

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN IN BANGLADESH: THEIR SUBORDINATE AND UNEQUAL STATUS

This chapter looks into the general conditions of women in Bangladesh society such as their self-image, their position in the social structure and organisation, their legal, educational and economic status, etc. Before discussing these specifically, some basic facts about the country of Bangladesh and its people must be mentioned.

3.1 Some Basic Facts About Bangladesh

Geographically, Bangladesh is a small country (56,977 sq. miles). Eighty five percent of the people in Bangladesh are Muslim and 98 percent speak Bengali.¹ Bangladesh is one of the heavily populated, and least developed countries in the world. The total population of Bangladesh was 111.4 million in March 1991.² In terms of population it is the eight largest nation in the world. The male and female population of Bangladesh have been estimated at 57.3 million and 54.1 million respectively.³ Bangladesh is among the few countries in the world where the proportion of women in the total population is smaller than men. In 1991, there were 106 males per 100 females.⁴ Adverse male-female ratio is caused by the higher mortality among females, both during infancy and the child bearing period.

¹ Stanley A. Kochanek, *Patron-Client Politics and Business in Bangladesh*, (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1993), p.17.

² *Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh*, 1993 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1993), p.3.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

However, 80 percent of the total population of Bangladesh live in the rural areas.⁵ Only 32.4 percent of the entire population is literate.⁶ Bangladesh is basically an agricultural country. Industry contributes to only 10 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) and employs a bare 1.8 percent of the labour force.⁷ The annual per capita income is a mere US\$220.⁸

3.1.1 The Country and Its Public Administration

As part of the Indian subcontinent, Bangladesh was under Muslim rule for five and a half centuries and passed into British rule in 1757. During the British rule Bangladesh was part of the British Indian province of Bengal and Assam (hereafter called Bengal) and was known as East Bengal. The other half of Bengal was known as West Bengal which is now included in the present India. During the British period, West Bengal was the Hindu-dominated portion of Bengal and East Bengal was predominantly Muslim. In 1947, East Bengal gained independence from British rule along with the rest of India and formed a part of Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan, which emerged as an independent country, namely Bangladesh, in 1971.

Bangladesh has a unitary and parliamentary form of government. The head of the state is the President and the Prime Minister is the head of government. The Prime Minister is assisted by a council of Ministers. The national Parliament is called Jatiya Sangsad. The capital of the country is the city of Dhaka.

For administrative purposes, the country is divided into five divisions. There are 64 districts under five divisions. Each district is divided into a number of thana.

⁵ Ibid. pp.81, 84.

⁶ Ibid. p.3.

⁷ Kochanek, op.cit., p.17.

⁸ World Tables 1995 (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, May 1995).

Currently, there are 489 thanas, under which there are 4,451 unions.⁹ The union is the lowest tier of local government.

3.2 A Profile of Women in Bangladesh

The women's position and status in society are the outcome of a number of factors. It is a result of the contemporary social reality and the interaction of religion, culture, demographic, socio - economic and historical factors. The life conditions and status of women in Bangladesh can, therefore, be viewed as subject to a number of factors, which form the main subject of the present chapter.

This chapter describes the historical and anthropological background of Bangladesh. It also discusses the social setting, gender relations and cultural norms of gender-segregation in Bangladesh society which have traditionally combined to determine women's status in society and their roles within it. Moreover, the present chapter reviews women's actual status and conditions in Bangladesh in terms of their legal, educational and economic positions. The profile of the women of Bangladesh will help to make the reader understand the subject on which the study is based, better.

3.2.1 *The Historical and Anthropological Background of Women in Bangladesh*

To understand the women's status and role in contemporary Bangladesh society, a brief discussion of the religious-cultural traditions of the country is necessary. The present image of women in Bangladesh is a substantial product of the traditional socio-cultural values which were spawned by the religious and historical past.

