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Happy New Year 2022

@iPad art by
Wahiduddin Mahmud.

Editor's Notes
Volume 3, Number 2, Fall 2021

Greetings for New Year!

Welcome to the Fall 2021 issue of the *BDI Development Newsletter* - a scholarly publication dedicated to covering ideas, stories, data, literature, and happenings related to the development of Bangladesh. This publication aims to inform as well as connect academics with practitioners working in the field, policymakers in government, researchers, concerned citizens, entrepreneurs, and those who are part of the global development community. The focus is not just on ideas but also on the people who make up the development ecosystem. This is the fifth issue of this publication. Old issues can be found [here](#).

This issue is largely devoted to the powerful and leading role women have played in the development of Bangladesh, and continue to do so. On the occasion of the Golden anniversary of the birth of Bangladesh, it is fitting that we celebrate the contributions of women in this journey. Since the very beginning, women have been at the forefront of the social, political and economic development of Bangladesh. Not only have they made great strides in their own growth and progress, but their toil and sweat have greatly helped the nation extract itself from the proverbial “poverty trap” and get on the path to sustained development leading to the middle-income economy status. This is one reason why the lead article in this issue is an interview with Dr. Hameeda Hossain, a scholar-activist who was recently honored by BDI with its *Lifetime Achievement Award* for her work on the empowerment of women in Bangladesh.

The *BDI Lifetime Achievement Award* was established in 2012 to honor an outstanding individual whose work has contributed significantly to improving the lives of the people of Bangladesh. The award seeks to celebrate the work of a scholar of high reputation and integrity. By shining a light on this scholar-activist, we hope others will be inspired to follow their footsteps, working to uplift the poor and marginalized. Dr. H. Hossain joins a distinguished group of former recipients - Professors Rehman Sobhan, Nurul Islam, and Jamilur Reza Chowdhury (JRC).

The second article, “Women’s Movement: The Challenge of Change,” is a reprint of an op ed by Dr. H. Hossain published in *The Daily Star* on March 26, 2021. She argues that although there is greater recognition in the literature and the media of the role played by women in Bangladesh’s progress economic development, this has not led to a “a comprehensive change in gender relations or promote women’s empowerment...”. She goes on the list why this is the case. A number of other brief reprints of recent articles relating to the role and status of women are included. The interested reader should use the link to the full article.

I am grateful to Dr. Wahiduddin Mahmud for sharing his [digital] art piece with the new year’s greetings for the readers of this Newsletter. I will appreciate hearing from you especially if you have ideas on topics for future issues and on improving this publication.

Munir Quddus
Editor, *BDI Development Newsletter*
January 20, 2022

A Conversation with Dr. Hameeda Hossain

Munir Quddus
December 26, 2021



Recipient of the *BDI 2021 Lifetime Achievement Award*

Dr. Hameeda Hossain was born in Hyderabad, Sind in 1936, where her father, Mr. Abdullah Akhund served as a judge in the British India. She went on to graduate from the prestigious Wellesley College, USA, where she studied literature and history on a scholarship. Later, she earned a doctorate in history from Oxford University, UK.

It is no exaggeration to say that Dr. Hossain has devoted her life to help create the world she wants, a world that takes seriously the needs of the most marginalized members of society. Her professional career began as an editor of Oxford University Press in Karachi. She helped co-found the English language political monthly magazine, *Forum*, in the then East Pakistan in 1967. Between 1968 and March 1971, she served as the magazine's editor. The monthly magazine played a critical role in raising awareness of the systemic inequities and discrimination suffered by the people of East Pakistan.

After the independence of Bangladesh, Dr. Hossain joined the University Press Limited in Dhaka as an editor. She became actively involved in the rehabilitation of the women survivors of wartime sexual violence. Her efforts to develop and market local artisanal crafts led to the formation, in November 1974, of *Karika - Bangladesh Hastashilpa Samabaya Federation Ltd.*

She has also published widely on a variety of topics, including women's experiences of the war, arts and crafts, the apparel industry, women workers and human rights. Dr. Hameeda Hossain is also a founding member of *Ain o Salish Kendra*, a legal aid and human rights organization, which was established in 1986.

As a scholar, Dr. Hossain has published a number of books and scholarly articles relating to human rights and women's issues in Bangladesh, Islam and worldwide. These include, [*No Better Option? Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh*](#), (1990, UPL, co-authored with Salma Sobhan and Roushan Jahan); [*The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750-1813*](#) (2010, UPL, and Oxford University Press, Delhi); and [*Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*](#) (2016, Zubaan Books, co-edited with Amena Mohsin). She has also published numerous articles, chapters in edited volumes, and op-ed articles.

