

## **WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN BANGLADESH: ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

**Brigadier General M Zahid Hasan, ndc, psc**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The issues and challenges of women empowerment in respect of human capability have been significant due to the emerging scenario of women emancipation in Bangladesh. In Bangladesh only 8.9% of women are regular paid worker. 56.3% are unpaid family worker, another 25.1% of are self-employed (agriculture and non-agriculture) (BBS 2012: 94), means dependant on men or family members to take joint decisions on spending. On the other hand, the Constitution of Bangladesh has ensured equal rights for men and women, but in practice it is less observed in the true spirit in many cases.

Almost half of the population of Bangladesh is women (BBS, 2012). It is very easy to understand that if half of the population of a country is not addressed equally, the overall socio-economic development may not be sustainable. Therefore, empowering other half (the women) is necessary. And achieving women's empowerment requires, sound public policies, a holistic approach and long-term commitment and gender-specific perspectives. The journey of a woman empowerment begins as an individual, in a household, in a community and in the overall socio-cultural set up of the society.

Changes in the ability to exercise choice can be thought of in terms of changes in three inter-related dimensions which make up choice: (i) resources, which form the conditions under which choices are made; (ii) agency which is at the heart of the process by which choices are made; and (iii) achievements, which are the outcomes of choices. These dimensions are inter-dependent because changes in each contributes to, and benefits from, changes in the others. Thus, the achievements of a particular moment are translated into enhanced resources or agency, and hence capacity for making choices, at a later moment in time (Kabeer, 2001).

Resources can be material, social or human. In other words, they refer not only to conventional economic resources, such as land, equipment, finance, working capital etc. but also to the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice. Resources are distributed through a variety of different institutions and processes and access to resources will be determined by the rules, norms and practices which prevail in different institutional domains (e.g. Familial norms, patron-client relationships, informal wage agreements, formal contractual transactions, public sector entitlements). These rules, norms and practices give some actors authority over others in determining the principles of distribution and exchange within that sphere (Kabeer, 2001).

The second dimension of power relates to *agency*, the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their *sense* of agency, or 'the power within'. While agency often tends to be operationalised as 'individual decision making', particularly in the mainstream economic literature, in reality, it encompasses a much wider range of purposive actions, including bargaining, negotiation, deception, manipulation, subversion, resistance and protest as well as the more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis (Kabeer, 2001).

A concern with 'achievements' in the measurement of empowerment draws attention to the necessity for further qualifications to the understanding of choice. As far as empowerment is concerned, we are interested in possible *inequalities* in people's capacity to make choices rather than in *differences* in the choices they make. While there are sound reasons to move the measurement of achievements beyond very basic functioning, such as life expectancy and nutritional status, to more complex achievements, such as education and political representation, we have to keep in mind that such measurements, quite apart from their empirical shortcomings, entail the movement away from the criteria of women's choices, or even the values of the communities in which they live, to a definition of 'achievement' which represents the values of those who are doing the measuring (Kabeer, 2001).

## **PRESENT STATUS OF WOMEN INCLUDING IMPEDIMENTS TO EMPOWERMENT**

### **Population by Broad Age Group and Its Impact**

The female elderly population (60+ years) between 2001 and 2011 has increased in a more accelerated pace than their male counterpart (BBS, 2012). The annual rate of increase of female population in old age was 1.56 percent while 0.51 percent was for male during the same period. On the other hand, child population has decreased with an annual rate of 1.75 and 1.78 percent for the male and female population between 2001 and 2010 respectively. There is, however, an increase in the economically active population (15-59 years) for both males and females, but this increment has occurred at a slower rate (1.10 percent) for female than their male counterparts (1.25 percent) from 2001 to 2010 (Rahman, 2013 and Unnayan Onneshan, 2013).

