

## Empowering Women: Empowering Bangladesh

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### ABSTRACT

Women around the world are resourceful economic agents, overcoming stubborn, gender-based barriers to advance the health, education, and economic survival of their families. Women empowerment is a developmental and most argumentative issue around the world. Empowerment of women is a universal concept and a multi-dimensional approach and it is not an easy or straightforward process. It's time being process of which awareness, alternatives, resources, voice, agency, and participation of women. Women empowerment depends on the country's cultural, social, economic and political aspects. Half of the populations of Bangladesh are women and their economic participation has increased significantly. The purpose of this study is to explore the women's' empowerment situation and overall development through equal and active participation in the socioeconomic activities in the perspective of Bangladesh. This study also identified the factors that facilitate the improvement of women empowerment through reviewing the literature which focuses on the empowerment of women.

**Keywords:** Women; Empowerment; Participation; Socioeconomic; Population

### INTRODUCTION

*"Human rights are women's rights, and women's rights are human rights.*

*-Hillary Clinton*

Women empowerment have become a common term nowadays in every corner of the world and many seminars and conferences and meetings are taking place frequently in metropolitan cities and other towns about women empowerment.

"Nothing, arguably, is as important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of political, economic, and social participation and leadership of women" (Mandal, 2013). The World Bank has identified empowerment as one of the key constituent elements of poverty reduction, and as a primary development assistance goal. The Bank has also made gender mainstreaming a priority in development assistance, and is in the process of implementing an ambitious strategy to this effect (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002).

The logic of women's empowerment is to enhance women's ability to make choices over the areas in their lives that matter to them (Charmes and Wieringa, 2003). Studies have found that women's rate of employment-a key indicator of women's empowerment -has increased over the years around the globe and in

Bangladesh it is increasing noticeably (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). An educated mother is necessary to form an educated nation with political and social consciousness as well as the empowering women (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). Women empowerment requires a wide range of facets including financial and decision making capacities of women and the overall development of a country depends on the maximum utilization of her people, both men and women (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006).

In Bangladesh women encompasses nearly half of the total population and no doubt the socio-economic status of women of Bangladesh in increasing day by day. Women's empowerment is not only about upholding the fundamental rights preserved in constitution and the international conventions and it is also about sustainable economic development and prosperity of this country (Hussain, 2018). Women have equal rights with men in all spheres of the state and public life and development researchers assumed that overall economic development and the process of modernization would bring about an improvement in the status of women by benefiting both men and women equally (Rashid and Taibb, 2016). Bangladesh considers women's participation as an important issue in the path of women's empowerment as one of the main drivers of transforming the country's

status from low-income to middle-income (Chaity, 2018). Empowerment process addresses the structural problems as the power relation's change and the women's bargaining situation improves (Abdin, 2008). In Bangladesh, the last few years the situation has been positive for women working in different sectors together with a steady rise in female leadership (Chaity, 2018). In Bangladesh education level of rural women increasing day by day and more women are contributing significantly to their family's household income (Sanawar *et al.*, 2018).

We can expect more visibility for working women in terms of availability and acceptability for the empowerment of women. This paper empirically analyzes the statistical data of nationwide and worldwide several research organizations about the women empowerment scenario of Bangladesh by considering the relevance of economic, social, and cultural for the wellbeing of women. This study highlights the progress that Bangladesh has made toward empowerment in the last few decades

### EMPOWERMENT

Empowerment means giving power & authority. In the point of view empowerment has lot of definitions and literature. Empowerment as expanding people's ability to make strategic life choices, particularly in contexts in which this ability had been denied to them (Kabeer, 2005a).

Women in Uganda and Guatemala defined empowerment as the ability to improve quality of life, whether fiscally or in relation to autonomy, as decision-making capacity, equality with men and remove dependency (Alkire and Foster, 2009). Empowerment is defined as a group's or individual's capacity to make effective choices, that is, to make choices and then to transform those choices into desired actions and outcomes (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002). Empowerment has been used to represent a wide range of concepts and empowerment defined as the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002; Kabeer, 2005a).