[On December 26, 2021, during my brief visit to Dhaka, I had the pleasure of spending some time with Dr. Hameeda Hossain in their home on New Bailey Rd. She had already sent me a draft of her responses to my questions. However, personally speaking to her on her life and work was important to me. She is a kind host, a dignified presence, and speaks with candor and great empathy. We spoke perhaps for ninety minutes covering different subjects, including her experiences leading to the brutal crackdown by the Pakistan military on the March 26, 1971, the return to a liberated Bangladesh with her family, her studies in Oxford University, and much more. For space and readability, I have edited the interview. Munir Quddus]

1. Please share a little on your early education and intellectual development/history.

I grew up in Sindh. My father was posted as a judge in different towns in Sindh, but most of my early education was in Hyderabad and Karachi. My father was very keen on a modern education. In both places I studied in Christian convents and passed my Matriculation from St Mary's Convent in Hyderabad Sindh in 1949/1950.

This was just after Partition and most of the Hindu students left. The atmosphere in the city also changed with migrants coming in from India. During my first year in college in Hyderabad, Sindh, I won an essay competition organized by the *New York Herald Tribune Forum*. I was invited to spend three months in 1952 in New York, living with American families and attending schools. This exposed me to a different culture as I attended their schools and met other Asian

students invited to *The Forum*. After living for three months in the US, I returned to Karachi, but was keen to continue my studies in the United States. The organizers at *The Forum* also encouraged me to continue my studies, and my father was of course very keen on my pursuing higher education. So I applied to several colleges and won a scholarship from Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Between 1954 and 1957, I studied at Wellesley, where I majored in history and literature. I could not afford to go home so I worked during the summers.

2. You have had a varied career, starting as a journalist, and eventually becoming a scholar and activist deeply involved in the affairs of the day. How has your career evolved over the years?

I have always been interested in writing. Even in school I won an award for an essay competition held by a local newspaper. But I did not plan for any particular profession. Instead I have taken advantage of whatever opportunities came my way. After completing my studies at Wellesley I worked with a suffragette organization in London for about six months. Then I came back to Karachi and joined the *Institute of International Affairs*, where I edited their journal. At the same time, I used to help edit *Outlook* -- a progressive weekly in Karachi, which was edited by Iqbal Burney.

When I took a month's leave to visit Dhaka in 1963 I met many academics who were politically involved. Amongst them was Dr. Sarwar Murshid who had published *New Values* for over 17 years. I edited one issue while I was there. After my marriage, I came to live in Dhaka and worked as editor at the University Press Ltd. In Dhaka I met many academics who were politically active. I became very involved as editor of *Forum*, a political weekly, which I had started along with Rehman Sobhan and Kamal Hossain in 1969. This was in the latter part of the sixties. As I traveled across the country I became very involved with artisans, particularly women producing folk crafts. An involvement with weavers led to my research and writing on craft development in Bangladesh (what was then East Bengal).

After I married Kamal I settled in Dhaka. I was busy working with women's groups and editing *Forum*. After Bangabandhu's assassination we moved to Oxford from 1975 to 1981. Kamal had a fellowship at All Souls' College and I decided to take advantage of the academic opportunities available, and enroll in a PhD course at St. Antony's College. My supervisor Dr. Tapan Ray Chaudhuri, a well-known Indian historian encouraged me to pursue my research interest in the social history of textile trade in Bengal and its impact on the lives of the weaving community. I had worked closely with weavers around Dhaka and learnt about their production and marketing. So I pursued my interest in the history of colonial trade and production. I completed my thesis in 1981 and it was published by the Oxford University Press in 1986. I then returned to Dhaka and continued to work as editor in the Oxford University Press and University Press Ltd.

I have continued my interest in research and writing and have moved on from history to contemporary issues in human rights. At *Ain o Salish Kendra* I was responsible for editing and publishing an annual human rights report. At the same time I have continued writing articles in the media, with a focus on human rights and women's rights, citizen state relations, etc.

3. Please expand on your work and engagement with the *Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK)*, which has been an impactful NGO in the women's and human rights space.

I have been very involved with the setting up of ASK as a legal aid and human rights organization. Some people are surprised when they hear of my engagement with this organization, since I am not a trained lawyer. I have worked with different women's groups, and came to know of the problems they faced within their families and in the community. Before 1971, I was working with weavers and artisans and learned a lot about village artisans. Professor Razzaq would take me around and introduce me to the rural culture of Bengal. After 1971, I helped out in a rehab home for Biranganas set up by Begum Sufia Kamal.

