

I HOW WERE BANGLADESH'S GAINS POSSIBLE?

1.1 What role has policy played in Bangladesh's success? Bangladesh's progress in enhancing women status has been widely celebrated and analyzed – sometimes even posed as a puzzle. For how could a country with such low per capita income achieve such heights in so many of areas? The halving of fertility rates from 1971 to 2004, the dramatic growth in female secondary education which now leaves boys behind, the eradication of gender inequality in infant mortality, the renowned micro-credit revolution, the vast numbers of young women employed in the garment factories moving out of their secluded existence are all tremendous changes that have contributed to women's status in Bangladesh. And while there remains a great deal to be done in terms of increasing women's labor force participation, reducing and punishing violence, increasing political participation and visibility in leadership positions, we do need to understand which policies played a role in assisting the gains that have been made.

1.2 The enhancement of women's status in Bangladesh has been as much a product of the vision of a new state as the unintended consequences of development policies. The newly independent state in 1971 had a dream of a new society, for which the state created a Constitution that focused on principles of equality and liberty. The state then proceeded to ratify several international conventions and participate in international conferences for women. After the first phase of rehabilitation of the war-ravaged new state was under control, the political imperative was to create the bulwark for a just and egalitarian society and make a break with the past. The institutions that were set in place at the time worked in tandem with the overall objectives of the Constitution. Subsequently, each Five Year Plan laid the groundwork for an evolving vision of gender equality and will be discussed later. The new state also allowed space to NGOs, which then proceeded to take the initiative as active service delivery agents and propellers of social mobilization. The women's movement played an important role in this new vision. Not only has it always been very vocal on women's rights, but took every opportunity it got to ensure that women's concerns and the principles of gender equality were integrated into policy.

1.3 Perhaps the two programs or policies that were expressly intended to improve women's status were the initially NGO-driven *microcredit program* and the *government's education policy*. The former had a number of salutary impacts of its own. Not only did women learn to save and get access to credit but the credit groups created a sense of solidarity and the allowed for other services like family planning to be delivered through them. Women's awareness in many other spheres was enhanced through these collectives and they began

Within a comprehensive, value-based, and sustainable social and economic development framework, gender-based discrimination has to be eliminated and efforts towards that end must form an integral part of poverty reduction initiatives. ... it is a key issue to address, given that women are subject to growing discrimination in society although considerable progress has taken place in the area of women's advancement during thirty-three years of the independence of Bangladesh. Inclusion of women's advancement and rights as a special issue is essential for three reasons: to uphold fundamental human rights because women's rights are also human rights; to achieve efficiency in poverty reduction and to achieve sustainable development (Bangladesh Poverty Reduction Strategy, 2005: 135).

to access training and self-employment opportunities. Similarly, education was expressly intended to raise women's status and to build an educated society in the newly independent country in 1971. This vision was subscribed to by a large part of the population and had the support of the elite¹⁷. The focus on primary schooling in the 1980s and then the Female Secondary School Stipend Program in the 1990s led to dramatic improvements in educational attainment, which the entire nation now takes pride in. Most of these gains will be discussed in other chapters in this report.

¹⁷ Hossain, 2005

1.4 But, women's status in Bangladesh was also an unintended consequence of policies and events. The historical famine of 1974 was a catalyst in at least two ways. From 1975, when famine prevention emerged as a key priority, the state has invested in rural infrastructure, initially funding off-season employment and later durable rural roads, which have had an enormous impact on women's physical mobility and access to health care, education, markets, and information. The significance of roads in human development outcomes comes through in several empirical findings¹⁸ and from focus groups conducted for this report. Famine relief efforts also "unleash(ed) and legitimize(d) the NGO process which has played such an important role in social change in Bangladesh."¹⁹

1.5 Bangladesh's dramatic fertility decline too was not driven by the impulse to empower women but rather from efforts to respond to the early 1970s Malthusian hype about overpopulation. These efforts led to an aggressive, supply-driven family planning program that provided door-step delivery of contraceptives to women who had traditionally been in *pardah*. This supply side push combined with a high demand for contraception enabled women to control fertility. And freedom from childbearing improved their health the health of their children and freed up their time to engage in other activities.

