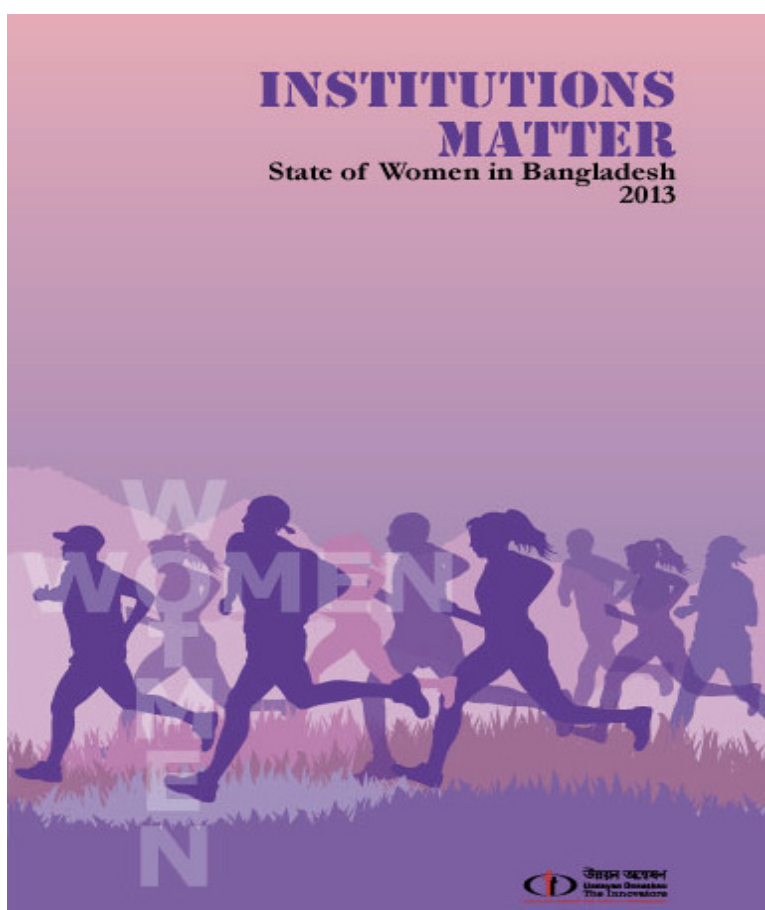


# Compulsive Structures and Embedded Institutions

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# COMPULSIVE STRUCTURES AND EMBEDDED INSTITUTIONS

**Rashed Al Mahmud Titumir**

## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has made moderate quantitative progress in the status of women, yet the country is plagued with structural rigidities, embedded in, and reproduced by, institutions. These developments are also, to a large extent, caused by compulsions for survival and not outcomes of self-serving assertions of opportunities unleashed by policy reforms such as the familiar claims of increased participation of women in the labour force owing to the neoliberal agenda of liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation. The ever increasing pressures to sustain, in the context of growing need and decline of familial support, has pushed women to engage in income generating activities. The option for women to make choices and to claim rights to decent employment has remained elusive in the context of survival and hence has been subjected to violence, injustices and dispossession. Women pushed out of their homes in droves becoming waged labourers in informal and formal economies for subsistence have, however, also consequentially led certain indicators to move upward over the years.

The institutional barriers rooted in patriarchal social system have, nevertheless, held its sway, amongst others, through increased violence against women. Equally the forms of resistances and women movements have to a great extent been muted by the economic-politico-power project of neoliberalism. The dominant ideology, amongst others, gave re-birth to a so-called civil society that has been engaged in manufacturing consent to maintain the status quo. This politics of apoliticisation has also been illusionary and conformist. The rhetoric of mainstreaming women agenda has also served less in the name of more and has reduced a great many women organisations and created many new ones to be contractors and/or implementers of projects, pulling down to a mere role of servicing set agenda. As a result, the transformative agenda that took a centre stage with the anti-colonialists or nationalists or feminist movements has been shelved and the women's agency and resistance have been dismantled. Thus, violence against women remains unabated and continues to rise, driven by imbalances of power, produced by institutions embedded in social structure in the wake of loosening of resistance, despite otherwise observed certain quantitative progress.

In most societies, powers wielded in the domains of politics, economy and religion are created through institutions. Institutions could be formal such as written laws, organisations, recognised mechanism or informal constraints such as norms, values and beliefs. These institutions simultaneously give control over resources and social functions to individuals and by doing so accelerate or retard the access to means and the ends of life.

