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## CONTEXT

Established in 1971, Bangladesh is the eighth most populous country in the world with a population of approximately 169 million. Accelerated income growth in the past decades has made Bangladesh one of the world's emerging economies. Its gross national income (GNI) per capita increased by about 252.0 per cent between 1990 and 2021.<sup>1</sup> With a projected annual growth rate of 6.4 per cent in real gross domestic product (GDP) in 2022,<sup>2</sup> it is set to graduate from the United Nations classification of least developed country (LDC) in 2026<sup>3</sup>. Celebrating 50 years of independence in 2021, the country has seen a steady rise in Human Development Index (HDI). It is in the Medium human development category and ranks 129 out of 191 countries and territories with an HDI of 0.661.<sup>4</sup>

Bangladesh is also among the 193 United Nations Member States working to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the commitment to 'Leave no one behind' (LNOB). Gender equality features as a standalone strategic priority of the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework 2022–2026 with Bangladesh, denoting the importance of this development area for both the Government and the UN system.



The country is internationally recognized for its good progress on several gender indicators. Women hold 20.9 per cent of parliamentary seats, while 50.6 per cent of adult women have reached at least a secondary level of education and female participation in the labour market stands at 34.9 per cent.<sup>5</sup> However, the rapid economic growth has exacerbated patterns of marginalization, putting vulnerable groups at risk of being left behind on the country's path to development. With a female-to-male HDI ratio of 0.898, the Gender Development Index (GDI) shows low equality in HDI achievements between women and men.<sup>6</sup> In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down progress, resulting in a

<sup>1</sup> [Human Development Report data centre, Bangladesh](#)

<sup>2</sup> [IMF data mapper](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations, Least Developed Country Category: Bangladesh Profile](#)

<sup>4</sup> [Human Development Report 2021/2022 Overview](#), page 26

<sup>5</sup> [Human Development Report 2021/2022](#), Table 5, page 293

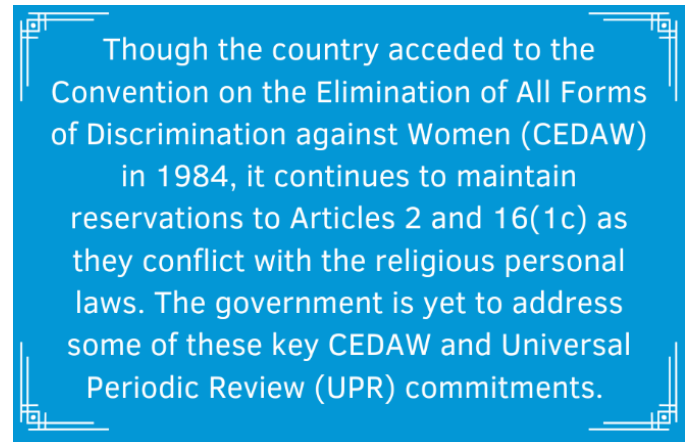
<sup>6</sup> [Human Development Report 2021/2022](#), Table 4, page 288

reversal of some development gains. Between January and September 2020, violence against women and girls escalated, women’s unpaid care work burden increased, and many women lost their livelihoods<sup>7</sup>. The pandemic has impacted women’s health more than men’s, emphasized pre-existing social and economic vulnerabilities, and posed new challenges to social cohesion.



The Constitution recognizes equal rights for women and men in the public sphere, and there is a reasonably compelling legal and policy framework guaranteeing women’s rights. The Prime Minister has declared Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment as one of the ten priority action areas, and Bangladesh has thus taken multipronged actions to achieve this goal. The 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan (2020–2025) prioritizes improving women’s human capabilities, increasing women’s economic participation and security, enhancing women’s voice and agency, and creating an enabling environment for women’s advancement with a key focus on post-pandemic recovery. The 2011 National Women’s Development Policy and related National Action Plan provide a base for

government action to promote gender equality. The Prime Minister of Bangladesh committed to promoting women’s participation in information and communications technologies, and the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs committed to addressing women’s unpaid care work issue in the Generation Equality Forum held in 2021.



Bangladesh has a significant history of strong and vibrant movements spearheaded by women-led organizations claiming their rights. Over the years, women’s groups have mobilized themselves and made sure their voices are heard on various issues, including violence against women, gender equality in securing economic opportunities and participation, equal representation in politics, reproductive rights, family law reforms and gender mainstreaming in public policies. In 2020, an intergenerational feminist alliance “Feminist Across Generations” was formed as a result of the nationwide protest on the increased rates of rape case in the country.