Being a part of the Indian subcontinent, historically Bangladesh shares two of the oldest religious and cultural traditions - ancient Indic civilisation and Islamic

⁹ Statistical Pocketbook of Bangladesh, 1993, op.cit., p.24.

culture. Its society has been moulded by the impact of these two predominant cultural heritages.¹⁰ Although little is known about the details of the lives of women in the ancient culture, it is postulated from the study of Indian civilisation, literature and law books that religion and cultural factors played an important role to construct the image of Bengali women. The earliest information available on Indian society mentions that women in ancient India (about 1000 B.C.) were accorded a high position in society.¹¹ The position of women changed considerably during the Aryan rule. It was established over the greater part of India between 500 B.C. to 500 A.D. At this time, the influential law book "Code of Manu"¹² legally assigned to woman, for the first time, her definite place in society and prescribed that, a woman "should do nothing independently even in her own home. In childhood subject to her father, in youth to her husband, and when her husband is dead, to her sons, she should never enjoy independence". Thus women were treated as minors under the law and were assigned a status equivalent to that of the lowest order of society, a worker.¹³ Though the law of Manu accorded to women a certain degree of honour, serving as wives and mothers it served to perpetuate in women a sense of inferiority over the centuries.

From the eleventh century when Islam became a religious and political force in the subcontinent, Islam and Hindu cultural images of women interplayed and mutually influenced each other. Over the centuries, this interplay created the image of

¹⁰ See. Qurratulain Hyder, "Muslim Women of India" in Indian Women, ed. Devaki Jain (Ministry of Information, Government of India, 1976), p.207; Audrey C. Smock, "Bangladesh: A Struggle with Tradition and Poverty" in Women: Roles and Status in Eight Countries, eds. Janet Z. Giele and Audrey C. Smock, (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1977), p.90; Jana M. Everett, Women and Social Change in India, (New Delhi: Heritage, 1981), p.40.

¹¹ For details of women's position in ancient India, Tripath Sharma, Women in Ancient India, (New Delhi: Ess Publications, 1987); S.C. Dube, "Men's and Women's Roles in India: A Sociological Review", in Women in New Asia, ed. Barbara Ward, (Unesco, 1963), pp.183-184.

¹² The book was composed in the early centuries A.D. For more information, see Dube, *Ibid.*, pp.187-188.

¹³ For details, see *Ibid.*; Sharma, *op.cit.*

an ideal women - one who is subordinate and inferior to men¹⁴ and which limited the ideal women's role to that of a virtuous wife and a good mother. Both cultures emphasised gender-segregation. It was reinforced by purdah.¹⁵ It varied in form between regions and communities all over the subcontinent, but in Bengal, it was generally observed by Hindu and Muslim women and they were not allowed to expose themselves publicly.¹⁶

Hence throughout Muslim and British rule, women in East Bengal were strictly regulated by the practice of purdah. It isolated them from the outer world and confined them to the four walls of the 'Zenana' or 'andarmahal'¹⁷. The condition of the Bengali Muslim women at that time was similar to that of "caged birds"¹⁸ with more legal rights than Hindu women but "restrictive social structures led to a complete erosion of the rights of Muslim women even in the 19th century".¹⁹

In the early nineteenth century, reform movements against social injustice to women and to improve their status in society began in British India, especially in Bengal. These movements were initiated by the western-educated Hindu urban elites.

¹⁴ Smock, op.cit., pp.83-88; Zarina Bhatti, "Muslim Women in Uttar Pradesh: Social Mobility and Directions of Change" in Women in Contemporary India - Traditional Images and Changing Roles, ed. Alfred de Souza, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1975), 25-26; Romila Thapar, "The History of Female Emancipation in Southern Asia" in Women in the New Asia, ed. Barbara E. Ward, op.cit., p.474.

¹⁵ Purdah, which literally means curtain, refers to the seclusion or concealment of women and the separation of the domain of men and women. It also controls women's interaction with men other than family members. For good discussion on purdah in South Asia, see David G. Mandelbaum, Women's Seclusion and Men's Honour: Sex Roles in North India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1988).

¹⁶ K.K. Dutta, "The Position of Women in Bengal", Calcutta Review, 37.1 (1930); Golam Murshid, Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905, (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, 1983); Sonia N. Amin, "Women and Society" in History of Bangladesh: 1704-1971, ed. Sirajul Islam, 3 (Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992).

