

# WOMEN'S LIVES AROUND THE WORLD

A Global Encyclopedia

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## Bangladesh

### Overview of Country

Bangladesh, officially known as the People's Republic of Bangladesh, is situated in South Asia. Bangladesh shares borders with India and Myanmar and is separated from Nepal and Bhutan by the small corridor-like land of Shiliguri, India. The Bay of Bengal is in the south of the country. It is the eighth most populous country in the world, with 168 million people, and the most densely populated among the countries that cross the 10 million mark. The present-day borders of Bangladesh took shape during the Partition of Bengal and British India in 1947, when the region came to be known as East Pakistan, as a part of the newly formed state of Pakistan. It was separated from West Pakistan by 870 miles (1,400 km) of Indian territory. Political exclusion, ethnic and linguistic discrimination, and economic negligence by the dominant western wing, nationalism, popular agitation, and civil disobedience between West Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) led to the Bangladesh Liberation War and independence in 1971. After independence, the new state endured poverty, famine, political turmoil, and military coups. The restoration of democracy in 1991 has been followed by relative calm and economic progress. In 2014, the Bangladeshi general election was boycotted by major opposition parties, resulting

in a Parliament and government dominated by the Awami League and its smaller coalition partners (IBP 2014).

Bangladesh is a unitary parliamentary republic with an elected Parliament called the Jatiyo Sangshad. The native Bengalis form the country's largest ethnic group, along with indigenous peoples in northern and southeastern districts. Ninety-eight percent of the population is Bengali. Islam is the main religion of Bangladesh and is practiced by 89.5 percent of the population. Hinduism is practiced by 8.5 percent of the population, Buddhism 0.6 percent, and Christianity 0.3 percent. Bangladesh's documented history spans 4,000 years. Its human history has lasted for more than 20,000 years (U.S. Department of State 2012).

According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Bangladesh has a Gender Inequality Index (GII) value of 0.518, ranking it 111th out of 148 countries in the 2012 index. In Bangladesh, 19.7 percent of parliamentary seats are held by women, and 30.8 percent of adult women have reached a secondary or higher level of education, compared to 39.3 percent of their male counterparts. For every 100,000 live births, 240 women die from pregnancy-related causes, and the adolescent fertility rate is 68.2 births per 1,000 live births. Female participation in the labor market is 57.2 percent, compared to 84.3 for men (UNDP 2016).

Bangladesh is one of eight countries that has a higher male population than female. As the majority of the country follows Islam, the idea of *purdah*, or veil, is still contested

in terms of whether it serves as a vehicle of discrimination or empowerment. In dominant Western discourse, veiling is often considered restrictive of women's rights, but others say it empowers women. Though the import industry is dominated by a female workforce, women are mostly unseen outside of their domestic sphere in the rural areas. Women make up higher percentages than men of the labor force in the garments industry, but the terms of equality are measured in various areas beyond employment. Their status and position is also measured in terms of education, income, assets, health, and the role they play in the family and in society. These characteristics are representative of the amount of political power and social prestige a woman is accorded, and thus the extent to which she can influence decision making within the home and community.

## Girls and Teens

Girls and teens in Bangladesh face pervasive gender discrimination and obstacles in their development in almost every aspect of their lives. Girls are often considered financial burdens to their families, and from the time of birth, they receive less investment in their health, care, and education. As a girl child grows and reaches adolescence, the gender disparities are clearly presented to her by the society. The growth of a young girl to adolescence is treated abruptly within Bangladesh. At puberty, girls' mobility is often restricted, which limits their access to livelihood, learning, and recreational and social activities.

Bangladesh has the fourth-highest number of child marriages. There are also high numbers of adolescent mothers. Though the maternal mortality rate has improved, it is still relatively high in comparison to other countries. Poor maternal health is the result of early marriage, women's malnutrition, lack of access to and use of medical services, and lack of knowledge and information. Most women give birth without a skilled attendant (UNICEF 2016a).

In the home, especially in rural areas, women's mobility is greatly limited, and their decision-making power is often restricted. Though the situation is changing in the cities where women are becoming more financially independent, there are still restrictions imposed by husbands in terms of power in the household. For instance, 48 percent of Bangladeshi women say that their husbands alone make decisions about their health, while 35 percent report that their husbands alone make decisions regarding visits to family and friends (UNICEF 2016b).

Violence against women is another major impediment to women's development. Street harassment, eve teasing, abductions, and rape are common phenomena in Bangladesh. Perpetrators are rarely held accountable, and even if they are, they frequently receive no or very little punishment within the legal system (Hossain and Suman 2013).

