

Chapter 38

Gender and Ethnic Discrimination: Life of Mainstream and Indigenous Women in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Socioeconomic inequality among men and women is a major hindrance in ensuring equal advancement for all human being to live a dignified life. Minority status of women further exacerbates inequalities faced by women belonging to small ethnic groups. The chapter explores gender inequality across three small ethnic minorities' groups in Bangladesh. Applying Nussbaum's capability approach to analyze the situation of women with different social and ethnic identities, this chapter unpacks the three-fold barriers experienced by women belonging to minorities groups – first, as minority group, second as women and third as minority women. Lack of awareness, perceiving their “present state” as destiny, social and local norms and patriarchal way of thinking force these women to live with identity of secondary citizens.

INTRODUCTION

Existing socioeconomic inequality has been a major hindrance in ensuring equal advancement for all human being to live a dignified life. Among all, inequalities based on gender identities are most the tormenting one. Around the world, gender inequality is installed in a multidimensional structure of relationships between women and men, which has its existence in every level of human experience,

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from the state level to individual level (R. W. Connell, 2002). Gender inequality is not necessarily differential access to material resources but it is mostly emerged from the gendered identities shaped by gender norms and stereotypes (Ridgeway, 2011). In Bangladesh women are very often 'ignored socially and politically, deprived legally, exploited economically' (Halim, 2001). According to the Hofstede's cultural dimension it was estimated that the society of Bangladesh is masculine in nature (Hofstede, 1994) where women are more likely to confine in household works and men are responsible for the family incomes. Informal social, cultural and religious traditions define the rural Bangladeshi women as docile daughters, compliant wives and dependent mothers (ANGOC and ALRD, 2011). These types of socio-cultural norms and expectations compel women to be dependent on their male counterparts and restrict women's involvement in political action and economic activities. As an outcome, women become the prey of inequality. In Bangladesh, Gender inequality is also evident in sex segregated labor market where women are more likely to be involved in low paid jobs and "non-standard" work and likely to have less access in education, skills, property and credit.

Gender inequality is further reflected in inheritance laws - under Muslim law women are only entitled to half of what their male counterparts inherit from a parent's estate and under the prevailing Hindu law of Bangladesh, women, have extremely limited right to inherit parental property (The Daily Star, 2010). However, "woman" is not a collective identity rather there are particular groups or classes of women who are more deprived than that of other women. Apart from mainstream Bengali women in Bangladesh, 'ethnic minority women remain among the poorest, most violated, most oppressed, most scorned and most exploited sectors of society' (Halim, 2005; cited in Wazed, 2012 p.16). Ethnic minority women irrespective of their matrilineal succession (Garos & Khashis) are being deprived and discriminated only because of their female identity (HDRC, 2008).

In the context of existing gender based inequality in various forms, this chapter explores gender inequality across three specific minority groups- Garo, Hajong and Rakhain. The specific objective of this chapter is to identify and analyze how gender identity has become a factor for economic inequality. To achieve this objective, analysis has been presented at two levels- inequality between men and women and inequality among women belonging to different small ethnic communities compared to their counterpart of mainstream Bengali women. We use Martha C. Nussbaum's Capability approach to guide the analysis and conclusions in this chapter.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Women in most parts of the world are lagging behind in fundamental functions of human life. They are less nourished than men, less healthy, more vulnerable to physical violence and sexual abuse (Nussbaum, 2002: 124). Similar obstacles very often hinder women's effective participation in political space. Women in many places are also burdened with double-shift work - employment and full responsibilities for domestic work including child care. They lack opportunities for cultivation of their imaginative and cognitive faculties. All these factors affect their emotional well-being. They have fewer opportunities than men to live free from fear. Combined effects of these unequal social and political circumstances provide women unequal human capabilities (Ibid). It is important to note that gender relations are relative and closely related to cultural norms. Therefore, keeping in mind the difference in values, focusing on universal and core constituencies of human life becomes more appropriate. Such focus allows us to "focus on what is common to all, rather than on differences" (Nussbaum, 1995: 64).

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