

Four Decades of Bangladeshi Women: Their Struggle and Emancipation

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Abstract: *This discussion is about life, hope, struggle and emancipation of Bangladeshi women. They are women from the four decades of independent Bangladesh. Bangladesh is one of the notable examples where women's different issues like health, nutrition, education, economic activities, labor and empowerment, political involvement and legal condition, matter of equality rights and obligations are related to various gender discourses. In many ways, women are still into enough vulnerable constraints in facing various upcoming unjust social challenges. But in course of time the continuing development and rising role towards women empowerment in every aspect of society is changing the previous system of gender inequality.*

In this world, the history of women has its own dimension and continuity which includes their captivity, struggle, frustration, hopes, changes and challenges. The universal subordination of women is evidently found everywhere through the course of time. Either from the East to the West or from the North to the South, women have been following the ideals established within the boundaries of male dominated society. Women in Bangladesh, as half of the total population, are equal to men in numbers; during last four decades of independence, even with the satisfactory socio economic changes; they continue to face hurdles and harsh challenges in the constrained societal environment and political structure. Bangladeshi women live in a patrilineal and patriarchal social system by custom. As a developing country, Bangladesh is trying to achieve basic development goals and expectations. But true achievements will come only when this significant half of population would get actual rights and access.

Methodology and Discussion Segments:

In this discussion I have extracted the theoretical particulars basically from few classics. A numbers of recent reports, journals, web links were seem to be quite helpful. Some scholarly articles on these relevant issues were very effective. Empirical data for Bangladesh portion is collected from my own field treasures (**The word 'Field Treasure' is used as my data**). Certainly my utmost interest for gender inequality issues, my day to day participation and observation as

women encouraged me to express my sayings in this subject. Regarding the other segments, here I will discuss about:

- a) The State and Bangladeshi women**
- b) Women in Economy**
- c) Women in Politics**
- d) Women's Health and Reproductive Health**
- e) Violence and Law**
- f) Women in Existence**

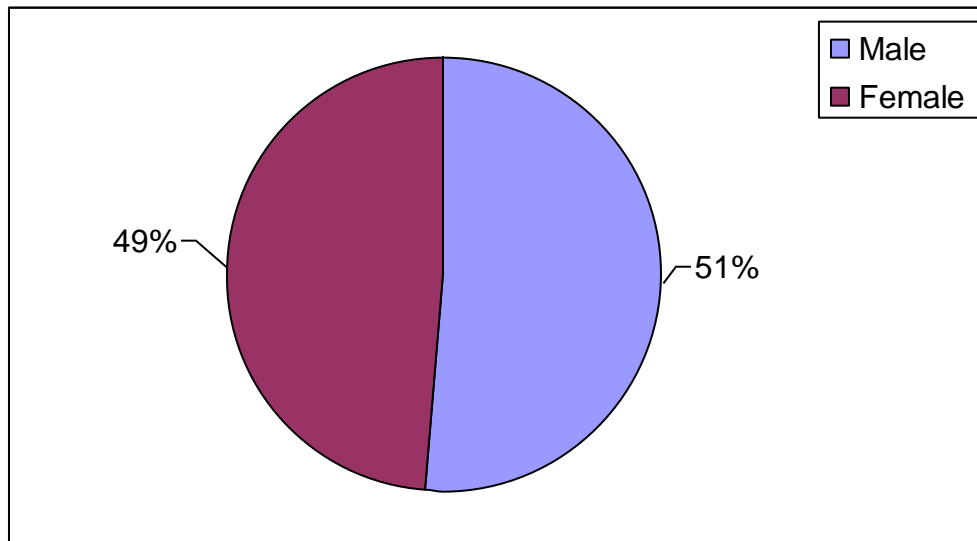
Women in Bangladesh do not represent simply the independence of four decades in centuries but strongly hold a unique chronological legacy of human dignity and resistance. From the ancient matrilineal practices to the present patriarchal system, women in this region went through different kinds of ups and downs. On one hand, probably their four mothers had witnessed the liberty of matri- patterned life style; on the other hand the female forerunners have been facing the dominance of patrilineality until now.

Bangladeshi women took strong part in Language Movement of 1952, Mass Uprising in 1969 and in the Liberation War of 1971 against West Pakistan's brutal colonial regime; ignited flame that has brought courage and inspiration to today's women in Bangladesh. In 1971, large number of women in Bengal fought, suffered, got injured and became war- affected. Women's participation was extensive. Women from all places rendered support to the freedom fighters. With the joint collaboration of men and women, Bangladesh won liberty and established independence and sovereignty. Women in Bangladesh continue to fight for establishing a regime of equality, rights and dignity.

a) The State and Bangladeshi Women

When one talks about the women in Bangladesh, we usually think of veiled women in villages and modern women in urban working centers. But the social veil represents Bangladeshi women much more than being a physical signification. Notions like state position, religion, nationalism, ethnicity, rural-urban conditions, and modernity are active in the context of Bangladesh with having their own determined set of moralities, both for men and women. A woman in Bangladesh is not just a woman but she is expected to behave as a Muslim woman, Hindu woman, Bengali women, woman from particular ethnic community, rural woman, modern women etc. Whoever she may be, she has to fit in a type and has to perform the roles set by moral authority.

Figure 1: The Percentages of Female and Male in Bangladesh.



The constitution of Bangladesh guarantees equal rights to every citizen. This is established from constitution number 33 to 39. Between constitution number 66 and 122, it has been told that in voting and for public domain every citizen can claim equal rights either. On one hand, for promoting women in national politics, they are given 10% of total seat in the parliament so that the constitution can conceive gender balance properly. On the other hand, in national election women candidates can compete directly too. Since 1984, State of Bangladesh is officially following the convention rules of CEDAW with some of reservations for promoting parity. Besides, ILO Convention with other international equality rights initiatives are also been implemented with some of constitutional reservations. Regarding establishing gender equality and development, Bangladesh government remains committed towards the empowerment of women, including through the 2011 National Women's Development Policy that looks for reducing violence; eliminate discrimination; increase access to education, health and employment; and address the special needs of older women, women with disabilities and women from indigenous and marginalized communities. Additionally, the government is currently implementing vision 2021, which aims to make Bangladesh a middle-income country by 2021. This vision plan states that the State wants to achieve gender equality by mentioning the poverty issues confronted particularly by women.

