

Contribution of Women throughout the Ages: Bangladesh's Liberation War in 1971 to the Present

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Abstract

Women are the integral part of the nation who actively contributes to building and maintaining the socio-economic well-being. The World Bank reported in February 2025 that women make up 50.8% of Bangladesh's overall population. Women are the cogs of the wheel in participating and performing in the Language Movement in 1952, the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971, economic development, social activities, the nation's GDP, and environmental awareness etc. The main purpose of the study is to pinpoint the contribution of women in different perspectives in Bangladesh from the liberation war in 1971 to the present. This paper also reveals the role of women in economic development, education, business entrepreneurship, and social welfare in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Women, Liberation War, Socio-Economy, Development, Bangladesh.

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1. Introduction

Women are the power booster of men and different sectors of the society for their active participation and contributions. Women are considered as inferior to men and are largely excluded from the public realms of cultural production within the patriarchal structure of society (Huda, 2005). Bangladesh's female population (as a percentage of the country's overall population) was 50.8% in 2023, according to the World Bank's compilation of development indicators drawn from officially approved sources. In February 2025, the World Bank provided the actual figures, historical statistics, forecasts, and estimates for Bangladesh's population, including the percentage of women in the country. In general, women have been viewed as symbols of grandeur, gentleness, beauty, and purity. They are also seen as innocent, gentle, and passive. However, their ability to fight bravely is scarcely thought to exist. General women made significant contributions to the Liberation War in 1971, despite the fact that it is nearly impossible for them to serve on the front lines of combat. Bhuiyan (2000) mentioned that in addition to directly participating in the liberation war across the border, a large number of men and women inside the country have struggled from within the country, sacrificing their lives to accelerate the success of the liberation war. But their stories remain unspoken even today.

Most of the woman in Bangladesh participated in the war sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Alongside men, women took part in these protests and campaigns. We know our Liberation war was not an abrupt matter, so the participation of women in liberation war was also not an astonishing thing. Indeed, throughout the history of Liberation Movement of Bangladesh, a good number of Bangali women have been found as frontline fighter, medical care-giver, informants and dedicated mother. Although the feminist scholars have reviewed the role of Bangali women both as victims and participants who contributed as political personalities, or guerrilla fighters or became the subject of sexual violence, they had not been regarded and honored as freedom fighters in mainstream Bangali political philosophy, literatures and mass media (Huda, 2008). Women's experiences may or may not have been misrepresented even when they are effectively and clearly fighting (Behera, 2004).

Women and men have made outstanding contributions in the war of independence. The role of women as freedom fighters in 1971 was, in a sense, unknown. Rehabilitation of women who were raped and divorced during the war was considered important then (Harun, 2005). It has taken time for all of us to understand that our mothers and sisters have sacrificed just like the active fighters in the liberation war. Similar rights of men and women and their regular participation in both public and private domains remain as core principles in his development paradigm. Empowered women are pretty aware about their rights as well as self-confident to combat with all inequalities and disparities of the society (Rahman, 2020). Different movements have helped to

create awareness about the recognition of women in different fields where they have played a role. This has led to a growing realization that although wars can be fought mostly by men, women can also play an important role in them (Goldstein, 2003).

2. Objectives

The main purpose of the study is to clarify the women's contribution in different sectors throughout the ages, from the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971 to the current situation. Based on the literature reviews, the researcher also motivated –

- a. To identify the contribution of women in economic development, education, social welfare, and business entrepreneurship.
- b. To disclose the challenges faced by women in different sectors.