I was one of the founders of ASK. We were particularly motivated to help women defend their rights, working children and others who could not afford legal fees. Salma Sobhan, who was teaching in Dhaka University was the executive director. There were nine of us who were registered as founders of the organization including Justice Sobhan, Barrister Amirul Islam, Fazle Hasan Abed, Advocate Aminul Haque, Khursheed Erfan Ahmed, Salma Sobhan and myself.

While living in exile in Oxford, Salma and I would discuss what we would do on our return to Dhaka. We thought of how we could help people resolve their disputes and protect their rights. When we eventually moved back in the 1980s Bangladesh was under military rule. We participated in the movement against Ershad's military government, we discussed how to set up a Centre for dispute resolution specially to resolve problems faced by women and working children to deal with family and marital disputes. People were forcibly evicted from slums at the time; this required legal intervention with the help of lawyers and social workers. Salma's law students were very helpful as volunteers. Dr. Sarwar Morshed and his wife had a house in Dhanmondi. They allowed us the use of their garage where we provided free legal aid to poor women seeking assistance. We used to visit the slums and discuss problems faced by Muslim and Hindu women. We encouraged them to share their complaints with us. Our experience was that awareness of rights was an effective factor in providing legal aid. So we used to discuss with small women's groups about their rights. This would encourage them to negotiate on an understanding of their rights.

We also faced cases of human rights violation by the state. For instance, in 1979, when we were informed of a slum eviction during which a young boy was killed, ASK immediately went to the court to stop the eviction. Subsequently ASK has filed legal cases for the right to shelter. The promotion of women's rights and protection from violence have been other issues taken up by ASK. An important part of ASK's legal aid starts with documentation of policies and programs or actions which may contradict women's rights, followed by investigative reporting and advocacy through the media. ASK also set up special education programs for working children. I was more involved with research and advocacy for human rights issues.

4. What ideas/projects/writings would you consider as among your most important contributions to the welfare and development of Bangladesh?

Most of my writings in the media have been commentaries on the current situation of human rights, to analyze citizens' access to rights in specific communities or groups such as women's rights advocates or feminists, and marginalized communities. I have written these in response to current events or debates in Bangladesh. We also need to recognize the diversity amongst citizens based on their ethnicity, religion, location, etc. It is important for human rights defenders to be aware of the marginalization or exclusion of citizens by these conditionalities.

My academic work particularly has drawn on historical sources such as economic and social history. My book, *The Company Weavers of Bengal*, is a historical study of a colonial control of trade in the eighteenth century. In particular I have analyzed the conditions of both industrial and migrant labor. An article I wrote recently on the subject of violence against women was included in a volume published by Zubaan, a feminist publisher based in Delhi.

Since these are current topics in the economic and social development of Bangladesh, they have generated conversations and debates amongst different groups.

Today, everyone is saying that Bangladesh is moving ahead - this is a good thing. In the 1970s when the economy was struggling, our work with women's issues was not as visible. For example, take the issue of family labor. Typically, the husband will sell the (handicraft) items produced by women at home. This would essentially make the husband the "middle man" in the supply chain, who would collect the profit. The growth of the RMG factories employing thousands of women is a positive development. These women are contributing to their family. But it is important that they are given fair wages, and are not exploited. They also need a safe working environment, especially protection from industrial accidents such as Tazreen or Rana Plaza, which led to so many deaths. Women workers are beginning to join trade unions and take up concerns of women workers. A few of them have been elected to the Parliament. Shireen Akhtar, who has been involved with trade unions and founded a women workers' organization is not a member of the parliament. Shamsun Nahar, an MP, also comes from a trade union background. Women in trade unions have campaigned for maternity leave. As a result laws were passed to provide 6 months of paid maternity leave without putting their jobs at risk. They are now campaigning for fair compensation in case of industrial accidents and for holding the perpetrators accountable.

But a lot more needs to be done if we want a just society based on equal rights. Both in our communities and at our work place we need to ensure justice.

