Voices from Bangladesh on International Women's Day 2018

Ms. Anna Minj
Chairperson, Bangladesh Community Radio Association (BCRA), and
Director, Community Empowerment, Integrated Development and Gender Justice & Diversity Programme, BRAC

International Women’s Day, celebrated globally on 8 March, is a time to reflect on progress made, to call for change and to celebrate the contributions of women all around the world. The theme for this year’s International Women’s day is “Time is Now: Rural and urban activists transforming women’s lives”.

Great progress has been made for women broadly. Still, so much work remains to be done to ensure that women are empowered, educated, safe, healthy, and free to be fully participating members of equal societies. BRAC has been working in all of its domains to promote gender equality and women’s rights and empowerment.

BRAC reported a total of 10,596 violence incidents in 2017, most of which were incidents of domestic violence. It is still considered as a private matter in our society. Moreover, women are often reluctant to report due to the social stigma and the culture of shame. Despite specialized act to address domestic violence, incidents have been rising due to lack of people’s awareness and trust in the existing legal system. Violence and abuse affect not just the women involved but also the families, and communities.

A survey shows that at national level, the country loses 2.13% of GDP due to domestic violence. In this situation, it is important to make people who have direct link to violence aware about the bad effects and legal punishment of domestic violence. Besides, it is also important to let the victims know that the state has laws to protect them. Men should be engaged in all activities as they are responsible for the majority of violence committed against women. The bold, brave acts of activists can lead to far-reaching change. The time in NOW.

Mr. Chandrasekhar Saha
Designer, Freelance Artist &
President of the National Craft Council
Bangladesh

In rural societies, people believe that a woman’s role is restricted to taking care of the household, the family and the children. But what we don’t realize that every human being, regardless of gender, has incredible potential to contribute to the world. Over the last few years, times have begun to change,
with women taking up greater roles in a world that was initially considered to be male-centric. Today, with the evolution of gender roles and the world at large, women may not have a strong role to play, but they are definitely contributing, doing their part, and people have begun to finally take notice.

Mithapur and Jamalpur, two remote villages from Bangladesh’s Paharpur, have developed and nurtured the culture of traditional pottery, with several craftsmen and artisans learning and developing the art for generations. From 2016-17, I had the opportunity to work with them, along with the help of UNESCO. Back then, the status of women was such that their day-to-day lives were spent in keeping up the archaic tradition of raising their children, maintaining household upkeep – tasks they had made a routine out of, tasks that meant nothing and left them feeling uninspired and ambitionless. All the geological finds from Paharpur, Shoumpur’s Bouddhabihar, along with the tradition of terracotta designing has allowed and inspired women to work alongside men, in making new, diverse kinds of terracotta crafts. This project ended with a successful terracotta exhibition and fair at National Museum, Dhaka. I was stunned by the creative vision of these craftswomen and their artistry, which in one word, left all the visitors spellbound.

A 75 year old widow stood out in particular, despite being completely asset-less, she indulged in the creative arts and left an inspiring mark. The sheer will power and determination the people of Paharpur displayed helped create a strong foundation for the nurturing of terracotta arts. Due to this nearly year-long project, they were able to step into a new chapter of their lives. The skill, creativity and dedication of the female artisan’s proved that there was and has been an innate creative instinct in them, one that was awakened by this opportunity. Despite being trapped in the trials that come with rural life, life changing transformations were made possible in the lives of these women, thanks to these projects.

Female artisans from both Jamalpur and Mithapur have now earned a strong foothold in society, moving forth with strength, respect and determination. Not only are they financially sound, they have discovered economical means to slowly but surely move forth to greater and better opportunities.

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Ms. Lubna Marium
Artistic Director, Shadhona
Researcher, writer, Dancer, Cultural & Human Rights Activist

Women in rural Bangladesh are resilient, to say the least. Though growing up within a patriarchal society, most are survivors. Surprisingly, in spite of such a discriminated upbringing, they, many amongst them ending up as single mothers, unflinchingly, leave home, hearth and loved ones, to earn a living. Sometimes living alone in nearby cities, but also, many a times, travelling to lands faraway where most times they do not even speak the language, these women fight all odds to persevere. How can this change?

The road to justice is long and hazardous. The need of the day is security – both social and financial - and the way to achieving this is by, first, assuring access to education, and then by giving a voice to women within local governance.

On this Women’s Day, let us all work towards lending a strong hand of support for women in rural Bangladesh, by raising our voices for them and, if possible, incorporating agendas within our own fields of work to enhance their well-being.
Mr. Md. Murshid Aktar  
Head of Education Programme  
Plan International Bangladesh

More than 70% girls dropout from the education system before completing grade 12 and most of them are from rural Bangladesh. Our vision hence is to enable girls and boys with quality education, ensuring they graduate out of class 12 with the right life and work skills. We believe investing in girls is the smartest thing to do. Hence our global strategy is also about taking actions together so that girls learn, lead, decide and thrive.

