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Qualitative Analysis of Social Factors Contributing to Gender Inequality: Evidence from Rural Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Gender is a sensitive issue in the traditional societal setup of Bangladesh. People hesitate to discuss gender even in the 21st century. The problem of gender inequality has been widespread in Bangladesh since the ancient and medieval periods. Moreover, this problem is more acute in rural parts of the country, where people have less privilege and live in a more conservative society. This qualitative study explored rural communities' social, cultural, and economic structure to determine the social factors of gender inequality in rural Bangladesh. To do that, this study used a qualitative research approach. Employing semi-structured in-depth interviews and critically analyzing secondary data, the research scrutinized the perspectives of male and female village residents across diverse roles, such as students, employees, farmers, homemakers, and entrepreneurs. The findings highlighted several social factors causing gender disparity, including the inescapable influence of patriarchal structures, gender stereotypes, preference for male offspring, child marriage, the notion of girls as liabilities, a lack of awareness, socioeconomic barriers, and a lack of explicit policy. With nearly 60.29% of the total population residing in remote areas where gender gaps persist, this research sheds light on the urgent need for intervention. Moreover, this study provided significant recommendations after critically examining the findings. Finally, the study underlined the imperative for governmental and decision-making bodies to prioritize these findings, advocating for the introduction of comprehensive gender awareness initiatives within rural communities to combat deep-rooted inequalities and pave the way toward a more equitable society.

INTRODUCTION

One of the most common and ancient types of inequality is gender inequality. Women, non-binary persons, and transgender people have been subjected to prejudice and exclusion from social, political, and economic spheres for millennia. It has also prevented women from assuming leadership positions and contributed to a rise in violence against women (OXFAM International, 2023). Gender-based discrimination is an infringement on fundamental human rights, including gender equality. Gender inequality disproportionately impacts girls, beginning in childhood and continuing to restrict their potential throughout their lives across all regions (Giving Compass, 2024).

The COVID-19 epidemic has exacerbated the circumstances and increased structural inequality. Women face discrimination and inequality daily in every nation on Earth. In addition to facing violence, abuse, and discrimination at home, in the workplace, and within their broader communities, girls are often denied opportunities to grow, succeed, and assume leadership roles (OXFAM International, 2023). In Article 28(2), the constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh proclaims equality between women and men (MoWCA, 2009). However, despite this constitutional affirmation, the practical manifestation of this principle faces formidable challenges. In the lived experiences of individuals, a

significant gap persists between this constitutional ideal and the societal norms and practices that spread gender disparities. It is more acute in rural Bangladesh, where society is more conservative and cultural dynamics are traditional.

This study investigates the existing societal structures and cultural dynamics by exploring age-old social practices, cultural norms and myths, the economic structures that shape opportunities, and the interrelationships within communities. By studying these elements of society, this study aims to identify the main factors that cause gender inequality in rural Bangladesh. It also intends to provide recommendations that can help break the chains of gender inequality in rural areas of Bangladesh. Ultimately, the aspiration is to catalyze societal progress towards genuine equality and empowerment for all individuals, surpassing gender barriers and fostering a more inclusive and thriving society in developing countries, especially rural Bangladesh.

Bangladesh has a population of around 160 million, of which 107 million live in rural areas. At least 50 million of them are female. According to the study, they are the backbone of the rural economy, putting in much overtime often 16 hours a day to provide for their families. Nevertheless, they continue to be ignored and devalued, not receiving the respect they merit (Anam, 2021). Inequality between men and women has existed in Bangladesh since the foundation of society and permeates every aspect of daily existence. Most individuals think that women should not be treated differently than men. In society, girls are neglected, starting in their early years. Furthermore, whereas the birth of a girl child is viewed as a curse, the birth of a male child is welcomed. Superstition, religious sentiment, social conventions, and other factors contribute to the perception of girls as the burden of society. In addition, they are urged to occupy themselves with domestic tasks since women are viewed as society's reproductive instruments (Akter, 2018).

In rural Bangladesh, women are acknowledged as proactive agents of social change due to their substantial socioeconomic input into agricultural methods. They have historically been closely linked to various agricultural tasks, including crop harvesting and seed preservation. Despite their crucial role in the rural economy, adopting

neoliberal agrarian policy has presented women farmers with several challenges. Due to the impact of capitalist patriarchy on agricultural practices, women's involvement in the agricultural industry has decreased in recent decades (Md. M. Rahman et al., 2023).

