

Dynamics of Women's Labor Force Participation in Bangladesh: A Comprehensive Analysis of past five decades

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Abstract

Bangladesh is a developing nation that incessantly progresses in terms of educating and empowering women. Women constitute almost half of its population, so, women's engagement in economic sector is essential for country's stability, progress, and growth. Women still face challenges, but if they had easy access to economic prospects from end to end gender equality, their lives might be significantly simpler. In order to increase the percentage of women who participate in the workforce, assurance of education, prevention of gender based violence and the elimination of child marriage can help (Mitra et al, 2015). In comparison with its neighboring countries, Bangladesh is doing well in promoting women's empowerment through education and employment (Ministry of Planning, 2018). Based on the currently available literature, the shifting trend of women's labor force participation is demonstrated in this paper. After the independence to present time Bangladesh has been taking various initiatives to promote female employment that results in upward trend of female labor force participation over the years. Establishment of rehabilitation center, innovation of microcredit programs, expansion of industry (Ready-made garments), proliferation of education and mobility, reduction of gender inequality influence to bring women into competitive labor market. Currently, 38% of the female working population is involved in active economy of Bangladesh. RMG or Textile portion, the biggest formal working sector for women, contributes to almost 80% of country's export economy where 65% of labor are female. Despite such progressive trends, social barriers, covid pandemic, lack of female leadership and proper policy planning, family burden etc hold women back. This essay also makes the case that fostering an environment that is supportive of women will increase their economic empowerment in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Female labor-force participation, empowerment, Gender equality

Introduction

Bangladesh has remarkably progressed in socio-economic sector through promoting gender parity. Specially, impressive advancement in schooling and microcredit programs for women has strengthened their condition. It is an over populated country and more than half of the population is female. Therefore, women's empowerment through education and economic participation becomes a rising issue for total development of the country. Particularly, women's economic involvement and their active participation

in labor market is important for gaining gender equality, eliminating poverty, achieving human development and economic growth (Hunt & Samman, 2016). Despite such improvement, Bangladesh still faces low female labor force participation. By 2015, Bangladesh has been a very few countries to address gender discrimination and to take measures to bring equal opportunities for both male and female in education, economy, and employment. At present Bangladesh targets to achieve Sustainable Development Goals where active participation of female labor force is one of the prime factors. At present, 38% of the female working population is currently engaged in active economy of Bangladesh. Among these sectors, RMG or Textile portion which contributes to 80% of export economy and 65% of labor are female. There exists strong correlation between sustainable economic growth and women empowerment leading to growing investments in education and employment. Therefore, women's participation in workforce needs to include in all levels of work from primary production to leadership position. In a recent survey of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics has revealed that over the past five years, Bangladesh's female labor force participation rate has increased dramatically, for the most part in rural regions. This suggests that more women are now able to access employment opportunities and contribute to the economic prosperity of their country (TBS report, 2023).

After the period of post liberation to present time, many influencing factors work behind the changing trend of women's economic participation in Bangladesh. Four main reasons are explored that why women have been more and more involved in the economy over time (Fahmida. et al, 2015). The first is the Bangladeshi government's execution of family planning laws. These measures, which started in the late 1970s, helped reduce total fertility rates (TFRs) while also giving women "respectable" positions in the community and health sectors. The microcredit revolution of the mid-1970s was the second cause. Because women are thought to be more dependable than men when it comes to repaying debts to creditors, loans were made expressly for them. Particularly, poverty in rural regions has decreased due to women's participation in agricultural production (who made up 65% of the female labor force as of 2010), primarily through microcredit institutions. The third was an industrial policy designed to advance Bangladesh's industries focused on exports. Calculating the contribution of Women to Bangladesh's Economy in the early eighties, women make up the bulk of those engaged in the ready-made clothing (RMG) industry. The Food for Education program, which was introduced in 1980 and gave food to low-income families in exchange for their kids attending school, is the fourth reason (Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2011).

However, there remain various obstacles, inequalities, adversities, and challenges for female employee in workplaces that must be considered and taken into measures.

Changing Pattern of Women's Economic Participation In Bangladesh

From the time of liberation war to present context, women have been contributing to our country's economy in many ways. Over the past few decades, Bangladesh being a poverty-prone country and having a patriarchal social background, there have been many complexities and challenges in acknowledging women's input to independence and socioeconomic development of the country (ADB, 1990; Kabir and Chowdhury, 2014). However, when Bangladesh became independent in the 70s, the issue of the women's movement and the importance of women's economic contribution began to extend worldwide. Due to this, the development measures for women taken by the Government of Bangladesh

were relatively well-timed and progressive, which impacted the economic participation of women later on (Hossain, 2021, Islam 2020).

At present, women's economic participation has increased day by day which indicates a positive vibe in achieving gender parity. Khatun et al.(2015) identified four factors that contributed to the increasing association of women in economic actions. The family planning policies and its implementation by the Government of Bangladesh in the late 1970s are deemed as the first reason foreshadowing women's involvement in economy. Secondly, the micro credit revolution where loans were mainly targeted to the women and they were pushed up to be small entrepreneur during mid 1970s. Third factor is the industrial upheaval of Bangladesh through the growth of the RMG sector in the early 1980s. In the RMG sector, most of the workers are women. It seems that women's inclusion in industrial sector on which a major portion of export oriented economy and GDP depends might reduce gender gap (Hossain and Alam, 2021).

An upward rate of female labor force participation is seen in Bangladesh after liberation war to till now. World Bank (2021) official statistics indicate that women's participation in the formal labor force is gradually increasing in the last fifty years. In 1961 female workforce participation was nearly 0.9 million, which increased three-fold to 2.7 million in 1984-85. They worked mainly as employees (51% of the total), self-employed (16%), day laborers (13%), unpaid family workers (13%), etc. These sectors tend to be impacted by quotas established to guarantee women employment in the public sector that 10% of officers, 15% of staff, and 50% of primary education each position are reserved for women (ADB, 1990). From 1990 to 2020, the data showed a rapid upsurge. The average value for female labor force participation was 36.31 % in 2019. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a market decrease occurred, and the latest rate is 34.54 % World Bank (2021).