Bangladesh also faces challenge of insecurity of refugee women. Problem regarding the insecurity of minority and indigenous women is also in the radar of policy makers. State of Bangladesh is trying hard to shape up itself as the reasonable entity for promoting gender equality nationwide. But until now it is struggling for achieving its proper individual gender balance friendly character due to many acute socio-political and cultural factors.

b) Women in Economy

The rural women of Bangladesh are disadvantaged enough. 80% of women used to live in rural areas in the late 80's. Among them, 70% of rural women were small cultivator, tenant, and landless households. Some of them worked as day laborers, part time or seasonal laborers. They used to provide labor in post-harvest activities and other small tasks. 15%-20% of women, mostly in poor landless households, depended on casual labor, collecting, and other irregular sources of income. Their income was vital to household survival. The other 10% of women were in households mainly in the professional, trading, or large-scale landowning categories, and they usually did not work outside the home. In fact, women are fulltime workers in their families and households where their contribution is unacknowledged most of the time. In rural agricultural society, patrilineal ideals seem to be very strong. Major portion of rural women didn't get introduced to education in formal. Though investment of women's labor makes a sizeable contribution in total agricultural production; they usually do not have legal or social recognition for their labor.

In agriculture, during cultivation, women play the vital roles in pre-harvest and post-harvest activities. But these are considered as extension of women's regular household responsibilities. On the basis of the economic activities of rural working women, their labor is divided into two segments. Labor for own household and outside home. In families, rural women are ensuring all the existence of succeeding generations from childbearing to rearing. In attending to it, they are also doing the other necessary extended activities. Additionally, at the same time they are doing socially recognized outer economic activities like serving as day laborers, working in road constructions, small business within micro-credit scheme etc. The rural women who do not work outside, their activities are divided into two parts as well. One is making incomes through rearing livestock, selling vegetables, sewing products, making cloths and processing dry foods etc. Another one is cooking, maintaining household jobs, gathering-collecting-making dry foods etc. This is amply evident women in rural sectors share much of the workload. They are visible and invisible workers in our economy. It is seen somewhere that indigenous women workers are less paid than majority of women laborers. They face work and wage related discriminations in various other ways. Often their payments are delayed, they are paid partially and sometimes even they face physical harassment. Changes in working pattern have come but in matter of recognition, still Bangladesh has to work hard on this.

In the last two decades, particularly employment of younger women has been on rise. Poor women found their job scopes in various informal sectors along with brick fields, building roads, construction sites, glass and electronic factories, tobacco and chemical factories, garment factories, shrimp factories, small handicraft sectors and tea gardens etc.

For last three decades, the number of women workers in the garment sector increased very fast. They have made important gains in the formal labor market in the past few decades, mostly due to increased participation in the garment sector activities. In fact garment industry is the most important working sector for working women now. The major part of export income comes from this sector. According to the report of *War on Want*, it is said that the expansion of the garment industry in Bangladesh was fuelled by the structural economic reforms of the 1980s, which opened up Bangladeshi economy to foreign investment, deregulation of markets and privatization. Government established tax holidays and the development of export enclaves enabling business. The process was accompanied by a massive increase of capital inflows into the country. Foreign direct investment leapt from a mere \$2.4 million in 1986 to more than \$1,000 million in 2008. But in this sector workers are facing unsecured working atmosphere. The tragic events at Tazrin Fashion and Savar Rana Plaza killed more than thousand garments workers most of them being women. These garment factories do not pay proper wages or provide proper job environment, trade union rights, facilities and necessary human security. Recently, the country has witnessed Tuba garment movement regarding due pays which was lead mainly by women workers. More women laborers join the sector each day. As per government statistics, the almost 1.8 million new laborers join workforce every year, majority of them are women. In Bangladesh, 90% of working women came from the process through economic marginalization. There are no such effective legal organizations or institutions who can talk in favor of them (*Jamali, 2012:78*). Along with this sector there are also women, who are working in urban domestic sectors, tea gardens, shrimp industries, other EPZ (Export Processing Zone) areas. There are women who work abroad as migrant workers too. Microcredit programs began to act and appeal with a new dimension of economy in Bangladesh. In a way, it provided some sort of micro economic solvency in families but without bringing greater effective trials for better economic policies; the implementation of microfinance development scheme will not work.

In Bangladesh, participation of women in national-international organizations, women business activities, teaching, health care, research sectors, administration and defense sectors have increased in last three decades. In fields of business and commerce, emergence of women entrepreneur is picking up rapidly. In numerous urban areas including big cities, women are joining white collar jobs are also taken by positive changes in women empowerment are quite significant in urban areas of Bangladesh. After finishing the graduation, women are coming in to different urban working sectors with eligibility and efficiency.

