

Female Employment in Bangladesh : Evidence from Census and Micro Level Studies*

Introduction

WOMEN in Bangladesh who constitute roughly one-half of the country's population are reported to be largely out of the labour force. Throughout the period 1901-1974 incredibly low female labour force participation rates were recorded in the censuses. For example, in 1974 female labour force participation in Bangladesh was only 2.5 (Govt. of Bangladesh, 1977). Clearly, such figures are devoid of reality and there is no denying the fact that a large majority of women in Bangladesh do contribute to production processes.

The purpose of this paper is to briefly present some findings based on census data and point out some of the weaknesses in the census approaches adopted in the measurement of female labour force that lead to a gross under-reporting of female workers. On the basis of evidence from several micro level studies it, then, attempts to examine briefly the relative contribution of women to the household economy.

Census Data

Table 1 presents crude labour force participation rates in Bangladesh by sex,

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TABLE 1—PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION OF LABOUR FORCE (10 YEARS AND OVER.) BY SEX AND RURAL/URBAN AREA IN 1974 AND 1961

<i>Economic Category</i>	1974			1967			<i>Linear Intercensal Growth Rate per Annum</i>		
	<i>BS</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>BS</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>BS</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>F</i>
1. Civilian Labour Force (All Areas)	28.7	53.0	2.5	34.3	56.2	10.8	1.4	2.5	-5.1
2. Civilian Labour Force (Rural)	28.4	52.9	2.4	34.2	56.1	11.1	0.9	2.1	-5.4
3. Civilian Labour Force (Urban)	32.2	54.1	3.8	35.8	57.5	4.8	8.7	8.8	7.7

SOURCE : Bangladesh Population Census, 1974, National Volume, 1977, Table 36, p. 35.

An indication of the wide disparity between males and females is clearly discernible from the table, which shows that while over one-half of the males are enumerated as members of the labour force, an abnormally low proportion of the females are so recorded. In 1961 female participation was less than one-fifth of that of males and the differential was more pronounced in urban areas, where the ratio was 12 : 1 in favour of males. A look at the 1974 figures offers a more disturbing picture. During the intercensal period (1961-74) labour force participation declined, more so among females, particularly in rural areas. While this is largely due to some of the limitations of the census approaches, it is also partly as a result of an increase in the number of female students over the period, rising from 0.3 million in 1961 to 1.3 million in 1974.

A breakdown of the labour force into major industry divisions is shown in Table 2. Agriculture provides the bulk of employment. In rural Bangladesh over four-fifths are employed in agriculture. The next important sector is social services and the proportion of females employed in this sector is roughly twice that of males. In most other sectors the proportion of males exceed that of females. In urban areas there is a heavy concentration of women in social services sector, employing over four-fifths of all females in the working force. About two-fifths of all males in the urban work force are employed in this sector. Trading and manufacturing are the other relatively important sectors so far as male labour force is concerned. Together, these two sectors employ one-third of male labour force. In contrast, only 6 percent of females are employed in these sectors. Thus, it is clear that while most rural women are

1. In 1974 19.65 million males were enumerated in the labour force compared to only 0.87 million females (Govt. of Bangladesh 1977, Table 14).

TABLE 2—MAJOR INDUSTRY DIVISION OF ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION (EMPLOYED) 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER BY SEX AND PLACE OF RESIDENCE (PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTION)

	Total	Agriculture ¹	Mining ²	Manufacturing	Electricity, gas and water	Construction	Wholesale and Retail Trade	Transport, Storage and Communication	Finance and Business Services ³	Social Services ⁴
All Areas										
Both Sexes	100.00	79.04	0.01	4.73	0.04	0.16	3.85	1.60	0.28	10.29
Male	100.00	79.33	0.01	4.74	0.04	0.17	3.97	1.66	0.29	9.79
Female	100.00	72.61	*	4.32	0.02	0.06	1.04	0.19	0.07	21.69
Rural										
Both Sexes	100.00	85.85	0.01	3.55	0.02	0.09	2.49	0.87	1.10	7.02
Male	100.00	86.05	0.01	3.52	0.02	0.09	2.55	0.90	0.11	6.75
Female	100.00	81.23	*	4.42	0.02	0.05	0.84	0.08	0.02	13.33
Urban										
Both Sexes	100.00	14.35	0.02	15.86	0.24	0.85	16.83	8.55	1.94	41.36
Male	100.00	14.70	0.02	16.53	0.25	0.89	17.61	8.97	2.03	39.00
Female	100.00	7.87	—	3.56	0.01	0.09	2.55	0.95	0.40	84.57