Because of the patriarchal framework of social institutions in Bangladesh, it is normal for men to oppress, dominate, and take advantage of women. Women are viewed in families as their husbands' property and passive dependents. Patriarchy also keeps women out of positions of economic and political authority (Hossen, 2020). Social and economic inequality are prevalent aspects of society that subject women to a variety of forms of discrimination. The primary obstacle impeding women's progress is their uneven and restricted access to resources, especially land and other fixed assets. The patriarchal norms, inheritance laws, and social customs that now exist in Bangladeshi society tend to reinforce discriminatory attitudes (Jinnah, 2013). Gender stereotypes are practiced here even before childbirth. Many laws and policies are made to ensure gender equality, but gender stereotypes still exist (Sushoma, 2021).

It is clear that men and women in Bangladesh have always been unequally treated, and this disparity exists in all spheres of life. In a rural place, this situation is more intense, where women have more obstacles and disadvantages in almost every facet of their existence. Against this backdrop, scholars have explored numerous issues related to gender equality from Bangladesh's perspective. However, there is a visible research gap in understanding the social factors that play influential roles in promoting gender equality, especially in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Addressing these issues requires a delicate investigation of social factors at play, which is essential for developing effective strategies to promote gender equality in these communities.

This study addresses the pressing issue of gender inequality in rural Bangladesh through a rigorous qualitative analysis. The rationale for this study stems from recognizing the pervasive nature of gender disparities within this specific socio-cultural context. By employing qualitative methods, including interviews and participant observations, we captured the lived experiences and narratives of individuals directly affected by gender inequality in

rural Bangladesh. This study is important because it focuses on the social reasons for gender inequality. To promote a gender-equal society by taking the necessary steps, it is necessary to understand the reasons that are creating this barrier within the socioeconomic structure of rural Bangladesh. Finally, this study aimed to provide subtle insights regarding the present scenario of gender inequality in rural Bangladesh and recommendations to overcome the existing barriers. It will also be a helpful document in the academic arena of gender studies.

METHODS

Research Approach and Design

This study aims to determine the social variables causing gender inequality in rural Bangladesh. In alignment with the study's objectives, this study employed a qualitative research approach aiming to share particular insight into a phenomenon based on those who have experienced it. This approach allows for rich, detailed enlightenment from the perspective of individuals and communities. It also facilitates an in-depth understanding of the cultural, social, and contextual elements that quantitative methods may not capture effectively.

Participant

Qualitative data was collected from 18 participants, nine males and nine females. They mostly reside in rural areas, but some live in urban areas and have strong connections with their village. Each participant voluntarily provided informed consent, without compensation, ensuring compliance with ethical guidelines. However, participants' anonymity and confidentiality were maintained.

Table 1. Social Demographics of Participants

Occupation	Age Group		
Students	8	18 - 25	6
Professionals	3	26 - 30	7
Farmers	2	31 - 40	5
Homemakers	3	Total 18	
Entrepreneurs	2		

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the above-mentioned participants. This technique helped select participants with specific knowledge, experiences, or characteristics relevant

to the study, ensuring rich and meaningful data to address the research questions effectively.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

This study conducted semi-structured interviews to obtain complex perspectives on people's actual experiences. Most of the interviews were conducted directly, while some were taken over the phone. To collect the data more accurately, we used a voice recorder. Before conducting interviews, we focused on establishing a comfortable and supportive environment to elicit more genuine and insightful responses from the participants. To offer a comprehensive understanding of the historical and contextual background, secondary data has also been compiled from books, newspapers, websites, and research publications.

Data Analysis

A thematic data analysis approach was used to find patterns and themes in the data. It meticulously reviewed the 18 transcribed interviews to identify recurring ideas and concepts. Collected data was also categorized systematically using a manual coding system to emerge significant themes. Transcripts were scrutinized thoroughly to capture the subtle nuances and variations in participants' responses.