3. Literature Review

The women freedom fighters played a vital role in liberating the country of Bangladesh 1971. Freedom fighters all around the country participated in the war to free the country and stop the violence of the Pakistani force. The 1971 Bangladesh War was greatly aided by Bengali women migrants in the United Kingdom. While the Bengali community was small in the 1970s, many of these women were actively involved in the liberation fight in Bangladesh, providing and extending support in a variety of ways. The women were aroused when Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman announced at the then Racecourse, now Suhrawardy Udyan, on March 7, 1971, "... and if a shot is fired ... build forts in every house" (Hossain & Sani, 2020). Men as well as countless women for the liberation of the motherland have proved that they are equal partners in all the glories of the liberation war by taking part in various struggles including the armed struggle without the necessary training and guidance. Women and students played a major role in this work (J. Islam, 2020). Almatas Begum used to cook in the liberation war camp and later took up arms training and guerrilla warfare training. Hilali (2020, December 17) illustrated that Matia Chowdhury, Sajeda Chowdhury, Nurjahan Murshid, Mamta Begum and others who played an important role as women organizers in the war of liberation. Taraman Bibi joined the Rajibpur training camp as a cook. At the time she was working in the most risky espionage. Some of women are disclosed in this paper like Ashalta Sen, Dr. Fauzia Moslem, Syeda Isabella, Begum Forkan, Syeda Sajeda Chowdhury, Lutfunnahar Helen, Karuna Begum, Aleya Begum, Bithika Biswas, Shishir Kana, Kalyani Ghosh, Mala Khan, Shahin Samad, Bulbul Mahlanbish, Rupa Farhad, Nasreen Ahmed, Namita Ghosh, Manjula Dasgupta, Shila Bhadra, Uma Khan who are directly participated the liberation war of Bangladesh in 1971. During our liberation war, near the Calcutta Padmapukur Par and Park Sarkas, there was established a Training Camp which name was „Gobra Camp“. In that camp about 400 freedom fighters were trained. The Awami League woman leader Sajeda Chowdhury took care the camp. The women who were trained. They are Shirin Banu Mitil, Geeta Mujumdar, Geeta Kar, Mukti(Faridpur), Sajeda, TiyoBa, Shrifajessor) ,Tript, Mukti, Lota, Ruma, Vakti ,Bela,Jinatunnesa Talikdar(Rajshahi) (Rahman 2014). Hannana Begum of „Bangladesh Mahila Parishad“ played a role in exchanging news for the freedom fighters. Begum Sufiya Kamal's two daughters worked till March-June as an informer. Many women have done a lot of work as helpers of the freedom fighters. Cooked, provided food, worked as a spy, served sick freedom fighters. Sharing information was a crucial and dangerous task during the war. Moving from one location to another and printing covert periodicals and leaflets were crucial during the war, but the courageous Bangladeshi women were especially important in this regard. At the risk of their lives in the dark of night, many women used to give news to the freedom fighters by sailing alone. Men and women had participated in the printing and distribution the leaflets“ and Newspaper. Women also played an important role in delivering correspondence from one place to another in the liberation war. Female sex workers collected important information from Razakars and Pakistanis and provided them to freedom fighters (Rahman 2014).

The role of women in the economic development of Bangladesh has been transformative, contributing significantly to the country's progress over the past few decades. Women have become key drivers of economic growth, particularly through their participation in the labor force, entrepreneurship, and social development initiatives. Islam (2006) cites an estimate of the Bangladesh Home Workers Women Association (BHWA) that the annual contribution of home-based workers to the GDP is about Tk 150 billion (US\$2.59 billion*). “But unfortunately, this contribution is not reflected in the government statistics. There is no question that women are involved in a tremendous amount of work that has significant value to family, society, and the nation. Microfinance institutions like Grameen Bank and BRAC have played a pivotal role in empowering women by providing them with access to credit. Women have used these loans to start small businesses, such as poultry

farming, handicrafts, and retail shops, which have contributed to local economies. Nobel Laureate Muhammad Yunus, founder of Grameen Bank, emphasized that women are more likely to reinvest their earnings into their families and communities, creating a multiplier effect on economic development (Yunus, M. 2007). . The Bangladesh government's National Women Development Policy (2011) aims to ensure equal opportunities for women in all sectors, fostering an environment for their economic empowerment.

Over the years, Bangladeshi women have made remarkable contributions to social welfare through government initiatives, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and grassroots movements. The role of women in social welfare in Bangladesh can be traced back to the colonial period, but significant strides were made after independence in 1971. The government, along with various organizations, has implemented policies to encourage women's participation in social development. Women in Bangladesh have played a crucial role in poverty alleviation through microfinance programs. Organizations such as Grameen Bank, ASA, and BRAC have provided financial assistance to women, enabling them to start small businesses and achieve financial independence. The National Women Development Policy 2011 and other government programs promote women's involvement in social welfare. The Ministry of Women and Children Affairs and the Department of Social Services work on policy frameworks to enhance women's contributions to social work.

4. Methodology

The researcher has reviewed the women participations and contributions throughout the ages in several public and private spheres from the liberation war to present situation and take a prominent role in newly created nation state, Bangladesh. This study is descriptive in nature based on secondary information as secondary resources have been considered primarily. In this regard, the author collected secondary data from books, novels, databases, newspaper, journal articles, reports, archives and national dailies on the liberation war of Bangladesh have been consulted to formulate the paper.