1.6 In addition, Bangladesh's total sanitation campaign, which led to the widespread use of toilets, meant that girls could now attend school comfortably. The campaign for clean drinking water, immunization, and the use of oral rehydration for babies reduced diarrhea and other childhood diseases and in the process reduced mothers' drudgery and demand for children.

1.7 Global economic developments also contributed to Bangladesh's success in empowering women. The Multi-Fiber Trade Agreement gave Bangladesh concessions in the garment trade that enabled the establishment of large export-oriented garment factories. Since sewing has been a skill traditionally learnt by women and girls in Bangladesh, these factories employed young women who had had some education, who were unmarried, and who provided cheap labor to help keep these industries competitive. In the process, a new generation of young women broke the shackles of familial and societal control and migrated out of their villages to develop their own identity.

1.8 **Uniqueness of Bangladeshi society may also have allowed for a shared vision.** Unlike other countries in South Asia, Bangladeshi rural society has a high degree of linguistic, religious and ethnic homogeneity. While there are small ethnic minorities in the form of tribal groups and a large Hindu minority, the country does not have the level of ethnic or sectarian tensions that its neighbors do. In particular, it does not have a stratification system based on caste (as in India and Nepal) or *biradari* (as in Pakistan) that tends to divide villages and impede social cohesion. While *gushtis* (kinship based groupings) in Bangladesh do exercise a hold on their members, they do not fragment in the same way as caste, clan, *biradari* or linguistic affiliations do. This makes it easier to organize women and contributes to the success of development campaigns. Government programs are similarly easier to design and deliver.

1.9 Not only is Bangladeshi society more homogenous, but until the 1990s, levels of income inequality were also low. In the 1990s, while income inequality rose in urban areas, there has been a significant decline in overall levels of poverty. Estimates of the most recent poverty assessment are awaited at the time of writing this chapter. Low levels of inequality bind citizens in a common trust.

Perhaps the most important part of the poverty story is one not found in the statistics at all. The poor of Bangladesh have undergone something of a personality revolution and become more assertive, pro-active towards opportunities, clearer on life-goals. The

¹⁸ World Bank, 2005

¹⁹ Rahman, Hossain Zillur (in written comments on this report) 2007

social reality may not have lost its oppressive features but the poor men and women of rural and urban Bangladesh are new protagonists on the scene and societal outcomes are very much open. (PRSP, 2004: xvi)

1.10 Finally, the structure of the elites and their distance from the poor can be a predictor of the former's tendency to capture power. The same factors that contribute to the social homogeneity and lower inequality discussed earlier, also contribute to the proximity of elites to non-elites. Recent research on Bangladesh has pointed to a remarkable congruence between the ideals and vision of the elite and the people regarding poverty and development at the national level. It has also pointed out that elites in Bangladesh are relatively new and still maintain their links with their rural roots. Moreover, the cultural ethos of the elites and the people are also remarkably similar, allowing for policies that address poverty and positive social outcomes²⁰.

1.11 This does not mean that achieving gender equality in several areas in Bangladesh was an accident of history. Far from it. This chapter focuses on the major institutional mechanisms for women's empowerment since independence. The first section focuses on state institutions that have addressed women's issues in Bangladesh - the Constitution (which includes provisions for women's political representation and participation in the public sector), the Government's development planning efforts, its National Policy for the Advancement of Women and its experience with international accords and conventions on women's rights. The discussion pays particular attention to how, since the nation's inception, national development plans have made concerted efforts to incorporate policy on women. There has moreover been a distinct, albeit gradual, shift in policy toward women's issues, as manifested in successive Five-Year Plans and, ultimately, in Bangladesh's Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS). The PRSP of 2004 represents the culmination of the vision of gender equality that evolved through the years. The final part of the chapter is a summarized overview of non-state entities that have powerfully shaped women's status, rights and opportunities in Bangladesh. Other parts of this report focus in a more detailed manner on the contribution of NGOs in furthering women's status in different arenas.