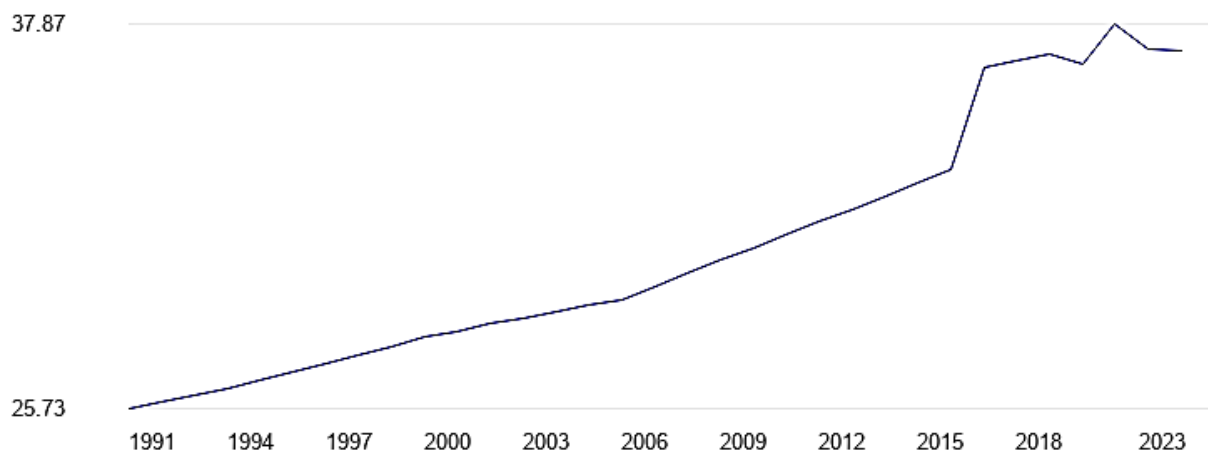


Figure 1: upward trend of FLFP

Source: https://www.theglobaleconomy.com/Bangladesh/Female_labor_force_participation/

Another data showed that during the mid-90s, women's participation was higher in urban areas, that is 20.5%, compared to rural areas (17.4%) of Bangladesh. However, in contrast, in early 2000, the scenario was overturned. According to the latest labor force survey (2016-17), the women's participation rate in

rural areas was 38.6%, much higher than the urban areas (31%). This happened because of women-focused NGOs microfinance initiatives and the rapid spread of young girls joining ready-made garments (RMG) industries (Hossain, 2019).

Year	Male	Female	Urban	Rural
1995-96	87	15.8	20.5	17.4
1999-00	84	23.9	26.5	23.1
2001-03	87	26.1	27.4	25.6
2005-06	86.8	29.2	27.4	29.8
2010	82.5	36	34.5	36.4
2013	81.7	33.7	32.9	33.8
2015-16	81.9	35.6	30.8	37.6
2016-17	80.5	36.3	31	38.6

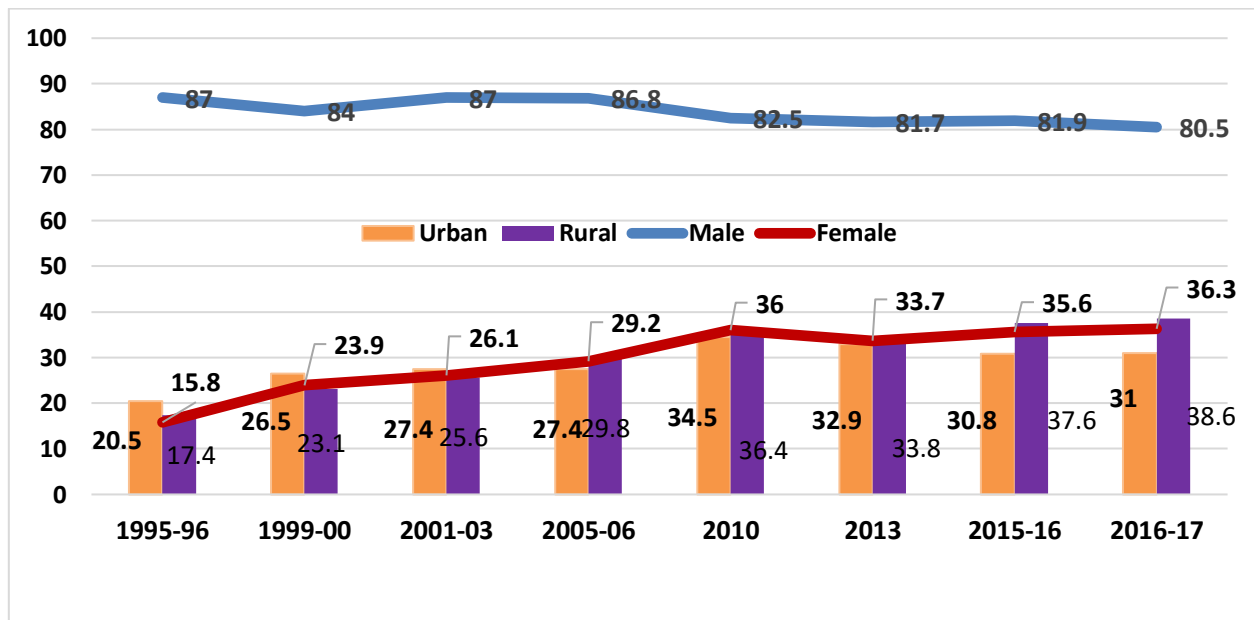


Figure 2: Labour force participation by gender 1991-2017

Bangladesh is doing relatively well compared to its neighbors regarding women's empowerment (Ministry of Planning, 2018). However, not every woman within the country is economically empowered, or always even generating income can make decisions of her own life, especially those living in rural parts of the country. A limited number of them holds administrative and political power in the country. The participation of females is also less than men concerning economic activities. Wage disparities between male and female employees exist among women who work in the economy. However, this situation is improving day by day. The quantity of working women amplified to 18.6 million in 2016-17 from 16.2 million in 2010 (The Daily Star, 2019). About 57 per cent women are occupied in the workforce including 80 percent in the Readymade Garments (RMG) sector.