Conceptual Framework

The late Kenyan Nobel Peace Laureate Wangari Maathai put it simply and well when she said, 'As you ascend, the representation of women decreases (Adichie, 2014). This is the true picture of gender inequality in higher positions. To prove her claim, you will find a bunch of research works. But what about the root level? How people in rural areas are dealing with gender inequality. What are the reasons for gender equality? Exploring pertinent literature from secondary sources, we have constructed the following conceptual framework for this study.

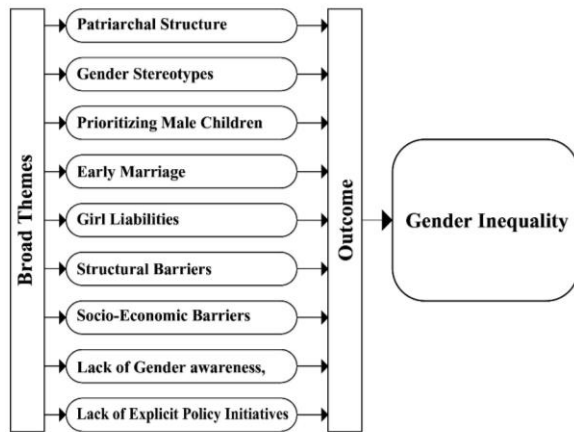


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework examines Gender Inequality as the outcome shaped by manifold interconnected social factors in rural Bangladesh. The factors comprise some broad themes such as Patriarchal Structure (Hossen, 2020) reinforces gender roles and power dynamics, Gender Stereotypes (Sushoma, 2021) strengthens traditional expectations, Prioritising male children (Huda, 2017), and the practice of Early Marriage (Rashid & Islam, 2023) marginalize women, Girl Liabilities (Huda, 2017) and Socioeconomic Barriers (Akter, 2018) limit opportunities for girls, Structural barriers (Kalam, 2014), Lack of Gender awareness (Parveen, 2007), and Lack of Explicit Policy Initiatives (Ferdaush & Rahman, 2011) exacerbate these issues and collectively prolonging gender inequality across generations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through participant narratives and qualitative insights, this study reveals the social causes that sustain unequal gender standards. This investigation reveals the complex webs influencing people's lives, shedding light on socioeconomic inequality, long-standing stereotypes, and patriarchal systems. Every observation combines to create a powerful story highlighting the difficulties in achieving gender equality.

Patriarchal Structure

The adjective “patriarchal” refers to a generalized system in which men hold authority over women. A community's relationships as a whole are referred to as its society. A patriarchal culture is one in which men predominate in both interpersonal and organizational power structures. Privilege and power are connected. Men enjoy some

privileges in a society where they hold greater authority than women, to which women are not entitled (Napikoski, 2020). Men have always dominated, oppressed, and exploited women in Bangladesh; because of the patriarchal nature of these institutions, this situation is tolerated. Women are viewed as their husbands' property and passive dependents in the home (Hossen, 2020).

The observations made by respondents in this study strongly resonate with the prevailing patriarchal norm embedded in Bangladeshi society. Among the respondents, 16 people said their family structure is patriarchal. Most of them clearly stated that “in our community, traditional family structures are patriarchal”. The sentiments expressed by participants highlight the entrenched dominance of men within traditional family structures. The acknowledgment that men hold the primary decision-making roles and are often the main beneficiaries of resources and opportunities echoes the systemic gender disparities deeply rooted in these communities.

Participant number 11 said, “In a traditional family structure, men are normally the focused people, and only they are allowed to make decisions and acquire most of the facilities among the family members”. Similarly, participant 12 said, “Father-centric family: a father or brother is the main earning person in the family structure, and the first priority of any kind of decision-making is taken from them and then female members”. Overall, the participants' insights highlight the deep-rooted influence of patriarchal structures and traditional gender roles, emphasizing their contribution to the perpetuation of gender inequality within Bangladeshi society.

