

Women in Bangladesh: Unsung Heroines Remain Unrecognized for Their Unpaid Work

Ms. Doulot Mala (Bangladesh)

Women's leadership in Bangladesh is widely praised across the world. They are in top positions here, starting with the country's premier, opposition leader, and speaker of the Parliament. Also women are one of the successful entrepreneurs in Bangladesh in the field of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Still, there is a dearth of recognition due to cultural stigma, the typical mindset in this country. Women's economic contribution, especially in the informal sector, remains unrecognized in Bangladesh.

Bangladeshi women are largely working as unpaid workers. They are facing status and dignity crisis due to the lack of recognition for their dedication to families and societies. Given this situation, economists, women and media activists have recently started raising their voices to enhance the recognition of the roles played by women. There is a nation-wide campaign, launched by an advocacy organization, titled "Equality through Dignity" to change the mindset of the general public.

In Bangladesh, the process for rice production is comprised of 23 phases from paddy cultivation to marketing, of which 17 are completed by rural women. However, they are not getting due recognition economically, even though they greatly contribute to food security, education, social security and childcare.

Women earn lower wages for the same work than men do, and the rate of wage discrimination is high in rural and underdeveloped areas. Although the tendency to undervalue women's contribution is universal, it is particularly strong in the least developed countries (LDCs) like Bangladesh. According to UNICEF, women spend two-thirds of their time on food production, but their total global income accounts for only 10 per cent of all.

Therefore, women's unpaid activities outside the traditional framework of GDP estimation should be revaluated and recognised as women's contribution towards the economy. Increasing wage-based work opportunities in the formal sector is key to making women's uncounted contribution more visible in the society, which calls for policy reforms and changes in social perception towards women, alongside amendments to the traditional statistical method.

An empirical study on "How Much Women Contribute to the Bangladesh Economy" conducted jointly by private think tanks, Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD) and Manusher Jonno Foundation (MJF), estimated the value of women's unpaid household works in Bangladesh to be equivalent to 76 or 87 per cent of the GDP for fiscal year (FY) 2013-14 on the monetary value. The study assessed the substantial portion of women's

works that remain uncoun­ted and tried to find out the actual contribu­tion women are making towards the society. Con­se­quently, it recom­mended a com­pre­hensive method to include women’s uncoun­ted activities in GDP. And this can be possible by elimi­nating wage discrimination against women and facilitating women’s engage­ment in formal works, for which the NGOs, women’s organisa­tions, the media and the private sector have recently raised their voices.

Ban­gladeshi women have vigorously come out with hundreds of thousands of initiatives for changing fortunes of their own and others around them, bringing about a social transformation in the economic journey of the nation with their participation. And they have marked remarkable achievements in two areas of success – microcredit and ready-made garments that have involved millions of girls and mothers – apart from their roles as unsung heroines for generations in agriculture and caretaking activities at home.

From rural areas to urban growth centres in Bangladesh, the women have plucked up courage to break their shackles of the past and work outside to enter the work force. In fact, the rise of Bangladeshi womenfolk can be considered as a revolution, given the change that has taken place in the past 2-3 decades in the once-backward society.

Today, the women are almost everywhere—from boutique businesses to light engineering industries, and from local companies to multinational corporations. Still, they are not enjoying freedom to spend their earning. The research has found 40 per cent of the women need to consult with their family members for spending their earnings. Also many are not willing to work as paid workers since they have to engage in household chores, taking care of their children, cooking food, cleaning houses, etc.

These works that are neither counted nor measured need to be recognized and added to the system for calculating the nation’s GDP. Policymakers should know and acknowledge the women’s social contribution through their household work.

Increasing female literacy rates could be one of the major steps to help women work both at home and in the professional world with dignity and proper recognition. Changing people’s mindset as well as social security systems, enhancing support from family members and acknowledging the efficiency of female workers must be ensured to establish their economic and social rights in Bangladesh.