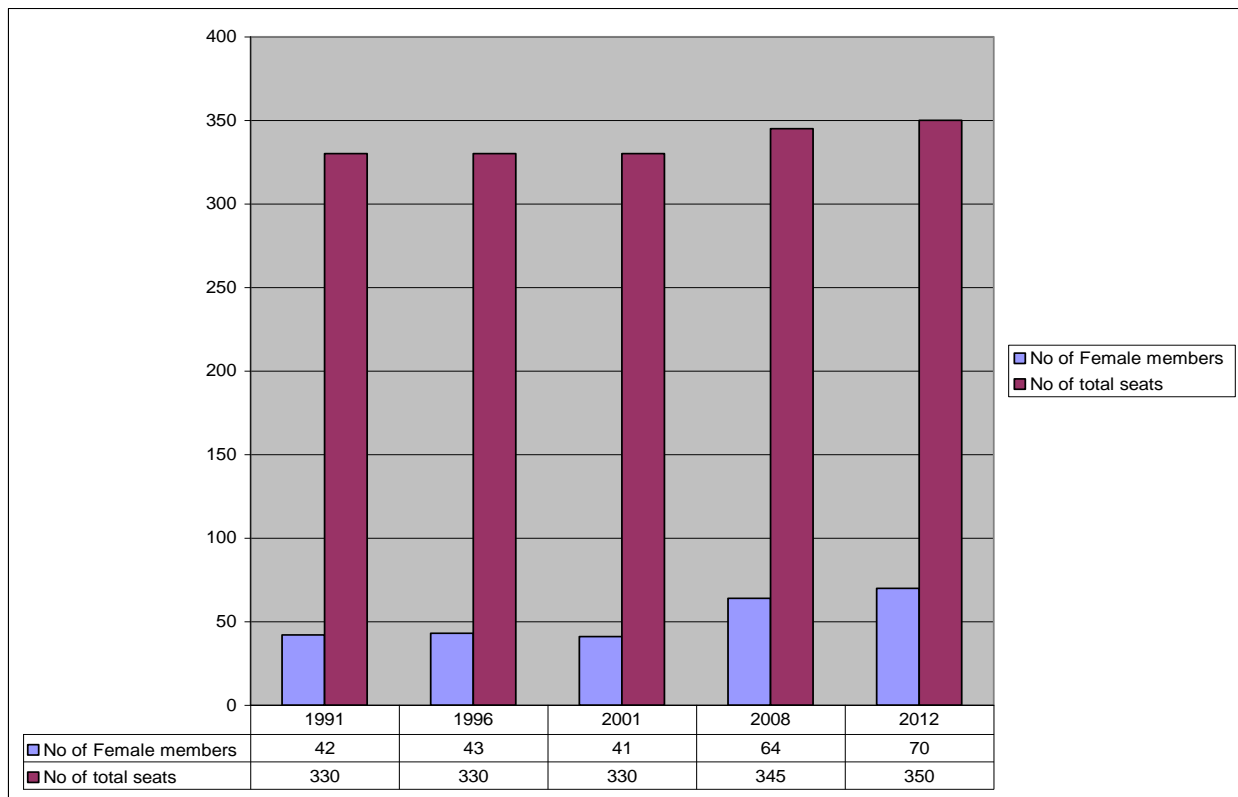
c) Women in Politics

Politically, Bangladesh is a very dynamic state. For many years of colonial dominance and oppression, as well as historical ups and downs, people of this country upholds unique political features. In the 40 years since independence, Bangladesh achieved unique political changes though, effective degree of participations are needed to build further participation equivalence.

Presently, the Prime Minister and the leader of main opposition party and even the speaker of the national parliament are women. But when we estimate degree of general participation, it is low. Bangladeshi women got their voting rights in 1972. The Constitution of Bangladesh proclaims equality of all citizens before law (Article 27). It noticeably affirms that: (1) steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life; (2) women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of state and public life (Article 28(2)).

According to the Bangladesh Progress Report, 2012; in the current National Parliament, the share of reserved seats for women has also been increased from 45 to 50. Moreover, the current Parliament has got 20 directly elected women Parliamentarians. The present government has also the highest number of women members (six in total) in the cabinet including the Prime Minister.

Figure 2: Proportion of Female Members in the Parliament, 1991-2012



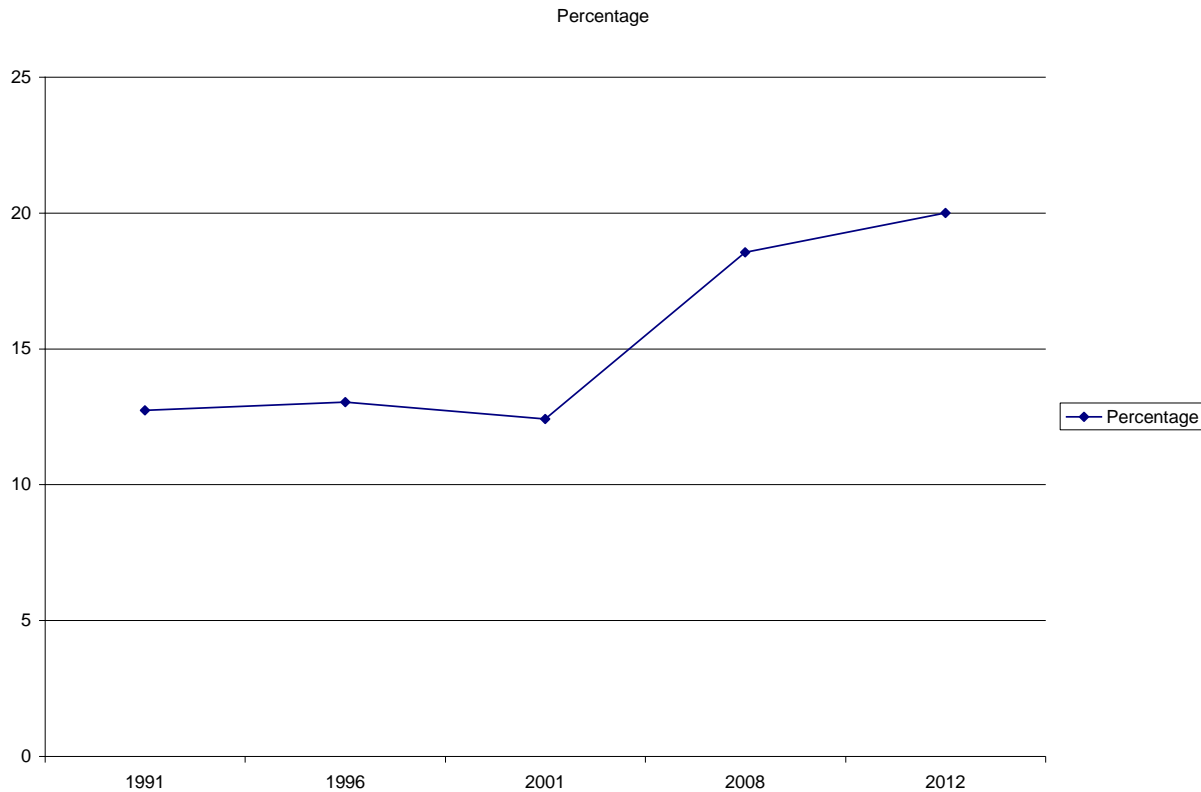


Figure 3: Proportion of Female Members in the Parliament, 1991-2012 (In Percentage); Source: Millennium Development Goal Report. (2012)