## Child Marriage

Bangladesh has the highest rate of child marriage of girls under the age of 15 in the world, with 29 percent of girls in Bangladesh married before age 15 (UNICEF 2016). Two percent of girls in Bangladesh are married before age 11. Continuous inaction by the central government and complicity by local officials allows child marriage, including of very young girls, to continue unchecked, while Bangladesh's high vulnerability to natural disasters puts more girls at risk, as their families are pushed into the poverty that helps drive decisions to have girls married.

Child marriage has been illegal in Bangladesh since 1929, and the minimum age of marriage has been set at 18 for women and 21 for men since the 1980s. Despite this, Bangladesh has the fourth-highest rate in the world of child marriage before age 18, after Niger, the Central African Republic, and Chad. Sixty-five percent of girls in Bangladesh marry before age 18 (HRW 2015).

The reasons behind the elevated rate of early marriage stem from traditional Bangladeshi customs and moral codes as well as social and economic conditions. In Bangladesh, a patriarchal, unequal society prevails. Poverty is also a major underpinning factor that encourages early marriage. Because young girls are often considered an economic burden by their families, their marriage to an older man and into another family may be seen as a family survival strategy to obtain financial security. Additionally, parents are attracted by the prospect of lower dowry payments if they marry their daughters off at an early age. Another root cause of early marriage in Bangladesh is the fear of sexual harassment of young daughters. Early marriage is seen as a way to "protect" a girl's sexuality in an unsafe environment (HRW 2015).

The prime minister of Bangladesh, Sheikh Hasina, vowed to end child marriage in 2014's Girl Summit, but, controversially, it has taken a step that promotes child marriage even more than before. Rather than eradicating child marriage, the Bangladesh government, with the consent of the prime minister herself, has promoted a new law lowering the minimum age for a girl to be married to 16

## 18 Bangladesh

instead of 18. This creates a bigger threat to girls and teens in Bangladesh, and if 16 is the legal age for a girl to be married, child marriage will be further validated.

### Education

Education is essential to reducing discrimination and violence against girls and women, and Bangladesh has made great progress in this area, already achieving gender parity in primary and secondary education. However, Bangladesh still has a long way to go to achieve gender equity, access to quality education for all girls, completion of basic education with acceptable competency levels and relevant life skills, and equal roles for women and girls in society

Education is the key to addressing entrenched discrimination and violence against women. Research suggests that the presence of more educated children in the household and community acts as a restraint on violence against women (World Bank 2008). In addition, educated girls tend to delay marriage, are more likely to seek help during childbirth, and are more likely to give birth to healthy babies who will survive and grow into adulthood. Bangladesh has made immense gains in girls' education, such that girls now outnumber boys in primary and secondary schooling (GED 2015). However, net attendance rates in secondary education are still extremely low, at only 53 percent for girls and 46 percent for boys. In tertiary education, there are only 6 girls for every 10 boys, well below the Millennium Development Goal target of full equality (UNICEF 2016).

Women typically receive less education than men their age. According to the UNESCO statistics 64.64 percent of men over the age of 15 are literate, compared with 58.31 percent of women (World Bank 2015)

### Health

The health of women is a crucial factor in the health of children, but gender discrimination leaves women in Bangladesh particularly vulnerable to disease and death. The maternal mortality rate (MMR) declined from 440 per 100,000 childbirths in 1997 to 320 per 100,000 childbirths in 2001. Translated into real numbers, this means that of 2.5 million women who become pregnant each year, an estimated 370,000 develop fetal complications, which the health facilities in the country are neither equipped nor able to handle. Increasing access to emergency obstetric care is a key element in reducing maternal mortality (UNICEF 2016).

Only 8.6 percent of births take place in hospitals or local health centers, and in 2001, only 11.8 percent of deliveries were assisted by doctors, midwives, nurses, or family welfare visitors. The remaining 88.2 percent were attended by relatives or other people, of whom only 11.9 percent included trained traditional birth attendants (UNICEF 2016).

The health-seeking behavior of women during pregnancy and childbirth is low: 48 percent utilize antenatal care, and 16 percent access postnatal care. There is also evidence of a disparity in health-seeking behavior according to educational and economic status. Poorer, less educated women are less likely to seek qualified routine or emergency obstetric care. Only 40 percent of women who perceived that they had life-threatening complications during their pregnancy sought immediate care—70 percent of women in the highest wealthy quintile of the population and 50 percent of those in the lowest quintile.

Maternal malnutrition, infections during pregnancy, anemia, and repeated pregnancies contribute to low birth weight babies and a high rate of maternal mortality. The maternal mortality rate is among the highest outside sub-Saharan Africa, and the vast majority of infants are born at home. The nutritional status of women in Bangladesh is also alarming. The body mass index (BMI) of 52 percent of women of reproductive age is less than 18.5; this means they are extremely underweight. This has been compounded by a high prevalence of iron-deficiency anemia (more than 50%) and vitamin A deficiency (for example, more than 2.8% suffer from night blindness) (UNICEF 2016).