¹⁷ Inner quarters for women. A Majority of Bengali Muslims lived in joint families, especially middle and upper classes, where women resided in separate parts of the house called 'Andarmahal' or 'Zenana'.

¹⁸ Nagendrabala Mustafi, Abarodhe Hinabastha (in Bengali) Bama Bodhini Potrika, (April-May, 1865), cited in Murshid, op.cit., p.30.

¹⁹ Shahida Lateef, Muslim Women in India - Political and Private Realities, (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990), p.77. Also see M. Muejeb, The Indian Muslims, (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967), p.224.

As most of the Hindu reform movements in Bengal were directed at improving women's status through education, Hindu women soon became aware of the need for education. Thus a considerable change occurred in their social status as they took advantage of education and employment opportunities, unlike Muslim women. Muslim women reacted very slowly to these opportunities while the whole Muslim community resented their displacement from power and sought to remain isolated from the colonial administration, western education and new economic enterprises.

However, by the turn of the century, Muslim leaders and reformers did realise the necessity for female education and thus Muslim women entered national and literary life. But, still Bengali Muslim women lagged behind in all respects, which was an inevitable outcome of the historical situation of the then East Bengal (present Bangladesh). From the end of the eighteenth through the middle of the nineteenth century, the Bengal province was the centre of British rule. British influence gave opportunities for development in West Bengal far more than East Bengal.²⁰ Thus throughout the colonial period, it was neglected and continued to fall behind its more prosperous western counterpart. Furthermore, throughout its history as East Pakistan after 1947, Bangladesh has been a deprived and exploited area. (This will be discussed in detail in the next chapter). This obviously has limited its opportunities for development. Hence, after emergence as an independent nation in 1971, Bangladesh has borne the brunt of poverty, which severely limits the life chances of all of its inhabitants, particularly its women who are always given less social priority than men.

3.2.2 *Women and Social Relations in Bangladesh*

The behaviour pattern of women in Bangladesh can be best understood in the light of the family and kinship system. They learn their appropriate behavioural patterns

²⁰ See A.K. Nazmul Karim, *Changing Society in India and Pakistan*, (Dhaka: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp.37-43.

as prescribed by the cultural norms and value systems of the country. Their real status is largely determined by the family and kinship systems, because men and women's authority, rights and obligations are largely expressed, ordered and maintained by these systems as structural units of society. Structural and value systems have combined to provide a subordinate status and limited role for the women of Bangladesh. Their place in the hierarchical system of gender relations confirms domesticity, dependence and limited access to social power.

The family system of Bangladesh is based on the patriarchal authority pattern, patrilineal and patrilocal kinship system. The whole system regulates women's life by according them status which is dependent upon the roles they play within the family system, such as daughters, wives, mothers, etc.

The women of Bangladesh remain under the guardianship of male relatives throughout their lives.²¹ They are considered 'vulnerable' and hence needing male protection and shelter. Moreover, in the patriarchal family structure of Bangladesh, men enjoy the traditional authority over women and other family members, control major family resources, make all major decisions and conduct all relations with the outside world. Women carry out all domestic tasks and perform their socially and culturally defined roles as daughter, wife and mother within the family circle. In a study on women's position in Bangladesh society, one female social scientist of Bangladesh concludes that Bangali women, both rural and urban, traditional and modern, live in a social system which sanctifies an unequal and inferior status for women.²²

²¹ For a good discussion, see Kirsten Westergaard, Pauperisation and Rural Women in Bangladesh - A Case Study, (BARD, 1983), pp.69-94; Susan F. Alamgir, Profile of Bangladeshi Women, (Dhaka: USAID, 1977); pp.i-12; Mahmuda Islam, "Social Norms, Institutions and Status of Women", in Situation of Women in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1979).

²² Rounaq Jahan, "Women in Bangladesh" in Women for Women, (Dhaka, 1975), p.27.

