



Effect of Gendered Norms on Women's Labor Force Participation in Northern Rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Labor force participation for women is considered as an imperative sign for achieving gender equity. Like men women's participation in the labor force can play an important role in the economic growth of a developing country like Bangladesh. However, due to socio cultural factors and slow growth in the rates of overall women's labor force participation, possibilities for women to get employed and promoted in the labor force remain uneven. Using qualitative research guideline, this paper is an attempt to explore the effect of gendered norms on women's labor force participation in northern rural Bangladesh. Total thirty six participants including one key informant were interviewed separately. Findings revealed that husbands' conservative attitude towards their wives, sex preference in education, women's limited movement, violence perpetrated by husbands and employer, gender stereotyped roles of women hindered women's active labor force participation. Intervention addressing men's attitude towards women's work and economic performances are required.

Background

Women's labor force participation is imperative for improving their social status as well as socio economic empowerment. Like men women's participation in the labor force can also play an important role in the economic growth of a developing country like Bangladesh. Moreover, sustainable development cannot be truly achieved without the active participation of women at every level in society. Therefore, importance of women's participation in formal as well as informal sectors (UN 2005; World Bank, 2007; Hossain, 2004 & Adcock, 2013) has been recognized in both developed and developing nations to the progress of balanced development (Coleman, 2004; Azmat, Maia & Alan, 2006). In Bangladeshi society, women are left behind economically, socially and culturally compared to men as patriarchy highly dominant at every sphere of this social setting (Balk, 1997). In the context of third world countries, in Bangladesh, there has been immense disparity between men and women with respect to their representation in politics, public service, and in almost every field of life (UNDP, 1995). Scholarly researcher also indicated that patriarchal norms, inadequate progressive socio economic policy and constricted public service sector restricted women's economic activities in many ways (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994, Jahan, 1994; Balk, 1997; Mandel & Semyonov, 2006; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b & Karim, 2012). Apparently, it is seen that in both the rural and urban areas of Bangladesh, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) operating non-collateral economic activities to women that might be increased their access to labor market. Although, increasing access to participation in the labor market does not signify women's participation in the job market freely (Ward et al., 2004). At the same time, it also seen that some of the women have undertaken self-employment and informal sector activities instead of waged formal labor (Ward et al., 2004), although they are not significant in number. Evidence suggests that at aggregate level, the percentage of women labor force at different sectors is in low level.

For example, the percentage of women labor force at informal sector was 90.85% and in formal sector it was only 9.15% (BBS, 2008) as societal as well as cultural norms restricted women's mobility in many cases (Jahan, 1994). Hence, it is assumed that due to effect of gendered social norms women's labor force participation is hindered especially while it comes to marginal rural women. Prior research that focused on women's participation in labor force mostly ignored married and marginal women especially in the context of rural Bangladesh. Therefore, the present study was an attempt to explore the influence of gendered norms on women's labor force participation in a village of northern rural Bangladesh. This study defined gendered norm as a set of behaviors or attributes that society attributes to a particular sex and it is changeable, culture specific and time specific. Keleher & Franklin (2008) also stated that gendered norms are usually embedded in social structures, operating to restrict the rights, opportunities, and capabilities, of women and girls, causing significant burdens, discrimination, subordination, and exploitation. This study also defined labor force participation as paid work in different sectors.

Patriarchy, Gendered Norms and Women Labor Force Participation in Rural Bangladesh