**GOVERNANCE**

Bangladesh ranks at the top among South Asian countries and 71 among 158 countries worldwide in the World Economic Forum Gender Gap Index 2022<sup>10</sup>. It has female leaders in three key political positions, including Prime Minister, Opposition Leader, and Speaker of Parliament. It is the only South Asian country where women have held the position of Head of State for a longer period than men. Women make up 21 per cent of the legislature in the 11<sup>th</sup> Parliament (2018-2023), inching up from 19 per cent in the previous one. Among 300 legislators, 23 were women elected directly, and 50 were seats reserved for women. However, the country does not yet have an inter-party women’s caucus in the national Parliament. At the local government level, there are three reserved seats for women in



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<sup>7</sup> [Statement on violence against women on the rise amid COVID-19 and rampant impunity by INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS](#)

<sup>8</sup> [CSO Consultation on “ICPD 25: Road to Nairobi”](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Healthcare In Bangladesh: Women to lead the way: Daily Star](#)

<sup>10</sup> [World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2022](#)

each of 4,480 Union Parishads across the country (the lowest tier of local government).

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) is active. However, there are concerns with regard to fulfilling its responsibilities effectively. Gender is one of the key areas of work, and it submits a shadow/alternate CEDAW report to the CEDAW Committee and is responsible for the submission of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR), which includes critical information on gender, to the UN Human Rights Council.

The Government of Bangladesh submitted its eighth periodic CEDAW report in 2015<sup>11</sup>. The CEDAW shadow report submitted by the civil society organizations in 2016 highlighted prevailing discriminatory laws, stereotypes, and harmful practices, violence against women, lack of women's economic empowerment, trafficking of women, and lack of women's participation in political and public life as key challenges to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment in Bangladesh.

According to the Beijing+25 Review Report, Bangladesh has made significant achievements in women's participation in public life and leadership positions.<sup>12</sup> However, women fill less than 20 per cent of first-class gazetted jobs, and less than 23 per cent of women have leadership roles in local government institutions.<sup>13</sup>

The 8th Five-Year Plan emphasizes the importance of women's participation in public life, including in public institutions, businesses, and trade unions.

The existing gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) mechanism is not yet fully functional due to inadequate resource and capacity to conduct gender-responsive planning, systematic

monitoring, and synergy between the national women's development policy and GRB allocation. Additionally, the country has a significant gender data gap and needs capacity development to generate and utilize sex-disaggregated administrative data. However, the allocation has increased from 28.69 per cent in the 2012/13 fiscal year to 33.84 per cent in the 2022/23 fiscal year.<sup>14</sup> With the support from UN Women Bangladesh, the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs has developed Gender Responsive Planning and Budgeting (GRP&B) module for the first time.

The Beijing+25 Review and the CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations (2016)<sup>15</sup> highlighted that the discriminatory provisions in legislation remain a grave challenge. It is recommended for Bangladesh to adopt a uniform family law since the country has different laws for inheritance rights that are discriminatory to women.

The Beijing 25+ review also recommended strengthening gender-responsive financing as a tool to advance gender equality and emphasized the importance of enhancing the institutional capacity of the national women's machinery.

The Beijing +25 review also highlighted the importance of portrayal of women and girls, discrimination and/or gender bias in the media. In terms of representation of women in media, there is a national broadcasting policy (2014) in place that aims to strengthen broadcasting for development and positive portrayal of women's productive roles in mass media. Specific provisions in the policy prohibit negative portrayal of women in the media, including broadcasting any programme that encourages violence or discrimination towards women and children.<sup>16</sup>

## WOMEN PEACE AND SECURITY

Bangladesh is one of the pioneering inspirations behind the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security and has consistently been a top contributor to UN Peacekeeping, including female police and troop contribution. The Government of Bangladesh has acknowledged the *Biranganas* (women who survived sexual



Photo Credit: UN Women/Fahad Kaizer

<sup>11</sup> [Eighth periodic report due by State parties due in 2015, Bangladesh](#)

<sup>12</sup> [Beijing+25 Review Report, Bangladesh](#)

<sup>13</sup> [UN Women Asia-Pacific Digital Library, Advocacy Brief: WOMEN'S EFFECTIVE PARTICIPATION AND DECISION MAKING IN PUBLIC LIFE, ELIMINATION OF VIOLENCE FOR ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT OF ALL WOMEN AND GIRLS](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Gender-Budget-Report - Finance Division, Ministry of Finance-Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh \(mof.gov.bd\)](#)