Gender Stereotypes

A stereotype is characterized as a generalization that applies to all members of a social group (Beeghly, 2015). Gender stereotypes have always existed and can be harmful. Simon Baron-Cohen, a psychologist from Cambridge University, has suggested that women are better at making friends, being mothers, gossiping, and 'reading your partner.' Males are good at leadership, decision-making, and achievement (Zhao, 2022). The responses from the participants shed light on this perpetuation of gender. The delineation of roles, where responsibilities like giving birth, caregiving, household chores, and early marriage

are attributed to women while earning, higher education, and decision-making are seen as male roles, underscores the pervasive nature of these stereotypes. These perceptions solidify the belief that certain roles and capabilities are inherently linked to one's gender, contributing to unequal opportunities and power dynamics. Sushoma (2021) argues that the rural community has a generalized view of the roles or behaviors that women or men should or should not possess or perform. For instance, they think women should care for family members, prepare meals, raise children, and perform other household duties. Men are in charge of making decisions, earning money, and doing outside jobs. Moreover, they treat women as their weaker counterparts and are not intelligent enough to make decisions for themselves. This type of wrongful gender stereotyping is a common reason for inequality against women in rural areas.

According to Participant 18 of this study, "Men think there are certain aspects of life in which women have little or no role to play, and they are only men's game". Participant 4 stated that "men are always bread earners in a patriarchal society. They control money, wealth, and access to resources. So, men always make the decisions, and inequality exists".

Collectively, these participant insights highlight the entrenchment of gender stereotypes that contribute significantly to perpetuating gender inequality in their community. These deeply rooted beliefs about gender roles and capabilities reinforce unequal power dynamics, limiting women's opportunities and reinforcing male dominance in various aspects of life. For example, Sarker et al. (2017) discovered that parents who exhibit strong gender prejudice and traditional gender role attitudes have a good attitude toward boys' education but a considerably negative attitude toward girls' education. Rural girls are thus disproportionately shut out of higher education. Addressing these stereotypes is crucial to dismantling systemic barriers and fostering a more equitable society.

Prioritising Male Children

Gender disparity often stems from the prevalent belief that male offspring hold more value. Many prioritize having boys due to the perception that they contribute significantly to their families' welfare, while girls are often relegated to

domestic roles (Huda, 2017). In this study, 16 out of 18 participants strongly stated that preference for male children is common in their villages. Participant 11 highlighted the discrepancy between societal rhetoric praising female children as blessings while favoring male offspring for stability in old age. He said "People want male children desperately. Though they will say female children are blessings (as they should be), they still think male children can give them stability in old age. In some cases, even if they do not do so, their parents are still going to worship them just because they are male".

Participant 13 stated, "In almost all families, the happiness, prosperity, and comfort of male children are given utmost importance, while female children are taught to adjust from a very young age. The tantrum of male kids is welcomed, while female kids' stubborn toddler behaviour is treated with huge disgust" Whatever this belief that men come fast manifests gender discrimination in the daily lives of families, participant number 13 also added, "Families in our community prefer male children, so it is very common that female children are comparatively deprived of their basic needs."

Religion also seems to have a role in son preference, with Hindus indicating a stronger preference than Muslims in this regard, but conservative Muslims showing a stronger preference overall (Kabeer et al., 2011). For example, Participant Number 9 said, "In Hindu customs, the prevalence of heavy dowry leads parents to prefer sons over daughters". Two interviewees had slightly different views, though; they think things are changing. For example, Participant Number 2 said, "Nowadays, it is not a big issue; things are changing. As a father, I will happily have a baby girl".

Child Marriage

In Bangladesh, forced child marriages remain a prevalent issue (Chowdhury & Morium, 2018). Regrettably, young girls in rural regions often abandon their education upon reaching puberty due to resource constraints and societal expectations compelling them to marry at a young age (The Daily Star, 2023). This study found that early marriage is a key social practice contributing to gender inequality. Participants in discussions on social practices contributing to gender inequality highlighted early marriage as a significant concern.

Although the Child Marriage Restriction Act has had some effect in metropolitan areas, child marriage is still prevalent in rural communities and has not changed much (The Daily Star, 2023). Research utilizing data from the Bangladesh 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey revealed that a staggering 51% of young women in Bangladesh were married as children (UNICEF, 2023). This alarming statistic positions Bangladesh as the country with the eighth-highest rate of child marriage globally and the highest in South Asia. The impact is profound, with almost 13 million women married before age 15 and approximately 38 million before turning 18 (UNICEF, 2023).