Female workers bring in remittances to help the welfare of the economy. Daily Star 2019. Due to women's increasing participation in agriculture and the global corona virus pandemic-related urban-rural

migration, the number of women working in rural areas has increased significantly in Bangladesh. According to a survey report, the female labour force participation rate in rural areas was 38.6 percent and 2022, it turned up to 50.89 percent (daily star, 2023). Women are also led to women's empowerment via women entrepreneurs (Nawaz, 2010).

According to research, women business owners spend between 40 and 60 percent of their revenue on domestic expenses (SME Foundation, 2019). A survey conducted revealed that twenty percent of families are headed by women. In addition, 75% of women own and operate their own enterprises (SME Foundation 2019). In addition, 18.3% of workers in agriculture are women. The unacknowledged yet ubiquitous role of women in agriculture is the unseen engine of this economy. The true contribution of women to the national economy is evidently concealed by their involvement in the underpaid, informal, and underappreciated labor sectors (Khatun et al., 2015)

Research Approaches

This study demonstrates a cross-sectional mixed-method approach for surveying the dynamics of women's labor force participation in Bangladesh over the last fifty years. The research combines both quantitative and qualitative analyses to scan trends and the influencing factors by integrating secondary data from numerous sources. The study particularly focuses on the impacts of cultural, social, and policy-driven dynamics, offering a comprehensive understanding of historical trajectories and contemporary challenges in women's economic participation.

Data sources

Government reports like the Sustainable Development Goals Report by the Ministry of Planning, 2018, provide quantitative indicators of the progress of the country toward gender equality and workforce participation. International and National databases: Key contributors include the Labour Force Survey through the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics and the Global Gender Gap Report through the World Economic Forum. Furthermore, studies such as Gender Equality and Economic Growth by Mitra et al. (2015) and Feminization of Employment and Gender Inequality in the Bangladesh Labor Market by S. Islam (2016) have been consulted for the intersectional insights and analyses of gender-specific barriers and progress in employment of Bangladeshi women and girls. However, industry-specific publications, such as the Garments Industry Report (BGMEA, 2021), shed light on women's involvement in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which was widely regarded as the key source of women's economic participation in Bangladesh from the 1980s to 1990s. International Agency Reports and Data Analysis from Organisations such as UN Women (Gendered Effects in Asia and the Pacific, 2020) and The World Bank (Gender and Equality, 2012) offer regional and global comparative viewpoints. Furthermore, contemporary and contextual daily newspaper updates, spanning the previous five decades from the 1970s to 2020, give insight into current labour market developments.

Table 1: Key Secondary Sources on Women's Labor Force Participation in Bangladesh

Source	Year of Publication	Authors/Organizations	Key Focus Area
Unemployment Drops to 3.6% on Increased Women's Participation	2023	The Business Standard	Current trends in FLFP and its impact on national development.
The World Bank Report on Gender and Equality	2012	Harcourt, W	Correlation between labor market outcomes and gender initiatives.
Gender Equality and Economic Growth	2015	Mitra, A et al (Feminist Economics)	Analysis gender equality's effects on economic growth.
Sustainable Development Goals	2018	Ministry of Planning	Evolution on SDG goals related to gender equality and women's workforce inclusion.
Feminization of Employment and Gender Inequality of Bangladesh Labor Market	2016	S. Islam	Gender-based disparities and labor market disputes in Bangladesh.
Labour Market Outcomes in Bangladesh	2011	S. Bridges et al	Broad analysis of labor market economy, regarding gender.
Garments Industry Report	2021	BGMEA	insights into women's participation in the RMG sector.
Gendered Effects in Asia and the Pacific	2020	UN Women	Regional analysis of labor market participation including gender issues .
Bangladesh: Women in Development	1975	UNDP	Early post-independence analysis of women's role in development. Highlights social and structural burdens women face in formal employment.
The Role of Women in the Economy of	1978	ILO	Examines women's roles in

Source	Year of Publication	Authors/Organizations	Key Focus Area
Bangladesh			agriculture-based economy
Social Development and Women's Employment	1971	World Bank	socioeconomic impact of women's employment on national development .
Women and Labor Force Participation in Bangladesh	1991	The World Bank	Focuses on the status of women in the labor force during the 1990s,
The Empowerment of Women in Bangladesh	1995	UNDP	Investigates increasing access to employment that empower women, with focus on the garment sector and microenterprise.
Gender and Employment in Bangladesh	1999	ILO	Demonstrate gendered employment patterns, focusing on wage gaps, job separation, and conditions in both formal and informal sectors.
Bangladesh National Labor Force Survey	1990-1991	Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS)	Provides key data on women's labor force participation, wage disparities, and employment types across sectors.

Data Analysis

Descriptive as well as comparative data analysis methods are applied for indentifying significant trends and patterns in Bangladeshi women's labour force participation. This study exposes how workforce participation has achieved advance from the post-independence era to the present through a longitudinal data analysis, paying special interest to informal businesses including agriculture and the RMG sector. Moreover, the study examines effects of government policies—like microcredit programs and gender-sensitive employment initiatives on women's economic positions. Social , familial obstacles to cultural norms, societal expectations, and political agenda that influenced women's professional progress and access to the workforce are also discussed in the research. As will be described through the comprehensive evaluation of sources mentioned in Table 1, these difficulties are recurring problems that arise in the study involving female wage inequalities, employment segregation, and even catastrophes like the COVID-19 epidemic. This comprehensive strategy illustrates the ways in which historical and modern forces have shaped women's position in the workforce.