In the context of rural Bangladesh, it is generally perceived that men's responsibility is to support their families economically while women's responsibility is to maintain household chores (Moin, 2003, Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b & Zahan, 2007). Basically, gender disparities, based on this social construction of biological sex distinctions (Amin & Mariam, 1987; Omvedt, 1987), is one of the great concerns of a patriarchal society like Bangladesh (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994, Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006a & Karim, 2006b) as it has various impact on women's labor market participation. Prior studies also revealed that in a highly patriarchal society like rural Bangladesh, women face variety of socio-cultural obstacles (Hashmi, 2000; Akmam, 2002, Karim, 2006a & Karim, 2006b) while it comes to participation in the income generating activities. Literatures also signify that patriarchal rules and norms, in most cases, favored men and disfavored women in many ways that made women as subordinated and men as independent (Papanek, 1973; Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994, Jahan, 1994; Karim, 2006a & Karim, 2012). Moreover, misleading sexist categorization of jobs in homes, and employers of labor is a major discriminatory factor actively influence on the lives' of women (Ojobo, 2008). For example, in respect to unpaid family worker, BBS (2009) reported that women (6.8 million) are more than doubled in performing housekeeping tasks compared with the men (3.5 million) that really indicate the negative evaluation of women labor force in terms of economic contribution. Previous studies that focused on women's participation in the public sphere also reported that traditional and persistent barriers hindered the access to labor market for women (Hoyt, 2005; Khan & Ara, 2006). It is notable that women's access to non-agricultural sector as well as decision making position is limited compared with their male counterparts (Hashmi, 2000; Jahan, 1994 & Hoyt, 2005) as there is a common idea embedded in patriarchal social setting like Bangladesh that women are inefficient in non-agricultural sectors in terms of work performance, quality management and decision-making (Hashmi, 2000; Sultana, 2002; Akmam, 2002; Karim, 2006a & Karim, 2006b). Influence of traditional norms on women's labor market participation also varies across the social classes. For instance, in a study of Women, Work and Values, Khan (1992) revealed that despite contributions to the family, the socio economic status of poor women is degraded because of participating in employment generation activity outside the home. This study also noticed that this occurs because of the fact that jobs available for poorer woman are accorded low social prestige (Khan, 1992). In general, the unequal position of women, in many segment of society, leading high level of discrepancy regarding women's livelihood and occupational status.

Present State of Women's Labor force Participation in Bangladesh

According to World Bank Report (2007), women are at a significant disadvantage in the labor market, earning as much as 60 percent less than men in the same type of work. Women those are less educated

and live in the remote area, have a few chances in paid employment both for the public and private sectors (World Bank Report, 2007). Until recently, most women in the urban formal labor force worked in garment industries, which provided 76 percent of Bangladesh's foreign earnings (Ward et al., 2004). Present situation of women's labor force participation is discussed below Labor force.

Participation by Sector

It is observed from the table-1 that at aggregate level the percentage of women labor force at informal sector in urban arena was 68.92% and in formal sector it was 31.08%. At the same time, 9.15% and 90.85% respectively for rural women (BBS, 2009). It is clear, however, that due to variety of socio-cultural factors women's labor force participation is at low level for both the urban and rural women.

Table 1: Sector Wise Women Employment. (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2008.)

Sectors	Urban Women (%)	Rural women (%)
Informal Sector	68.92	90.85
Formal Sector	31.08	9.15
Total	100	100

Labor force Participation in Economic Sectors

Women's participation in economic activities shows great variations by gender and by nature of sector wise activity. According to Gender statistics of BBS (2008), in 2005-06 employment person based on broad economic sectors has been shown (Table-2) that of the total employed women, the highest 68.13% were engaged in agriculture sector followed by 31.87% were in non-agriculture sector and 19.35% were in service sector, 11.51% were engaged in manufacturing sector and the rest were in other sectors (BBS, 2008). Simultaneously, for men as high as 58.19% were engaged in non-agriculture sector followed by 43.05% were in service sector and 41.81% were in agriculture sector indicating uneven labor market participation in terms of rate of participation in various sectors.. Moreover, 10.88% were engaged in manufacturing sector and the remains were in other sectors. In agriculture sector, women's labor force participation rate is higher in comparison to men's (BBS, 2008).

Table 2: Employed person 15 years and over by gender and economic sectors- 2005-06 (Source: Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2008).

