right to stand for elections to the office of chairman or member of the local self-governing bodies.

Inspite of the scope provided for all in the constitution for participation in the socio-economic and political fields age-old discrimination and biases created by the patriarchal structure of our society still influence the status of women and their participation in all sectors of the community. Those few women who are able to join politics or trade unions are viewed as non-conformists. As the women in our country are not looked upon equally with men and considered a burden they are less assertive, insecure and virtually dependent on their husband, father or brother. This situation prevents them from
formulating independent decisions as a result the entire society suffers.

Women posticipation in general elections have been increasing in Bangladesh in recent years. Two women contested 3 seats in 1973 and 17 contested in 15 constituencies in the 1979 elections. During the last national assembly elections in united Pakistan held in 1970, only 3 women contested for general seats in a total 162 general seats from the then province of East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and none could be elected. However participation has greatly increased over the years and in the 1991 general elections the ratio of women candidates were larger than in previous elections. In all the divisions together it made up for 15.66% while in Dhaka it was the highest with 23.33%. In the 1991 Parliamentary elections women candidates won 2.7 percent seats of the total general seats. Women won 1.3 percent seats in 1988 and 1.7 percent seats in 1986 parliamentary elections. A positive trend can be noticed if one glances at the female participation rate from 1970 to 1991. Nowadays female candidates have been able to increase their credibility and establish themselves as viable candidates. In the 1991 elections female candidates won more than 30 percent of votes in 16 seats and from this more than 50 percent in 5 seats.

Despite the increased participation of women in the political arena as candidates and voters, socially construed biases that act as impediments still persists. As there are no set criteria for nomination those candidates who are well versed on the needs of women and are committed to the cause have not always been nominated as possible candidates in any elections. Mostly nominations are given on the basis of party affiliation and resource strength of the candidates and not always according to their qualification. Unable to meet the economic criterion women generally do not feel encouraged to participate in politics. Resource constraints are the main barrier to women's participation. In our country women are not readily given financial and resource support as it is felt that the possibility of her getting elected are slim.

Women's role confine her world mostly within the home. Therefore, when she enters into politics she enters in a dependent role as in all male dominant professions the work
place, the mode and behaviour pattern, the tests of survival and strength have all grown to suit the male personality and adjusted to male needs and life styles. Her full involvement is also not possible for she does not discard her ‘female’ role in society as she enters the male world. Social norms and expectations regarding her mobility and range of social interactions also act as an impediment to her involvement and participation in politics. The vast number of women voters are illiterate and are not politically conscious as a result they are easily wooed by various electioneering techniques and influenced by their male family members.

Women candidates are also defeated because of prejudices arising from the belief that politics is only for men and that they will be more dynamic and dependable as they are ‘tough’ and take part in politics more seriously than their female counterpart as they consider politics to be a ‘full time occupation.’ Therefore, both men and women voters tend to favour male candidates. The nomination process of the reserved seats also make the female candidates virtually dependent on their male colleagues as they are usually nominated by them. They cannot function as equals of their male colleagues because they were not ‘elected representatives of the people.’ Therefore their independent views may not be taken seriously.

In most cases it is seen that female members both in the Jatiya Sangsad and Local Government institutions usually come from affluent families and represent people of their class or their local power structure. As a result representation from the lower strata of the society do not emerge because of resource contraints as elections are a very expensive affair. Moreover personal connections also play a role in the nomination of candidates. This may result in the election of incompetent candidates and omission of able and efficient candidates.

Therefore, despite the constitution providing for equal opportunity for women in politics, in practice the situation is quite different, as preference tends to shift mostly from female to male candidates both in terms of nomination and support, financial or otherwise, extended to them. Infact constitutional and legal safeguards only succeed in guaranteeing token participation. Women still continue to be in the periphery of the
political power structure despite their increased participation in politics.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

A democracy to be successful must recognise the importance and potential of the female community, otherwise it would merely serve to maintain a fundamental form of domination and so make a mockery of the ideal and values that democracy is understood to embody. Instead of rhetorics and mere cognizance stronger strategies are required. Investment on women at national level as well as regional level have to be increased. To bring about an improvement in the status of women and increase the participation of women in development process a metamorphosis in the consciousness of both men and women, social and cultural norms and values, pattern of education and mass media is urgently required. They all tend to at present perpetuate a passive discrimination in the role of women in social, political and economic arena. World-wide awareness of equality of right has made a very small dent in traditional thinking in the transitional societies of South Asia. The positive attributes of women and their contribution in the social and economic areas should be constantly highlighted. Creation of awareness among both men and women of the rights of women through mass media and strict enactment of laws against dowry and violence relating to women in addition to genuine inclusion of women issues at political party levels will ultimately contribute toward the change in the outlook regarding the role of women in SAARC countries. Development of the overall status of women will be a positive step in the direction of the development of the SAARC countries.