A Constitutional Guarantee of Gender Equality and Political Representation

1.12 The original Constitution of Bangladesh, effective in 1972, guaranteed equal rights to all citizens, regardless of gender, religion, and other social divisions. Specific articles of the constitution that guarantee equal rights and protections to women include Article 27 ("All citizens are equal before law and are entitled to equal protection of law") Article 28, Article 29—both of which prohibited discrimination on the grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth—and Article 65(3), which reserved 15 parliament seats for women.²¹ This number was later increased to 30. In 1975 (which happened to be the United Nation's deemed International Women's Year and the international climate no doubt was an influence on Government policy) the Government not only doubled the number of reserved parliamentary seats for women; it also reserved 10 percent of public jobs for women, created a full-status Ministry of Women's Affairs,²² and its plans began to consider integrating women into the development process (see discussion of the Five-Year Plans, below).

1.13 In 1978, for the first time two women were included in Union Parishad (UP) and Gram Sarkar - the lowest tiers of local government - as nominated members under the Local Government Ordinance 1976²³. The inclusion of women members with the local government's activities was in keeping with the

²⁰ Hossain, 2005

²¹ For details see Part A of Annex 2.

²² See Part-D of Annex 2 for details on the structure and responsibilities of the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (renamed from the Ministry of Women's Affairs in 1994).

²³ For a more detailed discussion, see Chapter V

national policy as stressed in the Constitutional Article 10 of part II to ensure the participation of women in nation-building activities. In 1983, the number of women members was raised to three under the Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance 1983. In 1997, women received the mandate to be directly elected to the UP through three reserved seats in each UP. At present there are 12,828 elected women members in 4,198 Union Parishads throughout the country. To make the role of women members more effective, some initiatives have been taken through amendments to the LG Ordinance and several notifications/circulars/orders of the Government²⁴.

B An Evolving Vision Towards Women's Advancement

1.14 A welfare approach during the phase of national rehabilitation phase: Much like the Constitution, development plans since Independence have incorporated policies specific to women, though their nature has evolved significantly over the years. What originated as part of an effort to rehabilitate the country's economy (following the Liberation war of 1971) has in the past decade developed into policy aimed at equalizing men's and women's status and opportunities in all arenas. In the first years of nationhood, the government had to focus on rehabilitating an economy ravaged by the Liberation War of 1971. Policy addressed women to the effect that they were displaced, dispossessed or damaged by the war—and priority was given to wives and daughters of men martyred in the war. There is general agreement that at that time, policy was intended to help war-affected women recover; however, civil society and current GoB officials tend to differ over the scope and efficacy of Government efforts.²⁵ On the one hand, GoB sources point out the range of interventions implemented by the *Bangladesh Women's Rehabilitation Board*, established by the Government in February 1972 to helm the women's rehabilitation effort.²⁶

1.15 From welfare to efficiency: 1974-85: In 1974, as part of the First Five-Year Plan (1973-78), the Board was transformed into the *Women's Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation*²⁷. By necessity, policy continued to prioritize the economy's recovery. Once women were no longer perceived as needing post-conflict rehabilitation, they were incorporated into the Government's dual objectives of economic growth and population control. Massive family planning campaigns already were underway in the mid-1970s, and women were perceived primarily as the means to lower fertility rates and as supplementary wage earners²⁸. This shift to a policy of "efficiency" is reflected in the interim Two-Year Plan of 1978-80, which—with regard to women—emphasized agriculture-based rural development, cottage industry, and agriculture-based rural development to help women achieve economic self-reliance²⁹. It was during this period in 1978 that the *Ministry of Women's Affairs* was established. In the same year, for the first time in development planning, the interim Two-Year Plan allocated separate funds to the women's sector.

