

## Women empowerment: A gender policy needs to be formulated

Mohammad Shafiul Alam | Published : 14 Mar 2017, 20:08:38

Social protection programmes, designed to respond to the vulnerability of poor people in times of chronic hardship, can play a strategic role in mobilising social change. To facilitate this, the Government of Bangladesh has developed a National Social Security Strategy (NSSS) to build a "more efficient and effective use of resources, strengthened delivery systems and progress towards a more inclusive form of Social Security that effectively tackles lifecycle risks, prioritising the poorest and most vulnerable members of society."

Poor women and poor men face different types of vulnerabilities. For example, women do not have equal access to nutrition, sanitation, healthcare, public services, finance, markets and employment. Adolescent girls are pulled out of school to earn for the family or shoulder domestic responsibilities such as household chores and care-taking (of younger siblings or disabled grand-parents). Girls who stay in school face the double burden of school work and performing household chores. Women also face restricted mobility, lifecycle challenges such as pregnancy and motherhood, sexual harassment at work place, loss of assets due to widowhood and less family support during old age and illness. Besides, they also face undesirable social stigma due to divorce or birth of disabled children,

In choosing a lifecycle approach, the NSSS recognises the dynamic needs of households and specifically, women within households. This paves the way for reforms that better serve women and promote gender equality. Such reforms, as envisaged in the NSSS, may necessitate the following:

**TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE NOT JUST ALLOWANCES:** Evidence shows that safety net delivery coupled with behavioural change that addresses unequal sharing of nutrition or labour within the household can effectively change social norms. Education on child marriage, pregnancy and family planning is helpful.

Training on domestic violence, inheritance laws and legal rights is critical. Knowledge is power. Awareness campaigns and training sessions should include all members of the community, not just women. Relevant service providers should be trained also. Unfortunately, the government, judiciary, law enforcement and private sector are deeply entrenched in patriarchal practices. Women are subject to discrimination despite the Constitution's provision for equal rights. Awareness of laws such as the Prevention of Domestic Violence Act and Child Marriage Restraint Act must be increased.

**ENSURE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT:** Targeted support should aim to help women become economically independent over time. The 'graduation approach' recognises the need for a holistic package of support to address the multi-dimensional obstacles poor women face while they attempt to move out of extreme poverty. Cash or asset transfers alone are insufficient. To advance economic empowerment, women require training to access finance, markets and services necessary to generate income and an effective savings mechanism to sustain change. Digital means of financial inclusion may be explored to effectively support women living in rural and hard-to-reach areas.

Poor working women are concentrated in low-skill manufacturing (garments) or informal sector work (construction or domestic work). Their meagre incomes disqualify them for safety net support, leaving them very vulnerable. Most jobs provide no labour or reproductive rights, no health insurance, no maternity benefits or child care support. Decent work is not ensured and gender pay gaps persist.

The NSSS suggests the provision of day care services by private sector employers and the introduction of contributory pension. This will require a determined engagement with private sector employers for large-scale adoption. Effectively implemented reforms may help foster an inclusive labour market.

**CHILD CARE:** The NSSS proposes the establishment of child benefit packages and nutrition interventions for pregnant women. Currently, Maternity Allowance and Lactating Mother's Allowance together cover less than 200,000 people, while over 20 million people are living below the extreme poverty line. Without adequate nutrition in the early years, children cannot cognitively grow into productive adults. Thus there is a strong economic rationale for investing now. The NSSS aims to support poor urban working women with

child and maternity care. This is a welcome suggestion as the urban poor have been largely neglected by the existing system. This support may help eliminate child labour and risks related to leaving young children in the care of slightly older, young children.

The NSSS proposes an increase in the transfer value and coverage of education stipends which will empower girls along with boys, but evidence suggests that after secondary school, girls become vulnerable again.

More attention needs to be given to economically empower adolescent girls through vocational training and job placements to prevent child marriage and domestic violence. Specific social protection programmes should be designed to address this vulnerable group. This is a dangerous gap in the lifecycle approach.

**IMPROVE ACCESS TO OTHER SERVICES:** Social protection programmes can play a role to help beneficiaries connect with service providers, e.g., for health, housing, sanitation, safe drinking water and other utilities, financial or legal care. For disabled women and mothers of disabled children, disability allowance is not enough; health care, family orientation, mobility support and economic empowerment are necessary. Field officers (from the ministries delivering the transfers) should be trained to support beneficiaries and act as their representatives in union committees. Female Union Parishad members may be given additional training and responsibilities to ensure that these needs are met.

**BUILDUNG SOCIAL CAPITAL AND VOICE:** Elements that foster social capital like group activities, peer learning and community mobilisation are helpful. In groups, women have a stronger voice and negotiating power. In groups, their votes are more likely to be heard and considered.

**MONITOR IMPACT DIGITALLY:** Monitoring of programme impact needs to be strengthened and gender indicators need to be measured. The days of paper-based monitoring are over. Quick and effective digital monitoring systems are relatively inexpensive and much more effective.

To promote gender equality through social protection as the NSSS proposes, focused attention is required in designing programmes and reform measures that explicitly empower women. A gender policy with this goal would be a helpful tool for such reform.

*The writer is Cabinet Secretary to the government & Chair, Central Management Committee (CMC) for National Social Security Programmes.*

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### **Editor : A.H.M Moazzem Hossain**

Published by the Editor for International Publications Limited from Tropicana Tower (4th floor), 45, Topkhana Road, GPO Box : 2526 Dhaka- 1000 and printed by him from City Publishing House Ltd., 1 RK Mission Road, Dhaka-1000.

Telephone : PABX : 9553550 (Hunting), 9513814, 7172017 and 7172012 Fax : 880-2-9567049

Email : editor@thefinancialexpress-bd.com, fexpress68@gmail.com

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