The empowerment process is not directly observable and empowerment brings with both rights and responsibilities, and may lead to some freedoms being curtailed (Mahmud, Shah and Becker, 2012). Empowerment is not a stoppable matter; it is a continuous improvement process in the context of socio-economic environment (Reza, 2018). Empowerment is also seen as the

process by which the powerless gain greater control over their lives, gaining power not over others but to achieve goals and in this way exercising choice is seen as gaining power or empowerment (Sharif Chaudhry Professor, Nosheen and Professor, 2012). Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and power in all spheres of life and the power has to be acquired and once acquired it needs to be and once acquired it needs to be exercised, sustained and preserved (Islam, 2015).

The term empowerment is a multidimensional socio-economic process and it helps people to gain control over their own lives (Mandal, 2013).

Empowerment is a construct that links individual and strengths and competencies, natural helping systems, proactive behaviors to social policy and social change (Douglas and Zimmerman, 1995). Empowerment as a process which breaks the boundaries between the public and private domain, that comes out of the personal into the social which connects the sense of the personal and the communal (Yuval-Davis, 2015). Empowerment is a continuous improvement process, though the result of the process may also be termed empowerment (Reza, 2018). But more specifically, the outcome of empowerment should manifest itself as a redistribution of power between individuals, genders, groups, classes, castes, races, ethnic groups or nations (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). For empowerment a person needs intellectual ability, decision making capacity, authoritative power and reduction of gender inequality.

### WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

*‘‘There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.’’*

*-Kofi Annan*

Can you imagine a single moment, in the earth there is no woman? No it is simply impossible. The reasons behind today's development and modernization of world are the role of men and women. But unfortunately and for many reason women are not empowered as like men especially in developing countries and women empowerment is always lower than men. But the scenario is changing gradually day by day. A lot of researchers defined women empowerment in many literatures.

Since the 1990's women have been identified as main agents of sustainable development and

women's equality and empowerment are seen as central to a more holistic approach towards establishing new patterns and processes of development that are sustainable (Handy *et al.*, 2004). Women empowerment' became popular, women were speaking about gaining control over their lives, and participating in making the decisions that affect them in home and community, in government and international development policies (Rahman, 2013). Women's empowerment is "an expansion in the range of potential choices available to women so that actual outcomes reflect the particular set of choices which the women value (Kabeer, 2005a). women's empowerment is separate from the empowerment of other disadvantaged groups due to issues specific to women, such as household and familial dynamics and the power relations between men and women (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002).

Empowerment of women is essentially the process of uplifting of economic, social and political status of women, the traditionally underprivileged ones, in the society (Dutta, Bhakta and Bengal, 2017).

Women of Bangladesh defined women empowerment which is related to their financial position, as resulting from "having money" and assets as well as cooperatively "succeeding" at job (Alkire and Foster, 2009). In Bangladesh women empowerment on the family unit rather than the individual woman or man-which includes the ability to work jointly and well together? Empowerment of women is now a global issue and this term is usually used for improving women's condition, in real sense it may be applied to any disadvantaged group of society for bringing them to the same level of advanced section (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). Women's empowerment is a dynamic process that has been quantified, measured, and described in a variety of ways.

Women empowerment and measuring empowerment indicators, the process of women empowerment is still little understood (Mahmud, Shah and Becker, 2012). The concept of women empowerment will help the country to reach a steady progress in gender equality, which helped to secure the gender equality. The World Bank has suggested that empowerment of women should be a key aspect of all social development programs (Malhotra and Schuler, 2002). According to (Rahman, 2013) empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building leading to greater participation, to greater decision-making power and control, and

empowerment is a process that is both individual and collective (Mahmud *et al.*, 2017).

Empowerment strategies for women must build on 'the power within' as a necessary aid to improving their ability to control resources, to determine agendas and make decisions (Kabeer, 2005b). "Empowerment is an active, multi-dimensional process which enables women to realize their full identity and powers in all spheres of life (Mandal, 2013).

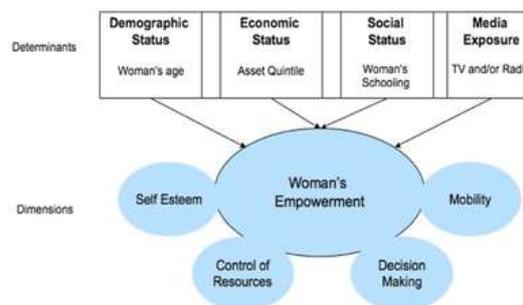
Women empowerment is not to take power from men by women rather it is the goal of women is to develop their own power while respecting men for who they are (Lincoln *et al.*, 2002).