Data Sources and Ethical consideration

All the statistical and numeric data used in this research paper is publicly available and accessed. Moreover, the authors of the applied reference papers do not have any confidentiality or restriction to publish or access those data. Additionally, this research paper is based on secondary data sources and there is no interviewee where anonymity or interview data security is required. Finally, the used data in this paper are adorned with proper references to avoid plagiarism and to maintain ethics of publication.

Limitations

Since this study applies secondary data, the primary constraints on its findings are the reliability and consistency of its sources. Due to the lack of primary collection, the data may be informative on a macro level, but it is inadequate to capture the particular and present circumstances of women in the labour force. Furthermore, the consistency and comparability of trends across time might be impacted by differences in reporting methodology across various sources. The research also recommends a solid grasp of the long-term trends of women's labour market participation in Bangladesh, in spite of these limitations.

Influencing Factors of Female Labor Force Participation

World Economic Forum (2020) revealed that Bangladesh has stopped up 72.6% gender gap and ranks 50th in the index through ensuring female labor force participation along with men. In addition, Bangladesh is the top performer among the South Asian countries. There are several underlying influential factors for women's active participation in economic activities after the liberation war to till now in Bangladesh.

Rehabilitation and Handicraft Project during 70s

After liberation war, one of the main crises of Bangladesh was to rehabilitate the war victim women; specially who became pregnant being raped by the Pakistani army. Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, father of Bangladeshi nation, begged his fellow citizens to give due honor and dignity to the women oppressed by the Pakistani army. The very first challenge for these women to restore their position in family and society and provide them with education, employment, and training according to their capabilities. Bangabandhu termed the victims as 'Birangana' in 1972 and ensured all state amenities to aid the women who suffered social prejudices due to being rape victims 'Women Rehabilitation Board' and separate agency for women affairs were established to address their physical as well as psychological distress and to train up them and involve them into productive work so that they can contribute to country's economy. That was the biggest initiative to bring the mass war victim women into economic project to reconstruct and develop the broken economy of the country. The Central Organization for Women's Rehabilitation (Kendrio Mohila Punorbashon Songstha) was then formally established on January 7, 1972. The organization met with A.H.M. Kamaruzzaman, the Minister for Home Affairs, Relief, and Rehabilitation, who provided substantial financial support and the use of two

homes: Eskaton 88, which served as the home, and Eskaton Road 20, which acted as the training center and school. A race was derived against time to save the women from suicide or being trafficked to brothels in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, or the Middle East. The rescue effort lasted for months as news of women in need of help spread throughout the community. With the help of local female political leaders, branch offices were opened in every district, and numerous women came forward to offer consolation and support. The most prior concern of the Women's Rehabilitation Board was to help out many women who were pregnant or suffering from physical injuries as a result of their treatment at the hands of the Pakistani army. The country's abortion law was turned down from January to October for women who had been raped during the liberation war. Most of the women received abortions or physical or psychological treatment at local clinics throughout the country, but the board also set up a special clinic in Dhanmondi with a team of international physicians sponsored by the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF).

The Women's Rehabilitation Board inaugurated Women's Career Training Institute. It was the first professional and vocational training institution for women in Bangladesh. The Women's Career Training Institute coordinated multiple mechanisms to promote women's basic as well as professional capabilities where eligible women were taught typing, shorthand, office management, and filing, as well as the English language and public presentation skills (Biswas and Tripathi, 2019).

That institute taught women to use Singer hand-operated sewing machines. Educated women were given their own machines and were provided with start-up capital. Afterward, some opened their own businesses; some found work in tailoring shops. It also involved training in the area of jute and cane works; many of these women also started their own shops.

The Women's Rehabilitation Board created a residential poultry farm in Savar that was managed by war victim women. The board also provided housing for women and training programs in tailoring and handicrafts. Furthermore, the Central Organization for Women's Rehabilitation located on Eskaton Road provided training programs in sewing machine operation, cookery, and handicrafts (The Daily Star, 2014). This journey was the very first initiative to bring women into market economy to reconstruct both their socio-economic position and country's development. Many women started to engage themselves into labor force.

Micro-credit Program during early 80s

Grameen Bank, created by Nobel Laureate Professor Dr Muhammad Yunus, is the very first micro-finance organization that provides micro-credits without collaterals among the rural poor. After liberation war, the whole nation faced grips of economic crisis where women became the worst sufferer. At the early stage of 80s Grameen Bank emerged as a trailblazing institution that assisted Bangladesh in decreasing rural poverty by giving the unskilled and semi-skilled people options for self-employment. In particular, by offering microcredit to low-income women without collateral. Microcredit programs are mostly vital for Bangladeshi women. Many women are restricted by social custom or family barriers from seeking wage employment in this society. Hence, the main probable source of their income is self-employment. But many of them face difficulty in accessing individual lending programs. Promoting literacy and providing literacy training are essential for women who are unable to join in the labor market due to social constraints or a lack of skills. So they can take full advantage of microcredit.

Furthermore, people who are unable to use microcredit productively must rely on other targeted programs like Bangladesh's Food-for-Work initiative and broad-based economic growth in order to transcend poverty. As women are in more complex and vulnerable situation, they need intensive observation even after providing micro-credit.

Grameen Bank improved women's socioeconomic standing by providing both credit and skill oriented training. As funds are not easily accessible during that time in Bangladesh, a war-torn nation rife with poverty, especially for women who are already denied basic rights. Professor Yunus founded Grameen Bank with an awareness of the challenges that Bangladeshi women and the impoverished faced. The Bank aims to uplift the social and economic status of the poor and the women by providing them the loans upon easy terms and conditions so that they can be self-employed. Many rural women borrowed the loan and started their own business like vegetable farming or cattle farming through which they can earn and become economically active in family and society. Later, various NGOs like Asha, Brac, TMSS provide micro-credit to raise women's economic activities.

