

## **EMPOWERMENT AS A NECCESARY COMPONENT FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT IN BANGLADESH:**

Khushi Kabir  
Coordinator  
Nijera Kori,

"Women Hold up Half the Sky" is an ancient Chinese saying. In a similar vein, Bangladesh's National Poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam also states in one of his most well known epic poems 'Nari' (Woman).

I sing the song of equality –  
In my view there is no disparity between man and woman  
All that has been created in this world that spreads positivity  
Half of it is done by Man and the other, Woman's creativity

In other words, recognizing the role and contribution of women which implies valuing their roles in totality, both in production and reproduction, not just in economic terms, but socially, politically or even in valuing their role and relationship with the environment, can never be over-emphasised. I use the word never, because we, living in a world order that is primarily dominated and controlled by patriarchal values tend to ignore and undermine this reality. But as we see by the two quotes I have stated, this reality has been recognised by not only ancient wisdom of the Chinese, but even by one of our most revered poets. Let us now see what is the situation in the ground.

Though this presentation is very rooted in Bangladesh's current context, the situation described would resonate quite easily with situations elsewhere both within the region, as well as with the rest of the world. Let us first begin with understanding the context in which mainstream development is looked at, what does it achieve, for whom, and where do its problems lie. Though economic development may reduce poverty up to a point and for a certain segment of society, the same is certainly not true for the entire population, based on gender, class, ethnicity or other categories of excluded and marginalised peoples, where inequalities are reproduced due to social property relationship, embedded through institutions, power, reality and composition of the state. There is now a word to describe it. It is called Inter-sectionality.

Mainstream discussion that is based on the premise of economic development, argues that sustained and equitable economic growth, whether in a nation, region or locale, inevitably leads to empowerment of all its citizens and more emphatically to women, particularly the marginalized section. Truth is that an automatic "trickling down" of the effects of growth or the modified version of "inclusive growth" by way of social safety net programmes no longer lift people above poverty. There is widespread concern that economic growth has not been shared fairly, and that the current economic crisis further widens the gap between the rich and poor. In Bangladesh, the total number of people living in poverty, particularly women, has increased due to rising disparities in the distribution of resources within this country and the firmly embedded patriarchal

structures, though percentages may show a more positive picture. Therefore, if a solution packaged with so-called "inclusive" instruments in mainstreaming women with safety net packages sans taking cognisance of structural inequality, reproduced through institutions of patriarchy, power, reality and composition of the state, is re-enforcing the current status quo. The debate that arose in the sixties and seventies with the shifting of neo liberal growth model for development, towards an inclusive, participatory and equitable approach is, incredible as it may sound, still needs to be reiterated and debated even more so today.

This perception of a neo liberal economic paradigm is even more relevant when we look at what is generally perceived by most people as women's rights. As usually stated in most policy papers on this issue, macro- economic policy is a women's rights issue, as it determines not only how resources are mobilized, but also access and control over these resources, and more importantly their agency in accessing these. As is true of most Constitutions, the Constitution of Bangladesh, too, guarantees gender equality, which not only grants equality to women but also empowers the State to adopt measures of positive discrimination in favour of women. Some of the articles enshrined in Bangladesh's constitution which corroborates the above statement are:

Article 10: 'Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life'

Article 19(1): 'The state shall endeavour to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens'. Again 19(2) states that 'the State shall adopt effective measures to remove social and economic inequality between man and woman and to ensure the equitable distribution of wealth among citizens, and of opportunities in order to attain a uniform level of economic development throughout the republic.'

Article 27: 'All citizens are equal before the law and are entitled to equal protection of the law'

Article 28(1): 'The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth'. Again 28(2) states 'Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and of public life'.

Once again Article 29(1) and (2) is clear on equality of opportunities for all citizens in respect of employment or office in the service of the republic and further that no citizen shall be ineligible or discriminated against in the above matters on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

In the arena of International Legal Frameworks, Bangladesh has along with many other nations acceded to and ratified relevant Covenants, Conventions, Protocols etc.

Internally, Bangladesh has a National Women's Development Policy which incorporates a number of positive actions and programmes for women. It has enacted certain laws regarding protection of women against violence, such as Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Acid Crime Control Act, Right to Information Act etc.