Broad Economic Sector	Female		Male	
	No. (In million)	Percent	No. (In million)	Percent
Agriculture	7683	68.13	15084	41.81
Non- Agriculture	3595	31.87	20996	58.19
Service	2183	19.35	15532	43.05
Manufacturing	1298	11.51	3926	10.88
Other industries	114	1.01	1538	4.26

Study Objective

To consider all things, the present paper is an attempt to explore the effect of gendered social norms on women's labor force participation in northern rural Bangladesh. More specifically, this paper will provide some evidence on gendered norms that influencing women's limited participation in many

stages of their lives.

Materials and Methods

Study Design. In the present research, an explorative qualitative research design was employed as its aim was to develop concepts about the research issue. In so doing, due emphasis was given to the views of all the participants as required.

Study Area and Participants. The study was conducted in a rural setting of Isurdi Upazila (a sub-district) under Pabna District, Bangladesh. More specifically, BBC bazaar of Isurdi Upazila was selected as the study locale. This study locale has all rural characteristics although electricity and transportation facilities were available. In this research, snowball sampling technique was used for searching and selecting the study participants. Majority of the participants in the present study came from lower middle class, although economically they are also considered as marginal people in the study locale. At first, forty one participants were addressed for participating in the interview sessions. It is worth of mentioning that due to personal limitation during the interview sessions some of the women were reasonably disagreed to participate and excluded from the list. Therefore, thirty one married women and five men were engaged in active and paid labor force, including one key informant, was selected purposively.

Data Collection. To achieve the research objective properly, field work was conducted from November, 2013 to June, 2014. The researcher along with a female interviewer was conducted the in-depth interview sessions. Using a qualitative research guideline, thirty six participants including one key informant were interviewed separately. Participants were interviewed one by one using the interview guideline on the phenomenon relating gendered socio cultural norms and women's labor force participation. Moreover, there was a socio-economic section in the guideline that was used to collect data regarding socio demographics (e.g., education, occupation, age, income etc). Necessary secondary data and information were collected through relevant books, journal articles, reports, documents and online resources.

Data Reliability. Beside the researcher, an experienced female interviewer was employed to conduct the interview sessions as majority of the participant were married women. Both the researcher and female interviewer were able to build up close relationship between the participants. Before the main in-depth interview sessions the researcher was ensured and developed the interpersonal trust among the participants as required (Uddin, 2008). Moreover, all interview sessions with the participants were held in familial settings that also ensured privacy.

Data Analysis. In the present research, data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis. To carry out the data analysis properly, the researchers identified the meaning units from the interviews, and then examined the core meanings by assigning the codes. (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Karim, 2012).

Ethical Consideration. At first, participants were briefed about the topic and subject matter of present research. Finally, before the interview sessions, purpose of the research was described clearly and verbal consent was taken from the subjects as participation in the interview sessions were voluntarily. Participants were also informed that they can withdraw from the interview sessions reasonably.

Results

Socio-demographic of Participants. Out of 36 participants, majority belong to middle age group varying from 20-49 years. During the interview sessions it was observed that very young participant was not available while only one participant was found to have over 50 years old. It was revealed that the participants' educational status, on the whole, was not satisfactory. Specifically, five participants were found to have SSC level of education while only three participants were found to have higher secondary

(HSC) level of education. A few professional degree holders were found as paid worker. In addition, among the participants, a good number of them were found to have below SSC level of education, although they were capable to continue their official responsibilities. Majority of the participants, according to their own view, can be considered as low income earner. Some participants were found to have some high income, although they were poor in number. All but six participants were married and some of them were found to have an extra occupational role beside the present role, although they were not significant in number.