In early 1980s, Women in Development (WID) approach spread worldwide to address women's economic contribution and to bring women in development discourse. Being a part of WID, many NGOs started focusing on women's economic participation and contribution in development process. Grameen Bank, Brac, or other NGOs also took multidimensional programs including microcredit loan, handicraft projects and various skill based training to utilize that credit. Such initiatives created a new opportunity for women to come into paid labor market.

Growth of RMG Sector in late 80s & 90s

In Bangladesh, women are historically expected to stay in the home, taking care of the children and elderly, and doing household chores, while males are to be the breadwinners (Islam, 2016). But since gaining its independence in 1971, the nation has received a notable increase in the number of women engaged in business, agriculture, and manufacturing. The percentage of women in the labor force increased from 4% in 1974 to 36% in 2019. About 4.2 million people are employed in the ready-made garments (RMG) industry, which accounts for 84.4 percent of Bangladesh's total exports in 2019 and is the country's second-largest source of foreign exchange after remittances. Ninety percent of these workers are women (BGMEA Report, 2021).

Bangladesh, after being independent in the year 1971, was considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world with no illustrious production supporting its advancement. Even the jute industry, the only key export earner began to split down. During this chaos, the industry that not only contributed but also helped in renovating the economy of the nation-state was- the Readymade-made Garments Sector in Bangladesh. The growth of this business since the 1980s has given women more opportunities for paid employment. The majority of the beneficiaries are lower-class women living in rural areas, who acquire the ability to work and a voice in the home and community (Rahman, 2014). According to Wright (2000), this has led to a prominent progress in women's empowerment and gender equality. Although there remain multiple constraints and challenges for female labor in industrial sector, this particular and paid labor market inclusion have brought a revolutionary changes in women's lives including decision making, self-esteem, mobility, consciousness etc (Mamun and Hoque, 2022).

At present, the ready-made garments industry accounts for 81% (Export Promotion Bureau Compiled by BGMEA 2015) of total export earnings of Bangladesh, thus, fetching the prime earner of foreign currency. This wear industry began its journey in the late 1980's. Various push and pull factors such as poverty, loss of male earning partner, school drop out, opportunity of formal wage employment, freedom, choice making etc worked behind women's inclusion in formal economic market in 80s and 90s (Rahman and Islam, 2013). Currently, 70% garment workers are female which has been the largest sector of female labor participation in Bangladesh.

The Ready-Made Garment (RMG) business has been appeared as a major provider for 84.94% of Bangladesh's total export earnings from July to December, according to data supplied by the Export Promotion Bureau for the fiscal year 2023–2024. In 2023, the Ready-Made Garment (RMG) sector contributed 10.3% to Bangladesh's GDP, according to the Bangladesh Bank. This was a significant contribution. The RMG industry made USD 46,99 billion in total export revenue during this time. Furthermore, the contributing to the wealth of the country, the RMG industry's spectacular economic success has been crucial in promoting employment for women (LightCastleBd, 2024).

Increasing Women's Education at Twenty-first Century

Women now have greater access to opportunities for personal development. Girls' education is essential for economic growth because each year they spend in school raises their potential earnings in the future. She will use her income to make investments in the health and education of her kids, therefore permanently ending the cycle of intergenerational poverty.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targeted of gender parity in access to basic and secondary education was greatly surpassed in this regard. Girls outnumber boys in both primary and secondary enrolment. SDGs also focus on equality education where women. By 2021, the number of girls attending secondary education had climbed by 7.7%, and the dropout rate had fallen from 14.7% to 3.5%. In addition, 50.95% of girls could enroll in high school in 2021. Additionally, the proportion of female instructors climbed from 19.53% in 2010 to 26.65% in 2021. Some evolutionary projects have influenced to increase in female education that leads to boost up women's labor force participation for last three decades. While the first five-year national plan (1973-78) emphasized on women's welfare in health and vocational skill; the next second five-year national plan (1980-85) focused on women's development by promoting congenial opportunities in education and employment. Later, various social barriers like child marriage, dowry system, domestic violence etc have been brought under laws to protect women and to promote female education. The government of Bangladesh launched the Female Secondary School Stipend and Assistance Program (FSSAP) in 1994 with the support of the Asian Development Bank (ADB), International Development Association (IDA), and other development partners. The program's objectives were to discourage early marriage and increase rural female secondary school enrollment and completion rates. Women's advancement in the social, economic, and educational spheres was effectively aided by this program. The prerequisites included being unmarried until the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exam or the age of eighteen, as well as having a minimum attendance rate of seventy-five percent and an annual test score of 45% percent. Following significant advancements, the government and several philanthropists funded the research through national initiatives. Bangladesh has ratified a number of agreements and conventions, including the Vienna Convention, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the Beijing Platform for Action, the

Vienna Convention, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other ILO conventions. Bangladesh developed its first national women's development policy (NWDP) in 1997 in response to the BPFA and the CEDAW. The NWDP underwent its most current update in 2011, which was finished. The 2011 NWDP was implemented through the creation of a National Action Plan in 2013, which is currently being updated to align with the SDGs.

Investment in the National Education Policy 2010 is in favor of the mandate for gender equality in the classroom. The policy framework is primarily focused on reducing gender disparities, along with promoting female participation and removing social barriers that hinder girls from receiving education. Bangladesh became one of the countries to gain gender parity in primary school enrollment by 2015 though girls lack behind in secondary and tertiary education. The GoB initiated the SEQAEP project in 2011, and it intends to improve secondary education's accessibility and quality by providing teachers and students with audio-visual demonstrations of classes. Girls are also given special attention in this project. Girls' staffing in secondary school increased by 7.7% by 2021 and dropout rates have reduced from 14.7% to 3.5%. Moreover, 50.95% of females could gain secondary education in 2021. The percentage of female educators also increased to 26.65% in 2021, whereas the rate was only 19.53% in 2010. The more female enter into education, the more female labor force increase. As education thrives human productivity, increase in female education leads to productive and competitive market opportunities.