5. Please share a little more on your work relating to reducing violence on women.

In Bangladesh the main factor behind the violence against women is impunity. Incidents of domestic violence are often reported in the media, but we find that the perpetrators are not held accountable. Women are socially deterred from speaking out and often because of legal complexities they do not file complaints. Legal aid organizations such as ASK, BLAST or BNWLA do take up cases of violence on women. And there are other women's groups that raise

issues of violence and demand accountability for such crimes, whether it is a case of domestic violence or rape. It is important that both men and women of different communities responsible for the crimes are held accountable, and made aware of their rights. For instance, there was a young girl in Comilla who was raped and killed. *Ain o Shalish Kendra* filed a case against the perpetrators. In another case, Yasmin, a domestic worker, going to Dinajpur was raped and killed by the police. Barrister Amirul Islam took up this case to prosecute the culprits. Thankfully, today there are more women coming forward to speak up and take legal action against violence.

Women's groups have taken up these issues at different levels from awareness building, and advocacy for legal reforms and even at international level, for example submitting reports to the Committee of UNCEDAW.

If you look at the official statistics – women's access to opportunities has improved in recent years. Compared to 1971, more girls are attending schools. Although one could question the quality of education. Our textbooks are subject to censorship - well known essays or writings were excluded from school books. We have made progress but there is more distance to travel. We still have institutionalized inequities in family laws. the right to divorce and to own property. Certainly, wages are unequal with women being paid less than men for similar work.

6. Please discuss the ideas and the research that went into your book based on your doctoral dissertation at Oxford, “*The Company Weavers of Bengal.*”

In Bangladesh I had come to learn of the organization of the handloom industry particularly the social manifestations of the exploitative chain in the production cycle which led to an unending dependence upon capital and its intermediaries. I had also been able to study the gender and age wise division of labor, which was based on a hierarchy of functions.

When I was in Oxford, I decided under Dr. Tapan Ray Chaudhuri's advice to extend my understanding of contemporary relationships of handloom production to its historical sources. When I started studying the sources, I discovered that except for a few well-known authors, there had been little in-depth study. During my research at the India Office library, now part of the British Library, I was able to find a large collection of original materials in the Company records. These records illustrated the social and economic relations of production and showed how a colonial order had imposed controls on production through a hierarchical chain of procurement which left the weaver totally dependent on the Company.

Particularly useful for my research were documents of correspondence (in Bangla) between the Company and its agents, which illustrated not only types of cloth produced but the methods of procurement. Luckily for me Dr. Anisuzzaman had, at the same time, been working on the translations so I was able to draw on his work.

7. What counsel would you give to young people today, especially women, who wish to become change agents and activists to directly improve the condition of the poor and marginalized in the Bangladesh society?

If we look at the engagement of citizens in Bangladesh today, young people seem more aware of their rights and have protested against violations of basic rights. The road safety movement is an example. Women have become more active in filing complaints of violation of their rights, both through the legal system and through social movements. In particular they have come together across generations to support survivors of sexual violence and to rally their force against the perpetrators. But the politicization of youth has led to a gang culture that is destructive of social relations.

I think we need to reach across the divisions of class and ethnicity to work together so that we can support those who are deprived. For instance we need to speak up for garment workers who are deprived of compensation in the case of industrial accidents, or domestic workers who are deprived of fair wages and of fair conditions of employment.

We must also recognize the marginalization of different communities, and to try to build a state in which people can participate whether they are from different ethnic communities, or religion, and to share common values of tolerance and respect.

8. On this 50th anniversary of the Liberation war and the birth of Bangladesh, what in your view has been the role of the NGO organizations [such as Ain o Salish Kendra, BRAC, Grameen Bank and numerous others] in the social and economic development of Bangladesh?

I would divide NGOs into different categories: of those who promote socio-economic programs such as in education, health or employment. Their programs provide a measure of financial independence. It is also said to enable women to become equal partners in the family. Some of these programs have expanded to collective ownership of resources. This is seen as a path for women's independence and a basis for equality. Some of this work may be in support government plans or programs.

Other organizations such as ASK are rights oriented which entails making citizens more active in creating social and political changes. This involves identifying violations of human rights, and organizing protests at both the national and international level to bring attention to the issue. They often take up class actions through the courts to establish legal rights. It is then followed up by social movements to implement laws and policies.

Thank you for your time.

Women's Movement: The Challenge of Change

Hameeda Hossain

Mar 26, 2021

<https://www.thedailystar.net/supplements/celebrating-50-years-bangladesh/news/womens-movement-the-challenge-change-2066677>



Bangladesh has begun to rate high in official statistics on indicators of women's advancement. In the last 50 years, women have emerged from their invisibility to feature in Bangladesh's development discourse. Official reports acknowledge them as drivers of the economy and as peace keepers. On bill boards we are shown posters of a woman garment worker, or another in uniform, which tell us of women's entry into the market or in frontline service to the state. Their labour has become essential to the family economy.

