



IN BRIEF

## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

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Photo : UN Women/Fahad Kaiser

### THE ISSUE

Women make critical contributions to a country's economy, whether in business or agriculture, as entrepreneurs or employees, or their unpaid care work at home. However, they remain disproportionately affected by poverty, discrimination, and exploitation. This results in low participation in the formal economy, low wages, poor economic resilience and autonomy, and vulnerability to highly gendered risks of exploitation.

According to the Quarterly Labour Force Survey provisional report 2022, female labour-force participation increased to 42.68 per cent in 2022 from 36.3 per cent in 2016/17. Yet, it is roughly half of the male participation, which stood at 80.5 per cent in 2022. According to the 2021 Time Use Survey carried out by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in collaboration with UN Women, women spend about 6 hours daily on household and care work, whereas men spend 45 minutes on average [1]. Women own only 6.9 per cent of agricultural land in the climate-vulnerable areas of Bangladesh, whereas men own 93.1 per cent [2]. Only 1.7 per cent of formal enterprises in Bangladesh have female-majority ownership, and when considering formal and informal firms together, women's ownership rate stands at 10 per cent [3]. Female migrant workers, who comprise around 13.85 per cent of the migration flow abroad [4], are often subjected to exploitation and

discrimination and face greater difficulty reintegrating into society due to social stigma. Despite strong policy commitments, women entrepreneurs still face challenges that include a lack of opportunity to access information, financial resources, and markets, among others. In addition, the gender digital divide continues to limit women's access to technology, connectivity, and digital literacy, affecting their employment opportunities.

According to a report by the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission published in 2020, the gender gap in mobile phone ownership is 38 per cent, with 21 per cent of women owning a mobile phone compared to 59 per cent of men in urban areas and 15 per cent of women compared to 54 per cent of men in rural areas.

At the Generation Equality Forum in Paris, the Prime Minister made the bold commitment to increase the participation of women and girls to 25 per cent by 2026 and 50 per cent by 2041 in the information, communication and technology sector, including tech start-ups, and the e-commerce sector in Bangladesh. The country has multiple policies in place to ensure women's economic empowerment, such as Labour Policy 2011, Overseas Employment and Migration Policy 2016, National Skill Development Policy, Small and Medium Enterprises Policy, and Women's Advancement Policy.

### STRATEGY

In line with Bangladesh's [8th Five-Year Plan](#) and the [United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework \(UNSDCF\) 2022-2026](#), the UN Women country programme (Strategic Note) for Bangladesh contributes to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. UN Women is committed to the economic empowerment of women so that they have income security, decent work, and economic autonomy. The key interventions aim at strengthening normative frameworks (laws, policies, strategies, and plans), institutional capacity-building for gender-responsive service delivery, strengthening women's voice and agency (leadership, networking, skills), and addressing discriminatory social norms.

[1]Time Use Survey

[2]Report of the Pilot Survey on Disaster-Affected Households

[3]Voices to Choices ([worldbank.org](http://worldbank.org))

[4]Labour Migration from Bangladesh 2018: Achievements and Challenges

## APPROACH

Using a feminist perspective, UN Women has a whole-of-society approach to supporting women's economic empowerment through income security and decent work. UN Women works with the most vulnerable groups of women to enhance their voice and leadership for economic empowerment. The target group of beneficiaries include women workers in tea gardens, women migrant workers, female-headed households, women living in disaster-vulnerable areas, women with disabilities, and gender-diverse groups. UN Women supported the Ministry of Expatriates' Welfare and Overseas Employment to strengthen laws and policies for women migrant workers and enhanced the government and private sector's capacity for gender-responsive migration. Through several regional initiatives, UN Women has been working with the Colombo Process Member States on gender-responsive migration governance. In Bangladesh, UN Women has been working to strengthen the collaboration of key actors for effective labour migration governance, leading to safe, orderly and regular migration for all men and women. In addition, UN Women has been working to foster skills that create dignified and formal participation of women as employees and entrepreneurs in the local economy, breaking entrenched discriminatory attitudes, norms, and stereotypes in five districts.