### Indicators of Women Empowerment in Bangladesh

Eight empowerment indicators to measure women empowerment especially for Bangladesh perspective (Hashemi, 1996). According to Hashemi, (1996) the eight indicators are: 1. Mobility 2. Economic security 3. Ability to make small purchases 4. Ability to make larger purchases 5. Involvement in major decisions 6. Relative freedom from domination by the family 7. Political and legal awareness 8. Participation in public protests and political campaigning.

Women empowerment was measured in four dimensions, namely: 1) mobility, 2) decision-making power, 3) employment status and 4) headship of the respondent in the household. Mobility had two categories: 1. ability to go the medical/health center and 2. ability to go outside the house (Sanawar *et al.*, 2018)

According to (Mahmud *et al.*, 2017) Four different indicators to measure the degree of women's empowerment in Bangladesh: 1) female school enrollment; 2) female labor force participation; 3) marriage age (or probability of marriage); and 4) fertility. (Mahmud, Shah and Becker, 2012) adapted a model from (Jeejeebhoy, 2002) about indicators of women empowerment.



**Fig1.** Women Empowerment indicators Model of (Mahmud, Shah and Becker, 2012).

**Women Empowerment of Bangladesh**

In recent years, there has been an increasing awareness of women's productive roles, mobility and contribution to development in Bangladesh. If the policies are made to more empower and giving priority then they can keep role in poverty mitigation, furthering women's right, education, health care and income engendering activities (Parvin, Rezaul Ahsan and Chowdhury, 1998; Roy, 2018). Separately from the household activities, women of Bangladesh are contributing substantially to the national economy and the majority of women in Bangladesh have yet to be empowered to participate actively in the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). The policies and programs of the Government of Bangladesh, NGOs, and other institutions do not sufficiently address the need for women's empowerment (Division, Commission and Begum, 2014). Bangladesh has made progress toward empowerment in the last few decades (Division, Commission and Begum, 2014; Mahmud *et al.*, 2017).

The story of Bangladesh's development success is indistinguishable from the story of women's empowerment in Bangladesh: changes in the lives of women are extensively treated as both cause and effect of the significant developments in human development in the past quarter century (Mahmud *et al.*, 2017; Hossain, 2018).

Gender discrimination is widespread in Bangladesh, the Constitution of Bangladesh [Article 27, 28(1), 28(2), 28(3), and 65(3)] guarantees equal rights to all citizens clearly incorporated provisions for equal status of women (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). In Bangladesh 85% of the workers in the garments sector are women and the development of the garment industry had a positive impact on female labor force participation as well as female years of schooling, which in turn delayed childbearing and female marriage in the urban areas in Bangladesh (Teeravarapug, Kitiwanwong and Saetong, 2011; Mahmud *et al.*, 2017). The quick keenness of microcredit plans in rural areas of Bangladesh is often cited as a key to improving women's empowerment by improving the authoritative power of women within households (Hunt and Kasynathan, 2001; Sanawar *et al.*, 2018). The Union Parishad law 1997 encourages women participation in decision-making and empowerment process in Bangladesh and government instructed that women members should be president of at least

twenty-five percent of these standing committees (Rahman Khan and Ara, 2006). In Bangladesh a lot of NGOs' are leading to women's increased leadership, strengthened decision-making and agricultural production, and increased control over income. These crucial areas of women's empowerment have been proven to affect both agricultural productivity and food security for the better (Handy *et al.*, 2004).

The government organizations and non-government organizations are now working together persistently to confirm women's overall improvement through equal and active involvement in the socio-economic doings and removing the various weaknesses to their empowerment (CRI, 2018). The NGOs also provide non-economic support, such as health care, primary education, family planning, and skill training (Hunt and Kasynathan, 2001). Bangladesh has been experiencing a substantial change in society because of women empowerment.