<sup>15</sup> [CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations on the eighth period report of Bangladesh, 25 November 2016 \(CEDAW/C/BGD/CO/8\)](#)

<sup>16</sup> [Beijing 25+ review report, Bangladesh](#) page 50



violence in the 1971 Liberation War) as freedom fighters<sup>17</sup> and allocated a monthly stipend to support them live a life with dignity. In 2019, the country launched its first National Action

Plan on Women Peace and Security (NAP WPS) 2019–2022, with support from UN Women Bangladesh. However, the government has decided to extend the NAP period until 2025 and has reiterated its firm commitment to fulfilling the WPS agenda<sup>18</sup>.

After the militant attack in 2016, there has been a rise in extremist activities, including female radicalization.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, threats of intolerance, misogyny, hate speech, and extremist ideologies in certain quarters—especially towards women—have also extended into virtual spaces. The extremely vulnerable groups, such as indigenous women, women with disabilities, and people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, or other sexual minorities (LGBTQI+), remain invisible in the WPS agenda.

## ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Violence against women (VAW)<sup>19</sup> remains prevalent in the country. The VAW survey (2015) conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) estimated that 72.6 per cent of ever-married women experience one or more forms of violence by their husbands at least once in their lifetime, while 37.5 per cent of adolescent girls aged 15 to 19, experience physical intimate partner violence. About 84 per cent of women with



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disabilities reported having experienced at least one act of emotional abuse or physical or sexual violence from their partner during their lifetime.<sup>20</sup>

Laws related to VAW are still discriminatory, especially the definition of rape, use of character evidence, and family law. However, the Cabinet has recently approved the draft Evidence (Amendment) Act 2022 section 155(4) that proposes the repeal of provisions allowing questions about a rape survivor's character during cross-examinations and contains a provision allowing the submission of digital evidence before a court.<sup>21</sup> It is a landmark achievement of the Rape Law Reform Coalition and UN Women.

Emerging result from the collaboration between UN Women and the Rape Law Reform Coalition is a significant contribution to legal reform efforts and women's access to justice.

Both CEDAW Concluding Observations and Voluntary National Review have highlighted concerns related to legal reform, women's access to justice, tackling harmful social norms and stereotypes, and strengthening the gender-responsiveness of law enforcement and judiciary.<sup>22</sup> The limited female participation and leadership in the justice sector hinders women from accessing legal and judicial support in time.

An increase in gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, both offline and online. The Needs Assessment Working Group (NAWG) Anticipatory assessment report revealed that 49.2 per cent of women and girls felt safety and security are an issue during lockdown<sup>23</sup>. Women and girls, especially women with disabilities and other marginalized groups, are disproportionately affected by disasters and humanitarian crises, thereby leaving them doubly victimised when accessing GBV services. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the GBV services despite extensive investment from the government and development partners for a longer period.

Misconception remains among GBV practitioners, including government and civil society, over prevention programmes, resulting in a less-effective implementation of programmes in ending violence against women and girls. Bangladesh demonstrated success in response through the multi-sectoral programme on Violence Against Women led by Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. The programme established

<sup>17</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birangana>

<sup>18</sup> [Dialogue on Women, Peace, and Security: Prothom Alo](#)

<sup>19</sup> The definition of women for VAW includes girls for this brief. UN Women works towards ensuring freedom from violence for women and girls of all ages.

<sup>20</sup> [Report on Violence Against Women \(VAW\) Survey 2015 \(unwomen.org\)](#)

<sup>21</sup> [New Age, 11 September 2022: Rape victim's character not to be questioned](#)

<sup>22</sup> [Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Bangladesh, 25 November 2016 \(CEDAW/C/BGD/CO/8\)](#)

<sup>23</sup> [NAWG COVID-19: Bangladesh- Multi-Sectoral Anticipatory Impact and Needs Analysis](#)



Photo Credit: UN Women Asia and the Pacific

thirteen One-Stop Crisis Centres (OCCs) in medical college and hospitals across the country.

