

## Global Gender Justice in 21st Century: Lessons and the Way Forward

Faraha Nawaz

Department of Public Administration, University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh

**Abstract:** The study aims to analyze the global gender justice in 21st century. In the era of globalization, many countries in the world are progressing in respect of ensuring gender justice, especially in education and employment. More young women are going to schools and more and more women are getting into paid labor market. However, maternal mortality rate is still very high all over the world. Women are still excluded from decision making at the policy level. Environmental movement is excluded from gender justice movement, though women suffer from environmental degradation because of socially constructed roles and responsibilities imposed exclusively on them. In the 21st century, it is proven fact that lasting development of the world will never come unless women are empowered. Similarly gender equality is regarded as the key to fight world poverty, hunger and justice. The study is predominately based on secondary data which is supported by some empirical case stories of third world countries highlighted in various primary data based articles, books, online publications so on and so forth. The study ends up with some recommendations to speed up the progress of women's empowerment and gender justice of the entire world.

**Key words:** Gender justice, women's empowerment, gender equality, fertility, human rights

---

### INTRODUCTION

Gender justice is a process that hopes to eradicate the socially constructed differences between men and women. It means elimination, exclusion, oppression and exploitation against women. Gender justice is the process that focuses on transformation of both gender and set of social relation that interact between men and women (Batliwala, 1994). Women and girls are the poorest and most excluded group of the entire population of the world. Women are the most vulnerable part of poverty. Total 1.4 billion people of the world living on just over 1\$ a day. The 70% of them are women and girls. Women do two third of world's work but earn only 10% of the income. Women produce half of the world's food but own only 1% of it. About 900 million adults in the world cannot read and write, two third of them are women. Early marriage, oppression and sexual harassment restricts women's freedom and decision making capacity. Women are burdened with their loads of domestic chores which are socially imposed only on them but all these work are overlooked by mainstream economists, since these are unpaid and informal labor.

In 21st century, lots of actions have been taken from both Government and NGO level, yet lot to be done to empower woman which is the third millennium development goal. Although, some strategies are taken to promote gender equality in education and employment sector, empowerment of women is still an unfinished

revolution. Women's empowerment goes beyond the equality concept and focuses on realizing one's full potential and having the ability to influence others. The study represents women's real life stories of Asia, Africa and Latin America and what can be done to speed up the progress and growth of women's development. In 21st century, it is proven fact that when women are empowered, it is one of the fastest ways to address poverty. The study concludes with some policy suggestions to solve the global crisis and accelerate the global gender justice at optimum level.

### MATERIALS AND METHODS

The key objective of the study is to demonstrate the state of global gender justice in 21st century. The study demonstrates some gender based empirical cases of the developing and poor countries of the world. By representing the real stories, the study shows success and failure of gender movement in the era of globalization. The study also reveals some policy suggestions to solve the present crisis and step up the progress in gender justice.

The study offers an analysis of secondary sources. Secondary sources of the study basically include different books written by scholars, research reports, journals, thesis, relevant publications, daily newspapers and relevant websites. These secondary sources have been analyzed to demonstrate the real link between environmental and gender justice.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I would like to begin my analysis with a popular saying of a feminist activist of Afghanistan: “A country is like a bird-a bird cannot fly without a wing; likewise country cannot progress without women”. In the words of Vice President of World Bank, gender equality is not women’s issue, it is a development issue. Women’s less economic opportunity not only limits economic development but also slow down progress in poverty reduction. Therefore, keeping women economically empowered is not the right thing to do; it’s a smart thing to do. Gender equality is a key instrument in poverty reduction and smart economy means having women’s voices at the decision making table. Consequently, smart progress means overcoming hurdles standing in their way and smart development means investing more in women.