3.2.3 *Cultural Norm of the Segregation of Sexes*

In Bangladesh society, the cultural norm of segregating the sexes still persists strongly. This cultural practice of segregation restricts women's physical and functional mobility and largely dissuades them from pursuing economic and political interests in the suprafamilial sphere. As such, the norm of gender-segregation imposes physical seclusion of women and distinction between the social roles assigned to women and men. It assigns women those roles strictly confined to family and private life, while men are expected to perform public roles and functions outside world. This sharp dichotomy virtually provides less opportunities for women to assume roles other than those of wife and mother. This is because, the norm of gender-segregation not only divides the world into gender-segregated areas, it also controls female behaviour.

In Bangladesh society, as other Muslim societies of the South Asia, a greater emphasis on female virtue and purity leads to the practice of restrictive behaviour for women. It controls women's behaviour and minimises the chances of interaction with the opposite sex (other than her own family). The cultural norm of gender-segregation, thus, limits women's mobility outside the home and virtually prohibits women from going to 'public places' and taking part in the male sphere of economic, social and political life. Even today, the majority of women's 'world' consists of the immediate family and the households of close relatives, within which they are confined with little chance of contact with the outside world. As a result, women in Bangladesh are largely outside the mainstream of national activities. Nowadays, however, strict observance of cultural norms of gender-segregation is on the decline because of the spread of education and changed norms and values, and necessities of economic survival. Segregation still prevails as it is deep-rooted in the cultural heritage of Bangladesh.

It is noteworthy that, though urban middle- and upper-class women usually enjoy more relaxed social restrictions, they are still aware of the cultural norms of

gender-segregation. Urban girls may enjoy more chances of being exposed to the outside world but restrictions still exist in their mobility and in their contact with males.

However, psychological consequences of restrictive role allocation and behaviour pattern seem to bear some significance for women, which may restrain their will to break the traditional image. Under this practice women are so cocooned by the condition that they often cannot or do not want to bring about changes in their own life styles. A majority of them still believe that violation of the role structure may undermine and erode feminine attributes and values, which are generally cherished. Furthermore, as the system of division of labour between men and women has been functioning for centuries in the Bangladesh society, it makes many women think that they are mentally or morally incapable of dealing with public sphere known as male world. It fosters feelings of dependency which seem to be incompatible with any kind of assertive behaviour.

3.2.4 *The Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh*

Women in Bangladesh are supposedly fortified with theoretical legal rights, but the rights are purely theoretical and are seldom applied. In Bangladesh all citizens are governed by the Civil Laws of the country. At the same time they are governed by personal laws that have originated from the religion of the each community. The Constitution of Bangladesh, promulgated in 1972, guarantees equal rights and non-discrimination between men and women in all spheres of state and public life.²³ It also permits the state to make special provisions in favour of women and ensures the equality of opportunities with respect to employment or office in the service of the Republic.²⁴

²³ See, Articles 28.1, 28.2-3, Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (as modified up to 30th June 1988).

²⁴ Articles 28.4, 29.1, *Ibid*.

Personal laws are based on religious beliefs and govern the most important events in a woman's life in this country. While Bangladesh comprises of an overwhelmingly large Muslim population, only Muslim women's legal status is discussed here.

In Islam, women are treated more equally by the Sharia laws. Three noteworthy legal rights are granted to Muslim women by Sharia i.e., rights regarding marriage, divorce and inheritance. However, most of these rights exist only in theory as contradictory social customs and norms are deeply ingrained in the social fabric.

According to Muslim law no marriage is performed without the woman's formal consent, but in practical life, the consent of the girl is a mere formality, as marriages are predominantly arranged. Another essential part of Muslim marriage is 'dower' or Mahr -a fixed sum of money or valuables, which the husband has to pay to the bride. The actual payment of Mahr is rarely made because in most cases such demands are not made mainly due to social norms and partly due to the fear of incurring the displeasure of the husband.²⁵ Even divorced women forgo their dower for the fear that it might harm their chances of remarriage or involve them in litigation.