Patriarchal Outlook Influencing Women's Labor Force Participation

According to the principal of patriarchy, men hold the sovereign power to control households and society as a whole while women are ascribed to a lower hierarchy compared to men (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b & Karim, 2012). As a result, women are socially, legally, politically and technologically aggravate their positions and they are subordinated as a production unit for bearing and rearing children (Ahmad, 2001). During the interview sessions it was revealed that husbands' patriarchal outlook hindered women's outdoor participation especially in income generating activities and control over income as well. They (participants) reported that their husbands or senior male members not only control their (women) income, but create obstacle in many ways to participate in job market. One participant expressed that::

In our husband (or male) controlled family and societal system, we (women) are deprived of sufficient educational attainments that always suffered women's unemployment as well as dependency ... since higher education is needed to get a high-quality job. But my parent was not favored me to involve in higher education She (participant) also said that we (women) do many things for family, society and for the country but we always treated as good for nothing. This situation is harmful for the future generation as well-she added. (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

Son Preference Leading Uneven Labor Force Everywhere

Due to highly patriarchal culture rooted in our society the strong preference for sons is drive the parents to have more children (Cain et al. 1979 & Sarker, 2001) that also in turn reflected uneven labor force participation in some cases. In the study area, during the interview sessions, it was observed that, majority of the participants live under poverty line. As a result they were unwilling to send their children for formal education. It was also revealed that some of them (women) having an ability to provide higher educational expenditures for their school going children but their husbands were reluctant because of conservative attitude towards women's education. One participant narrated

Due to economic insolvency, some of the poor parents like us have tendency to send their children for income earning activities. In fact, I have not so much financial problem. He ((Husband) also engaged in income generating activities... going not bad. But the major problem is my husband's conservative mentality... actually he (husband) is reluctant to pay some extra money for his daughter's educational attainment. Frankly, my husband told me that after getting married Minu (my daughter's name) will go to another house (father-in-law house)...so why should we invest for her. He can sign that's all. Rather we should do something for Belal (Son)...in our old age he will look after us. (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

She (participant) also mentioned that socio culturally constructed attitude towards girls and women hampered their labor force participation and livelihood in many ways. She expressed that:

“Actually, he (husband) is not comfortable with such words as ‘empowerment’ or ‘emancipation’,

women employment in outside the home. In my personal life, my father as well as my grandfather had opposed simultaneously regarding my admission in any educational institution. Because the then period, location of any school or college was out of reach... it was ok as social security was also related to it. But now a day, govt. as well as NGOs has opened various opportunities for girls' education. You see that NGO school was well as college is available in our locality... and Belal (son) is continuing his education rightly ... so why should we deprived of or girls- she added. In reality, I have nothing to do in this regard since he (husband) is the head of this family. (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

Literatures also suggest that, specifically in rural areas, this situation hampered girls' education that has greater impact on their future professional attachment (Kabeer, Nambissan, & Subrahmanian, 2003). But it is universal that achieving education is an effective way to obtain human capital. Only due to economic reasons, many parents consider the girls' education as a waste of fund (Huang et al., 2009). In this respect, Emerson & Andre, (2007) stated logically- "In a low-income country setting where child labor is common, the children of the household can go to school, go to work, or spend time in both activities. Therefore, the amount of labor income the father and mother bring into the household depends on how much schooling they received as children. Parents who were child laborers command lower wages and are more likely to be impoverished and so are more likely to demand that their children work to supplement the family income, a repetitive pattern that is termed the intergenerational persistence of child labor."

Women's Work: Public World vs. Private World

During the interview sessions it was revealed that the study area is a highly tradition bound society. In this area, participants accustomed to maintain gender norms widely. Some of the participants noticed that despite being employed, women are used to engage in household activities very easily and that is their traditional norms. It is a matter of surprise that not only male but also some female participants believe that women should carry out her household responsibilities as usually. A small number of participant expressed that house keeping tasks may often make the girl child to become too busy to concentrate on her studies. One participant reported:

As a woman I used to carry out my income generating activities and engaged in household work as well. From the very beginning I do perform this...it has been our established norms. She also added that- when I was small in my childhood I had to help my mother.... And now Boishakhi (Daughter) helped me a lot. In fact, in my family, my younger son is always engaged in study and with friend circle...so who will give me hands? (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

National reports also support the participants' expression to some extends. For example, BBS (2008-09) reported that the working aged population who was engaged in household work for women in rural area is higher in 2005-06 compared to 2002-03. It was expressed that participation in household work is increasing day by day that may be a burden for women development (BBS, 2008). For example, in every year, women spend 5606 hours (64%) while men spend 3153 hours (36%) for this same purpose (Rahman, 2003).