**Table 1.** Population and life expectancy of Bangladesh

<b>Total Population</b>	<b>158.9 million</b>
Male	79.6 million
Female	74.5 million
<b>Life expectancy at birth</b>	<b>70.9 Years</b>
Male	69.4 years
Female	72.0 years

**Source:** Bangladesh bureau of statistics (BBS), 2015

In Bangladesh, since women constitute nearly half of the population (BBS, 2017), they are keeping a great role to planning and implementing in country's socio-economic development programs. Women's Life expectancy rate is higher than male in Bangladesh. Bangladesh has been making steady progress year-on-year in reducing gender inequality. Bangladesh gained the 47<sup>th</sup> position among 144 countries in 2017 as per The Global Gender Gap Report, whereas India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan remain at 108, 109, 111, 124 and 143 positions respectively.

SOUTH ASIA		
Country	Overall rank	Overall score
Bangladesh	47	0.719
Maldives	106	0.669
India	108	0.669
Sri Lanka	109	0.669
Nepal	111	0.664
Bhutan	124	0.638
Pakistan	143	0.546

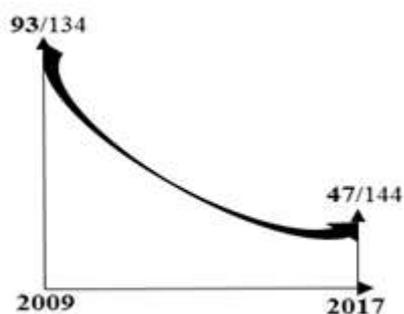


Fig2. Ranking of Bangladesh in Gender Gap

Source: The Global Gender Gap Index Report, 2017.

The Forum’s “Gender Gap Index of 2017” highlights Bangladesh’s success in four key areas: education, economic participation, health, and political empowerment. Bangladesh leads among the South-Asian countries in gender gap index 2017.

POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT		
Country	Rank	Score
Iceland	1	0.750
Nicaragua	2	0.576
Rwanda	3	0.539
Norway	4	0.530
Finland	5	0.519
Ireland	6	0.493
Bangladesh	7	0.493
Sweden	8	0.486
France	9	0.453
Germany	10	0.447

Fig3. Political Empowerment Ranking of Bangladesh

Source: The Global Gender Gap Index Report, 2017

In political empowerment area, Bangladesh is among top 10 countries of the index and stood 7th among 144 countries which have reduced gender inequality by political empowerment of women. In political empowerment Bangladesh left behind the Sweden, France and Germany. But Bangladesh has performed badly in health and survival sub index of gender gap index as the ranking significantly dropped to 125<sup>th</sup> from last year's 93<sup>rd</sup> (GAP, 2017).

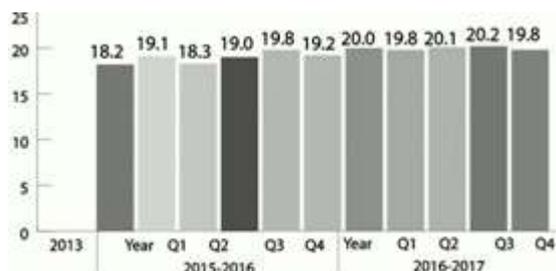


Fig4. Female Employment Labor Force (In Million)

Source: Labor Force Survey 2016-17(BBS)

The size of the female labor force in Bangladesh increased at a significantly more rapid rate than

that of men from the year 2015-16 to year 2016-17 and the size of female labor force increased by 4.6%, while the male labor force increased by 1% (Islam, 2011; Survey, 2018). Female participation in the workforce, bringing millions of women into the labor force and increasing women’s participation leading to increased productivity and economic growth.

Table2. Educational Attainment Ranking of Bangladesh

Year	Rank	Score
2017	111	0.954
2016	114	0.950

Source: The Global Gender Gap Index Report, 2016 and 2017

Bangladesh has slightly improved in educational attainment to reach 111<sup>th</sup> position from 114<sup>th</sup> last year. According to (USAID, 2017), women are lagging behind in education and literacy and the percentage of literacy of women in Bangladesh is 54 per cent.