The poor nutritional status of female children at birth is compounded by a lack of access to various services, resources, and opportunities, and it is associated with high workloads and lack of rest. All of these factors result in poor health and malnutrition, and many women continue to be sick throughout their adult lives.

It is not possible to reduce the rate of maternal deaths solely through health and nutrition initiatives. Maternal mortality is an indicator of the overall situation of women in a society, so a more comprehensive social development approach is needed. This means nurturing a sociocultural movement that addresses the reduction of maternal mortality as a woman's right and also enhances women's self-esteem and status.

Statistically, Bangladesh has experienced significant improvements in women's health over the past three decades. Women's life expectancy, for example, increased from 54.3 years in 1980 to 69.3 years in 2010, one of the largest increases in the region (ILO 2014).

## Access to Health Care

The government of Bangladesh, according to the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, is responsible for securing health care for its citizens. Over the past few decades, through efforts by the government as well as international organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), access to health care in Bangladesh has improved. More recently, health services have begun to transition from free public services to for-profit private services. The public sector mainly provides outpatient, inpatient, and preventive care, while the private sector mainly provides outpatient and inpatient curative care (IMPOWR 2012).

In Bangladesh, however, inequities regarding access to medical services exist based on both socioeconomic status and demographics, such as geographical location—urban versus rural—as well as gender. As nearly half the population lives below the poverty line, and many of the poor live in rural areas of the country, individuals in such areas may experience difficulty accessing medical care due to a lack of monetary resources and available medical facilities. To address this latter issue, the government recently began supporting the opening of community clinics within rural communities. Additionally, Bangladeshi women are denied equal access to health care. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stated that it “is concerned at women’s limited access to quality health care services, including reproductive health-care, specifically in rural areas” (IMPOWR 2012). Efforts are being made to increase Bangladeshi women’s access to medical services, but even if access is expanded, social prejudices may prevent some women from utilizing such services.

## Employment

In the economic field, women play a vital role, as evidenced by the importance of the ready-made garment (RMG) sector. While the number of men and women employed in manufacturing is roughly the same, the vast majority of RMG-sector workers are women—80–85 percent (ILO 2014). It is to be noted that, in most cases, employers engage garment workers, mainly women, in factories without any formal agreement or job contract. Thus, they can be easily hired and fired, and no compensation is offered when they are laid off in the interest of factory owners.

Bangladesh recently amended the Labour Law in 2013, which protects the fundamental rights of women workers,

including the right to maternity leave (HRW, 2015). At the international level, Bangladesh has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) as well as ILO Convention 111 on Discrimination in Employment and Occupation. The reality is that, despite such legislation, women workers’ rights remain ignored in the garment sector. Women workers are employed in poorly paid jobs, and they face severe labor rights violations and not getting their legal entitlements. They are also forced to work at night, often exceeding 10 working hours, which is a violation of the labor standard.

Women are poorly paid in this sector. Because of sustained campaigning by women workers, women’s rights and human rights activists, and other trade unionists in Bangladesh, the minimum wage for garment workers was raised in 2010 for the first time in four years. Receipt of wages in the garment industry depends on meeting an assigned production target. If production targets are met, a sewing operator’s salary now starts at 3,861 taka (approximately USD\$47.882) per month and a helper’s wage at 3,000 taka (USD\$30) per month. This amount is inadequate in meeting the minimum living standards in the urban areas. Besides the above, they get no other benefits or festival allowances (festival allowances are given in the time the prominent religious festivals, such as Eids, in standard private or government jobs in Bangladesh) (ILO 2014).

Similar to the recognition of women’s contributions to agriculture worldwide, women’s roles in Bangladeshi agriculture tend to be underappreciated, owing to the commonly held view that women are not involved in agricultural production, especially outside the homestead, because of cultural norms that value female seclusion and undervalue female labor. Nevertheless, women’s participation in the agricultural sector has increased over time. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, during 1999–2000 and 2005–2006, the number of employed persons in agriculture increased from 19.99 to 22.93 million—about 15 percent. For male labor, there has been an absolute decrease of about 6 percent, while the number has increased from 3.76 to 7.71 million for women—more than 100 percent. Because of such changes, the proportion of women in the agricultural labor force has increased from less than 20 percent to 33.6 percent of the total (FAO 2010.). This is indeed a phenomenal change, although it is not yet clear how much of this change resulted from a true secular increase as opposed to a better measurement of women’s participation.