Although a woman has the right to divorce her husband she does not have the right to divorce in the same way a man can. He has the right of unilateral divorce, known as Talak-e-Bedai,²⁶ which is often practiced in this country. It is a mere arbitrary act of a husband who may repudiate his wife at his own pleasure with or without cause. Whereas a woman can only divorce, if such power is delegated in the marriage document by the husband. She also can seek judicial separation under the

²⁵ See. Salma Sobhan, Legal Status of Women in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: The Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs, 1978); Sufia Ahmed and Jahanara Chowdhury, "Women's Legal Status in Bangladesh", in Situation of Women in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1979).

²⁶ Marriage is irrevocably and immediately dissolved by the simply pronouncing the intention to do so in front of witness. For details on right to divorce, Ahmed and Chowdhury, *Ibid*, pp.310-316.

Dissolution of Muslim Marriage Act of 1939, which was enacted by the colonial government, but women in Bangladesh hardly exercise this right to avoid the social stigma attached to divorce or from becoming destitute.

One of the noteworthy rights given to women by Islam is the right of inheritance. A woman can inherit property from her father as well as husband. The wife inherits one-eighth share in her husband's property. If there are no children she is entitled to an increased amount of one-fourth of the estate. A mother's share in her son's estate is one sixth when he has children and one-third when there are no children. The daughter inherits half of the son's share from the father's property. In practice, in most of the cases the woman fails to enjoy her right to property as it is contrary to the social custom of Bangladesh for a woman to claim her father's property unless it is given to her willingly. In addition, women generally prefer to give up the right over parental property to their brothers. The fact is, from their inherent insecure position women realise that in case of future difficulties such as divorce or widowhood they may have to turn to their own kinship group for assistance.²⁷

It seems that, although the personal laws or the country's Constitution assigns rights and prerogatives to women in Bangladesh it is not reflected in the social order. Major difficulties arise from the conflict between the legal rights and the traditional customs of the country.

3.2.5 The Educational Status of Women in Bangladesh

The lower educational development amongst women in Bangladesh has been largely responsible for their low status in society. In spite of the efforts of successive governments, various constraints diminish equal educational opportunities for women.

²⁷ For an interesting discussion in this regard, see Alamgir, *op.cit.*, pp.15-16.

It has been mentioned earlier that the present rate of literacy in the country is 32.4 percent. If the total literacy rate is very low, then it is even lower among the women. Compared to 32.3 percent of literate men only about 19.2 percent women are literate.²⁸

The rate of female literacy in Bangladesh is lower compared to other countries in South Asia, that is, 25.7 percent in India and 82.7 percent in Sri Lanka in 1989.²⁹ The rate is much lower among rural women. In urban areas, 30.3 percent females were literate in 1988, whereas the corresponding figure for rural women was 13.7 percent.³⁰

A noticeable gap also exists between males and females at all stages of education. At each succeeding level of the educational system, girls constitute a lower percentage of the total number of students. In 1990-91, the rate of enrolled girls at primary level was 45.4 percent while for boys it was 54.5 percent.³¹

At the secondary level³² the female enrolment is lower than that at primary level. In 1990-91, 37.2 percent of the total secondary school students were girls while boys comprised 62.7 percent.³³ Besides this substantial margin between the two sexes, the gap between enrolment in primary level and those who successfully completed their schooling is also striking. A large proportion of girls who attended gradually dropped out at various stages with the result that a small proportion enter into secondary school. In 1990, at the junior secondary level the female students constituted only 35

²⁸ Asfia Duza, Jahanara Huq, S. Rowshan Qadir and Khaleda Salahuddin, Education and Gender Equity: Bangladesh, (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1992), p.102.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.103.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.30.

³¹ Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh, 1992, (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1992), p.522.

³² Secondary education in Bangladesh consists of classes nine and ten, while higher secondary consists of eleven and twelve classes followed by a public examination at the end in each case. After the stage of higher secondary education graduation starts.