Institutions perpetuate male-female differentiations. Despite the progress of the last few decades as regards women's health, education, nutrition and economic opportunities, still

women in Bangladesh are far behind than men. The possibilities of women are limited by their traditional role imposed by the society. Bangladesh has been on the growth track, as evinced by the lift of the gross domestic product (GDP) to a decadal average of six per cent. The country has also advanced in the area of social indicators, despite one in every three people living below the so-called poverty line. However, the socio-cultural perception towards women has been dragging the process of such advancement as they are about half the population of the country. There is no doubt that the incidence of poverty has decreased over the years but the rate of such reduction is slowing down. Moreover, poverty rates are the highest among women who are not capable of taking care of themselves because they have limited access to education, jobs, health services and the like. Additionally, violence against women is one of the major barriers for their advancement in the country. Women are feeling insecure everywhere (inside or outside of home). As a result, women have restrictions in terms of educational institutions, labour markets, etc. In Bangladesh, about eight out of every ten women live in rural areas with no prospects for a brighter future. Women are responsible for most of the hard work that is done in those areas. They keep livestock, poultry and small gardens and they also do all the post-harvest work. On the other hand, women in cities usually cannot advance further than a manufacturing job. The high population rates mean fewer vacancies and more candidates. Moreover, another discriminatory feature of the social situation is the fact that women's wage rates are typically lower than men's in Bangladesh. Under these circumstances, women's development as well as the total development of the country is largely hampered. Despite the government taking several initiatives to reduce gender disparity and improve women's status, the inequality between men and women persists and challenges continue to evolve.

The progress in the status of women is a dynamic process, underlined by the structure, history, interventions and institutions, to name a few. The women are more vulnerable as they have less capacity to adjust with different socio-economic, cultural and environmental trajectories. Their efforts to improve their status are also trapped by political processes.

## **1.2 EMERGING FACTS**

### **1.2.1 Health**

Like many other parts of the world, women in Bangladesh are a disadvantaged group in terms of their health conditions. Millions of women still suffer from ill health as well as various forms of malnutrition. Although men and women in Bangladesh have some similar challenges with regard to health facilities, women in Bangladesh are the worst suffered population.

The infant mortality rate in Bangladesh for female has decreased from 91 per 1,000 live births in 1990 to 35 per 1,000 live births in 2010 with a rate of 3.1 per cent per annum. According to business as usual projection, the infant mortality for females might stand at 30 per 1,000 live births in 2015, which indicates that the country is well on track to

achieve millennium development goal (MDG) target of 31 per 1,000 live births. On the other hand, the child mortality rate for females in Bangladesh was 149 per 1,000 live births in 1990 which has reduced to 43 per 1,000 live births in 2010 with a rate of 3.6 per cent per year. If this rate of reduction remains the same, the child mortality might stand at 35 per 1,000 live births by 2015. This indicates that Bangladesh will achieve the MDG target in child mortality of 48 per 1,000 live births before the deadline of 2015.

Maternal mortality ratio in Bangladesh has reduced from 478 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 216 live births per 100,000 live births in 2010 with an annual rate of 2.7 per cent. If this rate continues, the maternal mortality ratio might stand at 186 per 100,000 live births by 2015, which indicates that the achievement of the MDG target of 143 per 100,000 live births might not be possible by the time limit of 2015. Regional, educational and wealth inequality have negative impacts on the nutritional status of women and rural, illiterate and poor women are more vulnerable to malnutrition as compared to their counterparts.

Despite considerable progress over the last two decades in health sector, women are still facing a lot of barriers in accessing health facilities. These failures are most acute in poor countries like Bangladesh where about one third of its population are living under the poverty line and comprise of some of the poorest women in the world. Not everyone has benefited equally from recent progress and too many girls and women are still unable to reach their full potential because of persistent health, social and gender inequalities and inadequacies of the health system. Bangladesh has a commitment to universal health care, but health provisions remain woefully inadequate, particularly in rural areas. Health provision remains urban biased but there is also a general bias against the poor in both rural and urban areas. Problems of recruitment to rural health facilities are widespread. Moreover, poverty is an important barrier to positive health outcomes for both men and women.

