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Post-conflict ruptures and the space for women's empowerment in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Bangladesh is widely deemed to have made rapid progress on gender equality and women's empowerment. How to understand the apparent advances of women in a poor, populous, Muslim-majority country in the belt of classic patriarchy? This paper locates the origins of these changes in the immediate aftermath of Bangladesh's struggle for independence in 1971, when a series of visible ruptures to the patriarchal bargain dramatized the ongoing crisis of social reproduction. This drew elite attention to the conditions of landless rural women, creating space for their programmatic inclusion in the political settlement, within a newly biopolitical project of national development. The paper argues that it is possible to make sense of the gains women have made as well as old and new obstacles to gender justice - including women's continuing responsibility for care - in this critical juncture in the political history of gender relations in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Why has Bangladesh, a low income, majority Muslim country, made relatively rapid progress on women's empowerment in its short history? This paper argues that the empowerment of Bangladeshi women, though far from complete, is a fact that warrants social scientific explanation. More or less since Bangladeshis won their liberation in a bloody war in 1971, the second in a two-part struggle against British imperial rule of united India and then against neocolonial rule by Pakistan, women from the Bengali Muslim majority have shifted onto a pathway that has brought them towards greater agency and control over their lives.

This paper argues that Bangladesh took its first steps on that path because a series of crises dramatized the breakdown of the patriarchal bargain, highlighting the ongoing crisis of social reproduction. The argument centres on the emergence of new ideas among the elite, that recognized that the patriarchal bargain presumed to protect the mass of rural women no longer applied - if indeed it ever had. New ideas about the relationship between women and the state, and specifically of the responsibility of the state to intervene directly into spheres of the familial and reproductive historically deemed entirely private, emerged at a time when grave and serial crises dramatized the extent of rural women's exposure to violence, hunger, and abuse. It is in view of this new and unhappy vision of Bangladeshi womanhood that the national development project was formulated and pursued. And it is because this vision of impoverished, unprotected females haunted elite perceptions of their new country that space was created for innovations to reach

this group with new services (and new modes of control), even though this went against the society's strong religious and cultural roots in Kandiyoti's 'classic belt of patriarchy' (1988). This shift in elite perceptions of how women were to be included within the social contract was part of the wider process of the post-war political settlement, in which relationships between contending elites, between the elite and the Western aid donors upon whom the country soon came to depend for finance and external legitimacy, and between the elite and the masses whom they governed, achieved a degree of equilibrium. And so the critical juncture, the point at which Bangladeshi women's history shifted onto a pathway towards empowerment, came in a heady mix of crises of subsistence and survival, radical new ideas about the place of women in Bengali Muslim society, and structural shifts in global, regional and national political power relations.

Organization of the paper

The paper is organized as follows. The next section (*Women's Empowerment: Miracle or Mirage?*) sets out the main contemporary claims to women's empowerment in Bangladesh, noting that the most prominent gains have involved greater participation in labour and financial markets, enabled by greater control of fertility and advances in human development. Collective and political modes have to date been less important to the empowerment of Bangladeshi women than individual and material improvements. It then sets out some of the critiques of the idea of women's empowerment, and identifies key domains in which gender inequality persists or has been re-fashioned within the

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global economy. This is followed by a discussion of the early part of Bangladesh's history, looking at key political events in the period surrounding the establishment of the political settlement, in particular at the social trauma engendered by the campaign of mass rapes during the 1971 war of independence from Pakistan (*The breaking of the patriarchal bargain*). The following section (*The emergence of 'the woman issue' in development*) discusses the impacts of the famine on how landless rural women came to be incorporated within the national development project, through a specifically biopolitical agenda to strengthen the state's capacities for control over the population, at this time. The final section concludes, drawing together the threads of the analysis to argue that the empowerment of Bangladeshi women has proceeded largely – although not solely – to the extent that has been necessary for integration within the global capitalist system. While ruling elites have generally possessed comparatively progressive views on gender, the gains in women's power have been substantially instrumental to those of the economy and the nation more widely. There are emerging signs, in the ongoing crisis of care, and in women's collective resistance to the adverse terms of their incorporation into the global economy and the political settlement, that the limits of women's empowerment through individual integration into the market have been reached.

The empowerment of Bangladeshi women: miracle or mirage?

The progress of Bangladeshi women has been positioned centrally in the explanation of the country's unexpected development success. As I wrote in my recent account of Bangladesh's unexpected development success (Hossain, 2017), that influential champion of international aid, Jeffrey Sachs, noted that:

Bangladesh today is far from a basket case ... Bangladesh shows us that even in circumstances that seem the most hopeless there are ways forward if the right strategies are applied, and if the right combination of investments is made.