While these advances can be attributed to positive state policies, it is only one part of the story. For women's changing roles in the economy have yet to make for a comprehensive change in gender relations or promote women's empowerment for several reasons: first, opportunities for education and employment are held back by social and cultural constraints; second, piecemeal reforms and limited participation without equal rights do not bring about real freedom of choice or give women voice; and third, women do not form one monolithic group. Simple reforms do not open doors of advancement equally to all women irrespective of their ethnicity, religion, caste, class or sexual orientation.

National and international investments over the last 50 years have increased women's access to selected services to meet their practical needs partially for education, waged work, and credit. The potential of women's low cost labour has also been seized by the market to boost Bangladesh's rating in global trade. While these advances are important in themselves, we need to ask if they have freed women from the shackles of forced marriages, dowry demands, domestic subservience and marital violence, or exploitation at the work place and sexual harassment in their public lives.

For a wide range of reasons from insecurity to poverty, young girls are unable to complete their schooling, resulting in drop outs. Women's participation in the labour

force has increased but their wages remain low and conditions are poor, especially in the informal sector. The export sector recruits a growing number of women, but poor conditions of work, low wages, and risk of industrial accidents call for urgent and effective changes.

Yes, women have demanded material progress, equality in resource allocation, and development opportunities, but beyond such piecemeal reforms, they expected state interventions to restructure institutional changes which would make for a gender-just transformation in relations within the family, in community values, and in recognition of women as citizens. This is why the demand for legal reform has remained an essential element of the women's movements, as a means towards affecting their public and private lives.

Unequal rights, particularly in marital relations and in inheritance, make for oppressive situations often leading to violence. Thus, notwithstanding women's increased opportunities for education, a customary preference for early marriage has limited women's autonomy. Social insecurity, fear of sexual harassment, and sexual violence are other reasons for young girls to be forced into unwanted marital relationships. Yet the demand for equal rights in marriage and divorce has not progressed beyond the Family Laws Ordinance 1961. After a sustained campaign by women's groups, the government finally adopted a National Policy for Advancement in consultation with many women's groups. It is time to review this and move on in recognition of changing times.

The legacy of traditional religious norms stands in the way of change in personal laws, and underlines the need for reform. A tolerance of unjust customary practices is a contributory cause of gendered violence. Since 2000, several laws have been enacted, including the Domestic Violence Act 2010, which aim to provide protection for the survivor and deterrent penalties to the perpetrator. But patriarchal norms prevent women from seeking justice and the legal system often acts as an impediment. In many cases of rape and sexual violence, defective prosecution and investigation procedures have obstructed justice and increased women's vulnerability. In the case of the rape and death of Shima Choudhury in jail custody, the accused police officers were acquitted on grounds of insufficient evidence, even though there could have been no other conclusion.

Women have challenged the social tolerance of violence instigated by *fatwa*. Nineteen years after the incident of a *fatwa* against Nurjehan in 1993, which led to her death, a directive from the Supreme Court has declared illegal any penalty imposed by a *fatwa*. It now calls for an institutional monitoring (by the National Human Rights Commission) of violations of this order, whether by local representatives, officials, or social elders.

More recently, a younger generation of women have collectively challenged the perpetrators of sexual violence in public institutions by taking it up in the higher courts and campaigning in public. The High Court recommended that educational and other institutions set up Monitoring Committees for deterrent or punitive action in complaints of rape. These interventions await strong enforcement measures by public institutions and active interventions by women and human rights groups.

Women's movements have campaigned for legal and policy reforms as a means towards a change in social or cultural practices. Women had struggled for their representation in parliament or other electoral institutions so that their demands could be discussed at the policy level. Through this they expected to exercise their right to freedom in decision making. Certainly, women's numbers have increased in parliament and in local government, but why do representatives, who have entered this space, sound vociferous in partisan party debates but remain silent on concerns that are central to women's security, such as violence on the campus or the use of militant student cadres?

And is their presence in elected bodies representative of different communities, or do they merely represent a major segment? The divide amongst women on account of their class, religion, ethnicity, or caste suggests that we need to understand how different identities subject women to different forms of exploitation, and how the state and society reinforce these inequalities. When a young Chakma or Marma girl is raped in Khagrachari or Bandarban, in some cases by law enforcement personnel, should we not be equally concerned as we are with the rape of a girl in Tangail?

Women's struggles for equality, for non-discrimination for peace and security, cannot be a means merely to earn privileges for a few or extract concessions from an unjust economic and political order. Should not the exploitation of garment export workers or young domestic workers be taken up by women employers as a woman's issue? Or should it be rejected by them as a class issue? The struggle is to overcome traditional norms of oppression set by a patriarchal society, to curtail the power of political hierarchies and to challenge the exploitation of unregulated market regimes.