5. Results & Analysis

5.1. Women in Liberation War of Bangladesh

The Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971 was a pivotal moment in the nation's history, and women played a significant and multifaceted role in the struggle for independence. Their contributions were diverse, ranging from direct participation in combat to providing logistical support, medical care, and moral encouragement. Some women took up arms and joined the Mukti Bahini (Liberation Army) to fight directly against the Pakistani military. They participated in guerrilla operations, intelligence gathering, and sabotage missions. Women served as nurses and medical staff in field hospitals, providing critical care to wounded freedom fighters. They worked under extremely challenging conditions, often with limited resources. Many women were trained in first aid and emergency medical care, which they provided to both fighters and civilians affected by the war.

Women provided shelter and safe houses for freedom fighters, hiding them from Pakistani forces and helping them evade capture. They worked as spies and informants, gathering crucial intelligence on Pakistani military movements and relaying this information to the Mukti Bahini. They acted as couriers, delivering messages and instructions between different units of the liberation forces. Women played a key role in maintaining the morale of the fighters and the general population. They organized cultural programs, sang patriotic songs, and composed poetry that inspired people to continue the struggle. They were involved in educating and raising awareness about the cause of independence, both within Bangladesh and internationally. During the war, millions of people were displaced, and women played a crucial role in managing refugee camps, providing food, shelter, and care to the displaced. After the war, women were involved in the rehabilitation of war victims, including orphans and widows, helping them rebuild their lives.

Many women lost their lives, were tortured, or suffered immense personal losses during the war. Despite these hardships, they remained resilient and continued to contribute to the liberation effort. They were often targeted by the Pakistani military, and many were subjected to sexual violence. Their courage in surviving and speaking out about these atrocities has been a powerful testament to their strength and resilience. The role of women in the Liberation War has been depicted in literature, films, and art, ensuring that their contributions are remembered and honored. Therefore, women were indispensable to the success of the Liberation War of Bangladesh in 1971. Their contributions were not only crucial in the immediate context of the war but also laid the foundation for the ongoing struggle for gender equality and women's rights in Bangladesh. Their legacy continues to inspire future generations.

5.2. Role of Women in Economic Development

Women in Bangladesh contribute to the economy in many ways, including in the clothing industry, real estate, and other sectors. Women's participation in the workforce has increased over time, but there are still gender inequalities in the labor market. From these sectors garment industry is one of the most notable arenas where women have made significant inroads. Bangladesh's textile and apparel sector, a cornerstone of the nation's economy, employs millions of women, offering them the choice of financial independence. Women in Bangladesh have increasingly joined the formal and informal labor markets, particularly in the ready-made garment (RMG) sector, which is the backbone of the country's economy. The RMG sector employs over 4 million workers, 80% of whom are women. This has not only boosted the economy but also empowered women financially and socially. According to the World Bank (2020), the RMG industry has been a significant employer of women, promoting gender equality and reducing poverty. So, it is clear that the women have been at the heart of the nation's progress.

5.3. Women Contribution in Education Sector

At present the total number of primary educational institutions (government and non-government) in the country is 114,539 and the total number of teacher is 626042 including the number of 389153 is female teacher and the percentage is 62.16. Education policy 2010 is being implemented in the spirit of National Women's Development Policy 2011 which aims to increase women education, reduce the disparity in education and opportunities between women and men and to involve women in the development process. At present, the enrolment rate at the secondary level has reached 62.04 percent. The secondary level has attained the boys and girls student ratio to 45:55. In secondary level the total number of 85,751 female out of 2,78,518 which percentage is 30.78%, are actively working as teacher for developing the nation's education system. Female are connected in higher secondary level (government and non-government) is 27.53 percent and the total number of women are 37,017 out of 1,34,485 teachers. The total female faculty of Bangladesh in university level (private or public) is 9,541 out of 32,644 which percentage of women is 29.23%.

Table-1: Women involved in teaching profession

Program	Female	Male	Total	Female Percentage
Primary Level (Govt. and non-Govt.)	389153	236889	626042	62.16
Secondary Level (Govt. and non-Govt.)	85751	192767	278518	30.78
Higher Secondary Level (Govt. and non-Govt.)	37017	97468	134485	27.53
University Education (Public and Private)	9541	23103	32644	29.23
Total=	521462	550227	1071689	48.66

Source: BANBEIS (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics)