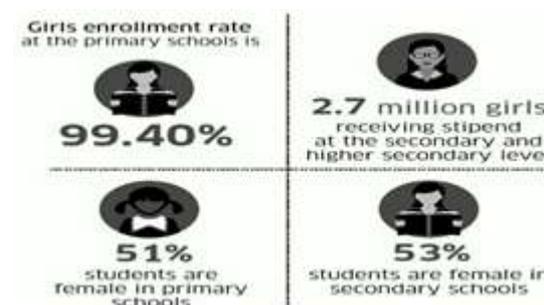


Fig5. Female Education Attainment in Bangladesh

Source: Center for Research and Information, 2017

To empower women, the current government and non-government organizations has given top priority to girls’ education. Education of girls up to degree level in public schools is also free. Female are also encouraged to take teaching as profession and currently 60 percent primary school teachers are women (CRI, 2018).

In civil administration of Bangladesh women’s participation are increasing and women are visible in different tiers of the civil administration. Women are playing the role District Commissioner (DC) in 6 districts out of total 64 and 16 are women among 206 Additional District Commissioners (ADC) (CRI, 2018).

Security of life is a key requirement to lead a good life. But security for women in Bangladesh is still elusive. Without ensuring security for women in their daily life, improving gender equality and women empowerment will be tough in Bangladesh.

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Types of Violence	Number
Domestic violence	394 (Killed 270)
Domestic worker violence	64 (Suicide 5, Killed 7, Unnatural death 27)
Rape	724 (Death 37, Suicide 8)
Acid violence	34 (Death 1)
Sexual Harassment (Stalker)	156 (Suicide 6)
Dowry related violence	239 (Killed 126, Suicide 4)
Salish & Fatwa	12 (Suicide 1)

**Fig6.** Violence Against Women

**Source:** *Ain o Salish Kendro (ASK) Report, 2016*

According to Ain o Salish Kendro (ASK) report 2016, 126 women got killed, 106 physically-tortured and 4 women committed to suicide because of dowry related violence in the year. Rape is another vicious threat for women. In 2016, 1050 women have been raped and 44 women killed after rape (Kendra, 2016). Many initiatives taken by both government and non-government organizations to protect violence against women of Bangladesh. In 2013, the Domestic Violence (Prevention and Protection) Rules was passed for ensuring proper implementation of the act and Child Marriage Control Act, 2013 which provides for strict punishments for marriage of girls below the age of 18 (CRI, 2018). A National Helpline Center for violence against children and women has been established to provide support to any

**Table4.** Employment in Computer Software Industry

Employment of Male & Female	Year	
	2013-14	2014-15
Total employment size in computer software manufacturing companies (number)	21514	23478
Male	18801	20656
Female	2731	2822

**Source:** *Report on private sector gross fixed capital formation in software survey 2016.*

In Bangladesh computer software industry is flourishing day by day. Though computer software industry is a men dominating industry, it is a remarkable matter that, in here women employment are increasing from year to year. In the year 2013-14 the women employment was 2713 persons and in the 2014-15 it was 2822 persons and the increase rate is 4.01%. It is a great sign in the context of women empowerment of Bangladesh.

**Table5.** Economic Participation and Opportunity Ranking of Bangladesh

Year	Rank	Score
2017	129	0.465
2016	135	0.410

**Source:** *The Global Gender Gap Index Report, 2016 and 2017*

women and the helpline number is 109 (CRI, 2018).

**Table3.** Women, Peace, and Security Ranking of South Asian Countries

Country	Ranking	Index
Nepal	85	0.672
Sri Lanka	97	0.656
Bhutan	108	0.628
Maldives	120	0.605
<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>127</b>	<b>0.585</b>
India	131	0.580
Pakistan	150	0.441
Afghanistan	152	0.385

**Source:** *Women, Peace, and Security Index Report, 2107*

In the women, peace and security index among the south Asian countries Bangladesh exists in fifth position and the ranking is 127. In this ranking Bangladesh left behind the India, Pakistan and Afghanistan (Georgetown Institute for Women, 2017).

In Bangladesh women are participating in a large extent in athletics, swimming, shooting, football, cricket, volleyball gymnastics etc.

The first all-female floor hockey team won a gold on Special Olympic 2017 and The women athletes' won 8 medals in South Asian Games (CRI, 2018).

Bangladesh has improved in economic participation and opportunity area this year with a leap by six steps from the previous year.