³³ Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh, 1992, *op.cit.*, p.510.

percent of the total number of students and at the secondary level the figure stood at 28 percent.³⁴

Although in Bangladesh, the drop out problem is a serious obstacle for educational development of both sexes, observers noted that it is more acute in the case of girls.³⁵ Not only do they have a higher drop out rate, they also drop out earlier than boys. Consequently only a small number of women reach a higher level of education. In 1990-91, only 27.8 percent students were females in 997 general colleges of the country. The corresponding figure for males was 72.1 percent.³⁶

Similarly, the percentage of female students in the universities is much smaller than male students. In the seven universities of the country (excluding the two newly established universities), there were 22.9 percent females compared to 77.0 percent male students in 1991-92.³⁷ In each of the country's leading universities, striking discrepancy exists in the proportion of male-female students. For example, in 1991-1992, female students constituted 29.4 percent compared to 70.5 percent of male students in the Dhaka University; in the Jahangirnagar University, the corresponding percentage for female was 21.4 percent and for male it was 78.6 percent.³⁸ The same kind of striking gender-differences also exist in other universities.

The gap between male-female, however, is much more prominent in technical and professional education. In 1991-1992, the University of Engineering and Technology had only 10 percent female students, the Agricultural University had

³⁴ Duza et al., 1992, p.105.

³⁵ Report of the Task Forces on Bangladesh Development Strategies for the 1990s, Vol. 1 (Dhaka: University Press Limited, 1991), p.105.

³⁶ Statistical Yearbook of Bangladesh, 1992, op.cit., p.497

³⁷ Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 1993, op.cit., p.283.

³⁸ Ibid.

slightly more than 10 percent female students.³⁹ Recent statistics provide evidence that polytechnics and other technical institutes also provide few opportunities for the girls and they are virtually out of technical education.⁴⁰

Only medical colleges and teachers' training institutions draw a considerable proportion of female students. In 1990-91, 29.8 percent female students were in the 8 medical colleges, 26.6 percent were in the Institute of Post-Graduate Medical Research and 37.2 percent were in the Dental College.⁴¹ In the corresponding year, the important educational courses where girls had better share of opportunities were: Teachers Training Colleges -36 percent; Institute of Education and Research (Degree course) - 40 percent; Primary Teachers Institute - 57 percent.⁴² Ostensibly, medicine, education and humanities are preferred fields for women as they rarely go for commerce or technical courses. Recent statistical estimations show that in 1989-90, among the various faculties under Dhaka University the highest percentage of female students (43.7 percent) were in the field of social sciences and lowest percentage (13.9 percent) were in commerce, whereas highest percentage of males (86 percent) were concentrated in commerce followed by law (69.2 percent).⁴³ Female students constituted 30.7 percent in law.⁴⁴

However, higher education of women is mostly confined to urban upper-and middle-classes in Bangladesh society and is still accessible to only a very small proportion of the female population. Some studies conducted on students of universities show that, in all universities most of the women come from urban areas,

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ See Duza et al., op.cit., p.105.

⁴¹ Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh, 1992, op.cit., p.496.

⁴² Duza et al., op.cit., p.105.

⁴³ Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh 1991, (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 1991), p.540.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

relatively well to do and better educated families. Even women come from rural areas, they represent the educated and more progressive-minded segment of village life.⁴⁵ Another study on university students also found that 94 percent of the female students had post primary to higher secondary level education in towns and cities.⁴⁶ Their guardians were educated, either service holders or professional persons with a liberal attitude to female education. Thus the study concludes that, university education for females in Bangladesh is elitist in nature compared to that of males.

It seems natural that female education is gaining wide acceptance in urban areas, as the girls there are less likely to encounter resistance from within the family to pursuing education. Moreover, girls only schools are more prevalent there and all universities are located in urban areas, so urban girls have a greater opportunity for schooling and higher education than their rural counterparts.

Most of the rural girls have little chance to receive more than primary education, because of the scarcity of girls' schools in rural areas. In purdah-ridden rural society in Bangladesh, few families are willing to allow their daughters' study in co-educational schools or to permit them to travel some distance to alien schools. Only in rare cases are girls sent to a neighbouring village or town to pursue their education.