Women’s participation in local government is also showing some signs of change. There are reserved seats for women in every municipal and local government sector. It is to mention that activities like election designs, formulating rules and regulations, decision making and other procedures are mainly made by male. To determine welfare steps for women requires women policy makers. This is true that in our country we have supportive laws and policies to encourage women’s participation in the activities of development and holistic decision making process. But the effective implementations are to be increased for the representation of women in the legislative, judiciary and executive branches of the government. The women’s movement in Bangladesh involves independent feminist activist groups, many of which are organized as NGOs, as well as official women’s wings of political parties and grassroots women’s labor organizations.

d) Women's Health and Reproductive Health

Regarding this segment I would like to introduce three aspects of Bangladeshi Women.

I) Food Intake and Malnutrition of Women

II) Fertility, Maternal Mortality and Maternal Health

III) Menstrual Regulation, Abortion and Reproductive Rights

I) Food Intake and Malnutrition of Women:

Gender discrimination leaves women particularly vulnerable to disease and malnutrition in Bangladesh. Particularly in rural Bangladesh, these effects are more visible. Women from the poor families get victim of poverty and patriarchal tendency even in case of food intake. Women from poor family are suffered by poverty in case of food and nutrition. On the other hand women from comparatively wealthy family are basically suffered from rather patriarchal attitudes. In rural area, women's usual ignorant food nutrition habit, belatedly food intaking after long hours working and sometimes fasting; harms their complete health system and immunity. This also results in various reproductive health complex and disease, anemia and malnutrition. The disparity is less among modern families in urban areas. Because of the changing perspective, attitudes and social philosophy towards women, these issues are being addressed with much attention since last 15 years.

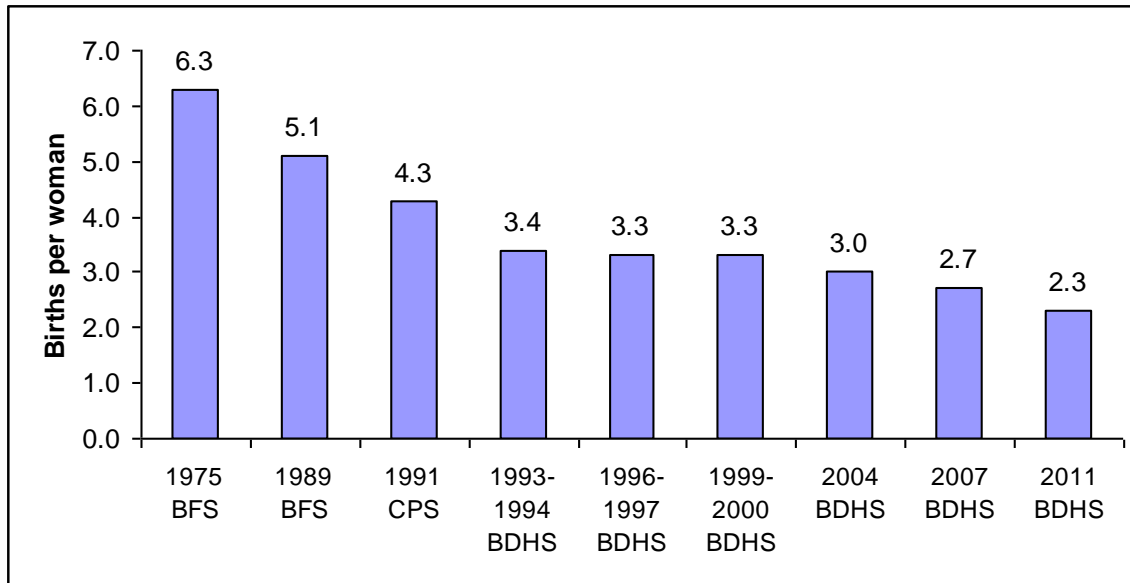
Millions of Bangladeshi women suffer from malnutrition including low birth weight, wasting, stunting, underweight, Vitamin A deficiencies, and iodine deficiency disorders and anemia. Micronutrient deficiencies especially iron and folic acid deficiencies that result in nutritional anemia in children and women and neural tube defects in newborns.

II) Fertility and Maternal Mortality

Fertility

In Bangladesh, the growth of population rate are recognized high and created several constraints on national efforts to improve low levels of food production and other factors for socio-economic development. It is said in *Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey, (2011)* that Bangladeshi women have the pattern of early child bearing. But another observation is that fertility rate has been declining since the 1970s at the same time as we see in figure 4.

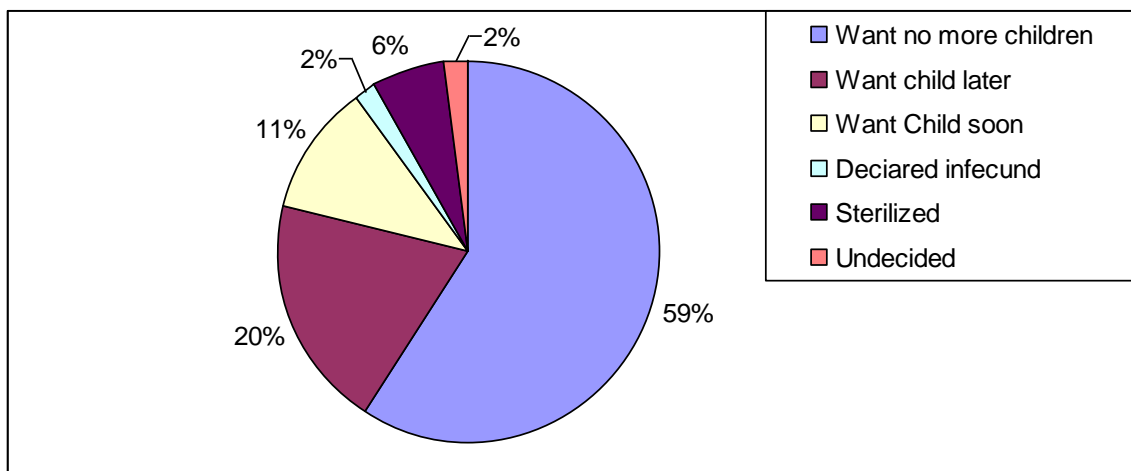
Figure 4: Trends in Total Fertility Rates, 1975- 2011, (BDHS 2011)