In the judiciary system, Bangladesh now has seven women judges out of 95<sup>24</sup> in the high court and 550 women judges out of 2000<sup>25</sup> in the lower courts across the country. Among the 10,373 members in the Supreme Court Bar Associations 1,636 are women. The country has an established Bangladesh Police Women Network (BPWN) that includes around 3000 women police officers. The network works to expand the prospect for women police in profession through networking and leadership. With the support from UN Women, BPWN has developed their strategic plan (2021-23).<sup>26</sup>

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

As per CEDAW Concluding Observations, pre-existing gender inequalities are the key drivers for women's low participation rate in the formal economy and the persistent wage gap between women and men in most sectors.<sup>27</sup> The female labour force participation rate stands at 34.9 per cent compared to 78.8 per cent for men<sup>28</sup> and Bangladesh is in the bottom third for all three employment-related indicators of the 2021/2022 Human Development Life-Course Gender Gap Dashboard. The female to male ratio of total unemployment rate is 1.93, and the female to male ratio of total youth unemployment rate is 1.57.<sup>29</sup> With the uneven unemployment rate between men and women, the majority of these unemployed female workers are in the informal sector engaged in unpaid care and domestic work, daily wage labour and unpaid family

businesses.<sup>30</sup> According to the 2021 Time Use Survey (TUS) conducted by BBS with UN Women support, women spend 24.6 per cent of their time on unpaid domestic and care work, whereas men spend 3.3 per cent.<sup>31</sup> Though there has been significant improvement in earning gaps between men and women since 2003-2016, discrimination in wage rate persists.<sup>32</sup> The economic opportunities are not evenly spread throughout the sectors for different inter-sectional groups of women and gender-diverse people. The 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year Plan recognizes that some groups, such as people living in hard-to-reach areas, ethnic minorities, and extinct occupational groups are more vulnerable than others. Hence, it incorporates social protection plans with a focus on these groups in line with the LNOB commitment.

Overseas employment is the country's second-largest source of income, and female migrants from Bangladesh constitute around 13.85 per cent of the migration flow abroad.<sup>33</sup> Female migrants are often subjected to exploitation and discrimination, particularly domestic workers, due to lack of a gender-responsive working environment, and adequate supporting regulations and policies.

Between April and December 2020, a total of 408,408 migrant workers returned to Bangladesh, among them 12 per cent were women.<sup>34</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities of female migrants in particular, who sustained major income loss due to forcibly losing their jobs and returning to the country.

Micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), play a significant role in the economy; however, only 7.2 per cent of the 13 million registered MSMEs are led by women, mostly in the micro and cottage enterprise industry. Lack of information and communication technology, fewer network resources and barriers to financial services are the main challenges for these women-led MSMEs in running their businesses. Additionally, lack of a gender-responsive working environment and unpaid care work burden stand as main reasons for women's inability to remain in the formal economy.<sup>35</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected MSMEs, putting them out of work as

<sup>24</sup> [Home: Supreme Court of Bangladesh](#)

<sup>25</sup> [1800 judges for 16.5 crore people... \(daily-bangladesh.com\)](#)

<sup>26</sup> [Strategic Plan of BPWN](#)

<sup>27</sup> [Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Bangladesh, 25 November 2016 \(CEDAW/C/BGD/CO/8\)](#)

<sup>28</sup> [2020 Human Development Report - Country Notes](#)

<sup>29</sup> [Human Development Report 2021/2022 Dashboard 2. Life-Course Gender Gap](#)

<sup>30</sup> The proportion of females in informal non-agricultural employment was 91.9 per cent for 2011/2021. ([Human Development Report 2021/2022 Dashboard 2. Life-Course Gender Gap](#))

<sup>31</sup> [Time Use Survey 2021 \(BBS\)](#)

<sup>32</sup> [Draft National Strategy for Promotion of Gender Equality in Technical and Vocational Education and Training \(TVET\) in Bangladesh](#)

<sup>33</sup> [Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2018](#)

<sup>34</sup> Probashi Kalyan Desk, Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport

<sup>35</sup> [Women MSME Policy Brief—Bangladesh, November 2020](#)

has adversely affected MSMEs, putting them out of work as these companies had limited capacity to absorb the shocks to remain in the formal economy.<sup>36</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected MSMEs, putting them out of work as these companies had limited capacity to absorb the shocks.

## CLIMATE CHANGE AND DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

Bangladesh is highly vulnerable to climate change and its impacts, including increased natural disasters. UNISDR estimated the average annual losses to disaster at around \$3 billion, or around 1% to 2% of GDP.<sup>37</sup> According to the Global Climate Risk Index by German watch (2021), Bangladesh ranked 7th among the top Ten most effected countries (2000-2019) in terms of Long Term Climate Risk Index (CRI).<sup>38</sup>

While the wide-reaching impacts of climate change threaten and exacerbate socio-political and socioeconomic vulnerabilities, women face the maximum brunt of climate change. The government recognizes that the role of environmental sustainability is key to making economic transformation meaningful.