<b>Table 1: Population by Broad Age Group</b>						
Year	Age Group					
	0-14 years		15-59 years		60+ years	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
2001	40.1	38.6	53.3	55.7	6.6	5.7
2006	36.5	36.0	56.8	57.9	6.7	6.2
2010	33.3	32.4	59.3	61.1	6.9	6.5
Rate of Increase (percent)	- 1.75	-1.78	1.25	1.10	0.51	1.56

Source: Unnayan Onneshan, 2013.

### **The Legal Structures of Women Empowerment in Bangladesh**

A range of legislative measures have been undertaken to safeguard women's rights in Bangladesh. Among others, The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (The Constitution) 1972, the Penal Code 1860, the Criminal Procedure Code 1898, the Dowry Prohibition Act 1980, and the Women and Children Repression (Special Provisions) Act 2000 are noteworthy. The socio-economic rights under the Fundamental Principles of State Policy are accorded in Part II of the Constitution. Part III of the Constitution containing altogether 19 articles (26-47A) provides fundamental rights. The rights include: the right to equal opportunity in the public sphere, non-discrimination, equal protection of law, right to life and personal liberty, freedom of movement, profession, occupation and religion, rights to property, protection of privacy, home and correspondence etc. (Constitution, 2011). Muslim personal law (*Shariah*) for Muslims and Hindu Law for Hindus, constitute a significant portion of formal rules in providing rights for women. Consequently, women's rights have been simultaneously dealt with by the two systems and Bangladesh does not have any uniform civil code. (Begum, 2004).

### **Women in Politics**

At present, the Honourable Prime Minister, the Speaker and opposition leader of the parliament and leader of a leading political party are women. Yet, participation of women in the politics of Bangladesh is very limited. Over the last two decades, however, there has been a significant change in terms of women participation in politics. Participation of women in national election has gradually increased. The percentage of women candidates in national elections among the total candidates was only 0.3 percent in 1973 which increased to 3.86 percent in 2008. Beside this, women are participating in local government elections as well (Rahman, 2013).

## Economic Status of Women

Women in Bangladesh are lagging behind from the men in terms of economic status. Lower access of female in the employment sector makes it difficult to establish gender equity. Despite the overall progress made in narrowing gender gaps, the position of women remains unequal to that of men. Male employment comprises 70.1% of total employment (BBS, 2012). Female employment comprises 29.9% of total employment. Women are considered as minor players in the economy as well as secondary participants in the labour market (Rahman, 2013).

<b>Table 2: Population by Economic Category and Sex</b>			
Economic Category	2010		
	Both sex	Male	Female
Bangladesh population 15 years and over	95.6	47.9	47.7
Civilian labour force	56.7	39.5	17.2
Employed	54.1	37.9	16.2
Unemployed	2.6	1.6	1.0
Not in civilian labour force	38.9	8.4	30.5
Housewives/household work	26.2	1.1	25.1
Inactive	12.7	7.3	5.4

Source: Labour Force Survey, 2010

## State of Employed Women

The employed population for male has increased from 31.1 million in 1999-2000 to 37.9 million in 2010 with an annual rate of 2.19 percent. Although an increase in the employment status of the male population is present, such an increase has occurred at a slower rate than before. On the other hand, a reverse scenario has been found in the case of female population. The employed female population has increased from 7.9 million in 1999-2000 to 16.2 million in 2010 with a rate of 10.51 percent per annum. Moreover, the increase has occurred at a more accelerated pace than before as well as than that of their male counterparts (Rahman, 2013).

## Main Economic Activity of Women

Women are largely involved in the non-monetised sector as well as in subsistence activities. Participation of women in the labour market has. Over the years, women have experienced some major changes in the labour market, primarily in terms of the nature of jobs and opportunities. The main economic activity of a population is largely varies according to their sex. More specifically, agricultural occupations account for the single biggest group for the male whereas it is household work for the female in the context of Bangladesh (Rahman, 2013).