While interviewing, participants emphasized the adverse effects of early marriage, linking it to malnutrition, infant and maternal mortality, and poverty. Participant 5 said that “it provokes malnutrition, infant mortality, maternal mortality, and poverty in society”. Participant 8 echoed this sentiment, observing how it limits girls' access to education, forcing them into financial dependence on others. She stated, “I have seen so many girls struggling for early marriage. Early marriage restricts them from modern education; as a result, they have to depend on others financially”. According to participant number 18, “Early marriage is the reason for adolescent pregnancy, which carries serious health issues for girls. Also, girls are more likely to drop out of school because of early marriage.”

Md. M. Rahman et al. (2023) also argued that in Bangladesh, child marriage generally has a major detrimental influence on the health, education, employment prospects, mental health, and general well-being of girls. Additionally, it feeds the vicious cycle of gender inequality and poverty, which has a lasting impact on society as a whole.

While most participants regarded early marriage as a substantial obstacle to gender equality, two noted a decline in its prevalence. Participant 14 highlighted a shift, stating that “there's relatively little practice of early marriage in their community”. This indicates a potential positive trend, although the overall detrimental effects of early marriage remain a pressing concern for gender equality and the well-being of young girls in Bangladesh.

Girl Liabilities

In rural areas, families typically view daughters as liabilities. Females have to leave their paternal houses after marriage, but boys remain, so they prioritize male children over females. So, from a very tender age, girls are trained in terms of household responsibilities. Village people believe investing in females is a waste of money because they will eventually get married and move into married houses. As a result, they frequently wed them off at a young age. Additionally, when girls are young, it is easier for them to find a good marriage in rural society. In light of this, gender inequality is common in rural communities, where females are seen as burdens (Huda, 2017).

Preference for male children is normal in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas (A. Rahman, 2019), a patrilineal society where men are expected to be the head of the home and the family's primary provider. This is made worse by the dowry system, which has been a social expectation since the 1960s and involves the bride's family giving gifts and money to the groom's family. This leads to the general perception that boys are financial assets while girls are financial burdens. 93% of parents in an 850-family study said they thought having a male would be a blessing for the family and the nation, while 96% said having a daughter would be a “problem” for the family and the nation (UNESCAP, 2012).

This study also resembles this view; for example, participant number 18 stated, “Perhaps poor families still fear that girl children are less likely to bring economic prosperity to the family, and as a result, raising girl child sounds like a liability instead of raising a male child that is supposed to bring economic prosperity to the family. It somewhat negatively affects the lives and opportunities of girls and women”.

According to participant number 9, “Most of the parents of our community think girls are a burden. They somehow try to arrange a marriage for their daughter. From birth, parents always save for their daughter's wedding while saving for their son's education. Their birth parents keep worrying about marrying them off; marrying off a daughter is basically synonymous with girl liability. Thus, girls cannot carry out their studies once they are married and cannot reach their dreams”.

Participant 16 showed a different but important perspective; she stated that “most of the people in our community think men can provide security and assurance, but women cannot, so they consider girls as their liabilities”. “Families considered girl children as their liabilities, so it is very common that they are not interested in giving girl children a proper education, and as a result, girls became the victims of child marriage”, said Participant Number 11.

Structural Barriers and Negative Social Norms

In Bangladesh, girls and women still face a variety of structural limitations, and the limitations are more common in villages. Due to patriarchal upbringing, unfair social roles, and traditional expectations, women are usually expected to interact with men on less favorable terms in rural society. Although unwritten social norms are very powerful, they often shape the thinking and attitude of the members of a particular group. In a socially cohesive rural area, societal norms establish gender roles that are based on prejudices and stem from unequal power, dominance, and subordination (Kalam, 2014). While talking about the factors of gender inequality, most of the interviewees mentioned cultural and religious prejudices against women, male-dominated family culture, superstition, and religious obstacles as major barriers to gender inequality.

According to respondent number 14, “Women have negligible influence in the decision-making process; girls are often considered a burden; marriage at an early age; judgments on men's and women's actions; conceptions of masculinity and femininity, etc. are some societal or structural barriers that hinder gender equality in my community”. Interviewee number 5 said, “The egoistic mindset of men, as they have to be dominant to drive the wheel of family, is the biggest barrier in her family”. While respondent number 13 mentioned, “The discriminatory behavior and thinking pattern of my parents are the only barrier that I have had to face all my life”.