## 20 Bangladesh

According to the World Bank, Bangladesh creates around 1.2 million jobs every year, mostly benefiting men. The latest Bangladesh Development Update suggests that to comfortably reach middle-income status by 2021, Bangladesh needs more women to join the workforce. Bangladesh can increase its gross domestic product (GDP) growth by 1.6 percent if female labor participation increases from the current 33.7 percent to 82 percent, a figure on par with the present male labor participation rate (World Bank 2008).

In a report made by advocate Salma Ali, the executive director of Bangladesh National Women's Lawyers' Association, over the last three decades, the emphasis in Bangladesh has been on ensuring gender equality and mainstreaming gender issues through various policies and strategies to ensure employment of women in various professions. The government is a major employer in Bangladesh; thus, the appointment of women in Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) and their inclusion in different cadres is very significant and needs special consideration from various perspectives. The government of Bangladesh has already made several policy decisions and taken special measures to ensure equitable female participation in civil service. A quota system was introduced to increase the presence of women in the government employment sector, though women's participation in government services has not yet reached a satisfactory level. BCS has more than 1.1 million civil servants in 37 ministries, 11 divisions, 254 departments, and 173 statutory bodies. Ten percent of posts are reserved for women. There has been progress in the numbers of women in service at mid and senior levels, from 8.5 percent in 1999, to 15 percent in 2006, and 21 percent in 2011 (UNDP 2016).

Similar to women in civil services, women's participation in law enforcement services is also very low. The number of women participating in the police and army is very small but steadily building up. At present, the total number of police officials is 154,921. The total number of working police officers is 144,411. Of all officers, the number of female police officers is 7,561, comprising just 5.24 percent. The Bangladesh Army did not recruit women for many years. However, in 2003, and following the lead of many armies in the world, the Bangladesh Army decided to recruit women as commanding officers. In the past, this post was considered to be only for men. These female officers proved that they are as good as their male counterparts. Some women officers even worked for UN peace-keeping forces. For the first time in the country's military

history, some 1,263 female soldiers were recruited. Of these soldiers, 945 were for the medical core and would be in training for one year.

In the social sphere, Bangladesh is an example of what is possible when women are involved in decision making. Indeed, it is a heartening story of social innovation and development, in part due to microfinance, which has played an integral role in rural and social development in Bangladesh. Ninety-two percent of borrowers are women, and 90 percent live in rural areas. While there is some debate over the efficacy of microfinance in poverty reduction, some studies have shown that, in Bangladesh, female participation in microfinance activities has led to an increased sense of empowerment measured by factors such as decision making, social acceptance, and political involvement, which in turn have led to general welfare improvements.

For example, Bangladeshi mothers increasingly have a say in their children's education. The country has managed to reduce the gender gap at all levels of education, particularly at lower levels of education, that is, youth literacy and secondary school enrollments. In these two areas, disparities have been reduced at a faster rate in Bangladesh than the global average.

Women spend five times more time on unpaid household chores than men, an effort that remains unrecognized at both family and national levels, according to a study by ActionAid Bangladesh that surveyed 316 people in the rural north. Women devote an average of 6.45 hours each day to care work at home, compared to men's average of 1.2 hours a day. Most of women's unpaid work involves cooking, and a woman will spend 12 out of 72 years of her life cooking, said Sadananda Mitra, a former deputy director of the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, presenting the study at Spectra Convention Centre in Dhaka. Women's employment rates remain low despite progress, and their wages are roughly 60–65 percent of male wages (Byron and Rahma 2015).

The maternity leave policy available to women in Bangladesh is 16 weeks with full payment. However, interestingly enough, there are no specific laws that exist for management-level women staff. The law that exists is Bangladesh Sromo Ain, 2006, or the Bangladesh Labour Act, 2006. The "Maternity Benefit" chapter refers to workers that do manual work, mainly in factories. The leave period that is guaranteed to nonmanagement women workers is similar to what is available in Pakistan, Singapore, and Sri Lanka (Bangladesh Labour Law 2006).

## Family Life

Bengali families are highly hierarchical. The notion of hierarchy becomes operative primarily through the male-female divide and, thereafter, through age. Women and female children always come second in family hierarchies. Women are supposed to look after the house and children. Their main task is to produce offspring and tend to them as they grow up. To a greater or lesser degree, women in Bangladesh are subjected to the regime of *parda*, that is, customary practices through which honor and purity are preserved. This entails a regime of physical and psychological seclusion.

*Parda* is stronger within the Muslim community and Hindu high castes. The status of a community is measured by the degree of modesty of the women. Male offspring are by far the first desire of many families. Baby girls are frequently not wanted or desired and may receive a less enthusiastic welcome than that reserved for male children. While in rural areas giving birth to girls is not as appreciated as giving birth to boys, within the rising middle class of the country, the stigma associated with giving birth to girls is not as prevalent as before.