1.16 Women's role in the "efficiency" approach became more manifest in the Second Five-Year Plan (1980-85), which coincided with preparation for the Second World Conference on Women (1985). Various paradigms of women's development were being discussed across the globe. For the first time, a Five-Year Plan in Bangladesh made reference to women's development with a specific focus on increasing women's participation in development within the framework of the efficiency approach. The

²⁴ Democracy Watch, 2002

²⁵ Perspectives of GoB officials reflected in this chapter are based on background papers and in-person interviews with Government staff, some of whom have had past positions in the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs.

²⁶ Board programs included the following: (a) Conducting surveys to collect correct information about women and children who were affected by the war and to make arrangements for their rehabilitation; (b) Providing vocational training of various types to war-affected women; (c) Providing training and jobs to women of families whose male earning members sacrificed their lives in the war.

²⁷ Guhathakurta et al. 1999

²⁸ See Kabeer 1999; Mahmud 2004; World Bank 2005a

²⁹ Guhathakurta et al., 1999

Government created the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MWA-- see discussion below) and increased reservation of parliament seats and public sector jobs for women, in addition to further incorporating (select) women's issues into development planning. Planners acknowledged women's potential for productivity and recognized their efficiency as users of credit and other resources. The plan, however, failed to adequately address women's limited accessibility (compared to men in Bangladesh) to both material and non-material resources, according to GoB sources.

1.17 *The new "equality" rhetoric 1985-90:* It was in the Third Five-Year Plan (1985-90) that the Planning Commission addressed women's low access to resources and other gender-based disparities in Bangladeshi society.³⁰ The new plan stressed the need to reduce inequalities between men and women in a range of development dimensions. It also recognized that women in Bangladesh's industrial sectors—particularly in the export-oriented garment sector—already were making significant economic contributions. The Third Plan thus prioritized poverty alleviation of disadvantaged and vulnerable women through employment and income generation, as well as the reduction of gender inequality across the society. The shift from an efficiency-focused to an equality-focused policy on women had occurred in principle; however, appropriate strategies for operationalizing the "equality" approach still were largely missing from the Plan. Yet, GoB cemented the public commitment to the Women in Development (WID) policy through initiatives in areas beyond development—setting up public courts exclusively for dealing with conjugal and parental rights-related cases, as well as enacting ordinances that made crimes against women (e.g., trafficking, acid-throwing, dowry-murder, and rape) subject to capital punishment³¹.

1.18 *Gender mainstreaming takes root - 1990-95:* The Fourth Five-Year Plan (1990-95) yielded more concrete results as it improved upon the equality-based approach by introducing the concept of gender mainstreaming in women's development. Mainstreaming emphasized the importance of considering gender differences in all development interventions, as well as the need to focus on poor women across all sectors of development. This plan also introduced a range of programs designed to equitably distribute project benefits between women and men, with a view to reducing gender disparities. Yet, program design still gave insufficient attention to detail, and the idea of equality was not clearly spelled out. Lack of appropriate institutional mechanisms and insufficient capacity of existing institutions also inhibited effective integration of women in development programs.

1.19 *Move to concrete goals and focus on empowerment:* The Ministry of Women's and Children's Affairs (MWCA)³² undertook its own review of these programs, which was useful in formulating the Three-Year Rolling Plan (1995-97). It was during the Three-Year Rolling Plan that GoB took concrete steps to align itself with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—three of which are directly related to improving the lives of girls and women—and build capacity to achieve them. Foremost was its formation of an Inter-Ministerial Task Force to ensure close coordination and interaction among the various ministries and government functionaries to identify cross-cutting needs and issues among sectors, determinants of past successes and failures, and perspectives on how to improve current situations and better achieve the goals.³³ Subsequent development plans, including the PRSP, have renewed Bangladesh's commitment to achieving the MDGs and have integrated guidelines to achieve MDG targets.

³⁰ In 1984 GoB signed the Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) 1979 and had endorsed the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (NFLS).

³¹ Kabeer, 1991

³² The Ministry of Women's Affairs was renamed Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (MWCA) in 1994.