While Constitutional guarantees are no doubt crucial in order to establish one's right as a citizen, and Laws, Rules, Regulations and Policies are put in place to ensure that these guarantees are implementable, it is precisely in this lack of enforcement of the implementation that the problem lies. Programmes directed specifically for women, both as safety net programmes as well as access and enhancement for women's capacity in social, economic and partially in political spheres do exist. The question that arises therefore is that what do these programmes, policies, rules etc. actually mean to women? Again it is important to specify which women are we actually targeting and how. Do these rights really in actual terms reflect the needs and realization of all categories of women? Is it possible to have one blanket regulation or laws, or even be it programmes, for all categories, regardless of class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, disabilities etc.? Though in some situations, class interests of poorer women are mentioned albeit in most cases as lip service only, which I will elaborate a little later on in this paper, other categories of marginalized women continue to remain invisible.

Rights, therefore, is not simply complying with International frameworks, nor is it a matter of making relevant laws within each country. It is more important, a means and an understanding as citizens one's own ability to exercise one's voice, the ability to act along with the power of Agency. This is looking at it from the Rights Holder's perspective.

The other side which is more important is that of the duty bearer, who has the important task of ensuring that rights are not gender, class, ethnicity etc. biased. It is their role to be open, accessible, transparent and participatory in nature. Their actions must not only prove so, but appear to be so. They have to be accountable to citizens, to women and have to recognize and accept the power that is inherent within people. It may be relevant to mention here that women's rights does not exist solely in the broader or societal sphere, but by its very nature is as part of the patriarchal systems and values imbibed within us and embedded in our society, thus women's right and her right to development begins from within. From within herself, within her home, within her family, her social being, her immediate and outside surroundings, and of course the state itself. The age old slogan of 'personal is political' still holds true even today.

While we have spoken so far on Rights and touched upon their enforcement and impact to a certain extent, the topic of this paper is about understanding not just women's rights, but about understanding their right to Development. Whereas women's right to development does feature or is imbedded in the above paragraphs, it is important to describe this in further or greater details. How then do we begin to look at women's right to development? Let us start by looking at a few examples of how conventional development affects women. As stated earlier, while some attempts to include women from poorer classes are targeted, other marginalized women are still ignored as a category needing specific focus. While looking at this we can also see how some programmes attempting to specifically target poor women fare as to how far they truly look at women's access, specially in terms of their access to resources and their control over these resources, their empowerment, their agency. Do these programmes retain the status quo, or do they increase women's agency, that is their ability to define and articulate needs and priorities and act upon them?

The Sustainable Development Goals, specifically goal 5 is designated towards ensuring women's equality. However all other Goals also impact upon women, whether it be education, nutrition status, health and sanitation etc. The main theme of SDGs being 'To Leave No One Behind' means just that. Development is for all and must be made fully inclusive. But mere providing of services as has been seen in the past and there are numerous studies, impact assessments, reviews etc. which shows that providing of services alone does not in reality lead to development as we see it. Even while Bangladesh may have had some positive results in terms of achieving numbers in goals, and most recently we have been given the honour of being considered on top of all other countries in South Asia in Gender Equity ranking, the impact of these achievements cannot be seen as obvious in the daily lives of these women that are assumed to have benefited through these achievements. Though not stated in so many words, it is empowerment as we see it being a key factor in ensuring women's right to development. Empowerment is the process of change through which those who have been denied the ability to articulate their needs, exercise their rights and influence the decision making processes which shape their lives are enabled to do so. There are three dimensions that need to be looked at concurrently when understanding the concept of empowerment in its fullest sense. One being the resource dimension which relates to a variety of tangible as well as intangible resources. This resource dimension encompasses conventional economic resources, such as land, assets, finance, equipment, employment etc.

It is also embodied in the human being itself in the form of education, analytical and practical skills, knowledge, creativity, imagination, wisdom. This resource could also be social in nature, encompassing social networks, associations and connections through which people are able to improve their situation and life.

A second dimension of power relates to agency as described earlier, the ability to define and articulate needs and priorities and to act upon them. Resources and agency together constitute what Amartya Sen refers to as capabilities, the potential that people have for living the lives they want, of achieving ways of being and doing as valued by themselves as right and the only way is through developing collective agency, thus increasing collective capabilities.

This idea of achievement constitutes the third dimension of empowerment. The failure of the poor and disenfranchised, here more particularly women from these sections of people in a society to achieve their valued goals is a reflection of the underlying asymmetries in their basic capabilities. It has to be understood that these underlying asymmetries do not exist due to their just being so, but very clearly due to the structures that exist and are reinforced continuously often in the name of development. Empowerment is seen as providing these groups with the capabilities needed to achieve their valued goals. For these groups as has been seen creating or increasing collective capabilities is crucial.