5.4. Role of Women in Social Welfare

Women are actively contributed and participated to social work for development of society and nations. The role of women in social welfare in Bangladesh has been significant, particularly in the context of grassroots development, poverty alleviation, and community empowerment. Women in Bangladesh have been actively involved in various social welfare activities, including education, healthcare, microfinance, and community development. Their participation has been instrumental in driving social change and improving the quality of life for many families, especially in rural areas. Organizations like the Grameen Bank and BRAC have empowered women through microfinance initiatives, enabling them to become entrepreneurs and contribute to household incomes. Over 20 million women have participated in microfinance programs, which have helped reduce poverty and improve living standards (World Bank, 2021). Women-led initiatives have focused on increasing literacy rates, particularly among girls. NGOs like BRAC and CAMPE (Campaign for Popular Education) have played a pivotal role in promoting female education. Female literacy rates have risen from 31.5% in 2001 to over 72% in 2021 (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2021). Women have been at the forefront of community health programs, serving as health workers and volunteers. Over 50,000 female community health workers are actively involved

in providing healthcare services, including maternal and child health, immunization, and family planning (UNFPA, 2020). Women in Bangladesh have played a critical role in disaster preparedness and climate adaptation, particularly in vulnerable communities. The Climate Resilient Participatory Afforestation and Reforestation Project have involved over 10,000 women in afforestation and disaster management activities (UNDP, 2019).

The Ministry of social welfare prioritizes women's participation in all its programs with aim of women's overall social-economic development including empowerment of women. Therefore, one of the main objectives of this Ministry has been to reduce all sorts of discrimination from family and society so that women can enjoy the benefits of development. Women are performed as a social worker almost 4244 member out of total employees 12954 which is 32.76 percent of total participants.

5.5. Women as Business Entrepreneurs

Women entrepreneurs contribute to economic growth, job creation, and societal progress and they also have a significant impact on Bangladesh's GDP. They also bring diversity, flexibility, and savvy business skills to their companies as well as they make up a significant portion of high-growth enterprises in worldwide, can help to improve standards of living, health, and family well-being and etc. Women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh are changing the rules of economic empowerment. They now make up 7.8% of the nation's 7.8 million SMEs, foster innovation, provide jobs, and contribute close to 25% of the GDP despite social constraints. With 40% of the workforce employed in the SME sector and over 80% of industrial jobs, this sector is a strong development engine, and women are becoming its transformative force (The Daily Star, 2024).

5.6. Threats for Women

Women in Bangladesh have played a significant role in shaping the nation's history, from the Liberation War of 1971 to the present day. Their contributions span across various sectors, including politics, economy, education, healthcare, and social activism. Despite facing societal and structural challenges, women have continuously worked towards national progress and empowerment. In Bangladesh, women have achieved notable progress in a number of areas, such as economic involvement, social welfare, education, and the liberation war. They still encounter many obstacles, though, which prevent them from reaching their equality and full potential. Social, cultural, institutional, and economic factors all play a significant role in these difficulties. Despite improvements in female literacy rates, inequalities still exist, especially in rural regions. Girls are frequently forced to drop out of education due to cultural constraints, early marriage, and poverty. According to UNESCO girls attend in primary school at high rates, but socioeconomic constraints because secondary school dropout rates to rise sharply.

Significant obstacles prevent Bangladeshi women from obtaining equal wages and formal work. Frequently, they are concentrated in low-wage, unorganized industries like agricultural and household work. The World Bank (2020) points out that even in the ready-made garment (RMG) industry, where women make up the bulk of the workers, they are paid much less than males. Bangladeshi women encounter obstacles with reproductive rights, maternal health, and healthcare access. There are persistent issues with high rates of maternal death and restricted access to family planning services. According to the Bangladesh Demographic and Health Survey (BDHS) 2017-18, the maternal mortality ratio is 173 deaths per 100,000 live births. Early marriage remains a significant issue in Bangladesh, with 51% of women married before the age of 18 (UNICEF, 2021). This often leads to teenage pregnancy, school dropout, and health complications. UNICEF reports that Bangladesh has one of the highest rates of child marriage in the world, despite legal reforms.

6. Conclusion

Women are not a curse for the nation; they are a blessing for society from different perspectives. They have multidimensional characteristics to employ in various fields, so we don't build a nation to ignore the women. They have played crucial roles in various spheres, including politics, education, social reform, and economic development. Many women actively participated in the war, both in combat and supportive roles. They served as freedom fighters, nurses, and provided logistical support. Female entrepreneurs are increasingly visible, contributing to the economy and challenging traditional gender roles.

Women in Bangladesh face multifaceted challenges, including economic inequality, gender-based violence, cultural barriers, limited access to education and healthcare. Raising awareness, changing society, and

implementing comprehensive policy initiatives are all necessary to address these problems. Bangladesh may achieve sustainable development and unleash the full potential of its female population by addressing these issues. Therefore, women in Bangladesh have made substantial contributions to the nation's development and continue to play vital roles in various sectors. Their resilience, activism, and leadership have been instrumental in shaping the country's trajectory from the Liberation War to the present day.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there has no conflict of interest with the research.

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