When a young girl in rural Nilphamari wants to be the Deputy Commissioner and change the lives of thousands in her rural area inspired by participating in youth programs and an energized school environment; we believe a spark has been lit. Our job is to guard and encourage that fire till it strengthens and lights the life of thousands of rural women transforming Bangladesh.

Ms. Nyma Nargis  
Executive Director  
Institute of Communication Studies

According to the World Economic Forum's 2017 Global Gender Gap Report findings telling us that the gender parity is over 200 years away - which give us a reflection of the state of women globally. We fighting for our rights and dignity more than 100 years, but today the journey appear rough and long. International Women’s Day provides an opportunity to empower women and celebrate activists working to attain women’s rights on a global scale. Collective action and shared responsibility for driving gender parity is what makes International Women's Day successful.

Today I dream of a society where all women have a life of dignity, respect, mutual trust and honor! Get the acknowledgment for her contribution in the society, as professionals as well as homemakers. I wish life came as a blessing to us; we don’t need to fight for that!
Mr. Omer Aiaz Ony
Actor, Faculty of Dhaka University,
Communication Expert

Bangladesh has achieved a lot regarding women participations in every sector since our liberation. Yet women empowerment is subjective to various parameters’ and in a holistic approach; it depends lots on how it is projected and by whom.

From various statistics it is evident that women in general have excelled in education, work force participation and most importantly power of decision making. Have all these ensured the real freedom of choice for women in general and specifically women in rural areas of Bangladesh? For instance, about 48 per cent of Bangladeshi women say that their husbands alone make decisions about their health, while 35 per cent say that their husbands alone make decisions regarding visits to family and friends (UNICEF, State of the World’s Children: The Double Dividend of Gender Equality, 2007). I think the dependency is there due to lack of education. If we really want to progress we need to improve the education system and methods here. And ensuring better education - is for everyone. A woman can be educated about the health and safety issues but it is important to educate the males to match the perspective of betterments of livelihood. In 2018 we should emphasized on reformation of education system not only for women but also for men specially living in rural areas, to ensure safety and equality in informed decision making power of rural women.

Ms. Rasheda K. Choudhury
Executive Director
Campaign for Popular Education (CAMPE) and
Vice-President Global Campaign for Education (GCE)

Today’s woman is not only a homemaker. She manages her household, engages in small business, carries out professional assignments. She is an institution, a change maker by herself. Today’s woman, be it urban or rural, contributes to the national economy, social development and intellectual pursuits.

The women of Bangladesh have played a significant role in the development of the country right from the Liberation War to its emergence as a lower middle income country applauded globally for its high performance in social indicators. It is high time women’s contribution is recognized in economic terms and promoted through social and political empowerment.

Let’s celebrate women and salute the change makers.
Ms. Rokeya Kabir  
Freedom Fighter, Founder and Executive Director, 
Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS)

The history of civilization recognizes the disparity between women and men; reach and poor; rural and urban; and the transformation of society from traditional to modernity. Through this transformation process, we now have become the citizen of 21 century.

At the eve of International Women’s Day March 8, 2018 time is now to invest more for the rural women.

Through continuous struggle women won some visibility, they are mostly urban. Invisibility of rural women from media to policy making level is pervasive. In our liberation war they played a glorious role to liberate the country. They gave shelter and food to armed guerillas at the cost of their life, provided valuable support and care to keep their moral high which has accelerated the liberation of the country.

Today, our rural women are the major foreign currency earner as garment and migrant workers. They are playing major role in food production, agriculture, industry, service and hospitality sectors. So it is not too much to ask for more space for rural women in media and national priority. They deserve infrastructure support like running water, latrine, education, skills training, health care, gas for cooking along with entertainment to live a better life. They also need space in power corridors, in various public and private institutions, and social committees. They also deserve dedicated financial and business promotion services. On top they should be entitled equal land rights by law to fulfill the constitutional declaration of “equal citizens’ rights”.

Ms. Ruby Ghuznavi  
Executive Chairman  
Aranya

After Bangladesh’s War of Independence in 1971, hundreds of thousands of women were left to fend for themselves, because so many men had died in the conflict. Many of these newly-single women were skilled artisans. But although able to produce beautiful craft items, they were not able to market them — in Bangladesh, the marketplace is very much a male preserve. By working together with a group of like-minded individuals, I helped to spearhead a series of initiatives that helped organise women into producer groups, so that they could continue working from home while earning a regular income to provide for their families and themselves. In this way, we were able to help thousands of women from all over the country to leverage these craft traditions into marketable
skills. We also assisted them in adapting traditional craft forms to the needs of a wider, modern-day marketplace. In time, many of these products entered the export market. And through the organisation that I set up in (?), Aranya, the crafts persons were given yarn dyed with natural colours, and provided with design assistance as necessary.

It is a source of great pride to me, that we were able to enter a number of the beautiful craft items they produced into national and international competitions, for which the artisans received a score of prizes and certificates from organisations like the World Crafts Council and UNESCO.