UN Women has also advocated for strengthening social protection measures for female tea garden workers and their family members, using gender-responsive planning and budgeting tools, and enhancing women tea garden workers' leadership skills for participation in decision-making.

UN Women works with a range of stakeholders, including the government, civil society, the private sector and women entrepreneurs, youth, and the United Nations agencies, to promote gender parity in the economic sector and women's economic empowerment. Specifically, UN Women and the International Labour Organization have signed a letter of collaboration to advance gender equality by working for women's economic empowerment in Bangladesh. Supported by the Joint SDG Fund, the Government of the Netherlands, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), UN Women has been working in Cox's Bazar, Dhaka, Jessore, Kurigram, Manikganj, Sylhet, and Thakurgaon.

## RESULTS

(2020-2022)

- **15,308 women workers, including women migrants and tea garden workers**, now have increased leadership skills, life skills, and financial literacy through capacity-building initiatives of UN Women. Beneficiaries have reported that they feel empowered and confident and have a voice at home, in their communities, and society to claim their rights.
- The government has integrated gender equality as one of the key principles in the draft prepared for the "**National Reintegration Policy for Migrants- 2022**" through technical support from UN Women and its co-chairship of the Labour Migration Technical Working Group under the Bangladesh United Nations Network on Migration (BDUNNM).
- **3,108 women migrants**, who returned to Bangladesh after losing their jobs in destination countries during the COVID-19 pandemic, have created alternative livelihood opportunities through cash-for-work, skills training, and mentoring from UN Women-led interventions.
- UN Women has supported the government in exploring safer and more diverse job markets for women's labour migration, strengthened the capacity of government officials to negotiate safe migration and decent work conditions for women workers with the countries of destination, and facilitated **gender-responsive recruitment processes** through improved pre-departure training by government training institutes.



- **249 members of local government institutes, including 182 women from five Women Development Forums**, have enhanced capacities to participate in local economic development decision-making processes and to carry out gender-responsive planning and budgeting for local-level planning.
- **46 companies** have improved capacities to ensure gender equality and implement the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs), established by UN Global Compact and UN Women for the workplace, marketplace, and community. Among these companies, **16 have become UN Women Bangladesh's WEPs signatories, benefiting 1,396 female employees.**
- UN Women developed a [policy brief](#) on **gender-responsive planning and budgeting for enhancing the social protection of female tea garden workers and their families in Bangladesh.** Subnational-level government officials in Sylhet used the evidence and analysis presented in the policy brief to strengthen support for tea garden workers.

## IMPACT STORY

### RUNU BEGUM

"I used to work in a garments factory in Dhaka. My mother came to know about this woman who went abroad as a labourer and told me about her. That is when I thought of going abroad to earn more money", said Ruma Begum, a tea stall owner in Dhaka. She went to Jordan as a migrant worker in 2015, leaving her two children behind with her mother and husband. "All I could think about was how to earn money to provide a better education for my children. However, they missed me and used to call me all the time. So, I came back to meet them in 2019. By the end of my visit, COVID-19 had already begun. I could not return; I lost my job. I spent all my savings running the family during the lockdown. At this point, I was desperate to get a job. I came to know about Bangladesh Nari Sramik Kendra's (BNSK) training from my neighbour. When I contacted them, they enrolled me in their program supported by UN Women to help returnee women migrant workers who have lost their jobs during COVID-19. We received some training and were given a sewing machine for tailoring. I started making masks and used to get a monthly salary of 9000 BDT (USD 85). This was a breakthrough for me. I had always wanted to have my own business set up. Soon this dream also came true. With support from UN Women, BNSK enrolled me in skills development training and gave me some seed funding to start my own business. I opened a tea stall. As a woman entrepreneur, running a business with a small capital and making a profit in a male-dominated market was tough. But I did not stop. Young men would come and tease me, but I responded boldly, and they backed off.



*Photo : UN Women/BNSK*

I have very little time to think about myself nowadays. I race through the morning, cleaning the house, preparing breakfast for my children, and getting ready for work. It takes a toll on me, but I am happy. The business is going well. At the end of the day, my children are getting an education and there is food on the table. I can support my husband and my parents and find peace. Women have been the most impacted by this pandemic. I feel proud and lucky to have received training and to be able to run my own business."