Besides the lack of facilities, the prevailing traditional attitude toward women also contributes to the limited scope of female education in Bangladesh. Apart from the cultural bias, poverty is one of the main factors that prevent girls from attending or dropping out of school. When family resources are limited, priority is given to boys, who are the future bread-earner of the family.

⁴⁵ See. Ellen Sartar, Socio-economic Survey of Dhaka University Students, (Dhaka: University Grants Commission, 1975); Yousuf Hasan, Socio-economic Background of Students in Higher Education, (Dhaka: FREPD, 1976).

⁴⁶ Habiba Zaman, Higher Education of Women in a Traditional Society, (Dhaka: University Grants Commission, 1981), pp.6-14.

3.2.6 *The Economic Status of Women in Bangladesh*

In a less developed country like Bangladesh, where indigenous sources of social conservatism still persists, women's position in the economic sphere shows certain outstanding characteristics. First, a large majority of women are active in agriculture-related activities as unpaid workers. Second, women's economic activity is strongly influenced by the prevalent cultural norms of gender-segregation. Third, though women have already made their way into the unacquainted sphere of paid employment in the men's domain, they are less likely to be found in high-income and high-status professional categories. And finally, their low economic status is congruent with their less educational development, and inherent limitations of the country's less developed economy.

As an agrarian country, the largest employment sector in Bangladesh is agriculture. In 1990, 55.3 percent male and 87.8 percent female were employed in agriculture, whereas the corresponding figures in the non-agriculture sector were 44.7 and 12.2 percent respectively in the same year.⁴⁷ Agriculture in Bangladesh is traditionally family-based and work is culturally gender-specific. Field-based activities and marketing are male preserves, whereas women do a large part of agriculture-related activities within the home compound as unpaid family labour. In recent years, however, increasing number of rural women are working as wage earners because of rural pauperisation.

Over the years, a considerable number of urban middle-class women have entered into the work force as a consequence of increased female education, and employment opportunities. The amount of female civilian labour force has increased in urban areas, from 0.2 million in 1981 to 2.1 million in 1990.⁴⁸ It is, on the one

⁴⁷ Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 1993, op.cit., p.106.

⁴⁸ See, Statistical year Book of Bangladesh, 1992, op.cit., p.86; Statistical Year Book of Bangladesh, 1993, op.cit., p.105.

hand, a positive sign of change from women's traditional role and status. On the other hand, it is depressing to observe that women are mostly concentrated in the non-professional and unskilled jobs in the organised sector. A recent labour force survey revealed that in 1989, women made up only 2.1, 0.1 and 0.8 percent in categories of professional administrative, managerial and clerical jobs respectively. At the opposite end, they occupied 4.8 percent jobs in the service category which comprised jobs as maids, cooks, cleaners and sweepers.⁴⁹

Another bulk of employed females consists of industrial labourers engaged in the manufacturing sector, particularly in the cottage and agro-based industries and garments industry. The majority of women in the industrial sector are employed in lowly-paid, unskilled jobs, and are mostly illiterate or have little educational attainment.⁵⁰

Women's status in Government services also does not present an impressive picture. They are still below the required 10 percent in jobs reserved for them.⁵¹ Government statistics provide evidence of disparities in job distribution patterns. Women were more likely to be found in class iii⁵² (non-gazetted) and class iv (employees) categories accounted for 10.07 and 4.94 percent respectively in 1992.⁵³ The percentage of female employment in class i and class ii categories (gazetted officers) was slightly higher than 6 percent, explains their poor representation at higher level Government service. The recent Governmental task force report reveals that out

⁴⁹ Labour Force Survey, 1989. (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics).

⁵⁰ For details, see Salma Khan, The Fifty Percent Women in Development and Policy in Bangladesh, (Dhaka: University Press Ltd., 1988), pp.62-66.

⁵¹ Considering women's disadvantageous position in society, the government policy of reserving 10 percent jobs for women in the public service was introduced in 1976 to promote female employment.

⁵² The government services in Bangladesh are divided into four categories, namely class i and class ii gazetted officers, class iii non-gazetted officers and class iv employees.