³³ Source: "Millenium Development Goals (MDG): Implementation of the Millennium Declaration in Bangladesh: http://www.mdgbangla.org/operationalization_mdg_bd/index.htm.

1.20 **The Fifth Plan (1997-2002)** focused on reducing gender disparities in all sectors by integrating women into the mainstream development efforts. In addition, the new Plan included a focus on children's survival and development, setting out 12 goals and objectives for the development of women and children. The Fifth Plan also brought a new emphasis on women's empowerment in order to set more concrete goals and objectives related to women's and children's development. Like the previous Five-Year Plan, the Fifth Plan focused on reducing gender disparities in all sectors by integrating women into mainstream development efforts. In addition, the new Plan included a focus on children's survival and development, setting out 12 goals and objectives for the development of women and children. The Fifth Plan also brought a new emphasis on women's empowerment in order to set more concrete goals and objectives related to women's and children's development.³⁴

1.21 The *Poverty Reduction Strategy – A quantum leap forward*: MWCA's review of the progress of programming for women and children mentioned above helped inform the policy on women's issues and gender mainstreaming in the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) (GED 2005), with links to the Sixth Five-Year Plan (2003-2008). The PRS has made concerted efforts to incorporate gender concerns into all eight points of the strategic agenda for development activities in upcoming years. Its Fifth Chapter, "Roadmap for Accelerated Poverty Reduction," issues a strongly-worded commitment to improving the lives of women, particularly those among the poor and other marginalized groups:

Within a comprehensive, value-based, and sustainable social and economic development framework, gender-based discrimination has to be eliminated and efforts towards that end must form an integral part of poverty reduction initiatives. ... it is a key issue to address, given that women are subject to grow discrimination in society although considerable progress has taken place in the area of women's advancement during thirty-three years of the independence of Bangladesh. Inclusion of women's advancement and rights as a special issue is essential for three reasons: to uphold fundamental human rights because women's rights are also human rights; to achieve efficiency in poverty reduction and to achieve sustainable development (PRSP, 2005: 135).

Box 1.1: Fourth Fisheries Project (GoB and World Bank): Insights from Chandina Upazila (Comilla District)

The six day training program on aquaculture requires 25 percent of trainees to be women. The program started in 2002 and so far 1,000 fish culturists in 40 villages have been trained. In the initial stage it was difficult to find rural women participants due to the conservatism and lack of demand for training on fisheries for women. Through intensive motivation efforts and awareness raising sessions with male family members, the extension workers convinced the community about the usefulness of rural women's participation in fisheries production. A highly motivated female Extension Officer, (who even changed her dress and started to practice purdah to be more acceptable to the rural community) enhanced female participation. A female Union Parishad member also provided substantial support in motivating rural women. Even so, in some villages the project was unable to reach even 5 percent women. Interviews with women who received training and were engaged in aquaculture, indicated that they saw fish culture as a family effort. Though these women own the fish ponds, they were mainly responsible for preparing the feed and feeding the fish, while male members were responsible for harvesting and marketing the fish. The women indicated that the training equipped them with the knowledge and technology to monitor this activity which they did not know before. They also reported that they feel empowered as they have a prominent role and want to continue this work since this is a good source of income – they claimed that on an average they earn Tk. 2000/ a month.

