

Preface

GENDER INEQUALITIES AND PERCEPTIONS

While women represent 50% of the world's adult population, and one-half of the official labour force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive only one-tenth of the world's income and own less than 1% of the world's property. (United Nations, 1980).

The main question which arises in the minds of all is that despite such investments in time and labour by women, why is there so much discrimination and inequality?

In our efforts to address this question let us first start with a brief theoretical discussion on gender inequality. Over the last four decades, there has been a dramatic increase in concern with the meaning and explanation of gender. Research in gender and development has led to a general consensus that gender is a fundamental organizing principle in human societies and in cultural production. Analytically, it has reached the status of class, ethnicity, state and world system in social science. Today, it is also widely accepted that gender, *like class and race/ethnicity, is a source of inequality*. That gender asymmetry is a universal fact of life is now a common place. It is acknowledged that in many societies around the world, women are discriminated against by law and by custom, rendering them among the most vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups. As Papanek (1989) stated: "gender differences, based on social construction and biological sex distinctions, are one of the great fault lines of societies-those marks of difference among categories of persons that govern the allocation of power, authority and resources."

Since the 1970s, the concept of "gender," has addressed the following questions about gender inequality.

- *How does it occur?*
- *Why does it take different forms?*
- *Why does it vary in degree across societies?*
- *What are the components that add up to gender inequality?*
- *What are the causes promoting gender inequality?*
- *How do various institutions and practices contribute to it?*
- *Are there any strategies to of changing it?*

While culturally and historically-bound, gender commonly is a function of power relations and the social organization of inequality. Inequality between women and men can take many different forms. Gender inequality exists in most parts of the world, from the developed country of Japan to the least

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developed countries within Africa, Asia and from the break up of countries of Russia to the United States of America (Sen,2001).

Throughout the world, women continue to face inequality in all spheres of life. Examples from various surveys validate this statement. The index ranking of 151 countries on gender inequality in addressing poverty, education, basic health, employment (income), violence and political participation contained in various Human Development Report prepared by the United Nations Development Programme since 1995 till 2003, shows that *“no country treat women as well as men.”*

Gender inequality refers to unequal treatment or perceptions of individuals based on their gender. It arises from differences in socially constructed gender roles as well as biologically through chromosomes, brain structure and hormonal differences. Gender systems are often dichotomous and hierarchical. Gender binary systems may reflect the inequalities that manifest in numerous dimensions in daily life. Gender inequality items stems from distinctions, whether empirically grounded or socially constructed. Gender inequality can further be understood through the mechanisms of sexism. Discrimination takes place in this manner as men and women are subject to prejudicial treatment on the basis of gender alone. Sexism occurs when men and women are framed within two dimensions of social cognition.

Gender inequality is the 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 further considered as a causal 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.

There a multitude of crimes against women leading to a number of agencies claling for an end to Violence Against Women. In some countries (Democratic Republic of Congo), rape and violence and violence against women and girls is used as a tool of war. In Afghanistan and Bangladesh girls have acid thrown in their face for refusing marriage or love affair. One example of the continued existence of gender inequality is Asia is the “missing girls” phenomenon. In other countries women are trafficked as commodities across borders.

Gender inequality is still a major contemporary social problem and not an individual matter. Therefore, it is deeply ingrained in the structure of societies. Gender inequality is built into the organization of marriage and families, work and economy, politics, religions, the arts and other cultural productions, and even the very language we speak. One of the most fundamental forms of gender inequality may be seen at the basic social unit, namely the gender division of roles within a family. Nevertheless, in spite of women’s new role, both as housewife as well as worker, the traditional division of roles-women at home and men at work-has not changed much.

The different papers included in this book deal with gender inequalities from a number of different perspective starting from the family, society, work place, economy, media, political participation, leadership and decision making. Chapter 1, titled,” Diversity or Dilemma? The Cry for Social freedom of MSM People Living in Dhaka City,” written by Aumio Srizan Samya delineates lives and dilemma of MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) people in urban Bangladesh. He outlines how these people are perceived, viewed and identified as deviant, outcast and sinners and suppressed to invisibility. They are deprived of basic human rights, access to proper education, health care services and other social benefits. Being deprived of all necessities of life the MSM people in Dhaka are facing oppression and inequality, being pushed not only to the edges but also making them silent and almost invisible from the society. This paper rightly argues that gender inequality is the 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 further considered as causal factor of violence against men, an issue not dealt with serious repercussions.