Child Marriage Restraint, Gender Parity, and Social Reformation

Child marriage has been one of the key causes for increased school dropout rates for girls in Bangladesh. Both boys and girls can be victims of child marriage, but girls are more likely to suffer its terrible consequences. According to a recent research by the World Bank Group and the International Center for Research on Women, Bangladesh could save 11.7% of its entire education budget by 2030 if child marriage and early pregnancies were abolished. One of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals is to end child marriage. More than one third of girls are married off before the age of 18, and nearly one in five have their first child before they turn 18 according to the "Economic Impacts of Child Marriage: Global Synthesis Report". The estimations in the report's 15 core nations, which include Bangladesh, encompass a wide range of contexts, including the prevalence of child marriage. One of its examined the effects of child marriage is labor force participation, earnings, and productivity. According to a World Bank report, child marriage has a significant financial impact. At present, due to increasing social awareness, girl's education, child marriage restraint act, child marriage has reduced in number that helps girls to bring into labor force. Child marriage restraint act 1929, plan international program named community-centered child development (CCCD) to spread awareness-rising about child marriage and multiple development issues regarding basic life skill, health-care, other vocational training. Special attention has been given on girl child to excel their education and employment (Plan International). Dowry prohibition act 1980 is another noteworthy social and legal reform that helped reduce dowry related violence which might pave the way for female education and employment. Domestic Violence Prevention and Protection act 2010 also helps to lead women to achieve their job.

Bangladesh has attained gender parity at the greatest rate in South Asia, according to the World Economic Forum's (WEF) most recent Global Gender Gap Report 2023, according to UNB. With a score of 72.2%, Bangladesh is ranked 59th in the world, showing significant progress toward gender

parity. Women nationwide experienced a rise in gender parity this year, as evidenced by a better index rating and score than in 2022. This progressive era is encouraging more women than ever before to enter the workforce. Besides, increasing female labor inspectors and other female attendees and endorsing group initiatives to advance gender parity in the workplace encourage women to join corporate labor market. Through the provision of maternity leave, the abolition of workplace violence and harassment, and the appointment of more women to positions of leadership also help increase the rate of female labor force. ILO and ministry of labor and employment have taken various initiative to reduce gender inequalities in workplace. Female participation in Bangladesh's labour force has increased to 42.68% in 2022, up from 36.3% five years ago, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) released on Wednesday (29 March). Increasing gender sensitivity and addressing gender based violence in work place helped women to bring into education and employment. May 13, 2009 a set of standards defining sexual delinquency was released by the Supreme Court's High Court Division in order to stop women, girls, and children from being sexually or physically harassed at work, in educational settings, or in other public areas, including on public highways, nationwide. By revising Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015, Bangladesh labor laws added a particular provision for the prohibition of sexual harassment in the workplace for women in 2022. Bangladesh Labour Rules 2015 added Rule 361 KA under Bangladesh Labour Rules to provide a harassment-free working environment in the private sectors (as revised in 2022). According to Rule 361 KA (2), the relevant authority of the organization must form a Complaint Committee in order to accept complaints, carry out investigations, and provide recommendations in the event that the woman being investigated for sexual harassment is the subject of the investigation. There must be a minimum of five members on the Complaints Committee, with the majority being female. A woman will serve as the committee's head. (<https://www.fmassociatesbd.com/laws-regarding-sexual-harassment-in-workplaces-in-bangladesh>)

Challenges and cotemporary Scenario of Female labor force participation

Triple Burden

Due to existing gender norms, women are assigned to be the provider of care work and basic needs. That is why women face triple burden of managing household chores, social responsibilities along with their productive work. As the biggest sector of female employment is RMG sector; most of the female garment workers need to manage both their unpaid household activities and working life. Situation becomes more vulnerable when these working women get pregnant and have children. As most of the workplaces do not provide any daycare center for children, working mothers face multiple challenges to continue their work. More than one-third of the female labor force is employed as unpaid contributing family helps, and the percentage of female labor force participation (FLFP) is still less than half that of the male rate. Women make less money than males, even when paid. Despite a narrowing tendency, the gender role disparity persists even after accounting for the education and job sectors. However, household responsibilities continue to restrict women's labor market opportunities, and limited mobility due to cultural norms undermines women's access to higher-skilled and higher-paying jobs as well as tertiary level education. Removing barriers to FLFP will help Bangladesh meet its challenges to create new jobs and enhance its economic competitiveness,

Social barriers, Inequality and violence

Multiple social barriers decrease women's engagement in formal productive sector. Restricted mobility, family reputation, unequal judgment etc chain women to work outside home. But sometimes existing socio-economic problem like poverty works beyond all social practices to bring female into economic work. The female labor market is anticipated to be pushed by poverty, and a positive association between female LFPR and poverty is likely to be seen. As was already established, social attitudes in Bangladesh are a significant barrier to female labor force participation. Even Nevertheless, the less fortunate women might be in a desperate circumstance and be willing to overcome the social barrier if it means they can support themselves. Richer households tend to lean more conservative. Gender wage gap is another crucial problem that affects FLFP. Though more than 70% rmg garments workers are female, they do not get equal payment that of men. When women get pregnant or become mother, they are treated less productive. Even in many industries they are redacted from work in this phase. Moreover, most of the industries are not work-friendly for female labors. There is no concern to ensure reproductive health necessities, no facilities for safe transportation. Work place violence like sexual harassment, bullying, sexual assault etc are common. Such occurrence burdens women's involvement in productive sector.