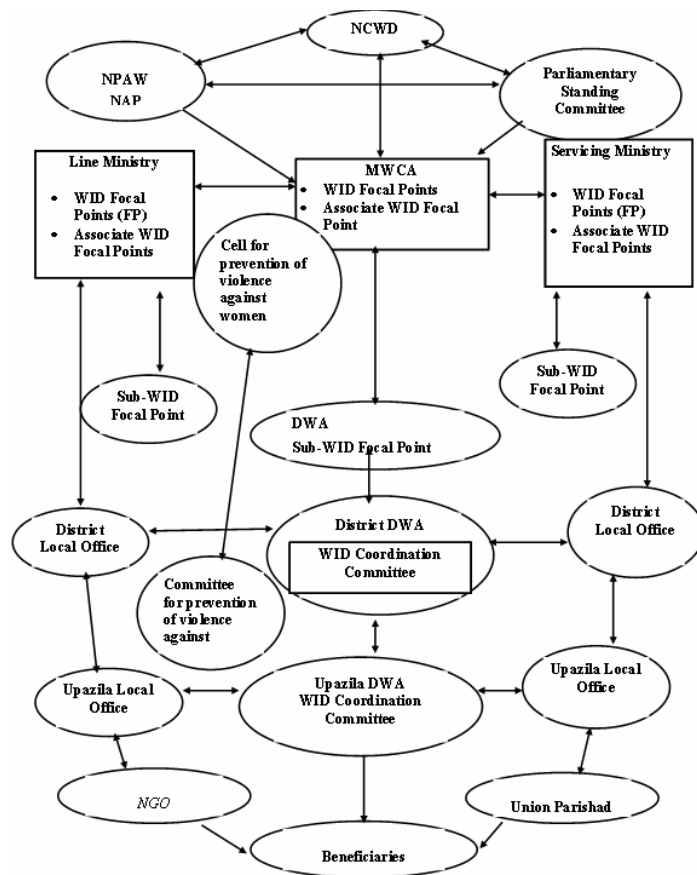
Source: Jahangeer et al "Integrating gender into the World Bank's Bangladesh Country Program: A review of the portfolio, 2006"

³⁴ Within the framework of CEDAW and the Beijing PFA, the Government also created a National Action Plan (NAP) for Women's Advancement to implement the Beijing PFA in 15 sectoral ministries, and a General Action Plan for implementation in all other serving ministries.

1.22 The PRS also summarizes the challenges to gender equality and lays out a framework to shape future initiatives for reducing gender gaps in a range of dimensions, including health and nutrition, labor force participation, and political empowerment. It also commits to addressing the severity of issues related to violence against women and trafficking of women and children. It represents a qualitative shift from the early paternalistic, welfare oriented pronouncements to a proactive statement that espouses gender equality for its intrinsic value. The process of formulation of the PRS moreover included the women's movement and its views in the widest possible manner.

1.23 *Bangladesh's National Policy for the Advancement of Women:* The National Policy for the Advancement of Women went into effect in March 1997, and was hailed by all stakeholders as a major step forward in the advancement of women's status, rights, and opportunities in Bangladesh. In May 2004, the Government issued a new National Policy for Women's Advancement, one that has generated widespread criticism and protest from activists in the women's movement and other members of civil society. These groups question the Government's intention behind changing the Policy, and suspect that the changes reflect an increasingly conservative attitude within the Government. Though the changes are subtle, the women's movement believes that they could provide the basis for further policy changes and erode the gains made over the years.³⁵

Figure 1.1
Bangladesh Institutional Setup for Advancement of



1.24 Initially, the need to revisit the National Policy of 1997 was procedural: according to the Rules of Business (the guiding principles for the Government machinery), the full Cabinet must meet to approve any policy document. Because the 1997 Policy had been approved during a National Council for Women's Development meeting, chaired by the Prime Minister, it had never gone through this procedure. Instead, its recommendations had been incorporated into a final draft, but MWCA and the other ministries had faced uncertainties as to how to interpret and apply some of the recommendations in the years between 1997 and 2004. It was through this procedural loophole that the Government in 2004 was able to make changes to the Policy. From 2004 to 2007 (when this chapter was written) there have been no indications that the changes have spearheaded more conservative policies in other areas, and the women's movement will no doubt remain vigilant so that similar changes cannot be passed without consultation.

³⁵ See Part-C of Annex-2 for a comparison of specific clauses in both versions of the Policy. At the time of this report going into print there were newspaper reports that the Policy had been reversed and that most NGO concerns had been addressed.