We see here that the total fertility rate has been declining between 1975 and 2011.

Pie chart as Figure 5 represents conceive preferences among currently married women age 15-49 as we see below.

Figure 5: Fertility Preferences among Currently Married Women Age 15-49 ;(BDHS 2011)



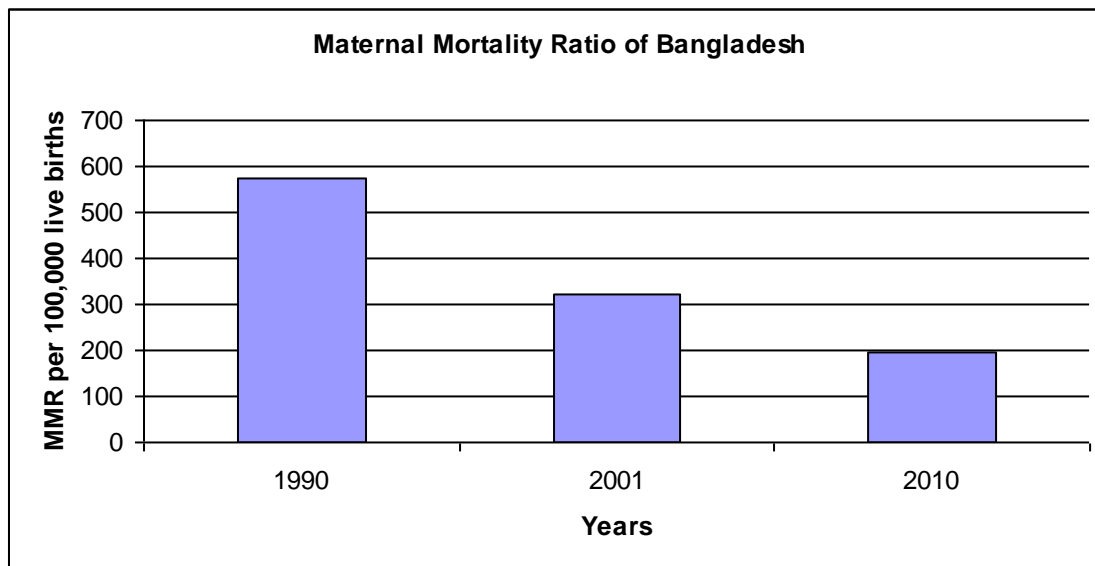
Here, 59% of currently married women in Bangladesh don't want children any more. 20% of them want child later, 11% want child soon where 6% of them is been sterilized; other each 2% are undecided and declared in fecund respectively.

Maternal Mortality

In Bangladesh, the Maternal Mortality Ratio still remains high compared to many other developed countries. With the current mortality ratio of 194 per 100,000 live births (*Bangladesh Maternal mortality Survey: 2010*) the country is yet to reach the Millennium Development Goal target of Maternal Mortality Ratio 143 by 2015.

Figure 6 shows trend of Maternal Mortality Ratio in Bangladesh between 1990- 2010 below:

Figure 6: Trend of MMR in Bangladesh, 1990-2010



Source: BMMS 2001, 2010

Here the MMR in 1990 was 574 per 100,000 live births in Bangladesh. Later, it is declined into 322 in 2001 and 194 in 2010. It represents the positive flow in this regard.

Maternal Health

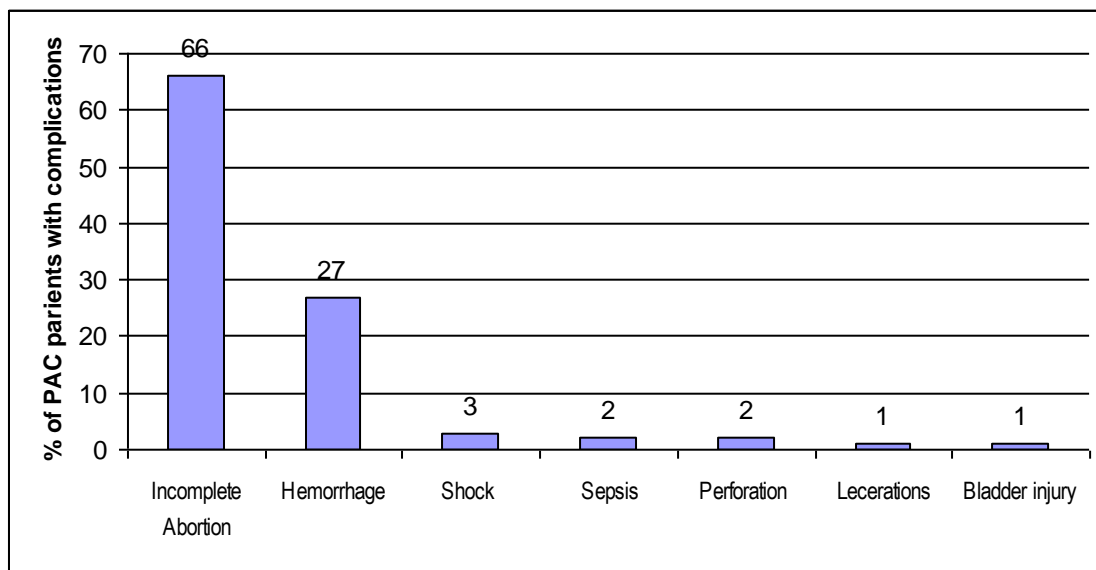
Maternal health issues include the antenatal care, place of delivery, delivery assistance with caesarean care and postnatal care equally. Because of the large number of population; it is hard to serve the maternal care facilities to every woman in every corner of country. Besides, many of

traditional socio-religious superstitious thinking constraints and lack of awareness are influential in this regard. The mass medical care centers are still not enough in rural areas. Joint collaboration and initiatives of government and non government organizations is needed. As women are subordinated to men, their sense of reproductive decision making in family is also regulated by the male partner among masses and in rural areas. The reproductive rights issues follow the same obstacles.