Purdah Norms and Labor Force Participation

In the study area, it was observed that patriarchal norms limit women's economic and educational activities in the name of prejudice of Purdah or female exclusion. Significant number of female participant reported that this practice creates varieties of adverse situations for married women, especially to access to participate in decision-making process in the family level and to connect with income generating

activities outside the home. During the interview sessions, a good number male participant narrated that their local culture followed the notion that women should always stay in the background. One of the male participants reported

I believe that women are inferior to men in terms of intellectuality therefore their (women) duty should be limited within the four walls. I think, they (women) also think that the place of the woman is in the kitchen. (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

At the same time another male participant reported:

It's a common concept embedded in our society... that our roles are limited within the household. Hence, movement in the public area is not badly needed for them. I strongly believe that both the men and women have the same rights... while it comes to issue of going outside the house. Some of our leaders follow conservative rules for their own business... that hindered women's position in the outside. (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

Stereotyped Gender Socialization Process

Gender socialization is one process through which people learn about and are influenced by gender roles and stereotypes (Baden et al., 1994). By this process role of men and women are categorized which ultimately has an impact on women's lives and livelihood simultaneously. In the study area, it was unfolded that there was far difference in performing housekeeping tasks between men and women although majority of them came from lower socio economic condition. Evidence also supports this notion of gender stereotyped roles regarding household responsibilities performed in families. A good number of participants expressed that:

Discrimination based on male and female was continuing from the very beginning. May be it has harmful effect on our lives... but who will remove this...this system makes us (women) vulnerable. Actually only men can change these types of activities because they led the society ... they also imposed these traditional norms. Men should be powerful than women- this is the main theme of this rubbish society! (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

As a result of faulty gender socialization process embedded in social structure, women and men may incorporate gendered norms into their social identities (Corrigall & Alison, 2006). In this regard, Corrigall & Alison (2006) stated their reasonable opinion. They stated: Gender socialization process results in women and men valuing different job attribute preferences. Because women are viewed, and often view themselves, as society's nurturers, they are likely to value jobs that involve helping others and that allow flexibility in working hours to accommodate family demands. On the other hand, masculine ideals promote aggression and the ability to support a family. Thus, men are likely to value job attribute preferences such as money and the opportunity to advance.

Violence against Women: A common Crime or Custom?

Violence against women has been common in all culture perhaps in all times (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Subsequently Bangladesh seems to be no exception. It hampers women's potentials and limits women's participation in development process (Cain, et al., 1979; Jahan, 1994; Schuler, & et al., 1996; Hadi, 2005; Karim, 2006a; Karim, 2006b & Karim, et al. 2012). During the interview sessions, a good number of participants reported that violence and harassment in the family as well as workplace was the most important factor, which exhausted their potentials. In the study area, it was found that among the

victims of violence, majority of them having an experience of physical and mental violence perpetrated by their husband, employee and employer respectively. It is very important to note that some of the participants having an experience of suffering in the work place also continuing their job because of the family need and financial crisis as well. One participant stated

We (women) are not safe in anywhere. Husband tortured me for not to give the major portion of my salary... he (husband) thinks that it is his right (according to husband). I faced mental torture many times in my job life. Only for continuing my livelihood I am carrying out in an unsecured work environment. All adverse situations are only for us (women). This is the shameful rule of our society! (Source: Field Work, 2013/14)