1.25 State Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women: The creation, as early as 1978, of a separate Ministry to help fulfill Government commitments to women's development is a powerful reflection of GoB's commitment to advancing gender equality in the country. It also foreshadowed the creation of a dense network of institutions to coordinate and implement programs for the advancement of women. In addition to the Ministry of Women's Affairs (called Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs, as of 1994), the Government also put into operation a comprehensive national machinery to promote the advancement of women. At the highest level is the National Council for Women's Development (NCWD), chaired by the Prime Minister. Below the apex, the implementing agency for the National Action Plan (NAP) for Women's Advancement (which also is responsible for the National Policy for the Advancement of Women) and the Parliamentary Standing Committee interact with WID Focal Points in all line ministries, servicing ministries and the MWCA. WID focal points in the line ministries comprise the Women's Development Implementation and Evaluation Committee. Associate WID focal points also are located in the line ministries, servicing ministries, and the MWCA.

1.26 Below the MWCA, the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA) contains a Sub-WID focal point, which oversees the district DWA, which houses the WID Coordination Committee. District local offices report to the district DWA's WID Coordination Committee, which, in turn, oversees the Upazilla DWA, which has its own WID Coordination Committee, to which Upazilla local offices report. Finally, below the upazilla level are the NGOs, the Union Parishads, and the beneficiaries (individuals/communities). The NGOs and Union Parishads interact directly with the Upazilla local offices, while beneficiaries appear to have more direct contact with the Upazilla DWA and its WID Coordination Committee. Other special mechanisms to eliminate violence against women are contained in the chapter on violence.

1.27 In sum, together the NCWD, NAP, Parliamentary Standing Committee, ministries, all levels of WID focal points, local offices, coordination committees, and on-the-ground NGOs and Union Parishads form a country-wide network for the implementation and monitoring of activities for the advancement of women. MWCA serves as the nodal ministry ultimately responsible for coordinating gender issues across the Government. MWCA itself works toward furthering women's advancement through its two major implementing agencies, the Department of Women Affairs (DWA) and Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha (JMS), which has field offices and staff across the country.³⁶

Box 1.2: Rural Transportation Improvement Project (GoB and The World Bank)

One of the innovative activities in the Rural Transportation Improvement Project is to provide market facilities to women. In each rural market five shops are allocated for women in separate "women's corners" with toilet facilities and rooms for their children while they work. This endeavor has enabled women to access rural markets which they could not do before. In Gabtoli Upazila of Bogra, 25 of the 100 shops are owned by women. However this activity has not been uniformly followed especially in those areas where the cost of shops is high. Since women often cannot pay for the shops, there is pressure to abolish them, as has been done in many places. Unless an innovative scheme like this is accompanied by advocacy, training and public support, it can quickly languish.

Source: Jahangeer et al "Integrating Gender into the World Bank's Bangladesh Country Program: A review of the Portfolio, 2006"

1.28 Bangladesh's Experience with International Conventions, Conferences on Women: Since it participated in the World Conference on Women, held in Mexico in 1975, Bangladesh has expressed solidarity with the worldwide movement for women's advancement. It has joined all successive world conferences for women's rights. In 1984, it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

³⁶ For a description of the structures and responsibilities of MWCA, see Part-D of Annex 2.

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), albeit initially with reservations on certain articles³⁷. The reservations on Articles 13(a) and 16(1)(f) have been withdrawn, but reservations on Articles 2 and 16.1.c remain. This points to the reluctance of the state to: a) grant women the same status and rights as men in the arena of the family; and b) to protect women against discrimination in the public arena—particularly in the legal sphere. To the government’s credit, however, it did allow Bangladesh to be among the top ten countries to ratify the Optional Protocol on CEDAW. The Protocol allows women to approach the International Expert Committee for Justice if they feel their rights have not been protected within guidelines of their nation’s commitments to women’s rights. Ratification of the Protocol reflects, at least in theory, GoB’s intent to assure women’s access to justice. The Bangladeshi women’s movement prepares a “shadow report” to CEDAW and this co-existence of the official and the “shadow” versions are a testimony of the space that NGOs get in Bangladesh.