### **1.2.2 Education**

Although noteworthy achievements have been made in female enrolment at the primary level, progress has been comparatively slow in secondary level. The main reason for this is that a huge portion of females entered into income generating activities after completing their primary level. The improvement is mostly due to several income assistance programmes like the government's budgetary allocation for girl's education, free primary education, massive stipend programmes and food for education programme.

It is evident that female literacy has increased from 40.8 per cent in 2001 to 53.9 per cent in 2010 with an annual rate of increase of 3.57 per cent, while for males the increase rate was 2.28 per cent per year during the same period. If such improvement in female literacy continues, gender parity at the national level might be achieved by the year of 2020. On the other hand, based upon the historical track record, the rate of increase of adult literacy for female was 3.98 per cent during 2001 to 2010. If this rate remains the same, the adult literacy rate for female population will stand at 66.41 per cent by 2015 indicating a huge gap of 33.59 per cent from the MDGs target of 100 per cent. The net

enrolment rate for the female population has also increased at different levels of education (primary, secondary and higher) over the years. A big matter of concern is the dropout rate. All the students at primary level are not enrolled into secondary level and so on.

Despite several progresses in education sector, women are far behind as compared from their male counterparts. Socio-economic and cultural factors as well as institutional matters are largely responsible for such inequality towards girls' education. Despite some progresses in female education, a large portion of female is way behind the real light of education. Most of them do not complete their total academic years, because of their engagement in the labour market after completing some schooling years. However, education is the key that enables the transmitting of specific, targeted, useful tools for survival and the betterment of the quality of life. About half the total female population is deprived of this. It is also difficult to reach the desired targets of development unless efforts are accelerated to improve female education.

### **1.2.3 Employment**

Employment of women has increased mainly due to the compulsion for their survival. Due to the economic hardships, women are pushed out to engage in labour markets. Over the last two decades, participation of women in employment has increased steadily in Bangladesh. In addition, the rate of increase of the female labour force is higher than that of men, though the total number of the former is less than half the total male labour force. The number of the female labour force has increased from 8.6 million in 1999-2000 to 17.2 million in 2010 with an annual rate of increase of 5.06 per cent whereas, the number of employed women has increased from 7.9 million in 1999-2000 to 9.8 million in 2002-2003 with an annual rate of increase of 8.02 percent.

The number of women who are involved in agriculture, forestry and fishery related occupations has increased from 3.8 million in 1999-2000 to 5.8 million in 2002-2003 with an annual increment of 17.11 per cent. In 2005-2006 and 2010, the annual increment rate of this sector is 11.16 per cent and 9.09 per cent respectively. The propensity of attaining employment among the higher educated women is better than those have primary education or less. The rate of women employment has increased with an annual rate of 3.68 percent between 1999-2000 and 2010, whereas it is tripled with bachelor and above.

In recent years women have made up an estimated eighty-five per cent or more of workforces in garment industries, but they are concentrated in the "unskilled" and "semi-skilled" categories. However, they are investing their labour but they are far from the expected compensation. In the workplace, men and women work the same amount of time but men get more wages. Physical fitness has an effect on the earnings of women in Bangladesh mainly in the agriculture sector. In this sector, men are preferred over women, and women get preferences in occupations where less physical labour is needed. In such cases, women are paid lower wages. Moreover, the wage rate of women is lower because the market has large numbers of unemployed and underemployed women who

would invest extra time. In addition, socio-economic and demographic variables, such as education, religion, inflation and physical fitness are all affecting the employment status of women.

### **1.2.4 Poverty**

Bangladesh has made some progress in reduction of poverty but a vast number of women are still under the poverty line. Therefore, the reduction of poverty is still a challenge for the government.

The incidence of poverty (upper poverty line) for female headed households has decreased to 26.6 per cent in 2010 at the national level with an annual rate of 1.97 per cent from 2005. If this rate of decrease continues, the incidence of poverty of female headed households might slide down to 25.03 per cent and 20.85 per cent by 2013 and 2021, which are higher by 0.03 per cent and 5.85 per cent respectively than those of the targets of the present government as stated in their election manifesto. So far, the incidence of poverty (lower poverty line) among female headed households has dropped from 21.9 per cent in 2005 to 14.6 in 2010 with an annual rate of 6.67 per cent.