III) Menstrual Regulation, Abortion and Reproductive Rights

There are thousands of women in Bangladesh risking their life every year by having the unsafe abortion. This includes lack of awareness, limitations in service, understanding incapability between menstrual regulation and unsafe abortion. The socio-cultural structure is very much responsible for this pity. In the year of 2010, a counted 653, 100 MR procedures were performed in health facilities nationwide. As estimated, 646,600 induced abortions were happened in 2010 again, the majority of which were unsafe. Generally women from rural area go to the amateur expertise or to quack doctors for treatment. It causes Incomplete Abortion, Hemorrhage, Shock, Sepsis, Perforation, Lacerations and Bladder Injury etc as Figure 7 reveals.

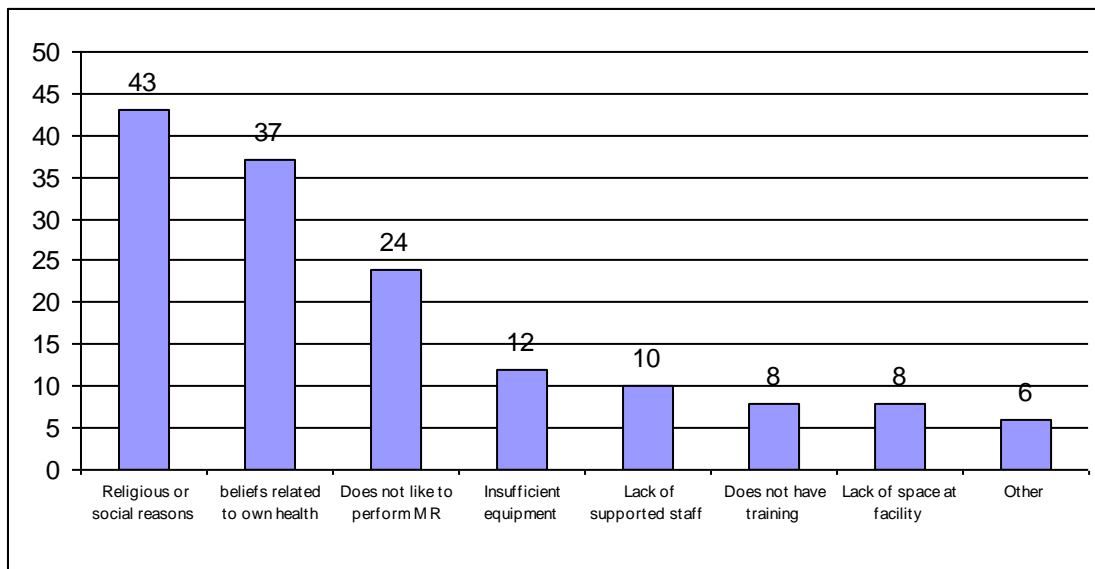
Figure 7: The Later Complications Regarding Unsafe Menstrual Regulation



Source: Health Facilities Survey, 2010 Quoted in GUTTMACHER INSTITUTE Report, 2012

There are other reasons for why the medical service centers are not being able to provide proper care regarding MR. The reasons can be better understood by the figure shows below:

Figure 8: Constraints Regarding Inadequate Menstrual Regulation Facilities

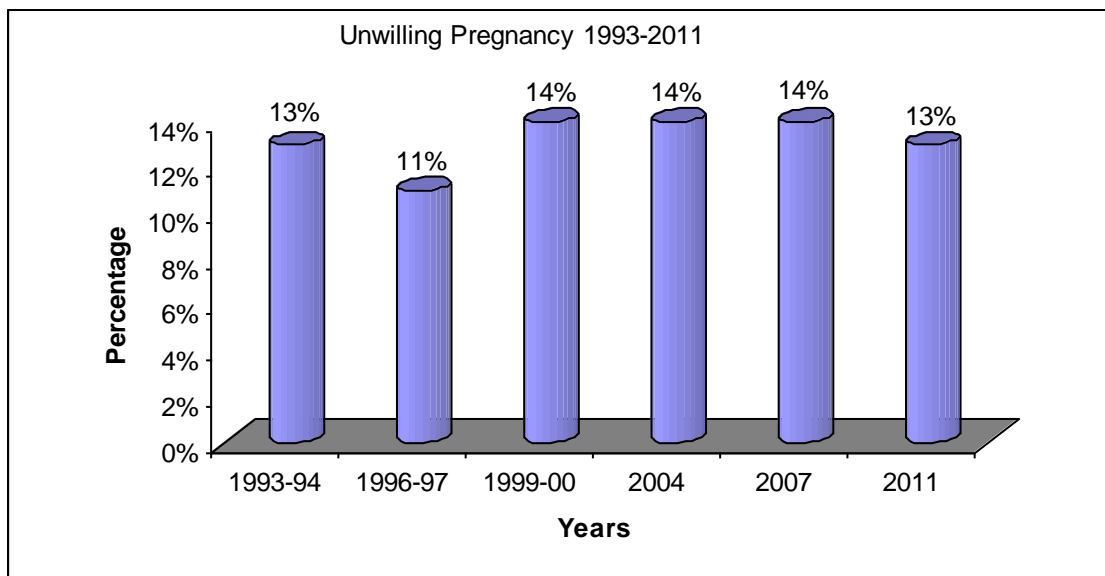


Source: Health Facilities Survey, 2010 Quoted in GUTTMACHER INSTITUTE Report, 2012

Here, we see that with the other medical reasons we have an immense degree of religious and social reasons in MR procedures.