Socioeconomic Barriers

Concerning the next theme, socioeconomic barriers are the rationale for gender inequality. Socioeconomic hurdles significantly hamper the establishment of women's equal rights in society. In rural societies, women have fewer privileges, assets, positions, and authority than men. Most women

work mostly in the home, raising chickens, growing vegetables, caring for animals, gardening, and other domestic tasks. These are all homestead-based pursuits that fall under the category of women's domestic tasks or responsibilities. Furthermore, these shores are regarded as economically underpaid and unproductive. On the other hand, men are more likely to engage in economically beneficial occupations like land cultivation, chicken farming, retail, service, and so forth (Akter, 2018). Our finding showed that women are typically expected to do household chores, whereas men will generate income. So, male children get preference in terms of education and other basic privileges.

According to the first interviewee, “The families that are more financially stable are more likely to treat men and women equally than those less financially stable. Moreover, in rural communities, most families are less financially stable and treat women unequally”. Like him, respondent number 10 also said, “Usually, rural women are not empowered economically, and they depend on men for economic support, so the treatment of women in families is underrated”. “Economic solvency is not only one of the major facts of being solvent and self-dependent for a woman, “With this power, they can at least save themselves from abuse”, said respondent number 12.

Lack of Gender Awareness

Because of ingrained ideas that have kept them in the shadow of their fathers, husbands, and sons, the majority of rural women are ignorant of gender inequity (Parveen, 2007).

We asked all our interviewees if they thought there was a lack of awareness about gender issues in their community, and all of them responded yes. One of them (respondent 11) mentioned, “A rigid mindset towards women and a lack of social awareness perpetuate gender inequality in areas such as education, employment, and health”. Respondent number 16 said, “Lack of awareness is the key to such inequality. People need both formal (e.g., national curriculum) and informal (e.g., religious teachings) education on this”.

Bangladesh's literacy rate is currently 74.66 percent, with a rural literacy rate of 71.56 percent (BBS, 2022), which is impressive. However, only the literacy rate isn't enough; to address these issues properly, proper education and knowledge,

including knowledge about gender and other societal issues, are needed. Due to a lack of social awareness, village people often treat their girls and women unequally compared to men.

Lack of Explicit Policy Initiatives

Lack of explicit policy initiatives is one of the common reasons behind gender inequality (Rizvi & Vinaik, 2020) that most respondents have mentioned, even though some respondents do not have any idea about gender policies. For example, respondent number 5 said, “I do not know about policies”. Interviewee number 10 said there is a “lack of property inheritance methods”. “I do not see any suitable policy”, said respondent number 6. Interviewee number 13 mentioned some ideas about policy; he said, “Religious scholars or speakers who explain gender equality through the lens of religion can play a significant role in this regard at the rural community level”.

Understanding Gender and Inequality

Gender is a social construct encompassing the socially defined traits of women, men, girls, and boys. It involves the expected behaviors, norms, and roles linked to being a part of these groups and how they relate to each other. It is important to note that, as a social construct, gender differs across societies and is subject to change over time (WHO, 2022). Gender is not fixed; it can be independent of biological characteristics. It encompasses societal definitions and control over sex distinctions, the cultural significance tied to the roles of men and women, and how individuals perceive their identities whether as a man, woman, transgender, intersex, genderqueer, or other gender identities. It is about social expectations, attitudes, and behaviors considered suitable for a particular gender. Additionally, gender is influenced by an individual's feelings and actions (Zevallos, 2014).

Gender inequality is the situations in the legal, social, and cultural spheres when women and men are afforded differing rights and dignity based on their sex or gender, as evidenced by the uneven access to and enjoyment of such rights, as well as the adoption of stereotyped roles in these domains. These impact their standing in the public and private spheres, the family and the job market, the political and economic spheres, authority and decision-making, and social-gender relations. Women hold a lower status than men in almost all societies (European Commission, 2004). In addition

to being a fundamental human right, gender equality is also a precondition for a world that is affluent, peaceful, and sustainable. Half of the world's population comprises women and girls, who also account for half of its potential. However, gender disparity still exists everywhere and impedes societal advancement (United Nations, 2016).

The dream of a society where all women and girls experience complete gender equality and where all societal, legal, and financial constraints on their empowerment are eliminated is yet unrealized. Given how severely the COVID-19 epidemic is affecting women and girls, it is likely even more remote than it was previously.