Chapter 2 by Nemu Joshi explores a variety of gender practices in the era of globalization. She explores how urban Nepali women constantly negotiate between global flows and local context and the effects of this negotiation on their gender roles, and on their familial and intimate relationships. This chapter analyses the ways media, especially Indian visual media, a common source of discussion among urban women, are affecting them and their daily lives. The chapter also focuses on the role of films and television in directing new identities and implications of gender roles, and indicates how urban women in Nepal are trying to negotiate their gender roles in relation to the binary of ‘cultural practices’ and modernity through constantly being addicted in watching Indian television serials and movies.

In Chapter 3, Dr. Soheli Khadiza Azad addresses the plausibility and transformatory potential of internally migrated women working in the readymade garment factories in Dhaka. She argues that they work as a critical mass to challenge the existing class and culture in urban Dhaka. Based on a feminist research methodology and reviewing of relevant scholarly research, the chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section emphasizes on migration, paid work and empowerment, while the second section focuses with the evidences of credibility and potentiality of working women to make a rapture into the existing class system and cultural set up of urban Dhaka city.

Nafisa Tanjeem in Chapter 4 deals with the after effects of the collapse of Rana Plaza including five garment factories that claimed lives of 1134 people most of whom were poor rural women. She proposes a cultural geographic understanding of the space of social media and explore place making processes through which micro celebrities got engaged in neoliberal conformist voluntarism during Rana Plaza Collapse in Savar, Bangladesh. She juxtaposes two cases of virtual activism for examining how gender, class, neoliberalism, and nationalism determine the politics of exclusion and inclusion in the space of social media.

Chapter 5 dealing with “Women in Bangladesh Local Government: Critically Evaluating Their Participation and Empowerment,” tries to evaluate the role and participation of women members in local government. The study is based on the Local Government (Union Parishad) Second Amendment Act 1997 of Bangladesh, which is an initiative adopted by the Government with the provision of one third reserved seats for women in the local government bodies to be directly elected by the voters of the Union. This law creates new opportunities and enables women to step in to the elective positions of grass roots level local government to raise their voices and influence the decisions taken in the Union Parishad. Md. Mostafizur Rahman Khan and Fardaus Ara, in evaluating the role of these women members reveal that in actual practice these women are debarred from equally participating in the affairs of the Union Parishad. These women are faced with the common phenomenon of the typical patriarchal attitudes of the male members, and are not allowed to participate, or take any decisions of the Union Parishad. The study further reveals that the elected women members in local government seriously lack material, human and social resources required to be able to influence decisions at the Union Parishad, and thus become empowered.

In Chapter 6, Dr. Dipak Kumar Bhattacharyya takes more of a theoretical approach to understand employment relationship and conflicts. As he claims that power is a dominant construct. Power can have adverse effect on institutional employment, which even culminates to conflict and resistance to change. When organizations are constrained by the negative aspect of worker’s power, it is difficult to bring order, and even to offer the right solution for lack of problem identification. He explains the process of interventions in two organizations to solve the problem of constrained employment relations, pertaining

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to workers' redeployment subsequent to technological change by using critical discourse analysis as a solution.

Chapter 7, namely, "The Role of Women Directors for Malaysian Firms' Performance," investigates the role of Women on Board Director on firm performance in Malaysia. This paper is a complete departure from the common understanding and perception of the negative role of women once they reach the top levels of management. Research in this area have always been focused on the different barriers women face in rising to the top and assuming management and leadership positions. Gender inequality is very pervasive in this area and women also face sexual harassment from their male colleagues. Rayenda Brahmana and Sze-Nee Chen, however, show that the positive effects of women in top management, because it induces performance of the firm. Their research indicates that the positive effects depend on the qualifications of top female managers. Upholding this finding/fact both the researchers emphasize on the importance and necessity of women in the Board of Directors of firms.

Chapter 8 by Sabiha Yeasmin Rosy and Md. Mynul Islam on "Communication Process in Family: Reinforcing the Gender Differences in Bangladesh" firmly confirms the fact the 'gender inequality starts from the family. The authors focus on that family is an important institution to build a person's personality, morality, value and attitude. However, they maintain that unfortunately, it is in our families that gender biasness is reinforced continuously through difference in behaviour towards boys and girls from childhood. Parents communicate with them in different ways which enables them to construct the traits of 'masculinity,' and 'femininity.' They argue that girls are compelled to learn about the feminine role which is packaged with politeness, submissiveness, and their mobility is restricted in public space. On the other hand, a boy learns to be social, intellectual, able to engage with the world with confidence. These different formations of the role and behaviour results in the persistent discrimination everywhere in the society. Girls and boys are therefore need to be raised as human to eradicate the gender differences and ensure equality.