Lack of Female Leadership

Currently, there are more girls than boys enrolled in secondary education in Bangladesh, and over 30 million women in that country use microcredit services. Targeting to achieve Sustainable Development Goals, Bangladesh has been focusing on gender equality to emphasize and ensure women's education, employment, and development through reducing gender inequality and gender based violence. Women now have to be able to access lucrative market opportunities and become financially independent as a result of these improvements, but this is not the case. In Bangladesh, there are still few women entrepreneurs and a low percentage of women in the labor force. Mostly, in formal sector women works as labor and usually they do not get managerial or administrative post. When a female is appointed in leadership position, she might address and analyze the actual conditions, sufferings, and needs of other female workers. Almost 60% of formal sector female labors are from RMG sector, there still remains a huge lack of female industrialists in this sector. When it comes to ready-made garment exports, or RMG exports, Bangladesh ranks second in the world and is the country's top export earner. 4.22 million individuals are employed in this sector overall, with women making up the largest share of workers in South Asia at over 60%. 1% of women hold leadership roles in this industry, despite the fact that women make up the majority of its workforce. Since the BGMEA's founding in 1978, there has only been one woman to hold the presidency.

Bangladesh has a 6.3% market share in the USD 1.4 trillion global apparel market in 2020. The RMG industry in Bangladesh accounted for roughly 81.16% of the nation's total export revenue in FY 2020–21, according to the BGMEA. Innovision BD estimates that the nation has roughly 4,000 RMG plants. Furthermore, the textile, apparel, and accessory sectors, along with the hundreds of related machineries, employ more people than any other sector of the economy. The World Bank estimates that 6.3% of Bangladesh's 67 million workers were employed in this industry in 2019. Furthermore, 20.1 million women, or 30% of the workforce, work in Bangladesh; of these, 2.53 million, or 12.5%, are employed in the RMG industry. For the past few decades, the proportion of female employees in the RMG sector has been decreasing, and the representation of female employees in leadership roles is essentially

nonexistent (Business Inspection, 2022). According to ILO, women usually cannot hold the leading position because of social barriers, sexual harassment, family responsibilities, lack of education and curriculum skills.

Growth of informal labor and Policy lacking

From 36.3% in 2012 to 42.68% in 2022, female labor force participation in Bangladesh has increased, with women becoming more actively involved in the workforce, particularly in rural regions. According to the BBS poll, 50.88% of women in rural regions and 23.58% of women in urban areas are employed. There has been an increased rate of informal sector work like housekeeping work, helper of any locus industry or business or shop. At present a large number of women being migrated from rural area to urban join informal sector. Though it has added an opportunity of women's economic participation, these working women have to face multiple challenges like low payment, unlimited working hour, medical leave etc. Though the international norm of equal compensation for equal work is strongly stressed by the Bangladesh Labor Act (BLA) in reality, the gender pay gap is widening, particularly in Bangladesh's unorganized sector. Male and female workers in Bangladesh are paid differently for the same job and the same number of hours. Additionally, there is no legal protection for female workers in the unorganized sector. Moreover, by improving health and safety requirements, particularly for expectant or nursing mothers, the ILO agreements defend mothers. These regulations prohibit forcing any woman to perform any task that could endanger her or her unborn child. But the situation in Bangladesh is different. The only rule that protects women is one that forbids pregnant women and those who have recently given birth from performing strenuous work, including work that requires them to stand for extended periods of time or any activity that is harmful to their health. According to an ILO convention, women must be granted 18 weeks of paid maternity leave in addition to an extra six weeks of leave following delivering. However, the BLA only permits a meagre six weeks of maternity leave prior to and following childbirth. In Bangladesh, no additional legislation has been passed to safeguard the health and safety of women. Following the court's consideration of the petition filed by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA), several guidelines were established to safeguard women from sexual harassment and workplace violence. A definition of sexual harassment was established, and all businesses now house sexual harassment reporting centers. Despite the approval of the law, this practice has not yet been put into effect.

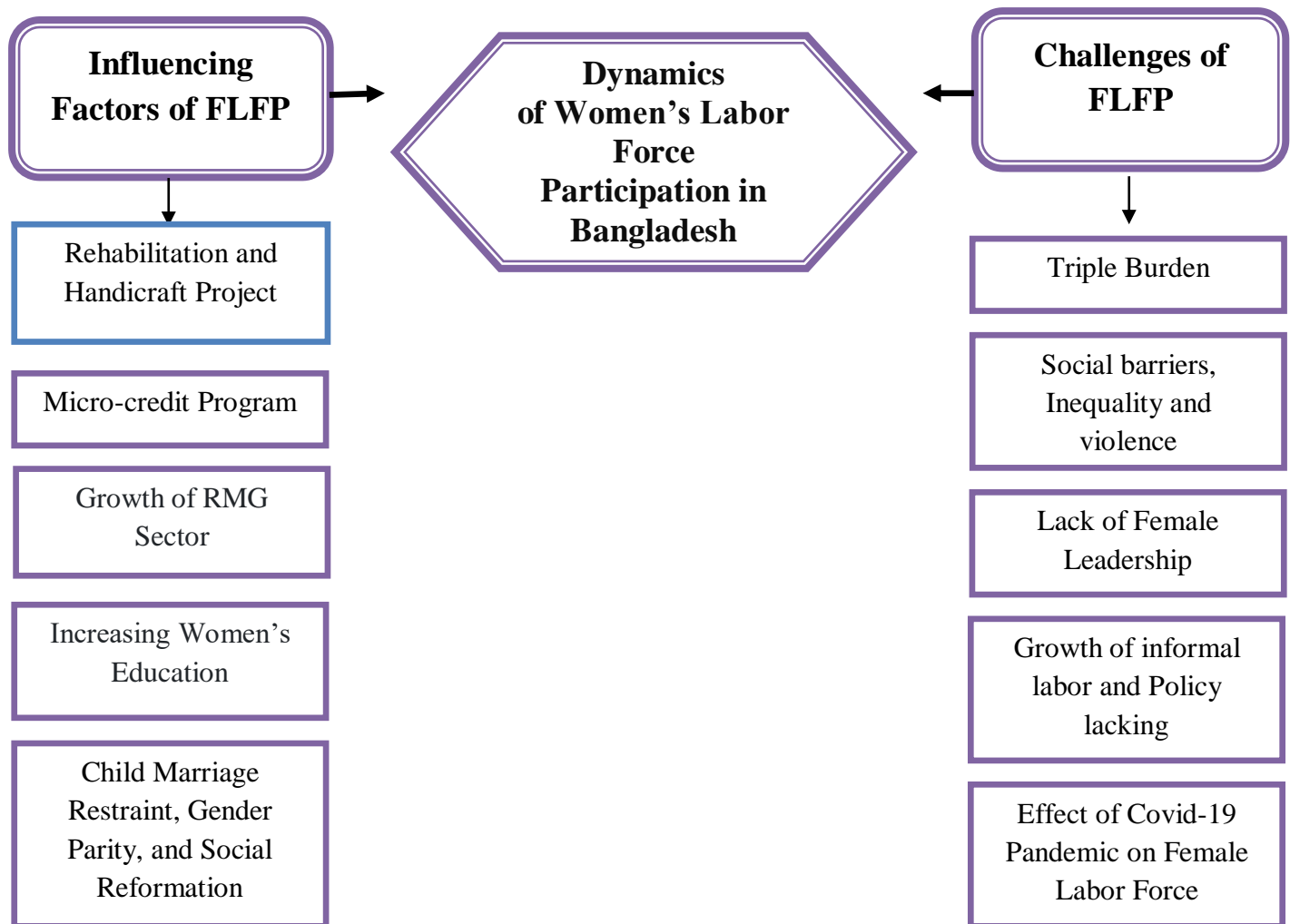
Effect of Covid-19 Pandemic on Female Labor Force