The incidence of poverty among the female headed households at a national level has decreased from 34.2 per cent in 2000 to 14.6 per cent in 2010 with a rate of 5.73 per cent per annum whereas female literacy has increased to 54.8 per cent in 2010, from 40.1 per cent in 2000, with an annual rate of 3.67 per cent. Women's earnings in the households enhance their decision making power and improve their quality of life, which mean they are less likely to be marginalized. The number of women earning disposable income has increased to 4954 thousands in 2010, from 3318 in 1995-96, with an annual increment of 3.29 per cent at national level, while the poverty among the female headed households has decreased from 52.2 per cent in 1995-'96 to 26.6 per cent in 2010 with a rate of 4.49 per cent per annum. There is a huge difference in the percentage of malnourished women between the lowest and the highest wealth quintile groups. The rate of decline of malnourished women in lowest wealth quintile groups indicates that it is difficult to achieve the target set in the MDGs of less than 20 per cent by 2015.

The poor urban people, especially women are living in poor quality housing with inadequate provisions of water, sanitation and drainage along with minimal or no social services or basic infrastructure. Under these circumstances, their livelihoods are under continuous threat. The poor women are facing difficulty in maintaining their livelihoods. However, the overall poverty situation in the country has improved over the years although the situation of poor women, especially in Dhaka city has become worse in terms of both upper and lower poverty lines through the accelerating rate of rural-urban migration of the rural poor.

### **1.2.5 Violence**

Violence against women has increased despite considerable progress in education, health, employment, poverty etc. along with awareness. They are vulnerable and insecure both

in domestic and public situations. This increased rate of violence against women has also reduced their status in the society. Violence is one of the major problems that present a threat to the security of girls and women and it is not a phenomenon peculiar to Bangladesh. Despite some achievements in the field of women's development, the incidences of violence against women are rather high in Bangladesh. Women who come out from their home to participate in productive economy, yet they are vulnerable and violence against them has increased due to existing institutional and patriarchal systems.

It is apparent that violence against women has increased at a concerning rate over the last few years. The number of acid violence incidents against women has increased from 88 in 2008 to 97 in 2012 (January-November) with a rate of 2.56 per cent per year. On the other hand, dowry violence has increased from 269 in 2008 to 771 in 2012 (January-November) with an annual rate of 46.65 per cent while rape has increased at an annual rate of 16.85 per cent.

There is a growing body of literature on factors associated with intimate partner violence (IPV). 24.45 percent women reported experiencing some form of intimate partner violence. Young women, who are married off before reaching their legal age at marriage, with no education, and from poorest household are the worst victims. Some who think wife beating is justified and those who have seen their fathers ever hit or beat their mothers are more likely to experience intimate partner violence in Bangladesh.

There are some specialized criminal laws for protecting women like the Suppression of Violence against Women and Children Act, the Dowry Prohibition Act, the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Acid Crime Control Act. Despite those, the incidence of violence against women, especially dowry, domestic violence and rape has increased at a concerning pace.

### **1.3 UNDERSTANDING THE PROBLEMS**

Women constitute around half the total population of the country. However, their participation in nation building activities remain constrained. This is not because of their disinterest or apathy, but because of the restrictions imposed upon them. The process is so pervasive, even if women grow competent; they become subjective to aversion by the opposite sex. Due to institutional barriers in a male dominated society, women are not able to optimise their potentials and are stereotyped to be 'incompetent' in performing activities outside their traditional role in the household. As members of the family, society or country, their positions are far behind in comparison to males.

When women start to play a role in decision-making, there is a shift in the power dynamics, which the perpetrators of violence perceive as a threat to their own status and as a result, opt for violence.

Despite certain improvements, women are pulled back by violence, which has increased in the recent years. Structural failures and patriarchal attitudes are the main reasons for such violence against women. Additionally, women are pushed to come out from their



home because of the compulsion of their lives and the institutional mechanisms are not effective in providing security to them. The roles and the representations of women created in society have led to the commodification of women. Representations of women, for example in advertising, have tended to highlight so-called beauty, size, physique, sexuality, emotions and relationships, but there is hardly any realisation that there are terrible consequences when women become things. The so-called concept of ‘modernity’ influenced by the western culture of capitalism has also accelerated the violence against women.

Violence against women is a manifestation of historically determined unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men. As a result, progress is hampered.

Violence is a product of social, cultural, religious and traditional values, which perpetuate patriarchal attitudes at different levels of society and restricts women’s empowerment. Unfavourable policies and legal frameworks, weak implementation of laws along with the deep-rooted social and individual attitudes and behaviour are responsible for slowing the progress of the status of women.