In 21st century, it is essential to draw a picture of the achievements and failure of global women’s movement. My heart fills with joy when I see lots of women confer the same voice in putting gender issues in the center of global political and development agenda. At the same time, my heart aches when I see still lots of women in Mexico terribly suffer from HIV infection. Many African women are forced to sterilize which is certainly a worse case of anti-reproductive or sexual rights of women. Today, we have medications which prevent transmitting disease from mother to child. Still in Mexico, many women are forced to undergo abortion if any risks found (Ahni, 2008). Therefore, confront with tough challenges still remains. In 21st century, we have to see the pattern of the progress, what is it that lies behind that success. We have to learn from it and accelerate the progress.

**What are the achievements in last century?** I can see there is incredible progress in the education sector. Gender gap in education sector is closed in many countries of the world. Voting rights have been granted in almost all parts of the world. In USA 140 women go to college than every 100 men. Since 1991, the proportion of young women enrolled in college has exceeded the enrollment rate for young men and the gap has widened over time in 2005, about 43% of women ages 18-24 were enrolled in college, compared with 35% of young men. This represents a major shift in the gender balance at US colleges and universities. Between 1970 and 2005, the gender composition has shifted to the extent that women now make up the majority, 54% of the 10.8 million young adults enrolled in college (Mather and Adams, 2007) (Fig. 1).

One economist says that women are the most powerful engine in global growth. In last 50 years for

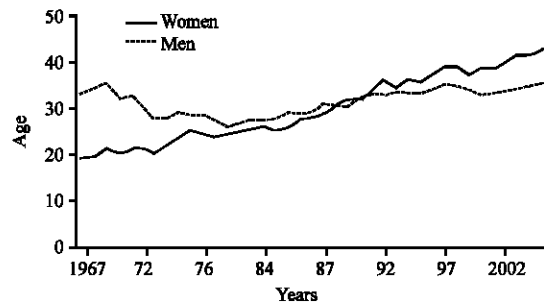


Fig. 1: Proportion of 18-24 years old men and women enrolled in college, 1967-2005; adapted from US Census Bureau by Mather and Adams (2007)

every job taken by a man, women have filled 2 new posts. Over last decade, employment of women enhances more global growth in China. Therefore, my contention is glass door is not shut up but there are visible scratches.

Women’s access to economy had increased but wage gap is seen. In USA 51% of professional workers are women today. Women are competing both physical labor jobs as well as talent based job. About 400-500 companies are headed by women. However, globally only 7% board members are women. Only 16% parliament members are women globally. In one-fifth of the chambers, women’s representation stayed the same as in the previous legislature. More worrying is that in 28.5% of cases fewer women made it to parliament. By the end of 2010, women held 19.1% of all parliamentary seats worldwide, an all-time high that confirms the pattern of slow progress over the past 15 years from a world average of 13.1% in 2000 (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010).

**Women’s situation in Asia, Africa and Latin America:** In Asia, Africa and Latin America, female headed households are vulnerable. Single mother’s jobs are part time, poorly paid, temporary, unsecured and sexually abused. Women of developing countries have foot in development ladder mostly at bottom level without social protection, health and without safety guarantee.

In Bangladesh, women work 7 days a week and take only 35-40\$ a month. So technically, they are still below the poverty line. But if you ask them, they will tell you no matter how poorly we are paid, no matter how much it is unsafe, still it is better as we have some sort of economic independence. So, the journey of progress is never simple. Some places in the world are unequal, unsecured for women. But, some progresses have been made. Law, custom, prejudice, culture, stigma, social norms and economic practices discriminate against women and girls. Drafting process of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women) took 15 years. UN convention took 30 years.

In Africa, 77 million girls are still not going to school which is 10 million larger than boys. Dropout rate is also very high. Gender parity exists in Bangladesh. But, it's very difficult to keep girls in schools. Girls get married before they are 16 years old and being mother before they are 18. In South Asian country like Bangladesh, women cook food and serve to husbands and family. Then they eat what is left for her no matter how small it is. Women consume half calorie than men. They have no ownership of land. They depend on their husband, sons. Some women are homeless. They are driven out from home due to domestic violence. Women produce about 60-80% of world's food nonetheless own only 2% of the land. They receive only 10% of agricultural credit (Action Aid, 2010). Women are prevented from agricultural rights in many countries.