Perhaps now is the time to take a quick look at what conventionally constitutes as women's development. First let us look at services provided for women towards their development. In the case of safety net programmes that exist, most beneficiaries are selected by local government, mainly male elites of the area and are used as a means of ensuring total and unconditional support to the ruling elite. Lack of accountability and transparency leads to corruption both in terms of what the 'selected' beneficiary actually receives, but also money taken

at the time of enlistment. This is the crux of SDG 16. Though laws are in place to ensure transparency and information is to be displayed prominently, women as passive recipients at the mercy of the powers that be and often used by the male members of their family, kin or social group to buy their loyalty to the 'leaders' do not have the agency needed to ensure their entitlements. Thus what was conjured as a social benefit to support poor marginalized women in times of need ends up being used as a tool for means of control. The same could be said about health centres catering towards women's health needs or something as basic as female child centered education programmes. A total lack of sensitivity on the part of the providers, coupled with no linkage or contact with ground realities regarding implementation or lack of, on the part of policy makers, in turn leads to a continued marginalization of women's inclusion in what is conventionally assumed as development. Let be more specific, the programmes by themselves and as designed look good. They have not only identified the lacking that exists towards women's inclusion or access to these basic services which are also the basic rights of all citizens to be ensured by the state, but taken positive measures to ensure their inclusion. Why then do we criticise this, or how and why does this not really reach its stated objectives? In order for these beneficiaries or marginalized women to achieve their valued goals of being treated with respect and their due share of their entitlements, their collective capabilities have to be organized together with ensuring their ability to act that is agency.

Another example that could be used is the much discussed and only very recently debated service provision of micro-credit, micro-loans etc. Again as has been observed though many interactions, corroborated by several studies, it is now evident that on its own, micro credit to poor women only helps reinforce existing unequal structures both within the family as well as the larger society. Without confronting existing patriarchal structures, any intervention only serves to continue existing imbalances unless these confrontations are made an integral part of the process. In the area of resources too, land rights and a pro women land redistributive policy is considered too radical or not an option to be considered. Excuses of cultural practices, traditions, taboos are conveniently brought out when women's and particularly excluded and marginalized women's access and rights are in question. The only place where women's access to land is mentioned is only in case of inheritance rights as determined by religious, traditional or social constructs, but not as an entitlement, not as a right as an equal citizen and not as part of a redistributive policy.

Commercialisation of production processes which were traditionally the domain of women and the intrusion of market led economy even at the lowest household level of production has further exacerbated women's alienation from her control over her means of production. This too has given rise to women's lack of control over her production and her right to development. The advent of transforming fertile agriculture land to a barren saline desert through promotion by a deliberately created global market for a shrimp aquaculture industry by forcibly taking away and grabbing land from local agriculture producers and fishers dependant on the existing natural resources for their livelihoods is a prime example of the negative consequences of an export led market economy

where women not only get marginalized or subjugated to lowly paid insecure labour, from having been a main actor in the agriculture or related processes, i.e seed preservation, livestock caring, post harvest inputs, vegetable gardening, poultry rearing etc. repairing of nets, drying fish etc. Apart from the fact that since this industry enjoys the protection of the powers that be, both within the government, within political bigwigs, donors and business interest groups, women living in shrimp areas face the added fear of violence and rape without having access to any kind of recourse. Another example could be given regarding conversion of indigenous lands for tobacco plantations and other forms of cash crops or pulp forests for profit. These types of exploitation of natural resources in the name of development have most severe impacts on indigenous and rural populations. Yes, women do as a result of these changes find employment opportunities, but at what cost? Low paid employment where they have no agency, as opposed to what they were in control of, even if it did not provide them with cash. We should learn to calculate and put an economic value to what has been lost, to the meager amount she is now forced to work for.

It may be stated that despite many international agreements and inclusion of many programmes for women's development over the past three and a half decades, women are still much more likely than men to be poor and marginalized. In fact statistics in most parts of the world show the increase in the feminization of poverty. They usually have less access than men to medical care, property ownership, training, employment. This is despite the fact that women in many of our countries have held the highest political post, they are still far less likely than men to be politically active as representing women's voice rather than their parties voice. Very often, mainstream development policies does not only erode cultural life of indigenous women but also provide for commodified versions of cultural life for them. Thus women's development and women's empowerment are not only intricately related but intertwined as one.