Children are usually considered the property of fathers. Boys benefit more from inheritance than their sisters. There are, however, differences among communities. Some indigenous communities in Bangladesh follow a maternal family system where women are considered first for property inheritance. Nevertheless, overall, women are frequently considered inferior to their male counterparts.

Giving a dowry to the groom's family has always been one of the biggest social problems in Bangladesh, and dowry-related situations create further problems in family life after marriage. The Dowry Prohibition Act 1980 outlaws dowries, with a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment, and safeguards from physical abuses are repeatedly affirmed in several pieces of legislation (Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh 1972). Women's dignity as a core value of human rights law is deeply entrenched in numerous international instruments, and Bangladesh also assumes affirmative obligations to respect and ensure this right. Despite this, dowry-related cruelty is endemic. In 2011 alone, dowry-related violence claimed 325 lives and resulted in 7,079 incidents of dowry harassment (Begum 2014a). This represents only a fraction of the total dowry victims, as women are very reluctant to unearth their "hidden wounds" publicly for several reasons, including loss of family honor and privacy, fear of in-law reprisals, and poor

## Women's Voices

### Abritty Abdullah

Growing up in Bangladesh with both of my parents working would have been impossible if I did not have my other "mom" taking care of me. In the city of Dhaka, where a kid is born in a middle- to high-income household where both the parents work, hiring maids for taking care of the children and household is the only way of bringing them up. My friends, my cousins, and I, and even my nephews, had someone taking care of us while our parents were gone working.

The idea of day care, husband and wife sharing household work, babysitting, or having help for a particular time is not popular in Dhaka due to financial constraints and the patriarchal framework. The women who come as maids in the households stay there 24/7 without a day off, and they work for the minimum possible salary because shelter and food is provided for them. My other mom, whom my brother and I used to call *Apa* (sister), stayed in our household for 24 years. Eventually I became her daughter, and she became my mother. My parents will probably never be able to pay back what she has done for us. My whole being is indebted to this person who has no blood ties with me yet is as important as the idea of mother to me.

She and my mom are equally responsible for my existence here in this world. I love them both equally, and whatever achievements I have made are a tribute to their hard work. I can only love my *Apa* back, because there is no way I can pay her back.

access to inadequate and costly legal remedies. Further, in a substantial number of cases, influential perpetrators act with impunity due to corruption, and victims are left with virtually no legal recourse (Begum 2014b). The underlying cause of this rising trend of violence, notwithstanding, the existence of a series of positive statutes necessitates an exploration of factors affecting the origins and development of dowry and how it is addressed in Bangladesh.

The distinction between state laws and religious laws often creates further confusion in terms of family laws, contributing to a situation where women face complex

## 22 Bangladesh

forms of discrimination. This is particularly devastating for poorer groups within Bangladesh who have little to no access to knowledge of state laws and may be controlled by family and religious laws. Muslim personal laws are discriminatory in their embrace of polygamy for men, their greater barriers to divorce for women than men, and their limited provisions on maintenance. Under the Muslim family laws in Bangladesh, women have no right to maintenance beyond 90 days after notice of divorce (or birth of a child, if the woman is pregnant at the time of divorce).

Hindu personal law also discriminates against women. It recognizes polygamy for men and contains significant barriers for women to access maintenance payments. Hindu women can seek judicial separation, but the law does not recognize divorce. In Christian personal law, divorce is allowed on limited grounds for both men and women, but the grounds are far more restrictive for women. Men can divorce if they allege their wife committed adultery. Women, on the other hand, must prove adultery plus other acts to secure a divorce. Such acts include conversion to another religion, bigamy, rape, sodomy, bestiality, desertion for two years, or cruelty. Charges of adultery are particularly humiliating for women in Bangladesh's conservative society.

Bangladesh has taken the important step of establishing specialized family courts that deal with separation, divorce, and maintenance cases. But women and lawyers told Human Rights Watch (HRW) that seeking timely maintenance in these courts is akin to an obstacle course. They described delays at every stage, nonexecution of maintenance awards, and evidentiary challenges. Some women face harassing countersuits by husbands.

Women whose husbands are too poor to pay or who have no marital assets need to be connected to social assistance programs and shelters, according to HRW. Bangladesh does have some social assistance schemes that could benefit women impoverished by separation or divorce, including one offering 300 takas (USD\$4) per month for "husband-deserted" women who meet need criteria. But among the many women interviewed by HRW who could have qualified for this program, none had accessed it. HRW also found that the social assistance programs do not address women's multiple vulnerabilities, such as disability, ill health, old age, and marital breakdown (HRW 2015).