**Table6.** Women Business Owners Ranking

Country	Rank	Score (%)
Uganda	1	34.8
Botswana	2	34.6
New Zealand	3	33.3
Russia	4	32.6
Australia	5	32.4
<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>31.6</b>
Vietnam	7	31.4
China	8	30.9
Spain	9	30.8
USA	10	30.7

**Source:** *MasterCard Index of Women Entrepreneurs (MIWE), 2017.*

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According to Center For Research And Information (CRI), Women are also entitled to Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) loan over \$30,000 free of collateral, against personal guarantee and in 2017, total 54,000 women entrepreneurs received \$600 million as SME fund(CRI, 2018). This shows that disbursement of loan towards women entrepreneurs has been increasing both in amount and numbers.

Although Bangladesh is a lower middle income economy country and growing slowly in terms of women's advancement outcomes, knowledge assets, financial access and supporting entrepreneurial conditions, it delivers one of the highest Women Business Ownership percentage readings among the 54 economies measured (31.6 percent, rank 6), trailing only Uganda (34.8 percent), Botswana (34.6 percent), New Zealand (33.3 percent), Russia (32.6 percent) and Australia (32.4 percent)(Mastercard, 2017).In this ranking Bangladesh left behind the China, Spain and USA those who are belonging in the high income economy. Economic life of rural women in Bangladesh has been changing and the women are engaged in self-help projects and credit groups have managed better situation and environment(Abdin, 2008). In Bangladesh microcredit system for women has become increasingly common as a poverty alleviation intervention in developing countries worldwide and empowering them (Hashemi, 1996).

### Women Organizations in Bangladesh

The following women organizations of Bangladesh are researching in the context of women issues such as improvement of women education, training, economic activities, violence against women, violence survivors, women health, safe contraception, struggling farmer women etc.

- *Institute for Development Studies.*
- *International Women Studies Institute.*
- *Naripokkho.*
- *Centre for Women's Initiatives.*

### International Women Development Partners

To ensure empowerment and increase the living position of women Bangladesh has collaborated with some international women development partners those are the institution of United Nations. These are: UNDP, UNFPA and UNICEF.

### Bangladesh and UNDP

Incorporating women's concerns into policy is a new idea that is gaining momentum among

decision makers in Bangladesh as a result of technical assistance to the Government as part of its strategy, which is aimed at mainstreaming gender.

### Bangladesh and UNFPA

UNFPA provides support to the Government for implementing the recommendations of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

### Bangladesh and UNICEF

UNICEF collaborates with a wide range of partners including line Ministries, local governments, communities, and 350 NGOs.UNICEF's all activities in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Declaration and Plan of Action of the 1990 World Summit for Children, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Women empowerment is not a simple and quick process rather it is a complex and long term process. It is also the matter of reorient to women and it needs time to improve the empowerment situation of women, especially in Bangladesh. Women empowerment is not just a question of rearrangement of power both economic and political; it is also a matter of change of values of society. Bangladesh is gradually improving the situation of women empowerment year to year which has proved by gender gap report. Although this country has been governed by two women leaders for almost two decades but the situation of women empowerment not improved in rapidly rather it is now in gradual process.The government of Bangladesh, in association with non-government organizations, international policy partners, the civil society and rights groups, continues to flourish gender equality and empowerment. In recent years' women in Bangladesh are encouraged to make legal rights claims, compete on election, entrepreneurship and technology, sports and community leadership roles. Women have been found to contribute tremendously to their households, economy and they have participated in a large quantity in Bangladeshi society as teachers, lawyers, journalists, and politicians and as informal workers.Non-government organizations are now playing a vital role towards women empowerment by increasing female education, strengthening female leadership at grass root levels, building capacity and social awareness.

The employment of female workers in the garment sector has already created an enhanced image for working women, further employment opportunities need to be introduced. More and more women are joining the labor force in Bangladesh. It is obvious that employed women are empowered and will take an active part in any household or work related decision. The last few years have been extremely positive for women working in different sectors- together with a stable enhance in female leadership. The 33% quota for women is indeed an important impetus to women's empowerment in rural Bangladesh. Many women have been successful entrepreneurs and their successes and achievement need to be shared nationwide to build up positive images not only for women of elite society but also representing the women of society's every level. To improving the area of women empowerment, to ensure sustainability, more importance should be given in skills improvement, higher education, household and outside security, and capacity building. The education, domestic and outside security, autonomy power, and economic balance increase women's confidence and her confidence to take decision in every spear of life so that they can contribute more to ensure women's overall empowerment.

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