⁵³ Calculated by the researcher from Table 4.13 and 4.14 in Statistical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, 1993, op.cit., pp.107-108.

of 410 top decision-making positions in the civil service there are only two women.⁵⁴ There are no women in foreign service (diplomatic) as ambassadors or in the higher administrative echelons of the various Ministries. None of the administrative units are headed by women.

The lack of women in the top administrative posts in Bangladesh, is partly the result of the exclusion of women from both central and provincial civil services by erstwhile Pakistan.⁵⁵ Further, social prejudices against having women at the top decision-making levels, lack of educational qualifications⁵⁶ and inadequate training are the other important causes for women's low presence in the higher posts.

It is noteworthy that, in Bangladesh, women's selection of occupation is profoundly influenced by the cultural norm of gender-segregation. The appropriateness of occupational categories for women is often determined principally by the amount of contact it necessitates with members of the opposite sex and next by whether it is commensurate with traditional female role images. Even urban-educated women who do work outside the home almost invariably seek careers in occupational fields that enable them to maintain the cultural norm. On account of this, professions that bring women in contact with men such as secretarial jobs, sales, nursing, etc are still looked down upon and teaching is the widely preferred job for women, which can be practiced without violation of cultural norms. Teaching is also viewed to be consistent with feminine nature and role.

⁵⁴ Report of the Task Forces, op.cit., p.338.

⁵⁵ During Pakistan period (1947-1971) women were only allowed to compete for taxation, audit and accounts, and the postal service. The Senior Civil Service and Foreign Service were closed to them. After independence of Bangladesh women are allowed to compete for all branches of the civil and foreign services.

⁵⁶ Khan, op.cit., p.51.

Certain jobs are again culturally prohibited for women. Unlike other third world countries like Africa, Latin America and the Far East, women in Bangladesh are almost absent from all kinds of jobs related to marketing and trade. They are rarely found to be engaged in self-employed projects or as entrepreneurs or industrialists.⁵⁷ Their presence is almost symbolic in legal professions too. The cultural practice of gender-segregation has made these jobs exclusively for males in Bangladesh.

Conclusion

Women's status in Bangladesh is considered low and submissive with few opportunities for self-development and change. While constitutionally, education, economy, politics and other spheres have opened up for all citizens to participate, cultural and social barriers have prevailed to limit women's participation. The cultural ideology of gender-segregation has profound influence upon them, keep them aloof from the 'public world' where livelihoods are earned and political, economic and social power are exercised. Though modernity has brought about some degree of changes, and increased educational level has extended the career opportunities for women, social and cultural factors related to women's self-devaluation persists. Women themselves and society at large view them primarily as housekeepers.⁵⁸

The women's status and greater participation in every sphere of life are further adversely effected by the limited opportunities for personal growth. In a highly stratified society like Bangladesh, life chances, the range of opportunities available to women and motivational factors vary considerably across the social class and region.

⁵⁷ See. Q. Kholquzzaman Ahmed, "Female Employment in Bangladesh: A Review of Status and Policy" in Situation of Women in Bangladesh, 1985, op.cit., p.28.

⁵⁸ See. Nurunnahar Fyzunnessa, "Data on Attitudes Towards Urban Girls Education" in Women and Education, (Dhaka: Women for Women, 1978), p.39.

Hence women's status poses a major paradox. There is an educated group of elite women, a very small segment with high status background who have achieved success in many fields of endeavour. Urban middle-class women, whose positions have been changed substantially over the past years are better educated and are engaged in different occupations and other spheres of life alongside men. The fact is, they enjoy relatively less restriction in movement, having greater chance of education and developing career interests. On the contrary, the rest of the women, who specially reside in rural areas, whose life chances are constrained by deprivation, disabilities and social conservatism, constitute the vast majority of women in Bangladesh.

There is, however, a changing trend in women's conditions. The traditional practice of keeping them within culturally defined boundaries is gradually changing. A noticeable change in value system has occurred during the last three decades after independence as an impact of modernisation. Yet, the relatively favourable attitude towards women's personal growth is mainly confined to the upper and middle-classes of the urban segment.