Another group of women terribly impacted by the events of 1971, were those who had survived rape and brutalisation at the hands of the invading Pakistani Army. After the war, many of these survivors were ignored or neglected by a conservative society that struggled with the “shame” of what had been done to them. In this way, many of them were victimised a second time. A few years ago, we launched an initiative to locate as many of these women as possible, and to initiate a dialogue with them, to find out what they wanted from the rest of Bangladeshi society. One of their strongest demands was to no longer be referred to as “birangonas” — a term that technically implies heroism, but became synonymous with rape survivors — and instead be called “muktijoddhas”. Namely, they wanted to be known as “freedom fighters”, like the men who had fought and sacrificed so much during that war. After extensive lobbying among different segments of society, and passionate advocacy that went all the way up to the Prime Minister, we were able to get them what they had asked for. The government also decided to provide a monthly allowance of Tk. 10,000 to each of the female freedom fighters, who had mostly, until then, been living their lives in poverty. To have been part of providing some recognition to these brave souls, albeit at this late stage, is something that gives me enormous satisfaction and a sense of relief.

Ms. Sara Zaker
Actor, Director, Business Entrepreneur and Social Activist

It’s a bigger challenge to change lives of the rural women than women in the cities. This is mainly because these women have lesser access to the development initiatives. One way of changing their lives is to make them more accessible to education, health, and nutrition and income generating activities etc.

The smartphones along with its technologies have reached the far corners of rural Bangladesh. It would be a smarter move to access the rural women through this device and give them access to the services of Health and nutrition, income generating activities, gender awareness etc. and thereby transforms their lives.
Mr. Sudip Chakroborthy
Assistant Professor, Department of Theatre and
Performance Studies, Dhaka University & currently
studying PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London

The 21st century is an important phase of the global initiative to navigate a liminal space to ensure women’s rights, equality, safety and justice, and acknowledge the positive activities toward the transformation.

Ms. Tahsinah Ahmed
Chief Executive Officer
Underprivileged Children’s Educational Programs
(UCEP) Bangladesh

Women worldwide have been seen to spearhead development in all spheres of life, be it in the family, community or in society. In Bangladesh, with opportunity, women have played an equally critical role traditionally, in agriculture, which is the life line of the economy; contributing with remittance as migrants abroad; or in the most productive industries like Ready Made Garments. They also play a major part in the informal economy, which comprises mostly of micro, small and medium sized enterprises. Two aspects are evident in women’s increasing engagement in the economy. Firstly, all women, irrespective of the type of profession they are engaged in, contributes back to their family, specially to ensure the education of their children and the economic advancement of their families. And second, most women are still engaged in lower levels of the value chain, especially due to limited skills.

The success of skills development to open opportunities for personal and professional growth is field tested over decades. Higher level skills lead to better jobs with higher salaries. The match of higher technical skills with stronger soft-skills takes one even further.

Established in 1972 UCEP Bangladesh provides i) second chance to education for out-of-school children and ii) decent jobs to youth through Technical Vocational Education & Training (TVET) and Skills Development. It has a special focus on social inclusion and therefore gives priority to females, children and youth from poor and underprivileged families. It aims to serve 126'633 children and youth (50% female, 5% learners with disabilities) within 2016 – 2020, of which 57’483 children will be provided with education and 69’150 youth will be provided TVET and Skills Development. At least 90% of the graduates from the TVET and Skills Development programme are expected to be employed in Decent Work.
The education and training of disadvantaged children and youth have had remarkable impact in their lives. Providing Competency Based Training and Assessments following the National Technical Vocational Qualification Framework, UCEP Bangladesh has an employment rate of 98%. Through job placement, female graduates, specially from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds transform from a burden to a boon. They demonstrate stronger voice, more meaningful involvement in decision making processes, higher self-actualization, more avenues to contribute to areas within and outside the family, and most importantly, increased dignity.

However, reaching higher professional levels in general and increased access to skills with high returns is still a tremendous challenge for women, especially in technical-vocational professions. Stronger efforts must be given to break this glass ceiling. May this be our resolve on the International Women’s Day.

Mrs. Tazima Hossain Majumdar  
Founder  
Needlecraft  
Dhaka - Bangladesh

In Bangladesh and across the world, there are gender disparities in all spheres of life. Some of the most challenging gender gaps remain especially in the economic sphere. Research indicates that women in professional positions still struggle to find higher paying jobs which men have access to more easily. Men are able to earn 23% more than women in the same position. Women in the grassroots economy face the same challenges. In agriculture, manufacturing and small enterprises, women tend to work the lowest paying jobs even though they work twice as much as men if we consider their unpaid care work in their households.

Transforming rural women and girls’ livelihoods in Bangladesh means emancipating their socio-economic freedom. Women must continue fighting to take control of their own lives, which is not to be dictated by their male counterparts. They must be in the forefront of economic development even if it requires breaking the social and cultural norms. Given the opportunity, they will enhance their ability to grow. We must invest in their education and technical skills development, which are essential in increasing their participation in the workforce and leadership within their communities and their families. We the women, should carry the torch of Clara Zetkin, in championing our womanhood for the future generation.