In Bangladesh, under Islamic law, the wife inherits a fixed share of one-eighth of the deceased husband's property if he leaves children, whereas the husband receives one-fourth of his deceased wife's property. If he does not

leave any children, then the wife inherits a quarter of the husband's estate. A daughter who is an only child inherits half the estate of her late father or mother. If there is more than one daughter and no son, then the daughters jointly inherit two-thirds of the estate. However, if there is a son, then the daughter's share will be equal to half of the son's share. In all cases, men inherit more than women.

Among Hindus in Bangladesh, a large number of women are also excluded from inheritance. According to Hindu law, not all daughters of a man are equally eligible to inherit. Unmarried daughters and married daughters with sons can inherit, while childless widowed daughters or daughters having no son are excluded. A Hindu woman, even if she inherits, has limited rights to her property in the form of life interest (i.e., on her death, the property reverts to the next heir of the person she had inherited the property from). A widow inheriting property from her husband also inherits on limited rights (i.e., life interest). Buddhists in Bangladesh are also governed by Hindu laws.

### Birth Control and Contraceptive Care

In Bangladesh, the average number of children per woman of reproductive age has decreased dramatically in recent years. This figure was above seven in the early 1970s, but according to the World Bank, it is now 2.2. Bangladesh currently has the lowest total fertility rate in South Asia. Family planning in Bangladesh (then West Pakistan) was introduced in the 1950s through voluntary efforts by social and medical workers. In 1965, it was adopted as a full-fledged government-sector program. Since then, the national family planning program has changed and evolved. Large-scale, field-based family planning programs from 1965 to 1975, which later focused on maternal and child health (MCH), supported multisectorial family planning programs from 1975 to 1980. Most recently, since the 1980s, it has turned into an integrated health and family planning program with emphasis on MCH, contraceptive health care, and primary health care.

Contraceptive health care in Bangladesh has evolved through the time. With the help of three major components of the family planning program—the government, NGOs, and a subsidized commercial sector—Bangladesh has done remarkably well in comparison to other South Asian countries. Associated with increasing contraceptive use, the country's total fertility declined from 6.3 births per woman in the mid 1970s to 3.4 births for the period 1991–1993. The most dramatic decline happened between

1989–1991 and 1991–1993, from 4.3 to 3.4 births, or 21 percent, in a short period of two years. The inexpensive cost associated with contraceptive care—which is even free in some rural areas of the country—has helped to shape the change in fertility rate (UNICEF 2016).

## Politics

Bangladesh has the eighth-lowest gender gap in terms of women's political empowerment in the world. This is largely because it has had a female head of state for longer than any other country in the world. In addition, the number of seats held by women in the national Parliament doubled from 10 percent in 1990 to 20 percent in 2011, according to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Web site. To encourage and ensure women's participation, the Bangladeshi Parliament has 50 seats reserved for women that are appointed on elected party position in the Parliament. Women's growing presence in the political field has had important implications on the family structure. The traditional views that women are an economic liability and that sons are more desirable than daughters are being challenged now, and the society is moving away from such attitudes. Studies show that the growing independence of women is one of the major causes of a decline in gender-based infanticide in Bangladesh (ILO 2014).

Bangladeshi women have achieved great improvements due to their continuous struggle since the country's formation. The last four decades have seen increased political empowerment for women and the adoption of new laws to protect women's rights. As of 2016, the prime minister of Bangladesh, the Speaker of the Parliament, and the leader of the opposition (supposedly the most prestigious political positions) are women.

Begum Rokeya is popularly known to be the pioneer for the gender equality movement in undivided Bengal (especially for what is now Bangladesh as well as for Muslim women). She established the first school aimed primarily at Muslim girls in 1909. This was a revolutionary effort made at that time, when Muslim girls were segregated from the mainstream education system and were not allowed to leave their homes on their own. Rokeya paved the way for Bengal's (now West Bengal and Bangladesh) Muslim girls' education. She is considered by many to be the first feminist of Bengal. Rokeya's advocacy on behalf of Bengali Muslim women a hundred years ago has evolved, and women in Bangladesh are now almost everywhere, prominently marking their identity (Byron and Rahma 2015).

## Organizations Working for Women's Rights

Bangladesh is home to what has been described as a vibrant women's rights movement. It consists of several hundred grassroots groups and a number of larger organizations. The largest is the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad, with a claimed membership of around 130,000 individuals and 52 branches in various parts of the country. Other prominent organizations identified include Ain O Salish Kendra, Mahila Samity, Proshika, Bangladesh Rural Development Committee (BRCA), Mohila Awami League, Nijera Kori, Nari Pragati Sangha, Karmojibi Nari, Samata, Usha, Step towards Development, Nari Pakkha, PRIP Trust, Bangladesh Muktiyoddha Sangsad, and the Samajik Proti-rodh Committee. An annotated list identifying some of these organizations appears in a UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) report on women in local government. The list provides information on their respective aims and activities and a snapshot of the overall diversity of the women's rights movement in the country. Some, like Proshika and BRAC, are primarily involved in microeconomic empowerment, while others, like Ain O Salish Kendra, are primarily concerned with promoting legal rights (Tahmina 2005).