Whenever we talk about Reproductive Rights of women we mean their proper abortion rights. Her own consent regarding sexuality, her own timing independence regarding conceiving child, her chosen way of abortion method preference and certainly the matter of menstrual regulation- these are all very inevitable for any woman's reproductive rights. In the case of Bangladesh, we see a quite visible situation of unwilling and unplanned pregnancy of women. These are best described through the Figure 9 and 10 respectively.

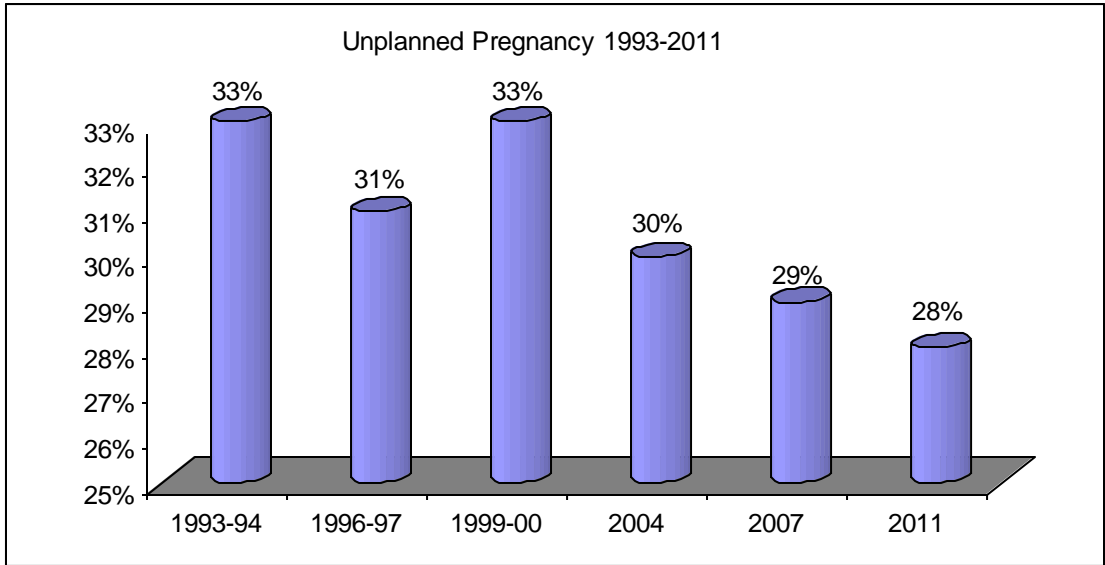
Figure 9: Unwilling pregnancy in Percentages, 1993-2011



Source: The Daily Prothom Alo, Dated; 3rd August, 2014

Here we notice the tendency that is found in the year of 2011, represents the same 13% which was also found in between the year of 1993-1994 in the chart. These women became pregnant as they did not find proper equipment and assistance during intercourse.

Figure 10: Unplanned Pregnancy in Percentages, 1993-2011

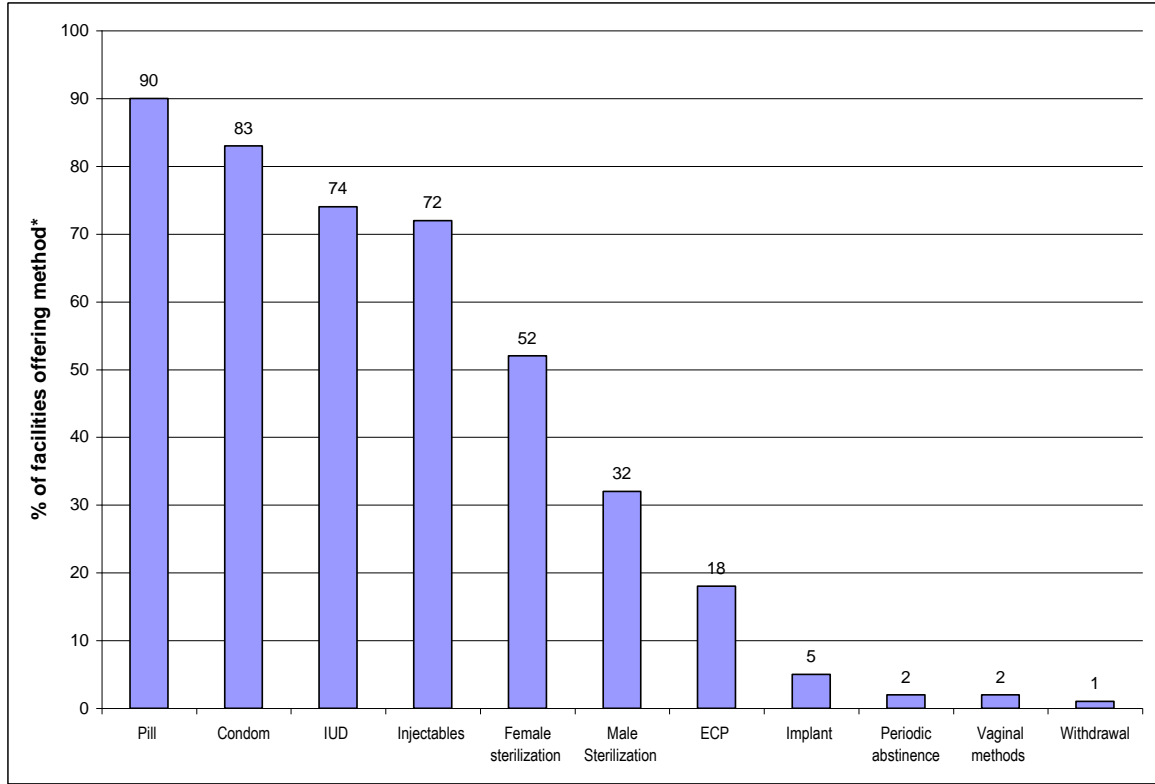


Source: The Daily Prothom Alo, Dated; 3rd August, 2014

Here we found the positive vibe regarding unplanned pregnancy which is declined as 28% in the year of 2011 than previous almost two decades that also resembles the MR Service from government organizations.