State of Gender Inequality in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's amazing journey from one of the world's poorest nations at its inception in 1971 to lower-middle-income status in 2015 is astounding. Over the past 20 years, rapid economic expansion has been recorded (World Bank, n.d.). Furthermore, there was improvement in many areas of human development. Despite these advances, Bangladesh still faces issues like “gender inequality”, which is slowing down the nation's overall progress, particularly in rural areas. Although Bangladesh is ranked among the top nations in the region for reducing the gender gap and doing great in women's political empowerment, even during the previous 50 years, more women than men have served as heads of state (Tithi, 2019), there is still widespread gender inequality, which stalls social advancement.

Looking at the situation in Bangladesh, the most recent Census indicates that the country's population reached 169.8 million in 2022. Bangladesh's population is more female (50.43%) than male (49.51%), according to the Census (BBS, 2022). This has ramifications for society and the economy, including the gender dividend (UNFPA, 2023). According to UNICEF (2020), based on information from the Bangladesh 2019 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, Bangladesh is one of the ten nations in the world with the highest rates of child marriage and has the greatest frequency in South Asia. It also states that 51% of young women in Bangladesh were married as children. Over 13 million Bangladeshi women were married before turning 15, and another 38 million were wedded before turning 18 (UNICEF, 2023). So, why is this unequal treatment? Why are our women and girls

less privileged? especially while Bangladesh has had an excellent rate of growth and progress over the past two decades? In order to find the answers, which is not rocket science, we need to know the reasons for gender inequality.

Bangladesh is trying to ensure the achievement of the fifth Sustainable Development Goal, which is to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. However, Bangladesh's patriarchal structure mandates that women have a considerably lower status both socially and economically. Although there has been continuous progress in eliminating gender disparity in various fields such as work, health, and education, there is still a great deal of inequality in Bangladesh, particularly in remote areas where 60.29 percent of the total population lives and nearly half of them are female (Kameke, 2024). There is still work to be done to achieve the dream of a country where every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and where all social, political, and economic obstacles to their empowerment have been removed.

CONCLUSION

The rural community of Bangladesh is unique in different dimensions. People living here have their course of social and cultural identity. They are very respectful of their age-old tradition; sometimes, they are even superstitious. Moreover, the rate of literacy and education is low here. So naturally, issues like gender inequality are more acute in rural Bangladesh. This study aimed to find out the social factors contributing to this inequality. After critically analyzing the secondary data and findings from the interview, this study found a range of interrelated social factors causing gender inequality in Bangladesh's rural areas. To create a more inclusive and equitable society by combating social factors of gender inequality, we have to be more aware and conscious. The government has to introduce policies, and by reforming and implementing gender-sensitive policies, authorities can provide the community with proper guidelines regarding gender. At the same time, community engagement and awareness building, women's empowerment, education, and awareness campaigns can also help promote gender equality in rural areas. Another important tool for overcoming these gender barriers is the legal framework. An appropriate law

on child marriage, domestic violence, rape, or other gender issues is a must.

Besides, support networks, local influencers, religious institutions, and scholars, women's access to property, data collection and monitoring, capacity building, and academic study of gender are also recommended against gender inequality. Overall, the results of this study offer a basis for well-informed approaches targeted at eliminating gender inequalities and enabling rural communities to make constructive changes. However, there are scopes for further research that may explore the intersectionality of gender inequality in rural Bangladesh, examining how ethnicity, religion, and economic status impact the lives and livelihoods of girls and women. Moreover, a comparative study between rural and urban areas may provide a more precise understanding of gender inequality and its multifaceted dimensions.

Based on the results and discussion, several important issues are suggested in this article:

The Mainstreaming of Gender: The process of incorporating a gender viewpoint into mainstream activities at all levels, such as policies, programs, and projects, is known as gender mainstreaming. It engages more and new participants in the process of creating a balanced society, removing equality issues from the confines of gender equality machinery. It is high time to introduce gender mainstreaming at the root of Bangladeshi village society.

The Right Policy to Combat the Barriers: Gender-responsive policymaking addresses negative norms that support gender inequality while promoting the interests of all genders and concentrating on particular needs and priorities (Tiasha & Sharmin, 2023). After analysing data from secondary sources and interviewing people, it is clear that existing policies are not enough to combat widespread gender inequality. So, the government should work on reforming more gender-responsive policies.