A younger generation of feminists have taken up the challenge of citizenship. We need to work together across different spaces: to change the gang culture prevailing in the political space, to speak out as free citizens, and to raise a collective voice against hierarchies of power.

Our struggles should thus envision a recognition of diversity in women's life experiences, and work towards social and economic justice by a meaningful representation in state structures. In challenging the present structures of power, the struggle cannot be deflected with marginal changes without justice.

Women's economic empowerment and future development of Bangladesh

Mustafa K Mujeri | Published: January 05, 2021; Updated: January 10, 2021

Abstract

Bangladesh's development story over the past fifty years is full of development surprises and extraordinary resilience of the people in the face of frequent natural disasters and manmade calamities. The country's economic transformation has largely been driven by social changes, initiated by women empowerment, and providing a rare example of a neo-liberal development model under which social progress has far outstripped economic growth. In the process, the role of the state has been critical in pursuing sound macroeconomic policies, disaster management, investments in public health and education and partnerships with NGOs and civil society, along with pursuing a reasonably pro-poor growth and social policy agenda highlighting women's empowerment and grassroots activism.

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<https://thefinancialexpress.com.bd/views/womens-economic-empowerment-and-future-development-of-bangladesh-1609856560>

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, USAID

Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in the last 20 years in improving the lives of women and girls. Maternal mortality rates are falling, fertility rate is declining, and there is greater gender parity in school enrolment. At the same time, 82 percent of married women suffer gender-based violence and pervasive sexual violence prevents women from achieving their full potential. Despite efforts by the government and non-governmental organizations to reduce the rate of child marriage in Bangladesh, it remains the highest in South Asia at 59 percent of girls getting married before the age of 18. Women's participation in the workforce remains constrained to limited, low-paying sectors. Three million Bangladeshi women are employed in the lucrative ready-made garment sector, which is Bangladesh's largest export industry. Increasing numbers of women are involved in small and medium enterprises, but there remain large finance gaps that women face despite several government initiatives. Across its programs, USAID is committed to addressing many of the challenges facing women in Bangladesh.

[HTTPS://WWW.USAID.GOV/BANGLADESH/GENDER-EQUALITY-AND-WOMENS-EMPOWERMENT](https://www.usaid.gov/bangladesh/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment)

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/endpovertyinsouthasia/bangladeshi-women-are-rising-onwards-and-upwards>

Bangladeshi women are rising-onwards and upwards!

MERCY TEMBON

MARCH 08, 2021

Last February, I met Chaya Rani Das, a very talented woman with extraordinary leadership skills.

As an elected official in the Union Parishad (local government), she is an influential decision-maker.

Between 2003 to 2016, Bangladesh increased the female labor participation rate by 10 percent to 36 percent, thanks to the readymade garments (RMG) and livestock sectors. In fact, today over 70 percent of rural women are small-holder farmers and own poultry and other livestock.

The Government's successive Five Year Plans emphasized gender equality and sought to promote women's entrepreneurship and participation in regional and international trade. As a result of this long walk towards equality, many women are benefiting from an environment that enables business startups and greater access to a digital economy.

Between 2003 to 2016, Bangladesh increased the female labor participation rate by 10 percent to 36 percent, thanks to the readymade garments and livestock sectors.

<http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bangladesch/15741.pdf>

Feminist Perspective on the Future of Work in Bangladesh

Farzana Nawaz

Bangladesh has made significant progress in women's rights in recent years. It is currently the top performer in ensuring gender equality in South Asia and among the top five countries in the world in ensuring political empowerment of women. Women's participation in the workforce increased by 35 per cent between 2008 and 2017, while male employment increased by 11 per cent. Despite that progress, women's share of the labour market continues to be quite small—women still comprise less than 30 per cent of the total workforce in the country, and 56.9 per cent of women aged 15–65 years belong to the “not in education, employment or training” category. Most working women (more than 90 per cent) work in the informal sector.

Agriculture continues to be the largest sector of employment for women, but in recent years there has been a steady increase in female employment in the industrial, service and manufacturing sectors. The ready-made garments sector has been the biggest source of formal sector employment for women, particularly semi- and low-skilled women. According to estimates from a recent Centre for Policy Dialogue study, approximately 2.1 million women engage in that sector. Women's employment is also increasing in the hotel and restaurant, transportation, telecommunications, banking and insurance sectors. Experts have pointed out that this is likely to be an outcome of women's increased access to and participation in higher education.