**Discriminatory institutions on women's property rights:**

In Table 1, 0 stands for the absence of discrimination ratified at the institutional level while 1 stands for the maximum level as to factors determining gender inequality. Table 1 reports those countries presenting values between 0.5 and 1, as a demonstration of the existence of discriminatory elements in social, economic and legislative architectures.

Land has always represented a source of economic, political and social power. Such power has often ensured control over other resources and groups of people. In rural contexts, the status acquired through land property determines the inclusion or exclusion in/from decision making processes. Being able to claim land property rights or a stable access to land represents a welfare factor and the precondition to get a house, to run economic activities and to create job opportunities. It is often necessary to access water, electricity and health services. In addition to that, land as other limited resources is becoming scarce and therefore even more precious. Due to population growth, increased demand for agro fuels and climate change, the issue of land distribution and redistribution is becoming even more crucial (Action Aid, 2010).

In Africa, women spend 40 billion or 200 million hours in carrying water in a year which is equivalent to the entire workforce of France. Two third of goods are transported by women's back or head. These data are not included in economic data because these are unpaid work (Deen, 2013). Many feminist economists argue that economists only look at household resources but they ignore who gets benefit from it and who controls. They also criticize mainstream economists as they not only overlook women's informal labor but also underestimate the poverty under which women are living.

Table 1: Discriminatory institutions on women's property rights

Countries	Access to land	Access to bank credit	Access to other properties
Afghanistan	0.5	0.5	1.0
Bangladesh	0.5	0.5	0.5
DRC	0.5	1.0	1.0
Ethiopia	0.5	1.0	0.5
Ghana	0.5	0.5	0.5
India	0.5	0.5	0.5
Kenya	1.0	0.5	0.5
Liberia	0.5	0.5	0.5
Mozambique	0.5	0.5	0.5
Nepal	0.5	0.5	0.5
Pakistan	0.5	0.5	0.5
Sierra Leone	1.0	0.5	1.0
Tanzania	0.5	0.5	0.5
Uganda	0.5	0.5	0.5
Zimbabwe	1.0	0.5	0.5

Gender, institutions and development database, 2009; Data collected in February, 2010. The database can be accessed from the following link: <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DatasetCode=GID2>; Action Aid (2010)

Moreover, women also ignore themselves. Mother gives her food to children, pregnant women are deprived from healthcare, elderly widow is isolated. All these data are invisible in economics. Furthermore, gender violence is the biggest obstacle. Poor women's options of escaping from violence are fewer. Sex selective abortion, child marriage, dowry, acid throwing, eve teasing, domestic violence are still very common in third world countries. Sexual abuse is also very high in some parts of the world and environment is not always safe. From my understanding, education and employment could be the key tools for emancipation. Women must have their control over their motherhood. Contraceptive pills liberate more women in this regard.

Khan and Petrsek (2009) argues that in border town of Mexico, many women were disappeared when they came there for work. They were raped, they were killed. Police, government ignore the issue for many years. Irony of fact is that until 2007, nobody came to talk with the victims or their families. When Amnesty International started putting pressure on Mexican government, they took action. Women should have health care facility after being raped or sexually abused. Besides in Northern Nigeria, women were accused after abortion.

Some progress has been made in women's sexual and reproductive rights sector. Changes come from women themselves. In many poor countries of the world like Bangladesh, microfinance has opened up enormous number of possibilities among them. Women begin to realize that they are not only beneficiaries of the system or the victims of the system or oppression they are actually agents of change. More strength is coming from collective power from women's groups. It is women themselves who make the big difference. Recently Government of Bangladesh has taken a policy to ensure equal rights in terms of inheritance of land ownership. In

Bangladesh, cabinet five ministers are women including foreign and home ministers. More and more women are standing in elections and are coming in mainstream political arena.