Community Engagement: Through questioning social mores and cultural precepts that uphold gender inequality, community participation improves perceptions of gender equality. This study strongly suggests community involvement, along with the participants. Community dialogue and collaborative partnership among the local NGOs, educational institutions, and stakeholders must be

introduced to make people conscious of gender equality. Involving local influencers, religious and political leaders, and educational institutions in this initiative can also help.

Empower the Women: The process of giving women more economic, social, and political clout is known as women's empowerment. To create a fairer and more equitable world, women must be empowered. Our ability to help women reach their full potential will benefit people on an individual, community, and societal level (Rashid & Islam, 2023). So, Women's empowerment is a must to build a just rural society. Through education and skill-building, access to resources, and entrepreneurship opportunities, we can empower them economically, which will ensure their financial independence.

Gender Awareness Education: Gender awareness education aims to realize and develop the mindset, attitudes, and behavior of families in building justice, equality, and equal partnerships between men and women, child protection, and elimination of domestic violence (Rahma et al., 2020). As Gender inequality starts at a very early stage of childhood, so awareness-creating initiatives must also be introduced early. For example, gender equality modules should be introduced in primary schools to educate the younger generation about equal rights and opportunities. Bedside institutions like Mandir Masjid, Madrasa, and Maktoob could be used to educate the local people about gender equality.

The Social Media Campaign: We cannot deny the influence of social media on our lives; it has a direct effect, especially among the G-Z people. With the process of making Digital Bangladesh, even villages have internet facilities, which ensures social media excess. We can use this to promote gender awareness at the root level. Fu (2022) found that social media sites increase the sources via which people can learn about gender equality. According to him, 96.3% of survey respondents were aware of gender equality.

Legal Reforms and Support Networks: Laws are a must for all the injustices against women, like child marriage, domestic violence, rape, and others. The authorities must strengthen existing laws and introduce new ones to cope with new challenges. For example, the present Child-Marriage-Restraint-Act-2017 in Bangladesh against child marriage has

a part that allows child marriage under special circumstances and thus should be stopped (GoB, 2017). Moreover, to ensure the protection of women, support networks like women's shelters and helplines have to be established for women facing discrimination, abuse, or forced marriages.

Religious Engagement: Religious engagement in development projects can increase gender equality (Kisusu & Tongori, 2023). In this study, an interviewee mentioned reiterating the same. This initiative can play a huge part in rural communities, where religion and religious practices directly influence people's social and cultural lives. People like the Imam of the Masjid, purohit of the Mandir, or local religious scholars can promote gender equality by using religious knowledge that supports equal treatment for both genders.

Women's Access to Resources: The 2011 policy's section on economic development states in clause 25(2) that women would have complete authority over the wealth accumulated via labor, inheritance, loans, land, and market management (GoB, 2011). But unfortunately, in practice, Women in Bangladesh, especially in rural areas, are deprived of their property rights. One of our interviewees mentioned her brothers took her inherited property by giving a minimal price. The authorities should take steps to give women equal access to economic resources, property rights, and inheritance.

Data Collection and Monitoring: The authority should have accurate knowledge about gender inequality. To do that, they must keep an up-to-date database. They can collect and keep gender-disaggregated data from rural Bangladesh separate from the urban area, which will help them monitor progress and identify areas that require more attention. Of course, this data can also guide the evidence-based policymaking process. Monitoring gender data and evaluating differential effects are important for reducing gender inequality (Thierry, 2019).

Capacity Building: In villages, people are less familiar with gender and gender-related issues, so naturally, they are the less conscious party. The young generation can be taught gender in school. But to raise awareness among adults, the concerned authority can invest in training and capacity building for adult men and women in rural communities on gender equality issues. Capacity

building, including gender mainstreaming, is crucial for reducing gender inequalities (Cairney et al., 2022).

Gender Studies: Understanding the processes of gender inequality and creating plans to advance gender equity require a solid understanding of gender studies (OPJGU, 2022). For that, the academic study of gender is a must to promote gender equality. In Bangladesh, gender studies are not very popular. Only a few universities have programs on gender studies. The university authorities of the country should introduce a program on gender studies. Even the secondary and higher secondary education boards should introduce gender studies into their education curriculum, which will also be very helpful for the root-level community.

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