**Table 3:** Employed Persons 15 Years and Over by Status in Employment, Residence and Gender, 2010

Status in Employment	Total		
	Both sex	Male	Female
Total	100.00	100.00	100.00
Regular paid Employee	14.6	17.0	8.9
Employer	0.2	0.2	0.2
Self Employed (agri)	22.8	25.8	15.7
Self employed (non-agri)	18.0	21.7	9.4
Unpaid family worker	21.3	7.1	56.3
Irregular paid worker	2.8	3.1	1.8
Day Labourer (Agri)	10.7	14.2	2.5
Day labourer (non-agri)	9.0	11.6	2.8
Servant	0.8	0.1	2.5

Source : Labour Force Survey, 2010, BBS

### Women in The Public and Private Sector

In the public arena there is poor participation of women. Like, in the primary education sector officially, 60% of the teaching positions are reserved for women. In reality however, only 49.2% of the teachers in government and primary schools are women and, in secondary it is only 23.26 % of (BBS, 2012). As general managers in different places only 6,032 women are positioned as oppose to 138,736 male counter parts. Business professional are only 862 (men 17,297), social science and related profession it is nil (BBS, 2012). Though nursing midwifery associated profession women are better but negligible number of women superintendent's of police in the police force and very few women in other positions in the force.

**Table 4:** Number of Secondary Schools, Teachers and Enrolment

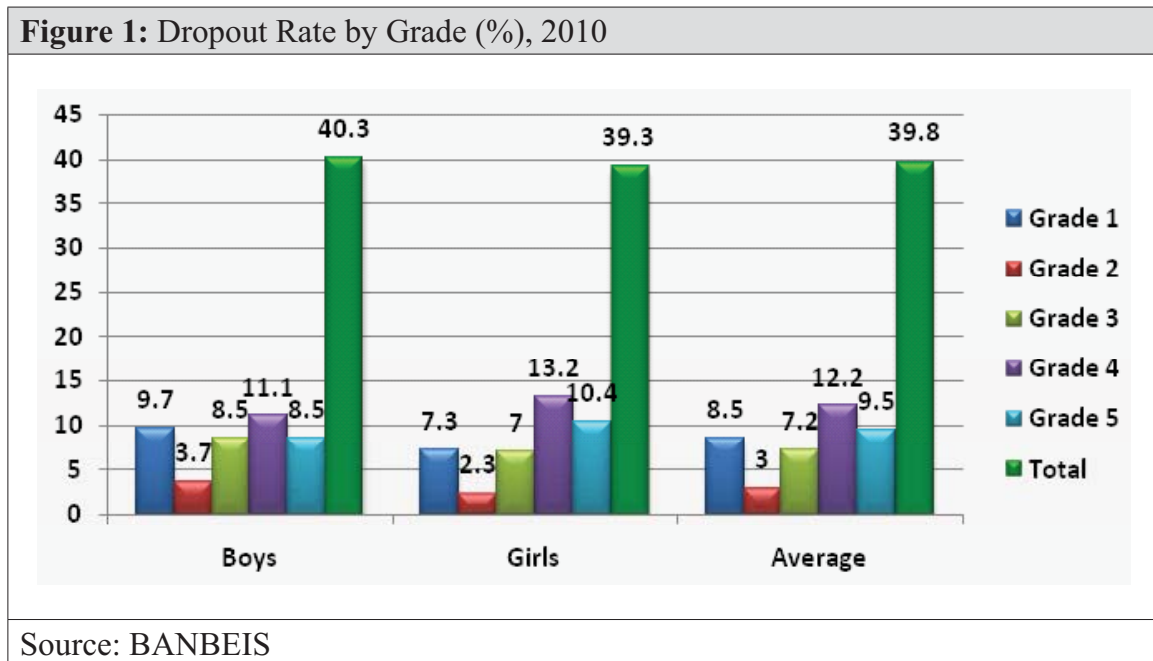
Year	Number of Teachers			Enrolment		
	Total	Female	% of Female	Total	Girl	% of Girl
2011	223555	52001	23.26 (52001)	7510218	4026374	53.61
2012	183277	30196	16.48 (30196)	7887010	4196097	53.20