1.29 In 1995, Bangladesh signed the Beijing Platform for Action (PFA) without reservations, at the Fourth World Conference on Women. The PFA is a comprehensive framework for women’s empowerment in developing nations with specific guidelines. The GoB has since made concerted efforts toward progress in the PFA’s 12 critical areas of concern. Participation in the UN’s periodic Special Sessions to follow-up on the PFA, such Beijing +5 in 2000 and Beijing +10 in 2005 have enabled GoB to continue and revitalize its efforts toward these ends.

1.30 International multilateral and bilateral agencies have historically played a substantive part in engaging with the government and in encouraging NGOs to further gender equality. Many of the policies in Bangladesh have been enriched by this engagement, as Bangladesh’s experience has enriched the knowledge base of these agencies. Funding for programs for women’s advancement similarly has been adequate. Even today, international agencies play an important part in financing NGOs and government agencies, undertake monitoring and evaluation and provide opportunities for two-way learning and technical support. As part of this report, we have conducted a review of the World Bank’s Bangladesh lending portfolio to see the extent to which gender issues are integrated in it, and areas of opportunities and constraints. Key lessons from the review are in Part-F of Annex 2.

1.31 **The women’s movement in Bangladesh has been one of the most vociferous voices for gender equality.** The role of the women’s movement and NGOs in furthering women’s status and gender equality finds place in every chapter in this report. We have tried to draw on their tenacious and innovative role in a number of areas; hence, this section is an overview.

1.32 Even before independence, the writings of Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain inspired a new generation of women leaders. The “movement” itself is typically an amorphous entity that comprises both men and women from academia, NGOs, government and political parties. *Bangladesh Mahila Parishad* or Women’s Council of Bangladesh, now an umbrella organization, was formed before independence and has a history of political activism and mobilization when it was part of the broad social movement that fought for independence from Pakistan. After independence the *Parishad* became an effective force for legislation favoring women and campaigned for changes to inheritance law, reserved seats in Parliament for women, free education for girl children, a uniform family code, and the prohibition of dowry, polygamy, and child marriage.

1.33 Similarly, *Naripokkho* began in 1983 as a development organization and is now one of the foremost advocacy groups and focuses on issues like violence against women, human rights violations and what it regards as conservative trends in Bangladeshi society that may serve to undermine the gains made by women. Organizations like Ain-O-Salish Kendro (ASK) and The Bangladesh National Women’s Lawyers Association (BNWLA) are at the forefront for legal reform and legal aid. Most of

³⁷ These were Articles 2, 13(a), 16(1)(c) and 16(1)(f).

these organizations rely on a committed band of volunteers – often professional women who give their time and resources to further the movement. In recent years the women’s movement has found a strong ally in the media, especially newspapers.

1.34 Perhaps the defining feature of Bangladesh's women’s movement in comparison to those in its neighboring countries is its ability to transcend differences and take a unified stand on important issues. It has played not only a watchdog role, but, through the NGOs that are part of the movement, has engaged in social mobilization, awareness-building, direct delivery of services, independent monitoring, research and advocacy. In the last few years, the protest against the change in the National Policy for Women, the ongoing campaign against acid attacks and domestic violence and the push for legal aid have been particularly noteworthy.

C Conclusion

1.35 The development of Bangladesh’s institutions and processes are testimony to a strong commitment to gender equality. While the early gains in gender equality arose from positive outcomes in other development priorities like the population program, immunization, water and sanitation, rural roads, control of diarrheal diseases and microcredit, the later programs were specifically intended to reduce the gender gaps in many different spheres. The women’s movement and NGO activity have contributed as both pressure groups and direct service providers, although their value is greater as the former than as the latter. The commitment of Bangladesh to international conferences and forums has similarly pushed the agenda within the country towards gender equality. Financing for activities related to gender equality mainly for NGOs, but also for the GoB has been supplemented by international agencies. Bangladeshi scholars have similarly connected with scholars elsewhere to create a body of evidence that tries to assess the impact of various initiatives and to contribute to the policy discourse. The PRS was in various ways the culmination of all these efforts and lays the groundwork for the challenges lying ahead.