¹Includes Forestry, Fishing and Hunting

²Includes Quarrying

³Covers Financing, Insurance, Real Estate and Business Services

⁴Covers Community, Social and Personal Services

*insignificant

SOURCE : Bangladesh Population Census, 1974, National Volume, 1977, Table 16, p. 443-45.

employed in agriculture, most urban women are employed in the social services sector and their participation in other sectors is rather negligible. That is, agriculture and social services sectors are the major sectors in which the bulk of Bangladeshi women are employed.

A large majority of female agricultural labour force are unpaid family helpers, while one-quarter of the males were reported in that category. In all other categories males outnumber females (Table 3). Among the nonagricultural labour force about four times as many women were reported as unpaid family workers as men (Table 4). It is, thus, clear that a high proportion of

TABLE 3—EMPLOYMENT CATEGORY OF AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION (EMPLOYED) 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER BY SEX (PERCENTAGE DISTRIBUTIONS)

	<i>Total</i>	<i>Owner Cultivator</i>	<i>Owner Sharer</i>	<i>Share Cropper</i>	<i>Agricultural Labourer</i>	<i>Unpaid Family Helper</i>
Bangladesh						
Both Sexes	100.00	31.14	13.17	3.46	24.84	27.39
Male	100.00	31.66	13.62	3.56	25.52	25.64
Female	100.00	18.33	1.76	0.85	7.85	71.21

SOURCE : Bangladesh Population Census, 1974, National Volume, 1977, Table 20, p. 555.

TABLE 4—EMPLOYMENT STATUS OF NON-AGRICULTURAL ECONOMICALLY ACTIVE POPULATION (EMPLOYED) 10 YEARS OF AGE AND OVER BY SEX

	<i>Employer</i>	<i>Employee</i>	<i>Self-employed</i>	<i>Unpaid Family Helper</i>
Bangladesh				
Both Sexes	5.35	48.03	37.83	8.79
Male	5.63	47.96	38.91	7.50
Female	0.58	49.08	19.57	30.77

SOURCE : Bangladesh Population Census, 1974, National Volume, 1977, Table 19, p. 547

women in Bangladesh work inside family farm or business. This is in keeping with the prerequisite of *pardah* and other social and cultural customs and limitations imposed by the society on the choice of work available to women.

Negative attitudes of society in general and of males in particular towards women working outside the home is quite strong in Bangladesh. Medicine and teaching are the two most highly respected and accepted occupations, since restrictions imposed by *purdah* are not broken (Papanek, 1971). However, economic pressure is forcing many women to seek outside employment. A study of 582 working women engaged in non-agricultural occupations in the Dacca Metropolitan Area in 1975 indicates that most of the women who accepted jobs outside the home did so under economic pressures to supplement their family income (Chowdhury, 1977). Data from other studies in Bangladesh also show that economic pressure is the most important factor inducing both rural and urban women to take up jobs outside the home (Islam, 1975; McCarthy *et al.*, 1978).

As earlier observed, there is not much credibility to the census figures because of gross undercount of female workers.³ This is largely due to various shortcomings in the approaches adopted in the measurement of female labour force. Mention may be made of the following important ones:⁴

(a) A vast majority of females are unpaid family workers and there are difficulties in enumerating them as members of the labour force. Their work in family farm or business is usually combined with and not easily distinguishable from activities such as household duties, child care, etc. It is very difficult to draw a distinction between women who prepare meal for farm labourers and do other odd jobs and those who produce farm products for sale (U. N. 1958).

(b) The census approaches assume the prevalence of the kind of formalized institutional work situation which is generally found in developed countries where there is a clear distinction between "work" and "non-work" activity; where home and work places are typically separate and where the notion of "job", that is employment by others as the nexus of work is firmly embedded. These assumptions fail to recognize the very informal social and economic underpinnings of work in agrarian societies, where there is a predominance of family farm and the practising group is fluid and difficult to define, especially among females.

(c) The census measures are based on a preconceived notion of what constitutes "work". "Work" refers to income-generating or directly productive activities. However, in the context of rural agrarian societies such as Bangladesh the concept of "work" should be broadened to include not only directly productive activities but also other activities essential to the maintenance of household. "Work cannot be fully defined without reference to a society"

3. Evidence of undercount of workers is rather common in many of the developing countries. See, for example, Khan, 1963; Thorner, 1963 and Visaria, 1965.