## Participation in Government

The prime minister and leader of the opposition are both women who, collectively, have ruled the country back and forth for more than 20 years. In 2012, there were also 6 female ministers and state ministers in the 44-member cabinet, including the leaders of important ministries, such as defense, foreign, energy, agriculture, and home. There were 69 women lawmakers in the Parliament, 19.7 percent of the total seats. Nineteen of these women were directly elected, and 50 women were elected through the gender quota system (Asia Foundation 2012). The statistics may indicate a triumph for women overcoming past exclusion, but the underlying patriarchal dominance is still alive in the society.

There are still unequal power relations in the political arena of the country. Women are discouraged from entering the political arena by preexisting social norms that associate leadership with men. Despite two prominent female leaders, the prime minister and the opposition leader, who both come from influential political families, the number of women in political spheres and leadership positions in the country remains low. The top leaders in the Parliament choose who should run for political offices and

## 24 Bangladesh

ministries, and they are almost all male. While the faces of the two ruling parties are women, the construction of both parties is done by their male colleagues. Though the final decisions are up to these two strong female leaders, the system is largely organized and led by male politicians and decision makers. Nevertheless, the prominence, power, and importance of these two women leaders is notable.

### Women's Rights in Bangladeshi Law

According to the constitution, women's rights are protected under the broad and universal principles of equality in the following articles: Article 10 provides that steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life; Article 19 (1) provides that the State shall endeavor to ensure equality of opportunity to all citizens; Article 27 specifies that all citizens are equal before the law and entitled to equal protection; Article 28 (1) provides that the State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth; and Article 28 (2) says that women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and of public life. In addition, Bangladesh has specific laws prohibiting certain forms of violence, including the Penal Code, 1860; the Anti-Dowry Prohibition Act (1980); the Cruelty to Women Ordinance (1983); the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (1993); and the Prevention of Repression against Women and Children Act (2000).

However, despite such legal support, Bangladeshi women still do not receive equal treatment in reality. According to the *Dhaka Tribune*, women in the informal sector are often paid lower wages than men for the same work (Mostafiz 2013). In divorce proceedings, women need to prove the validity of their reason for seeking divorce to obtain a court order to enforce their rights. Men on the other hand, do not need such proof and can divorce their wives at any time without proven reason. Under traditional inheritance laws, a woman is generally given half the share of her male counterpart. Despite anti-dowry laws by the state (and religious edicts supporting this position), traditions remain widespread, and women whose families do not fulfill requests to pay dowry to their husbands are sometimes subjected to horrifying forms of violence.

As is well known, women who turn down marriage proposals are sometimes in danger of suffering violence from spurned men, and there have been many reported cases of men throwing acid at women. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs set up assistance cells to help victims of violence in the 1990s, but the numbers of cells are

not enough to deal with the large number of cases. Many attacks go unreported due to fear of not getting any justice, fear of retaliation, or sheer lack of knowledge about where to go for help (Mostafiz 2013).

### LGBT Rights

In Bangladesh, the laws center and reinforce a gender binary, and there is hardly any indication of nonnormative genders or sexual minorities in the laws of Bangladesh. The self-identified gay, lesbian, and transgender population remains confined within the highly religious cultural and political setting of the country, and the infamous Penal Code 377 still exists in the law of the country. Members of the LGBTQ community in Bangladesh encounter social, cultural, and economic forms of oppression and violence. Outside of male and female, the only recognized other gender within Bangladesh is *hijra* (or what some refer to as the transgender female group), who experience extreme marginalization. As Khan et al. state, "In Bangladesh, mainstream society does not accept others beyond the male-female gender norm. Those who live beyond this continuum are subject to harassments and abuses" (2009).

Section 377 of the Penal Code criminalizes anal sex between men and other homosexual acts. This was introduced by the British Raj during colonial rule in India as Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code and was later used as the model of many antisodomy laws in many other British colonies. The law dates back to 1860, when it was introduced by the British colonizers to criminalize sexual activities "against the order of nature," arguably including homosexual acts. Prior to Section 377 and British colonial rule, there were no specific laws defining sexual norms.

Similar to other colonized countries, Bangladesh also adapted the British-imposed law after its independence under the same penal code number. On the Ministry of Law's Web site, Section 377 states, "Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal, shall be punished with [imprisonment] for life, or with imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years, and shall also be liable to fine" (Ministry of Law, Bangladesh 2016). According to Section 377, any sexual union other than the penis in vagina is punishable under the law. Thus, even consensual heterosexual acts such as fellatio and anal penetration may be punishable under this law. This law's existence threatens any sexual relationship or activities outside of heterosexual norms.