Figure 11 shows the percentage of Contraceptive Service Methods and Ingredients provided by health centers.

Figure 11: Offered Contraceptive Methods in National Health Centers



Source: Health Facilities Survey, 2010 Quoted in GUTTMACHER INSTITUTE Report, 2012

In this present situation we need increasing scopes of more efficient health centers nationwide, building deep awareness about reproductive health security of women, increasing quality ingredient and equipments, implementing immediate effective service and assuring safe abortion policies, increasing scientific nursing system, continuous monitoring and initiatives, promoting proper sex education in educational levels and most importantly abolishing gender disparities in Bangladesh.

e) Violence and Law

As a part of South Asia, the word “violence” on women is more or less common for Bangladesh like any other developing countries. But certainly its representation has its own distinct characteristics. Despite constitutional assurance of gender equality and legislative and other

encouraging interventions, the violence occurs in households, in work places and of course in society.

There are various patterns of violence on women those are been observed recently:

- 1) Domestic violence is a major social problem in Bangladesh. From all economic level, a number of women are quite vulnerable to the maltreatment and abuse by spouse, other family members and in-laws. Despite the fatal consequences to women's psycho-biological health, this is still ignorant. Society still does not consider this as the serious crime. According to the report by Division for the Advancement of Women, law enforcement agencies are reluctant to get involved in cases of domestic violence and women are often victimized with no way out. Most of Bangladeshi women, as part of the patriarchal society, are from an early age, taught to be submissive, tolerant and self-scarifying. The existing social value makes it difficult for women to assert themselves and speak out loud against domestic violence. Besides, after marriage women usually don't get enough sensible support from her previous home either. This form of violence includes physical torture like acid throwing, beating/stabbing, dowry, murder, rape, and suicide.
- 2) Acid violence is another rampant form of violence that is may well be a phenomenon observed in Bangladesh. This kind of attacks occurs when men want to take revenge for the refusal regarding disappointments, sex, and marriage or when his demand of dowry is not met. It is generally thrown to her face or sexual organs.
- 3) According to Section 375 of the Bangladesh Penal Code, rape occurs when a man has imposed intercourse with a woman of any age without her consent. In recent times, reports on rape cases have been noticeable because of raping among children. Many instances of gang rape are also reported as well as rape followed by murder.
- 4) Custodial Violence detects violence towards women who are taken under custody of government agents, such as the police, military personnel or other law enforcing agencies which also takes place in Bangladesh.
- 5) In many cases, women commit suicide when they can't bear the pain of physical and mental torture as consequences of rape, family and social violence, religion based community violence like Fatwa, Dowry demands, Abandonments and other disappointments. Emotional violence created by men does affect women equally. These are all considered as violation of primary human rights.
- 6) Trafficking of Women and children in Bangladesh exists for commercial sexual exploitation and force labor. 2006 study on the commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) found that nearly 27,000 Bangladeshi women and children have been

forced into prostitution in India, and around 40,000 children from Bangladesh are involved in prostitution in Pakistan. It is estimated that Bangladeshi women sold into brothels serve approximately 19 clients per week, few of which use protection. Forced labor is the other reason that Bangladeshi people are trafficked. As demand for cheap labor is so high, people are trafficked into domestic work, farm work, organized begging, and factory work. Furthermore, engaging into labor in abroad, such as in Malaysia and other Middle East countries, occasionally creates an exploitative situations of forced labor, with conditions including restrictions on movement, threats, and physical assault of women.

- 7) Religious, community violence and social violence actively happen in Bangladeshi society based on religion, language and caste, ethnicity and women's existence.

In Bangladesh, the laws; legal rights and obligation regarding violence on women is one of the core issues of state attention. We have satisfactory judicial justice structure. But the problems lie beneath the implementation of law enforcement. There are numerous government and independent organizations who are working to establish gender equity in justice uplifting for women. Government is now more focused on the relevant issues like existing constitution and its corrections, improving criminal justice system, institutional support services, health services, reevaluating discriminatory laws, monitoring the law enforcement authorities, duration of justice procedure, promoting other support services.

f) Bangladeshi Women in Existence

In my opinion, women in Bangladesh have tremendous potentialities in spite of having difficulties regarding their existence. They have a deeper in built resistance that we can't just ignore. Becoming women in a developing country where the socio-economic, religious and conservative cultural constraints are active towards quality freedoms of women, it is rather challenging and struggling as well. This is a good sign that Bangladesh has already achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education at the national level. Positive development happened due to implementing initiatives focusing on girl students, providing stipends and exempting of tuition fees for girls in the rural areas and scholarship scheme for girls at the secondary level. Girls, comparatively from privileged strata in society; after finishing secondary level, make their own decision regarding tertiary education and job. Though growing in a tradition of liberal Pardah (It is a religious and social practice of female seclusion which is practiced with judicious use of walls, curtains, and screens. A woman's withdrawal into Pardah usually restricts her personal, social and economic activities outside her home) women from urban areas are free to flourish. A kind of liberal cultural consistency is still believed by Bangladeshi people. Women from various working sector are already establishing many positive

examples among other developing countries. If the state can continue the positive flow, women empowerment can be undoubtedly distinguishable.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude my speech with a question actually. Not only Bangladesh, to understand all kinds of gender disparity all around the world; are the present parameters of research and studies effective enough? If not so, which expressions would be the alternatives for better reading regarding “Gender Issues”? When we bring women in gender issues, we try to understand their existential crisis within the setting of every societal aspect too. It needs more insightful collaborative understandings and realization towards gender equality.

Thank you all for your kind attention.