It is impossible to conceive of one without the other. What is also extremely relevant that mere quotas or role models, though they do have their roles are simply not enough. They make no dent in the psychological and mental framework that constitutes patriarchal forms of the societies we live in. Without taking into consideration the totality of women's lives, their needs, their rights and their strengths as a part of human populations, and developing a new feminist development paradigm based on a holistic approach which is based on equality of rights for all, access and use of resources for all, a sustainable process based on inclusiveness, justice and as a continuing process, not mere economic sustainability is what I would call a holistic approach to development. It is time to move away from models to practices and approaches. It is time to learn from what people and particularly women have been coping with each new shift and changes taking place in their lives. As one of the women I have had the privilege to work with in one of the most remote rural areas in Bangladesh once replied when asked what makes her continue her struggle. She is someone who has in the past been raped, been jailed and tortured in custody, is still fighting false cases perpetuated against her, which means loss of income whenever she goes to court. She said 'I am part of this struggle because I want my daughters, and my daughters' daughters and their daughters to be able to live in this land'.

Understanding women's right to development implies gender equality, a situation or society in which women and men enjoy the same opportunities, outcomes, rights and obligations in all spheres of life. Equality between women and men exist when both sexes are able to share equally in the distribution of power and influence, have equal opportunities for financial independence, enjoy equal access to education and the opportunity and ability to develop agency and collective capabilities. A critical aspect of gender equality is the empowerment of women, with a focus on identifying and redressing power imbalances, giving women more autonomy to manage their own lives. Women's empowerment is vital to sustainable development and the realization of human rights for all.

Though I have not touched upon an important and crucial aspect of what role if any, civil and military bureaucracies play in determining women's access to development and ensuring and increasing their rights over resources and services, this does not mean that this is not an important and crucial issue towards women's right to development. The impunity that the bureaucracy for very obvious reasons enjoy, is one of the basic reasons for increasing women's insecurities where sensitivity, openness, accountability and transparency is deliberately made difficult or even impossible. The use of state power and force, is one of the major bastions of patriarchy. True democracy along with accountability to all citizens is an extremely important aspect and when that happens, development and empowerment will no longer be a Utopia. As is the second issue that I will also like to deal with. The use of Ideology, and most carefully and strategically, through use of religion without allowing for differences in interpretations, debates arising from these interpretations and allowing for inclusiveness and the right to one's own belief even if it differs from one's own is sadly discouraged. Islamophobia which in my mind is a created phobia, just as consumerism is also a created desire, is a combination of trying to specifically target one group as being violent, who again through some of the extremist and violent actions in the name of Islam only play and provide credence to this new bogey. Though the popular global phobia is Islam as a religion, we see a similar situation, a similar ideology in all nation states where majority religions are used to create a power game of attacking the "Other". Be it white racist Christian supremacy, the bigotry and violence of the Hindutva, the Buddhist attacks and genocide against Rohingyas, or even in Bangladesh against 'others' who are non-muslims or of non Bangla ethnicity. This ideology, as has been observed and now accepted globally, hits women the hardest. It creates a world view which is based on ideology being forced without space for dissent, diversity or differences, and not only through the ideology of religion which is used widely to enforce coercive behaviour but also the ideology of neo liberal economic models to reinforce women's subjugation. We therefore now have to look at events around us as part of a total phenomena or world order. If, we believe in the development and empowerment of women, not just in Bangladesh, but globally, we need to start by taking a very deep and honest look at ourselves and what our actions propagate. We need to change ourselves and then our roles within our families and the institutions we belong to.

I would like to end on a more positive note. I have been working with rural populations both women and men for around four decades. I left my training in

drawing and painting and took off to live and work with rural populations particularly women. When asked what gives me the motivation to continue despite such odds, despite not having much conclusive and collective positive data to show what is termed as 'success'. It is these women who have so little to lose, only because they have so little to begin with, in material terms. It is these women who have suffered humiliation of the worst kinds in their private lives, in the so called sanctity of their homes, who have taught me to think positively. They cannot afford to even think of giving up. Their dreams and their lives depend on their collective action. On their ability to stand together and to counter with their convictions the looming larger forces that are taking away from them what they have known as their lives, their livelihoods and their protections.

- This paper was presented as a lecture given at "The National Defence Course – 2018", The National Defence College Bangladesh.