When the first case of covid-19 detected in Bangladesh, following the WHO rules and continuing worldwide trend its government announced lockdown for a certain period of time which was quite. A large of working people, especially women were most prone to be the worst sufferer for multiple reasons. According to a report 2017, 90% of nursing profession is covered by female nurse and doctor. Therefore, during pandemic they have to survive both physically and mentally to provide overtime work-duty with contagious virus patients. Many of them died while giving treatment and many of them were forced to leave their job. Increase of domestic violence and unpaid care work led women to lose their outside job that had been negative impact on labor market scenario. According to BIGD report

2020, women already spend more than 6 hours doing unpaid domestic work and the school closure (extra time to take care of children), pandemic situation (additional maintenance for new born or aged people), work from home added extra burden of managing all these things which are considered as female task. Besides, a huge number of female labor are engaged in garment industry sector and domestic helping sector. Restricted mobility, industry closure confined women into domestic work. Consequently, a downfall in female labor market is seen during 2020 to 2022. Industries and professions Two categories of job losses have been brought on by the COVID-19 outbreak in Bangladesh: "temporary" lockdown jobs and permanent impact jobs (Castle light bd, 2020). Twelve to seventeen million temporary employment were lost in the first two months of the outbreak as a result of the closure of MSMEs (micro, small, and medium-sized companies), the transportation industry, the construction industry, and the manufacturing sector (Ahmed, et al, 2020). Over 10 million individuals have lost their employment in agriculture, according to a poll, bringing the total number of temporary job losses to approximately 25 million. The World Bank has confirmed that more women than males have lost their jobs over the previous two years, despite the fact that the precise number of jobs lost is unknown. For women ensnared in the unorganized sector, job losses was a significant issue. According to the UN Women survey(2020), 49% of women working in informal jobs and 83% of women in formal jobs reported losing their jobs or having their hours cut. Nonetheless, COVID-19 impacted both men (25%) and women (17%) who held formal employment; nonetheless, women suffered larger income decreases (38%) but fewer job losses overall. Women's earnings from agricultural production, food processing (such as puffed rice and flattened rice), and other types of informal employment significantly decreased as a result of the pandemic-related market closures.

Discussion

Women, half of the country's population, have been contributing to its economy from the post liberation period to present time in numerous ways. Although there is still much need for improvement, the situation for women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh is currently improving. The rise in the female labor force participation rate has an impact on women's ability of decision making. In contrast, women are faring far better in the field of education. Women are now contributing more to leadership and generating more income than before. Furthermore, there are a lot more women running their own businesses. Women who participate in both formal and informal jobs and companies have more access to resources and can use their decision-making abilities. Economic stability is a key factor in the economic empowerment of women. But economic empowerment also requires social empowerment. Various socio-political issues, cultural standards, gender-based concepts, NGO and governments initiatives operate the cycle of female labor force in society which both have encouraging and challenging outcomes.



After the dawn of Bangladesh as an independent country in 1971, it has outstandingly stepped forward to social, economic, and cultural sectors where women's active participation significantly contributes to achieve such progress. Specially, women's economic engagement and enhancement in market economy has helped to reconstruct country's trade and industry growth. In addition, Bangladesh is an over populous country where women comprise half of its population. That is why, women's economic participation in formal labor market is important for accomplishing gender equality, poverty reduction, human development and economic sustainability. Women work in both paid and unpaid labor sector. Increasing female education, micro-credits programs, gender equality, government initiatives, growth of industry etc have influenced female labor force participation in formal sector. But still there remain multi-dimensional social barriers, reproductive health issues, family responsibilities, gender-based violence that hinder women's productivity. Additionally, attention must be given to the problem of women (both employed and unemployed) engaging in unpaid domestic labour. The Bangladeshi

government should raise awareness of women's economic participation as well safe working condition. Female labor force participation can be encouraged by increasing their access to capital including all types of financial assets and rising training opportunities to advance their skills. The general development of the nation depends on the economic empowerment of women. If half of the population lacks power, a country cannot develop properly. The unpaid domestic labour that women perform has a tendency to go unnoticed in Bangladesh's current cultural and social setting. But at present, women are becoming economically empowered as a result of factors like education, the prevention of child marriage, women's participation in formal and informal occupations, women entrepreneurs, and access to resources. Along with enhancing Bangladesh's legal and regulatory system which needs to be women-friendly so that violence, harassment, unequal judgment can be prevented and proper insurance of their labor rights can be assured ; the Bangladeshi government must emphasize on these issues.

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