Discussion

This study was aimed to unfold how gendered norms influencing women's labor market participation in the present study area. It is to be noticed that the participants of the present study were selected on the basis of lower middle class in terms of socio economic status. Because people's attitude towards socio culturally constructed notions may vary between the classes. This study revealed that multidimensional gendered social norms and institutions were played as impediment of women's labor force participation. Moreover, research findings also signify that the traditional patriarchal society of Bangladesh is based on class and gender divisions by which different rules and norms are made for men and women in an identical social setting (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Hashmi, 2000 & Jahan, 1994). More specifically, in rural Bangladesh, class mobility allows movement between rich and poor, but the division of social space and the difference in behavioral norms between men and women are rigidly maintained (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994; Hashmi, 2000; Khattak, Habib & Khan, 2008). Majority of the study participants were revealed that they have a lack of necessary education which also a major cause of suffering from entrance to a labor market freely. At the same time, gender based disproportion in adult education also found in the study area. Furthermore, in the study area, among the participants, there is a lack of higher educational degree which is also leads an intricacy while it comes to the issue women's participation productive sectors. Because education is an imperative predictor for both the entry level of labor market and in regard to fix wage structure (Ward et al., 2004). In addition, the custom of Purdah – a system of social control over women – is still a significant factor of gender identity and gender relations (Feldman, & Florence 1983). Participants were frequently exposed that predominantly existed Purdah norm was an impediment for them to participate in the labor market. They (participant) reported that some of the conservative leaders of their locality always show opposite position regarding women's labor force participation outside the home. Basically the practice of Purdah norms makes it difficult especially for married women to fully benefit from the educational system that resulted women's limited access to participate in decision-making process and to attach with earnings sources (Papanek, 1973; Hashmi, 2000 & Ojobo, 2001). During the field work, it was also unveiled that because of unequal power relation in both the families and work places they were experienced physical as well psychological violence simultaneously. Prior research revealed that this circumstances severely affects on women's labor force participation in general and may suffocate women's movement in particular (Baden et al., 1994; Baden, 1994 & Jahan, 1994) in many ways. It was also unfolded that there were far differences in performing housekeeping tasks between men and women even when a husband was an employed person. Like other segment of society, individuals, came from lower socio economic condition, also exhibits an identical behavior or attitude regarding culturally constructed gendered norms. It clearly indicates that stereotyped gender roles also have significant influence on women's limited labor force participation in rural Bangladesh process (Cain, et al., 1979; Jahan, 1994; Schuler, & et al., 199 &; Hadi, 2005).

Strengths and Limitations Despite varieties of limitations, the present research findings have some

implications regarding gender sensitive working policy, equal access to labor market and interventions in the context of lower middle class and marginal married women in northern rural Bangladesh. In the present research, participants were purposively selected from marginal families. Therefore findings possibly represent only a special segment of the population in the study area. Moreover, due to time and budgetary constraints, small number of participants were selected which may not seem to be sufficient. Opinions of the participants collected from the interview sessions may affect the research outcomes, to some extent, due to over or under reporting.

Conclusions

As a consequence of women's unequal labor force participation, it leads to an imbalance socio economic and sustainable development process. Document also suggests that attitudes toward women's employment are deeply rooted in different part like economic, social, political and cultural systems (Ma, 2010). Since, there may have multifaceted factors encompassed with this issue of gender, it would not be easy to conclude with simplification that only a factor influencing women's entrance to labor force participation. Further in-depth research to be conducted which accounting the husbands' gender ideology. Frankly, various policies and strategies taken to ensure employment of women in various professions are inadequate (Jahan, 2007). To date it may be hopeful for us that women emancipation movement and efforts to progress women empowerment process open new window for their broader participation in economic activities and also for recognition of women as agents for change and development process. Misleading sexist categorization of jobs in homes, and employers of labor is a major discriminatory factor. It must be eliminated through creating mass-consciousness activities. Women in the rural area have lacking of proper education and information about labor market. That's why they are being deprived of quality jobs. Hence, print and electronic media should be played pivotal role about the expansion of the notion of gender and power relations between men and women. Further study should be conducted together with both the husband and wife to find out deeply rooted causes behind the present problem. An effective intervention, addressing men's gender ideology, to be required for mainstreaming women in socio economic development process and for building up a balanced society.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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