4. A detailed discussion on the various approaches adopted in the measurement of labour force in agrarian societies and their limitations is contained in Khuda, 1979.

(Simon, 1971). "The majority of persons involved in activities not considered work are women. Their activities are not able to be reckoned conventionally, yet they relate directly to national well-being; they include child bearing and rearing, household cooking, cleaning, laundering, gardening, sewing and domestic animal husbandry" (Manderson, 1978). Thus, "work" should be redefined in a broader and more realistic sense to include productive work for cash earning, productive work in self-employed enterprise and household maintenance activities.

Evidence from Micro Level Studies⁵

Given the overall demand for all types of workers, in actuality the demand for male and female workers is dependent on the culturally prescribed division of labour along sexual lines in rural Bangladesh. Generally, there are certain types of activities specified for men only, while there are others specified for women only (Jahan, 1975; Jenneke and Beurden, 1977; Khuda, 1978, 1979, 1980, 1982 and 1983; Cain *et al*, 1979; Arthur and McNicoll, 1978). Men generally undertake the outside stages of grain production and off-farm activities required to be carried out away from home, while women take on the stages that can conveniently be performed inside the homestead (bari). Generally speaking, women are more likely to carry out activities that are lighter in nature and which can be more easily combined with household maintenance activities.

Males contribute a considerably higher proportion of time spent on directly productive activities than females. In a study of a traditional Bangladesh village the sexual division of labour was 2 : 1 in favour of males in respect of both directly productive activities and agricultural activities (Khuda, 1978 and 1982). In a relatively developed rural area, however, males contribute four-fifths of all time spent on directly productive activities and 73 per cent of all time spent on agricultural activities (Khuda, 1983).

The decline in the relative contribution of females in the relatively developed area is due to the fact that a good deal of paddy harvested was sent to rice mills, while in the traditional village most of it was husked at home.

Women in rural Bangladesh are primarily engaged in post-harvest operations which include activities such as threshing, boiling, drying, winnowing and husking of paddy. Husking is the most important activity accounting for about 40 percent of all time spent on post-harvest operations. It also provides employment to a large number of landless and near landless women, who are hired by the relatively well-off households. About 70 percent of all paddy produced

5. This section is based on evidence from various studies on the use of time carried out in Bangladesh, mostly in rural areas (Farouk and Ali, 1977; Cain, 1977; Khuda, 1978, 1982 and 1983; Caldwell *et al*, 1980).

in Bangladesh is husked at home (Govt. of Bangladesh, 1977). However, as a result of government policies of subsidized rural electricity and cheap capital from nationalized banks, mechanical and automatic rice mills are being set up in increasing numbers⁶ which are gradually displacing the landless and near landless women from the job. The decline in the number of female agricultural labourer from 213,000 in 1961 to only 48,000 in 1974 is, perhaps, largely as a result of the displacement of women due to mechanical rice milling (Govt. of Bangladesh, 1977, Table 44).

The bulk of time spent on household maintenance activities are contributed by females : over 80 percent (FChuda, 1982 and 1983). Food preparation and cooking, washing and cleaning and fetching water from nearby tanks and tubewells are clearly women's work and the contribution of men in all such activities are negligible. Marketing for household consumption is the exclusive responsibility of males.⁷

The sharp sexual division of labour is because (a) the social law assigns to men the role of breadwinners and to women the role of home-makers, which requires men to devote as much time to directly productive activities as possible and women to devote as much time to household maintenance activities as possible; (b) the pro-harvest and harvesting operations in agriculture in which men are involved require considerably more time than post-harvest operations, the bulk of which are carried out by females; (c) employment opportunities in respect of off-farm activities is considerably greater among men than among women, and (d) females are not encouraged and in most cases not allowed to take up outside employment involving their participation in directly productive activities.

In line with the broader and more realistic definition of work (discussed earlier) which includes not only time spent on directly productive activities but also that spent on household maintenance activities, we now examine the total work contribution of females vis a vis males in Bangladesh, mostly in rural areas.