Bangladesh has assumed the presidency of the 48-nation Climate Vulnerable Forum (CVF) and the Vulnerable Twenty (V20) Group of Finance Ministers. As Chair of the CVF, Honourable Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina has launched a program to develop “Mujib Climate Prosperity Plan” for Bangladesh. Along with this, initiatives, including the Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan, the National Adaptation Plan, and the Delta Plan are put in place aiming to promote green development, green jobs, and solar energy. However, efforts in investing in green jobs for women

and promoting their leadership in renewable energy-based economic development remain inadequate.



Unplanned urbanization puts much of the country’s population at heightened risk during natural disasters. However, the country has achieved remarkable success in building resilience to disasters. Noteworthy progress has been made in developing gender-responsive disaster risk reduction plans with support from the United Nations agencies, including UN Women. The revised Standing Order on Disaster and National Plan for Disaster Management are gender-responsive; Protocol and Guidelines for collecting sex, age, and disability disaggregated data (SADDD), and a Gender Marker for Infrastructure are in place. Ministries and local government, and some good numbers of practitioners, have increased capacity for gender-responsive resilience. Furthermore, the resilience of some of the most at-risk women living in flood- and cyclone-prone districts has been enhanced through UN Women’s interventions along the humanitarian-development nexus.

## ROHINGYA RESPONSE

Running in its fifth consecutive year of the Rohingya refugee crisis, Bangladesh is now hosting close to half a million Rohingya women and girls in the refugee camps in Cox’s Bazar. The speed and scale of this mass displacement invoked a critical humanitarian emergency in Bangladesh and prompted urgency in delivering a gender-responsive response to this cross-border crisis. The UN, including UN Women, has supported the government in its response through the Joint Response Plan (JRP). During the last five years, Rohingya refugees have shown resilience and the government and people of Bangladesh have generously hosted them.

The pre-existing gender inequalities, gender-based violence, and discrimination continue to be perpetuated in the Rohingya Camps and the host community, further exacerbated due to COVID-19. Women, girls, and the most vulnerable groups have



Photo Credit: ZANALA Bangladesh Ltd.

<sup>36</sup> [Women MSME Policy Brief—Bangladesh, November 2020](#)

<sup>37</sup> [Climate Risk Country Profile: Bangladesh; World Bank](#) page 3

<sup>38</sup> [Global Climate Risk Index](#); page 13



limited livelihood options and access to basic services, information, education, and decision-making processes. Bangladeshi host-community women are also affected by disrupted social relations and face barriers in accessing scarce and overstretched social services and livelihood options.

The Government of Bangladesh's position on the issue stands on safe, sustainable, and dignified repatriation, which was also reinforced in the recommendations of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, during her recent visit to Bangladesh.

Initiatives such as Multi-Purpose Women's Centre as well as the coordination mechanism of Gender in Humanitarian Action (GiHA) have made significant contribution ensuring gender-responsive humanitarian interventions.

Multiple service and support systems are in place and supported by UN agencies in partnership with the Government to address issues related to women's health, safety, and security at the camps and in host community. The health facilities supported by UNFPA provide lifesaving SRHR services

for Bangladeshi host and Rohingya refugee communities. The Women Friendly Spaces supported by UNFPA are working to ensure comprehensive survivor centered GBV case management services, psychosocial support, lifesaving emergency referrals, skills development and changing social norms by engaging men and boys at the camps. UNICEF also runs similar interventions with Safe Space for Women and Girls that offers a wide range of services such as psychosocial support, life skills and menstrual hygiene awareness as well as distribution of dignity kits. UN Women has supported the Bangladesh Police since 2019 to strengthen gender-responsive policing in Cox's Bazar improving the availability, accessibility, and quality of police services. UN Women Bangladesh has also established 'Women and Children Desk' at the camps to address safety and security issues of Rohingya women and children.

As Bangladesh works towards LDC graduation and achieving SDGs, the priority remains to continue addressing the persistent inequalities and vulnerabilities faced by women and girls in the country for an inclusive, equal, and sustainable future. Hence, financing gender-related interventions, investing in research for gender statistics, creating space for civil society and giving voice to women are crucial.



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