Desk reviews from nine countries, including this one from Bangladesh, are presented as a first step to understanding the concerns for women in the future of work and to discuss possible interventions. We are highly thankful to Farzana Nawaz for authoring this paper. Her analysis of the situation of women in Bangladesh and their perspectives on the future of work is rooted in her deep understanding of both the women worker's and the women's rights movement in the country.



New research reveals obstacles and opportunities for women-owned businesses in Bangladesh

[Rebecca Pearson](#)

Sun Dec 19, 2021

When it comes to business ownership, women just need fair and equal access—something easier said than done. Centuries of common practices and processes have created fundamental gender-based access disparities. Financial marginalisation and limited property rights are also significant impediments to women business owners. These limit potential buyers and business partners from ever seeing innovative solutions that women-owned businesses have created in engineering, automobile parts, logistics or AI, for example. Add conscious and unconscious bias to the mix and it is often an uphill battle requiring specific focus to overcome the hurdles.

To better understand the obstacles that women business owners face across South Asia, the US Department of State's Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs helped fund research on their status in corporate value chains and why so few of them win procurement contracts from corporate buyers

<https://www.thedailystar.net/views/opinion/news/new-research-reveals-obstacles-and-opportunities-women-owned-businesses-bangladesh-2920556>

Breaking Social Barriers: UN honours three Bangladeshi women

Unb, Dhaka

Fri Mar 15, 2019 02:33 AM Last update on: Fri Mar 15, 2019 05:49 AM

The UN has honoured three Bangladeshi women who defied tradition, challenged gender stereotypes and social barriers put in front of them because they are women. They became a successful community activist, an entrepreneur and an employee in a non-traditional sector, empowering many others on the way.

At an event hosted by the ILO, UN Women and UNFPA in the capital yesterday, Pushpa Khatun, 19, Parvin Akhter, 33, and Nasima Akhter, 37, received the recognition award from the country heads of the respective UN agencies.

The fearless journeys of Pushpa, Parveen and Nasima to transform their lives and that of others resonate with this year's International Women's Day theme, "Think Equal, Build Smart, Innovate for Change".

<https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/news/breaking-social-barriers-un-honours-three-bangladeshi-women-1715449>

Press Release**April 21, 2021****Honoring Dr. Hameeda Hossain
BDI Lifetime Achievement Award, 2021**

The Bangladesh Development Initiative (BDI), a non-partisan research and advocacy group of independent scholars based in the United States, is pleased to announce that **Dr. Hameeda Hossain** is the recipient of the 2021 *BDI Lifetime Achievement Award*.

Established in 2012, this award is designed “to honor outstanding individuals or organizations who, through their scholarly and/or policy and civic engagements, have contributed significantly to understanding the challenges, and the ideals that have led to the development of Bangladesh and have improved the quality of life for its citizens.” Through the award, the Executive Committee of the BDI recognizes and celebrates the work of a scholar or institution of high reputation and integrity whose work has inspired others to develop and implement ideas for the betterment of the people of Bangladesh.

This year, the BDI selection committee has determined that throughout her long and distinguished career, Dr. Hossain has embodied the ideals of BDI by employing her knowledge, talents, time, and skills to work tirelessly to improve the lives of the poor and marginalized in Bangladeshi society. At the age of 15, she won an essay competition sponsored by the *New York Herald Tribune* on the subject of “The World We Want”. The prize was a three-month tour of the United States. It is no exaggeration to say that Dr. Hossain has devoted her life to help create the world she wants, a world that takes seriously the needs of the most marginalized members of society.

Born in Hyderabad, Sindh, in 1936, Dr. Hossain attended missionary schools in Karachi and Hyderabad. Her father Abdullah Akhund was a judge in colonial India. Her grandmother established a clinic and shelter for the refugees who came to Pakistan from India following Partition in 1947. Dr. Hossain studied literature and history as an undergraduate at Wellesley College in Massachusetts, USA. She received her doctorate in history from Oxford University in the United Kingdom. Her thesis was published under the title of *Company Weavers of Bengal Organization of Textile Production for the East India Company 1750-1813*.

Hameeda Hossain’s career has spanned publishing and editing, as well as crafts development and advocacy for women workers and human rights. She began her professional life as an editor with Oxford University Press in Karachi. She helped to co-found the English language political monthly magazine, *Forum*, in the then East Pakistan in 1967. *Forum* played a critical role in raising awareness of the systemic inequities and discrimination suffered by the people of East Pakistan. Between 1968 and March 1971, she served as the magazine’s editor. After Bangladesh’s independence, she joined the University Press Limited in Dhaka as an editor.