**Some optimistic reports in South Africa, Ruanda and India:**

In South Africa, women led trade unions brought seasonal workers who are mainly women. In Morocco, women's movement changes Islamic law code in that country. In Ruanda before genocide, women were not allowed by law to own law. Today 49% parliament positions are hold by women. Having achieved near-parity in the representation of men and women its legislature, this small African country now ranks first among all countries of the world in terms of the number of women elected to parliament (Elizabeth, 2003). Likewise, Sheth *et al.* (2000) reports that in local council of India, 33% is occupied by women. Husbands drive their wives to these places. Male councilors are replaced by female councilors as quota system has been introduced but when women get the position they no longer want to hear their husbands' instruction.

**What lessons do we learn?** It is essential to increase women's capabilities through investment in women's health, education and employment. It is, therefore, important to ensure security to protect them. Most importantly empower women to claim their rights allow them to participate, they will decide by their own and they will take decisions by themselves. Voice of women need to be heard. Maternal mortality is still very high around the world. Maternal death has not changed much in last 20 years. Half a million women in every minute are dying around the world. Some women suffer from pregnancy related complication. The progress in this sector is very slow only 1% <20 years. While many sectors like sending girls to schools, infant mortality rate are showing good picture, maternal mortality rate is still very disappointing. I agree with some health experts' arguments regarding maternal mortality.

However, my contention is who decides when a woman should get married? Who decides when she should conceive? Who decide how many children she should have? How she would space those children? Who decides when she should go to medical care for sickness? Who decides how much in the national budget should put on maternal health issues? If we see these issues from perspectives of decision making by women, we can observe the issue very differently. Why changes have not been made regarding maternal mortality. My argument is that gender inequality is not an outcome of insufficiency and economic growth is not adequate to address the issue.

I would like to join the arguments of Irene Khan, secretary general of Amnesty International that gender equality is deeply related with rights issues. It is the outcome of deep seeded discrimination against women, sometimes comes from laws, sometimes perpetuated with policies. Moreover, equality and empowerment is not same thing either. WB and other international development organizations agree with equality issues. All of them agree with equal rights of men and women in education, health and employment. But, Kahn argues that all development organizations will remain silent about laws and policies saying that it is too political. She argues that lasting change will never come unless women are empowered by controlling decisions that make difference to their lives.

I agree that health, education employment, social protection are important but to me most importantly it is essential to ensure rights of women which is the unfinished revolution in 21st century. Gender is most important untapped resource for development. For example infant mortality falls when mother has high school education. When mother is educated children immunization rate will be higher so there is direct benefit between mother's empowerment and child protection.

Likewise, if we talk about water management, climate change adaption, environmental degradation, investment is agriculture, we even think who is carrying water for household consumption? Who is collecting firewood for cooking? Who is working in the land? Who is washing dishes, cloths in the pond? Who is mostly affected by environmental degradation, soil erosion and climate change? In many countries, women are still responsible for finding fodder and grazing lands for livestock by and large. They are primarily responsible for getting water supply not only for drinking but also for other basic needs for households. In many countries, women are responsible for growing and gathering certain kinds of food like vegetables, fruits and so on. With growing deforestation and desertification, all these tasks are still falling on women but these tasks are becoming harder and harder to do and there is no shift that we are able to see in the division of labor. If we get the answers of the questions then environmental policies would get a different dimension. It is important not to give women the money, giving women the chances to determine their destiny.