## Religious and Cultural Roles

The main religion in Bangladesh is Islam (89.7%), but a significant percentage of the population adheres to Hinduism (9.2%). Other religious groups include Buddhists (0.7%, mostly Theravada); Christians (0.3%, mostly Roman Catholics); and Animists (0.1%) (BANBEIS 2016).

In Bangladesh, gender norms are intimately bound up with religious beliefs and cultural practices, as they are throughout the world. Women's empowerment efforts have at times been strongly opposed by conservative groups, often citing religious scripture to defend patriarchal practices. Given the fact that these practices and the ideologies that undergird them are deeply enmeshed in the social fabric of Bangladesh, critics have questioned the extent to which development approaches that target women in isolation and focus narrowly on areas such as economic empowerment or health interventions can adequately address ingrained social norms. Such critiques have been at the heart of recent work that has found that patriarchal power structures in the home have severely limited women's control of microloans, offering them little real empowerment in such programs and trapping them in cycles of debt. It is clear that if the objective is bringing about substantial and lasting progress for women's empowerment in Bangladesh, then a more nuanced and sensitive examination of dominant patriarchal ideologies and the sociocultural practices they inform is needed. This is an area where religious ideas and religious leaders can and do play a significant role (Adams 2016).

ABRITTY ABDULLAH

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## Bhutan

### Overview of Country

Bhutan is a small landlocked kingdom located in the eastern Himalayas of South Asia. It lies between India and China, with a total land area of about 14,000 square miles (38,394 sq. km) and an estimated population of 720,679 (2012). The landscape stretches from subtropical plains and forests in the south bordering India, to subalpine forests and Himalayas in the north bordering Tibet in China. Bhutan is well-known as the "Land of the Thunder Dragon," derived from its Bhutanese name *Druk Yul*. It is said to have earned its nickname because of the fierce storms that often roll in from the Himalayas. Bhutan was the last remaining Buddhist monarchy in the Himalayas since 1907 until the country transitioned into two-party parliamentary democracy in 2008 (BBC 2017). The United Nations recognized Bhutan as a country in 1974.

Bhutan is known for having an extremely youthful profile in terms of its demographics where almost half the population of Bhutan, 45 percent, is under the age of 20. Women comprise 48 percent of the total population (National Statistics Bureau of Bhutan 2015), of which 69 percent reside in the rural parts of the country. According to the Population and Housing Census of Bhutan 2005, 31 percent of males are unpaid family workers, compared to

61 percent of the female population in the rural areas. The population density in Bhutan varies from rural to urban areas, given the increasing trend of internal migration. The urban population of the country is at 31 percent, and the remaining 69 percent of the population is rural. The population density of Bhutan is estimated at 41 people per square mile.

Bhutan is extremely rich in terms of natural resources, and it boasts an astounding volume of forest-covered areas and freshwater resources. It is the only carbon negative country in the world; 72.5 percent of its total land area is covered by natural vegetation that creates rich and diverse ecological systems. More than half of the total land area in Bhutan has been allocated as protected areas.

According to the Human Development Report (UNDP 2016), Bhutan ranks 132nd out of 188 countries in terms of the Human Development Index (HDI), with a value of 0.607 in the 2015 index. The Gender Inequality Index (GII) value for Bhutan in 2015 was 0.477, ranking it 110th out of 159 countries. Bhutan observed a 6.0percent increase in HDI value between 2010 and 2015, from 0.572 to 0.607.

Bhutan is primarily an agrarian society, where 62.2 percent of the total population is involved in agriculture. A majority of the population earn their livelihood through subsistence farming and animal husbandry. Small-scale subsistence farmers occupy most of the arable land and produce the majority of the crop and livestock products for the country. According to the country's Labor Force Survey Report, the agriculture sector contributes 12 percent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) (Labour Market Information & Research Division, Department of Employment, Ministry of Labour and Human Resources 2012).

Despite the vast majority of people being involved in farming and the agriculture industry, Bhutan's growth has been inadequate in curbing the issue of poverty or food security in the country. Although agriculture remains a significant source of income and livelihood for the country, its contribution to the nation's GDP in recent years has been receding as people move away from traditional forms of livelihood, such as farming, and opt for a more modern lifestyle and occupations. This has also led to the feminization of the agriculture sector in Bhutan, where female figures are leading the farming industry in the absence of men (World Bank 2014a).

The tourism industry has emerged as an important source of revenue for the country in recent years. "Tourist arrivals and revenues (from convertible currency-paying tourists) expanded at an average of 15 percent per year in