Table 5 presents the average number of hours worked weekly by age and sex in a Bangladesh village. The number of hours worked rises with an increase in age and finally drops in old age. Among males it drops as one reaches mid-forties and among females it drops as one reaches mid-thirties. That is, by the time a man reaches mid-forties his work contribution to the household begins to drop and this decline takes place earlier among women. By the time a man reaches mid-forties he normally has grown-up sons on whom he can rely heavily and by the time a woman is in her mid-thirties she usually has grown-up

6. In 1977 there were about 7600 licensed custom mills in the country, **increasing** at a rate of about 5-7 percent per annum (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, 1979).

7. In rural Bangladesh women do not go out shopping because of purdah and **this is also true** of most urban women.

TABLE 5--AVERAGE NUMBER OF HOURS WORKED WEEKLY BY AGE AND SEX IN A BANGLADESH VILLAGE

	Males									Females								
	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	All males, 10 yrs+	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55+	All fe- males, 10 yrs+
1. Directly Productive Activities	8.7	22.9	27.9	47.7	58.0	66.2	52.5	49.8	46.0	3.6	7.9	7.2	10.0	14.5	20.8	22.6	24.2	13.7
2. Household Maintenance Activities	6.9	5.5	5.2	5.8	9.2	8.3	8.4	10.2	7.7	10.7	18.9	43.7	57.7	55.4	43.7	39.4	38.3	42.6
3. Total number of hours worked	15.6	28.4	33.1	53.5	67.2	74.5	60.9	60.0	53.7	14.3	26.6	50.9	67.7	69.9	64.5	62.0	62.5	56.3
Number of Persons	23	16	8	5	14	12	8	11	74	17	14	10	8	19	5	7	6	69
Person-days	3864	2688	1344	840	2352	2016	1344	1848	12,432	2856	2352	1680	1344	3192	840	1176	1008	11,592

SOURCE : Khuda, 1983, Tables 5, 13 and 16.

daughters and sometimes daughters-in-law to meet most of the labour demands on the household economy.

A comparison of males and females aged 10 years and above shows that females worked, on average, about three hours more weekly than males. A breakdown by two major activities shows that females spent three-fourths of their total working time on household maintenance activities and one-quarter on directly productive activities, while men spent over four-fifths of their total working time on directly productive activities and less than one-fifth on household maintenance activities.

In a study of another Bangladesh village the sex differential was more pronounced than what we find in Table 5; females worked, on average, 56 hours weekly compared to 41 hours of males (Khuda, 1982). Farouk and Ali (1977), in a study of one urban and six rural areas of Bangladesh found that in both urban and rural areas women work longer hours than men. Caldwell et al (1980), in a study of a rural and an urban area found that in the rural area adult females (15 years or more) worked 76.5 hours weekly compared to 65.3 hours weekly of adult males and in the urban area the differential was greater: adult females worked 50 hours weekly compared to 33 hours of adult males. Cain's estimates from another Bangladesh village, however, do not vary much by sex. He found that adult males and females worked, on average, over 9 hours per day (Cain, 1977). The evidence from most micro level studies, thus, indicate that women work longer hours than men.

Conclusions

This paper examines female labour force participation in Bangladesh based on the census data, which show that most women are out of the work force. Of those enumerated as members of the labour force a large majority are in agriculture as unpaid family workers. However, the evidence from various micro level studies in Bangladesh shows that females work longer hours than males, when "work" is redefined in a broader and realistic sense to *include time* spent not only on directly productive activities but also that spent on household maintenance activities.

There is not much credibility to census figures because of gross underenumeration of female workers due to various limitations of the conventional census approaches adopted in the measurement of female labour force. Since a census operation involves a lot of time and resources, *it clearly represents a huge loss* to the national economy unless realistic estimates of female labour force can be obtained. There is a need for an alternative approach to the measurement of female labour force. Khuda (1979 and 1982) proposed one such alternative approach which considers all population aged five years and above and data are collected on the number of hours spent on directly productive activities and

household maintenance activities⁸ for the week preceding the survey. The merit of this approach is that besides providing realistic estimates of labour force participation, it provides for the measurement of unemployment as well as of underemployment. Also, by collecting data on household maintenance activities, it provides information on the relative contribution of women to the household economy, an information not available by using the census approaches. Data obtained using the alternative approach should, however, be supplemented by carrying out in-depth time allocation studies in some selected areas. Such studies should collect data on a daily basis for several months to overcome the problems of seasonally and memory lapses.

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8. Information relating to time spent on household maintenance activity is, perhaps more difficult to obtain than that expended on directly productive activities but, there is a need that it should be cried.

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