(Sachs, 2005, 10)

Contrasting the position of women in Bangladesh with those in Malawi, both of which he had recently visited, he described the striking sight of young women garments workers en route to work in Bangladesh, noting the central importance of their integration into the global economy:

These young women already have a foothold in the modern economy that is a critical, measurable step up from the villages of Malawi (and more relevant for the women, a step up from the villages of Bangladesh where most of them were born). The sweatshops are the first rung on the ladder out of extreme poverty. They give lie (sic) to the Kissinger state department's forecast that Bangladesh is condemned to extreme poverty.

(Sachs, 2005, 11)

He is not unaware of the hardships these young women suffer, having read 'poignant, fascinating, and eye-opening' accounts of long hours, harassment, lack of worker rights, but is struck by

the repeated affirmation that this work was the greatest opportunity that these women could ever have imagined, and that their employment had changed their lives for the better.

Nearly all of the women interviewed had grown up in the countryside, extraordinarily poor, illiterate and unschooled, and vulnerable to chronic hunger and hardship in a domineering, patriarchal society. Had they (and their forebearers (sic) of the 1970s and 1980s) stayed in the villages, they would have been forced into a marriage arranged by their fathers, and by seventeen or eighteen, forced to conceive a child. Their trek to the cities to take jobs has given these young women a chance for personal liberation of unprecedented dimension and opportunity.

(Sachs, 2005, 12)

Sachs also visited rural women members of a microcredit group run

Table 1
Selected human development indicators.

Source: World Development Indicators (accessed December 23, 2015).

Indicator	Then	Now
Life expectancy at birth, total (years)	47 (1971)	71 (2013)
Contraceptive prevalence (% of women ages 15–49)	8 (1976)	62 (2013)
Births attended by skilled health staff (% of total)	10 (1994)	34 (2013)
Immunization, measles (% of children ages 12–23 months)	1 (1982)	89 (2014)
Improved water source (% of population with access)	68 (1990)	87 (2015)
Improved sanitation facilities (% of population with access)	34 (1990)	61 (2015)

by the non-governmental organization (NGO) BRAC (formerly the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee). With their tiny businesses and beautiful saris, these women 'presented a picture every bit as dramatic as that of the burgeoning apparel sector' (Sachs, 2005, 14). None of these women wanted more than two children, a remarkable change from the 1970s, when six or seven were normal. He concludes:

Bangladesh has managed to place its foot on the first rung of the ladder of development, and has achieved economic growth and improvements of health and education partly through its own heroic efforts, partly through the ingenuity of NGOs [non-governmental organizations] like BRAC and Grameen Bank, and partly through investments that have been made, often at significant scale, by various donor governments that rightly viewed Bangladesh not as a hopeless basket case but as a country worthy of attention, care, and development assistance.

(Sachs, 2005, 14)

The story of Bangladesh's development success is indistinguishable from the story of women's empowerment in Bangladesh: changes in the lives of women are widely treated as both cause and effect of the significant improvements in human development in the past quarter century (Asadullah, Savoia, & Mahmud, 2014; Chowdhury et al., 2013; Nazneen, Hossain, & Sultan, 2011). The domains in which women's lives have been most visibly transformed include paid work, notably in global sectors such as readymade garment exports and increasingly, in international migrant labour; rural self-employment, financed by micro-credit; and human development, in particular increased access to public health, education and social protection services (see Kabeer, Mahmud, & Tasneem, 2011). Over the almost half-century since Bangladesh gained its independence, the life-chances of women, and of those for whom they care, have been transformed (see Table 1). While basic conditions of life have greatly improved for women and their families, in addition, and in distinct comparison to their South Asian sisters, Bangladeshi women have seen an improving trend on other dimensions of their power, including political power as well as equity with respect to health and economic participation, and the law (see Table 2 showing the Global Gender Gap indicators for South Asia).

Participation in paid work in formal and semi-formal sectors has grown in the quarter century since democratic rule was established in 1991, although gender biases in the official statistical machinery means it very likely remains under-estimated by a substantial quotient (Mahmud & Tasneem, 2011). Some 80% of the 4 million readymade garment (RMG) sector workers are women, and the positive effects of control over regular cash incomes spill over into other domains of women's agency and autonomy (Heath & Mushfiq Mobarak, 2015). The vast majority of the 36 million micro-credit borrowers are women,¹ and despite controversies about how the loans are used (Goetz & Gupta, 1996) and about the impacts of debt on women's lives (Karim, 2011), access to cash finance appears to have improved women's bargaining position within the household (Kabeer, 2001); may have reduced their

¹ From the Credit and Development Forum (CDF) <http://www.cdfbd.org/new/> (accessed April 11th 2016).

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