Source: BANBEIS (BBS, 2012)

## WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIO - CULTURAL SECTOR

### Women and Education

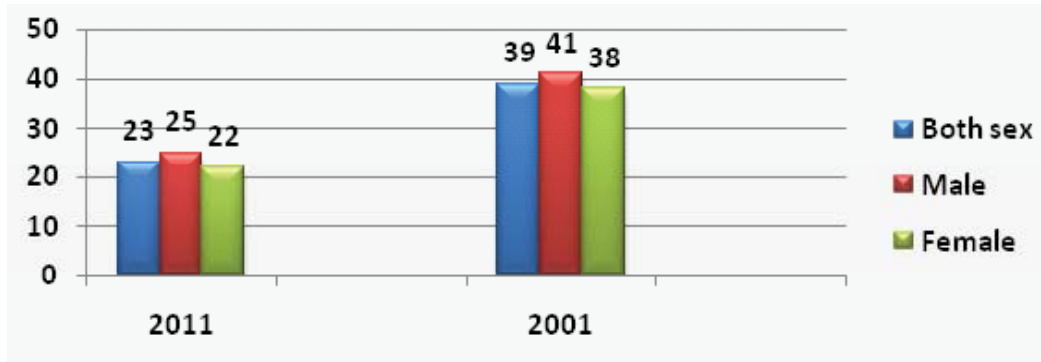
The literacy rate in Bangladesh is 56.80% for men and 49.20% for women (BBS, 2012: 444). Out of this 49.20% a very small number of women have graduated from colleges or universities while the majority have passed primary school or spent three or four year in primary level education before dropping out or being forced to stop by their guardians or parents.



### Health Status of Women

Gender differentials in the health sector continue to exist throughout the country. The poor health status of women not only affects themselves but rather pass from generation to generation. Productivity and the opportunity to develop sustainable economies are adversely affected by the poor health (Rahman, 2013). Women are found in a lower health status than the male.

**Figure 2: Neonatal Mortality Rate per 1000 Live Births**



Source: Report on Sample Vital Registration System 1998-2011, BBS

### **Health Expenditure and Access to Basic Health Services of Women**

About 3% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is spent on health in Bangladesh, out of which the government contribution is about 1.1%. The total health expenditure in the country is about USD 12 per capita per annum, of which the public health expenditure is only around USD 4 (WHO, online). Only 30 percent of the Government’s total health expenditure is actually allocated to basic health services. There is one hospital bed for 3,200 persons, number of population in per 10,000 only 3 doctors (DGMS, 2013) and one nurse for 15,000 persons. For a population of 160 million, there are only 6,556 midwives, 1,795 lady health visitors, and 28,000 family planning field workers (UNDP, 2010: 7-8).

### **Torture on Women in Bangladesh**

Because of extreme male domination and religious superstitions, women are tortured in different ways. These traditions have been going on for hundreds of years. In modern times the vastness and varieties of tortures on women are so great that it should be termed as ‘Crime against women’ instead of calling it ‘Torture on women’ or ‘attack on women’ (Assignment, 2014). Acid throwing, physical torture, rape, ‘fotoabazi’, dowry and different types of sexual harassment and blackmailing have always kept the women worried and shrunk. Many incidents do not come into light for the threat of political leaders or for the fear of family prestige or so called social stigma.

	Women Molestation					Child persecution	Abduction			
	Rape	Acid Throw	Seriously Injured	Other Ways	Total		Hostage	For trafficking	Other	Total
Total	3620	85	485	15108	19298	1649	79	56	715	850

Source: Police Headquarter, ( BBS, 2012).