Ferdous Jahan, Sharif Abdul Wahab and Fairouz Binte Hafiz in Chapter 9 focus on "Gender and Ethnic Discrimination: Life of Ethnic Minority Women in Bangladesh." They explore gender inequality across social groups (Bengali and Indigenous) and contexts (urban and rural). Their arguments shade light on how indigenous women experience two-fold barriers – one is inside their community and second is as ethnic minority within the broader community in Bangladesh. This chapter applied Nussbaum's capability approach to analyse the situation of women with different social and ethnic identities. Lack of awareness, perception of current situation as destined, social and local norms, and patriarchal way of thinking are forcing these women to live as secondary citizens.

In Chapter 10, "Overcoming Intersectional Barriers: Lessons from Inspirational Women in Nepal," Sara Parker and Kay Standing discuss the complexity and challenges of exploring the impact of gender on women's ability to realize their potential in Nepal. The chapter highlights the importance of exploring intersectional factors that also influenced women's life experiences and autonomy. Based on interviews with 34 'inspirational' women in Nepal the authors explore how the term 'inspirational' is defined and discuss the range of work being done by so many women in Nepal as highly and truly inspiring. Through a process of discourse analysis of their stories of childhood and education they try to identify what are the key factors that have played a role in enabling these women to realize their potential, and to overcome intersectional barriers to work in a range of diverse positions, from the first Female District Development officer to the first women to achieve her doctorate from overseas; to women who have set up NGOs working towards a more equitable and just society to others who have set up their own businesses or have become leading academics. The conclusion of their study draws together some recommendations

for future research, and recommendations for policy makers as well as those seeking to promote a more equitable sustainable development that truly include women in the process as autonomous, heterogeneous actors in the development process and thus overcoming the barriers of gender inequality.

Chapter 11, written by Ziant Hossian Juthi, deals with a rather new and important dimension of women's body and beauty. The title, "Beautification, Choice, and Empowerment: A Study on Women Cosmetic Surgery Patients in Dhaka, Bangladesh," tries to explore the inter related dynamics of cosmetic surgery, choice and empowerment. While poverty, inaccessibility to proper education and health facilities are the causes of gender inequality in Bangladesh, an increasing number of cosmetic clinics (beauty parlour) are being established and a majority of women have become conscious of their beauty and getting involved in their beauty care and finally adopting cosmetic surgery. The paper tries to address that although surgery brings changes in physical appearance and might make them attractive; however, it contributes very little in terms of enabling them to make their own decision in the family or community. Rather, it focuses on the most common issue that these women are prescribed by patriarchal norms, hindered and forbidden from all sorts of activities and enjoyment of basic rights and participation leading to gender inequality. All these facts are justified to prove that they have not achieved empowerment.

Ishrat Zakia Sultana, writing on "The Exploitation of Women Workers: Unveiling Capitalism in Bangladesh Garment Industries," is the last chapter of the book, and focuses on the series of man-made accidents in Bangladesh's garment industries. In dealing with the causes of these accidents she precisely tries to focus on the poor construction of the factory buildings linked with the unjustified fulfilment of the rights of the poor women garment workers. In discussing these, she claims that the economically desperate women are hit by the capitalist system through which these industries are functioning. Thus she sees that there is a systematic exploitation of women garment workers by the industry owners, who otherwise perceive and practice 'human rights', by negating and denying these to the women workers. Hence, in comparison to male workers, the women workers face gender inequality in the devastating and deteriorating work environment. The paper also investigates how these exploited women are trying to improve their economic conditions, and finally to what extent female garment workers can overturn the vicious circle of exploitation and establish their rights.

The book although focusing on the issues and aspects of gender inequality in the perspective of South Asian countries of Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Malayasia will be advantageous for scholars conducting research in other developing countries like Africa, South America, countries in Middle East and Western Asia, where gender inequality is a continuous and persistent issue in the area of poverty, education, health, political participation, decision-making, leadership and empowerment. The differences reported in the different papers regarding language and gender research are simply the product of 'masculine dominance,' and 'gender sociability.' The chapters raise questions about what's new about gender inequalities in the present time? With the demise of male bread winner family, and the rise of 'female-headed households', there has been something of a 'paradigm shift' in gender relations. But is this shift leading to more or less 'equality?' This needs to be researched and analysed further.

Nazmunnessa Mahtab
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

Aditi Sabur
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

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