My perspective is very similar with the arguments of Irene Khan as she says gender equality, gender empowerment, gender security are all human rights issues. She argues both men and women must have the same rights beyond law, custom and culture. Human right

focuses on human beings not on economic outcomes. Human rights are concerned about how many girls are going to schools rather how many education buildings are made. It is concerned how much nutrition is coming rather than agricultural growth. Therefore, I would like to join her arguments by telling that we have to consider the human part of every policy. Moreover, human rights focus on inequalities, racism, injustices, ethnicity, biases and prejudices that expose discrimination.

### **POLICY SUGGESTIONS**

Government needs to look at issues differently and have to consider human part of each and every policy. Government and development organizations need to focus on outcome perspective not just output. For example WB had a project in 3rd world countries on infrastructure and water management. They were making water outlet to agriculture. Suddenly, they found that supply of water needs to be closer to home so that young girls can fetch water easily because collecting water is solely the duties of women and girls. Therefore, when girls can fetch water easily and get more time to schools. Irene Khan also highlights in her book named unheard truth: Poverty and human rights that basic needs like food, health, education, water should be treated as rights rather than needs. Human rights promote structural equality in an unequal market. We need to take health, education, water and food out of market because fewer women can get benefits out of market. Government has to be the ultimate authority to meet up basic human needs otherwise people would not afford health, education from market. She also reports that health; education can not be priced since, these are human rights not human needs. Human rights can make a beautiful accountability framework where citizens are right holders nonetheless state and others are duty bearers which make them accountable to right holders. If we invest in demand side of justice, the supply side begins to work much better. Government has to do everything by understanding and focusing human rights and human rights have to be gendered.

### **CONCLUSION**

The study highlights some success and failure stories of gender justice movement throughout the world. Some policy suggestions have also been drawn to

promote gender justice in 21st century. As a citizen of a 3rd world country, I have a dream like many others to see a world without oppression, exclusion, elimination, exploitation and discrimination against women. As a citizen and mention before, all as human being, women deserve their full human rights and they have the ability to realize their potential. Government, civil society and private sector should deliver the same message and work together to solve the global crisis to make oppression, poverty and hunger free world.

### **REFERENCES**

- Action Aid, 2010. Women's rights and access to land, the last stretch of road to eradicate hunger. [http://www.actionaid.it/filemanager/cms\\_actionaid/images/DOWNLOAD/Rapporti\\_DONNE\\_pdf/Her\\_Mile\\_AAItaly.pdf](http://www.actionaid.it/filemanager/cms_actionaid/images/DOWNLOAD/Rapporti_DONNE_pdf/Her_Mile_AAItaly.pdf).
- Ahni, 2008. Forced sterilization in Mexico. <http://doublepickles.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/forced-sterilization-in-mexico.html>.
- Batliwala, S., 1994. The Meaning of Women's Empowerment: New Concepts from Action. In: Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment and Rights. Sen, G., A. Germain, L.C. Chen (Eds.), Harvard University Press, Cambridge.
- Deen, T., 2013. Women Spend 40 Billion Hours Collecting Water. Journalism and communication for global change, IPS. <http://www.ipsnews.net/2012/08/women-spend-40-billion-hours-collecting-water/>.
- Elizabeth, P., 2003. Strengthening governance: The role of women in rwanda's transition. EGM/ELEC/2004/EP.5, Washington, DC. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/meetings/2004/EGMelectoral/EP5-Powley.PDF>.
- Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2010. Women in parliament in 2010, the year in perspective. Geneva, Switzerland. <http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/wmnpersp10-e.pdf>.
- Khan, I. and D. Petrasek, 2009. The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human. W.W. Norton and Company, New York, ISBN: 9780393337006, Pages: 250.
- Mather, M. and D. Adams, 2007. The cross over in female-male college enrollment rates. <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2007/CrossoverinFemaleMaleCollegeEnrollmentRates.aspx>.
- Sheth, D., Y. Yadav and M. Kishwar, 2000. Enhancing women's representation in legislatures: An alternative to the government bill for women's reservation. <http://www.loksatta.org/cms/documents/advocacy/womens.pdf>.