### Unpaid Work and Women

The total unpaid work carried out by women per year is worth Taka 111.59 billion or United States Dollars (USD) 14.45 billion in Bangladesh which is 10.75 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). According to the survey the total engagement of women in domestic work in Bangladesh might be equivalent to 9.3 million full employments per year. Besides, women who are employed in different types of professional services spend on an average 3.69, 5.2, 4.8, and 4.3 hours per day respectively for household work. It measures the amount that women would earn if they were employed as waged laborers instead of being engaged in unpaid domestic work, estimates that the total unpaid women's work per year might be equivalent to Taka 1115.91 billion (FE, 2014). The total value of the work by women remaining unpaid in Bangladesh might be equivalent to Taka 336.918 billion or USD 4.36 billion, what would have been spent to hire someone to carry out the work (FE, 2014).

### Social Dignity of Women

In Bangladesh it is taken for granted that men work because they are the primary breadwinners (Kabeer, 2000: 85). From the early childhood female child is neglected. The birth of male child is welcome, on the other hand when the female child is growing up, she realizes that she is born to serve the family, and the social environment enhances her idea. Weakness and helplessness of women are being exploited by men. The choice of women in the case of marriage is less considered. The father becomes the decision maker. The registry, demand of bride, witness etc are compulsory.

### Sex Roles and Stereotyping

In patriarchal Bangladeshi society the social and cultural pattern requires serious consideration in this respect. Practices based on ideas of superiority and inferiority of one sex in relation to another and sex stereotyping need to be addressed. Social expectations of the roles to be acted out by women are extremely traditional and emphasis is given to child rearing and household management. Between from 0.6 to 2.8 brides per year per 100,000 women are reported to die because of dowry-related violence in recent years (Wikipedia, n.d: online). Personal laws, based on religion, are also biased towards women in certain aspects of private life and serve to reinforce discrimination.



### **Women and the Politics of Religion**

Those women who challenged to venture in the public spheres have been tortured in many forms with the plea of violating Muslim traditions (!). As a result of misinterpretations of religion deeply rooted in the society women of our country could not advance. Women are kept at home building the shadowy wall in every sphere of life. They are only encouraged to do all the household chores. Religion has been used as a weapon in this aspect (Hossain and Masuduzzaman, 2006). Within the family, a strict sexual division of labour is in force through the system of *purdah* (Naz, 2006: 16).

### **Property and Women**

The causes of poor condition of women are the traditional heritage. In Muslim society a female child gets less share of her father's property and in absence of the husband, the wife gets less than her children. This inheritance system recognized by the religion degrades the women in male dominated society. In Bangladesh the land and its management belong to the male, not to the female, which makes the men inheritors. Power is such a stuff which is always exercised on the weak. In a family the husband exercises his power on the wife and the children which is the main theme of the male dominated society (Hossain and Masuduzzaman, 2006).

## **FUTURE STRATEGY TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN SOCIO - CULTURAL SECTOR**

### **Implementation of NWDP**

The government has approved NWDP 2011 with a provision of equal share of women in property and their opportunity in employment and business. The approval came at the weekly cabinet meeting chaired by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina on 7th March 2014, a day before the International Women's Day. The policy is the revival of 1997 Women Development Policy, to the fulfillment of an election pledge by Awami League. This NWDP is not a law and does not affect the inheritance laws. The policy upholds the rights of all women irrespective of their religions.

### **Execution of GSB**

MWCA is the lead ministry for mainstreaming gender in all other line ministries and is headed by the State Minister. In addition to the MWCA, the Government also put into operation a comprehensive national machinery to promote the advancement of women. At the highest level is the National Council for Women's Development (NCWD), chaired by the Prime Minister. Below the apex, the implementing agency for the NAP for Women's Advancement (which is also responsible for the National Policy

for the Advancement of Women) and the Parliamentary Standing Committee interact with WID focal points in all line ministries, servicing ministries and the MWCA. The NCWD should be responsible to execute and coordinate the GSB. And MWCA should take initiative to implement the GSB which is allocated for women's development.