Following the 1971 Liberation War, Dr. Hossain became actively involved in the rehabilitation of the women survivors of wartime sexual violence. Her efforts to develop and market local artisanal crafts led to the formation, in November 1974, of KARIKA - *Bangladesh Hastashilpa Samabaya Federation Ltd.* Dr. Hossain and her fellow volunteers established this pioneering craft cooperative run by artisans, including many survivors of wartime violence, with the objectives of putting the spotlight on the new nation's ancient culture and folk traditions and protecting the welfare of the artisans, the majority of whom were women.

Inspired by her work with artisans, she chose to write her doctoral dissertation at Oxford on the history of weavers in colonial Bengal, under the supervision of Tapan Raychaudhuri. She has published widely on a variety of topics, including women's experiences of the war, arts and crafts, the ready-made garment industry, women workers and human rights. Her publications in these subjects include [*No Better Option? Industrial Women Workers in Bangladesh*](#), (1990, UPL, co-authored with Salma Sobhan and Roushan Jahan); [*The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organization of Textile Production in Bengal, 1750-1813*](#) (2010, UPL, and Oxford University Press, Delhi); and [*Of the Nation Born: The Bangladesh Papers*](#) (2016, Zubaan Books, co-edited with Amena Mohsin). She has also published numerous articles, chapters in edited volumes, and op-ed articles.

Hameeda Hossain has attended major international women's events in her capacity as a women's rights activist, including the inaugural UN Conference for Women in Mexico City in 1975. Since her participation in the International Women's Convention in Nairobi she has been associated with several women's and human rights networks in the South, such as Asia Pacific Women, Law and Development, a network of feminist scholars, researchers and activists from the Global South working for economic and gender justice and sustainable and democratic development and South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR). In 2004 she co-authored Bangladesh's Shadow Report for CEDAW and in 2010, the UN CEDAW Alternative Report on Bangladesh.

Dr. Hossain has been an unflagging advocate for workers' and human rights. She has been consistently aligned with progressive causes and efforts, particularly on issues relating to secularism, civil liberties and economic justice. As a founder member and founder chairperson of *Ain o Salish Kendra* (a legal aid and human rights organization founded in 1986), she assumed responsibility for its research and advocacy programs. Between 1996 and 2006, she edited its invaluable annual reports on human rights in Bangladesh. She is currently convener of the *Sramik Nirapotta Forum* (Workers' Safety Forum), an informal network of NGOs promoting workers' rights. Since 2002, she served as vice-chairperson of Research Initiatives Bangladesh, which describes itself as an organization that seeks to "support research aimed at identifying strategies and programs that could ensure sustainable, progressive alleviation of poverty in Bangladesh." She is also a Member, Board of Trustees, of the *Gyantapas Abdur Razzaq Foundation* which is dedicated to the "search for intellectual excellence".

Dr. Hameeda Hossain has been a witness to and a participant in the changing role of women in Bangladesh's economic and political life for over half a century. She continues to work across generations, bringing her secular and democratic lens to the feminist movement in Bangladesh.

The 2021 BDI Lifetime Achievement Award will be formally presented at BDI's next international conference. As the recipient of this award, Dr. Hameeda Hossain will be invited to offer a lecture on a subject of her choice.

For additional information on BDI and its mission, please visit www.bdiusa.org or contact Dr. Munir Quddus, President, BDI (muquddus@pvamu.edu).

Readers' Feedback on Past Issues of *BDI Development Newsletter*...

1. Thank you Munir. Good to hear from you. I'll definitely read the materials you sent. This is definitely a great initiative. Best.

Professor M. Yunus

2. Thanks, Munir for sharing this precious Newsletter. I will read it carefully.

Dr. Atiur Rahman,
Former Governor, Bangladesh Bank

3. Dear Professor Munir Quddus,

Thanks for sharing this issue of BDI Development Newsletter that contains Prof Rehman Sobhan's interview and resume of his illustrious life. I got Prof. Sobhan as my teacher at Dhaka University and later, during my time at the UN, as a resource person in numerous development policy related initiatives that I and my team organized. Needless to say, we all immensely benefited from Prof. Sobhan's wisdom and forward-looking thoughts and ideas. May Allah keep Prof. Sobhan in good health and give him a long life - there are not too many of his caliber and integrity left in Bangladesh anymore.

Best regards.

Adil Khan

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