At the national level Bangladesh may adopt and develop the following programmes.

(1) A proper evaluation of the contribution of women along with social recognition and integration of the value of unpaid work, including domestic work in resource accounting mechanism should be undertaken.

(2) Programmes to remove persistent negative images, stereotypes, attitudes and prejudices against women through changes in socialisation patterns, formal and non-formal
(3) Adoption of educational curricula for women not confined to women issue but keeping in mind gender specific needs and present environmental insecurities will help reorient the values, attitudes and beliefs of both sexes.

(4) Greater investment in women, education and otherwise. However emphasis should be on measures to eliminate illiteracy among females and to expand the enrolment of women and girls in educational institutions promote universal access to primary and secondary education for girl children and women.

(5) Intensification of legal aid programmes and emphasis on creation of legal awareness through workshops, seminars and media. It may be incorporated in the educational curriculum particularly at school level.

(6) Programmes to support and strengthen employment opportunities, equal pay for women in the formal and informal sectors. Terms of employment suitable to women should be adopted. Adequate economic, political and social support systems and services - child care, particularly day-care facilities, parental leave, sick leave should be provided.

(7) Expansion of credit facilities for women so that they can become self employed. Increasing access to credit and agriculture inputs and implements. Abolishment of male guarantee, in fact removal of collateral system for women.

(8) Increased participation of women in decision-making in all spheres so as to share responsibility through measures to review policies and establish plans to increase the proportion of women involved as decision makers, planners, managers, scientists and technical advisers in the design, development and implementation of policies and programmes for sustainable development. Provision of leadership and managerial training to women at all levels.

(9) Measures may be taken to strengthen and empower women's bureau, women's non-governmental organisations and women's groups in enhancing capacity-building for sustainable development.

(10) Women should also be encouraged to participate for general seats by providing the necessary resources required. Nomination for reserved seats should be provided for efficient and competent female candidates from all political groups and
their percentage should be increased both at the local and national level. However it must be kept in mind that the reserved seats must be gradually removed as they diminish participation of women in politics and also because it is based on the assumption that women will not be elected in general seats, therefore separate 'women's seats' are required.

(11) Women Members of Parliament should also make an attempt to be more active. They should assert their role and put forward issues that concern the womenfolk of Bangladesh.

(12) Political parties should address more seriously issues concerning women's participation in politics. They should also incorporate the women's agenda into the mainstream of politics. They should refrain from paying mere lip-service to women's issues but help in the actual implementation of the policies and programmes that may bring about the emancipation of women.
Notes and References

4. David P. Held op. cit., p. 81.
5. Ibid, p. 82.
7. Like in other countries around the world low political involvement of women is usually attributed to three factors: (a) socio-political; (b) situational; (c) structural factors.
(a) Socio-political factors: usually include primarily a country’s ideology, as a rule assigning differing expectations to men and women. Men are usually put in the role of decision-makers and given a privileged position in society while women are assigned inferior roles, involving a degree of subordination to and dependence on men. It is the chief contribution of the family in patriarchy to socialize the young into patriarchal ideology’s prescribed attitudes towards the categories of role, temperament and status. The socialization of girls within the family structure is in keeping with the life-long role of subservience and self-effacement that women are expected to play. The first lesson a female child is made to learn is that the differential treatment between her and her brothers is a fact of life. She is looked upon as a transitory member of the family and she learns to appreciate the fact that she is a liability and does not have the same rights as her brother to the family resources.
(b) Situational factors include women’s place in society, tied to performance of traditional roles in the family and the household, leaving the little opportunity to become actively involved in other groups, or to devote the time and energy required to fight for positions giving them share in management, production and distribution of goods or in political life.
(c) Structural factors: It is pointed out that even when women achieve higher education that education still prepares them for so called feminine occupations.
22. The Bangladesh Constitution.
24. The Muslim Law Ordinance, 1961, 5, 6 (1).
25. Ibid. 5.6 (5) and (6).
27. Muslim Family Law confers inheritance to the children of predeceased's sons and daughters. Previously under Islam they could not inherit according to the rule "Nearer in relationship excludes the remote."
29. Salma Sobhan, op.cit.
32. Ibid.