### **Fulfilling Educational Needs**

To facilitate short-term educational needs women can acquire functional literacy which enables them to operate bank accounts, receive credit facilities, and maintain simple records of their market transactions, and that of immunization dates of themselves and their children. Long-term strategic interests in the education sector would on the other hand entail ensuring that female children get equal opportunities for education, reducing the drop-out rates of girls especially after primary education, and taking affirmative action in providing scholarships for girls for higher studies. It would also entail encouraging women to enter non-traditional fields of study such as engineering, architecture, practical mechanic and other vocational training.

### **Improving Health Services**

Women need to have access to health services which are acceptable to them and their families both culturally and financially. Their requirements may be met through easily accessible facilities for treatment of illnesses induced by malnutrition, frequent pregnancies and lack of sanitation and hygiene. These health centres may also provide them with information on preventive vaccinations for themselves and their family members, family planning methods, nutritional requirements of the household, and infant and child care (Hamid, 1996: 145-146).

### **Removing Social and Cultural Barriers**

The elimination of social and cultural barriers can be instrumental in empowering women. Most of these by their very nature are long-term strategies. Social and cultural practices are closely linked to the legal rights of women which make the empowerment of women in this area a complex and long-term objective. To bring about changes in such deep-rooted cultural biases requires both evolutionary and revolutionary processes.

### **Consciousness Raising**

Operationalizing empowerment requires consciousness-raising of both men and women to bring about the necessary change. Consciousness-raising enables women who have been brought up in dependence relations to see their personal experiences in the perspective of a more general framework and in common with the situation of other women. Consciousness-raising is a continuous process which aims at facilitating the acquisition of knowledge about the reasons and caused of one's condition so that possibilities of change may be considered through collective action.

### **Empowerment Through Participation**

Participation significantly advances the process of empowerment almost for all of the women. In fact, the process of participation itself is empowering. As women gain in self-confidence, they would seek more avenues for participation; their involvement in community activity would in turn enhance their self-confidence and sense of personal control. As individual became engage in an activity, social group, or social action, they often notice the value of the social interaction and a reduction of their social isolation (Bellah, *et al*, 1985).

### **Collective Actions to Gain Empowerment**

Individual women may challenge structural inequalities when they act in ways inconsistent with gender norms, but that the impact of such actions tends to be limited. The ‘project’ of women’s empowerment requires collective action in the public sphere (Kabeer, 2001). For example, in rural Bangladesh in the early 1990s women who took up nontraditional jobs, adopted contraceptives, or traveled by themselves to health facilities before these behaviors were common were pioneers in the process of diffusion (Hashemi, *et al*. 1996 and Schuler, *et al*. 1996). Gradually, other women did the same, and while women in these communities continue to suffer from gender inequity in many spheres of their lives.

### **More Access to Valued Resources and Services**

Beginning to have access to the valued resources and opportunities is important for people’s empowerment process (Rai, 2009:2). Gaining employment is a pivotal point in women lives as a process of empowerment by the way of expanding their economic power. A job is also perceived as a way to expand other people’s respect for the person. Other examples of valued resources include independent housing, technical resources, land, and money etc. Access of services and service systems is as useful as access to valued resources. When services are helpful, it means an individual health or social service worker who is involved with them on a one-to-one basis.

### **Implementing Legal Empowerment**

Legal empowerment is a process and a goal that involves the use of law to increase the control of disadvantaged populations over their lives through a combination of education and action. Legal empowerment involves creating a critical consciousness through training about inequalities affecting the lives of women coupled with action undertaken to challenge those relationships. Education and training undertaken under the auspices of legal empowerment must use the law explicitly or implicitly.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To empower women of Bangladesh following measures (socio - cultural point of view) should be taken:

- a. Discrimination against women is mainly a social phenomenon, which manifests itself in various aspects of life. Therefore, to eliminate discrimination against women changes in the mindset and attitude of the people are important.
- b. GOB should take appropriate initiatives to retain the girls at higher education. Also due motivation campaigns does needed targeting the parents in making them understand the urgent need of such education.
- c. Empowerment of women in the health sector is very much necessary through long term strategy. The government in particular the Ministry of Health should take initiative to improve the health condition of women society by nationwide campaign. The awareness programme should be included in the text books.
- d. In order to empower women more access to valued resources are needed. These resources may be a job, technical knowledge, land, independent house, money etc. GOB should take projects through its ministries and departments and with the help of other agencies in achieving satisfactory level of easy access to resources by the women.
- e. The present government has approved NWDP (2011) with a provision of equal share of women in property and their opportunity in employment and business. The MWCA should draw a NAP based on this policy immediately and execute the policy in order to achieve the spirit of NWDP.
- f. The GOB has launched gender sensitive budget in FY. Mere allocation of budget will not bring the necessary dividend out of it. Concern ministries should implement the budget to bring about the essential development / empowerment of the women. NCWD should take the lead role to coordinate with other concern ministries / departments to implement it.
- g. Participation in community activities and associations enables women to empower themselves. This will also enhance to raise their voice collectively. GOB should take initiative to create such social groups or social actions at all levels. The government may take help of social workers, school teachers and elite people of the society in this field.
- h. GOB should take appropriate measures to ensure the rule of law by educating both the enforcing agencies including judiciary and at the same time the women to make them aware about their rights.

- j. Within the constitutional framework of Bangladesh, it should be argued that ways need to be found to make legal reforms in family law available to all sections of the population and to strengthen their use like, educating law enforcing agencies, judiciary and above all the political will to give all women of Bangladesh the chance to benefit from better rights than the patriarchal society would seem to offer.

## **CONCLUSION**

In Bangladesh, the life of a woman is dominated by a patriarchal and patrilineal social customary system. More frequently, such a system upholds a rigid division that controls the mobility, roles and responsibility and sexuality of women. Traditionally, women in Bangladesh are plagiaristic of their family status. The role of a woman includes the maintenance of her family as a social institution. GOB in education sector has made an incredible commitment for girls. Distributing free books and making school free for girls alone may not meet the long term needs. Necessary initiatives are to be taken so that early drop out of girls can be prevented. The nationwide campaigns are needed to aware the parents about the urgency of educating girls. Education on changing the roles dictated by the social condition of women and girls needs to be addressed to achieve the initiatives. In the health sector short and long term requirements of the women are interlinked with education. Men have to understand the consequences of women's health which will come from cultural awareness.

Government and the institutions and the society as a whole may endeavour to give necessary valued resources and services to women. Providing a job, technical knowledge, land or the money may be the process of women empowerment. Many women friendly initiatives are necessary by all the agencies to implement these. Access to valued resources and opportunities is important for women's empowerment process. Access of women to information and support, mobility, visibility and control over production cannot be materialized unless the instruments of bringing changes in the existing system dealing with development in women issues include macro-policies, resource allocation, regulation & monitoring, public awareness etc. Theoretically, some of the strategic documents and policy papers are sound and seem to be implementable, but in reality, the outcomes are yet to be discernible. The government should be creative and effective enough to take radical programmes or policies as well as to ensure its implementation.

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#### **Author**

*Brigadier General M Zahid Hasan, psc is a Course Member of NDC 2014. He was born on 03 December 1965. He was commissioned in the East Bengal Regiment on 25th December 1986. Besides his regimental appointments as Company Second in Command, Adjutant, Company Commander, in two infantry units, he commanded one of the reputed Infantry units in Bangladesh Army. He has also commanded two Border Guard Battalions. Besides his unit service he was also an instructor at School of Infantry And Tactics and Bangladesh Institute of Peace Support Operation Training. He has served both at United Nations Iraq Kuwait Observer Mission and United Nations Mission in Liberia. He was Additional Director General of Bangladesh Ansar and VDP before joining National Defence Course – 2014. He obtained Masters on Defence Studies from National University of Bangladesh. Brigadier General M Zahid Hasan, psc is a proud father of a son. His wife, Mrs Jesba Jerine is a housewife. Brigadier General M Zahid Hasan, psc hobby is playing golf and travelling.*