The state has numerous pronouncements as regards empowerment, stated in many papers and documents, but the institutions as well as patriarchal mind-sets subject them more vulnerable to violence.

## **1.4 TOWARDS A NEW DIRECTION**

It is a constitutional obligation of the government to provide a decent living standard for the citizens by ensuring security. The plan documents are full of expressions of intents, yet a significant number of women in the country are still passing their days in insecurity. Although the present government is hopeful about achieving the target of MDGs as well as the targets of Vision-2021 related to women, yet the Unnayan Onneshan research suggests that Bangladesh is not well on the track en route to achieving those targets. It might be quite difficult to achieve the targets unless the government finds ways and means to address the structural bottlenecks identified here.

Existing institutions and traditional patriarchal society largely condition women’s progress in areas such as education, health, employment, and poverty. The institutional barriers along with patriarchal society have slowed the desired levels of progress for women. Economic compulsion has sent the women outside the home while institutions and traditional culture are not quite able to ensure their security. As a result, violence against women has increased.

### **1.4.1 A Multi-pronged Approach**

Reducing violence against women requires a multi-pronged approach engaging institutions at the realm of politics, economy and society, contrary to what has been practised by the current regime. The societal sub-system entails configuration of people,

who interact with each other in political arena in order to retain control over productive resources in the economic sphere. The political sub-system is reflection of societal sub-system as the powerful attempts to arrive at or impose a set of collective goals. In other words, the societal sub-system defines players, the political sub-system inscribes rules and economic sub-system actualises the system of accumulation. Thus concerted efforts need to be holistic.

#### ***From an enabler to a duty bearing state***

The heart of empowerment embodies rights. Any rights based approach requires the core commitment to equality, liberty and fraternity. Thus rights based approach has to be understood in a duty bearer framework. Therefore, rights cannot be ascribed without a well functioning state. A well functioning state is contingent upon the political settlement. The structural rigidities are such that the state is prone to be captured. For example, the questions of how and why violence against women continue to occur and even increase, despite a plethora of laws, aptly demonstrate the deficit in politics that guides the apparatuses of the state that enforce laws. Ensuring protection of women by addressing the issues in a systematic and collective manner depends on the nature of the state and the polity.

The government must need creativity in renewing and revising strategies and approaches, including increased budgetary allocation for women. Therefore, provisions must be formulated for the evaluation of programmes and understanding of the impacts as well. Findings need to be scientifically utilised in developing suitable programmes addressing the causes of gender inequality in Bangladesh. Otherwise, the aim of improving women's status may remain elusive and distant dreams, which the nation cannot afford. For example, affirmative action has been given importance in policy documents, but programmatic intervention is neither adequate nor implemented with vigour. Unless state functions, a few legal or income promotion and safety net programmes for the women cannot contribute significantly towards promoting living standards of women.

#### ***Shift from target-based to a society-based approach***

There is need for a shift from target-based approach to that of a society-based one. A target-based approach remains inapt and cannot deliver, as it is a liberal-individualist approach. The priority is not social solidarity, not the need to belong. Effective strategies on gender, including mechanisms to prevent gender-based violence, must thus be communitarian, targeting each one of the members of the society for amelioration as opposed to current practice of subjugation.

#### ***From trickle down to equality and fairness***

The rate of progress only shows the percentage change in the level of status of women by ignoring the changes in distribution. Progress may not bring the intended improvements unless it is supported by policies that would reduce the initial level of inequality. In a country if reduction in gender gap is the fundamental objective of development strategies, the goal of development should be balanced between growth and equity targets. However, having a modest economic growth in the country, all people especially women cannot benefit from growth due to the differentiation. Additionally, institutions remain a

stumbling barrier for the development of women. To further the causes of women, the government may take special initiatives. Furthermore, a revamping of the policies in an effective manner to ensure equitable distribution of income and wealth must precede those initiatives. The accelerating rate of improvement in women's issues can be accomplished only by reducing institutional barriers at the source.

With respect to policies, broader types of interventions are important: employment generating (support for income generating activities which also include access to infrastructures and markets), capability enhancing (support for improvement of human resources including education, training and health services), and motivational (so that people aspire for a good life, commit themselves for it and work hard to achieve it) as well as planned supportive activities, particularly during natural disaster.

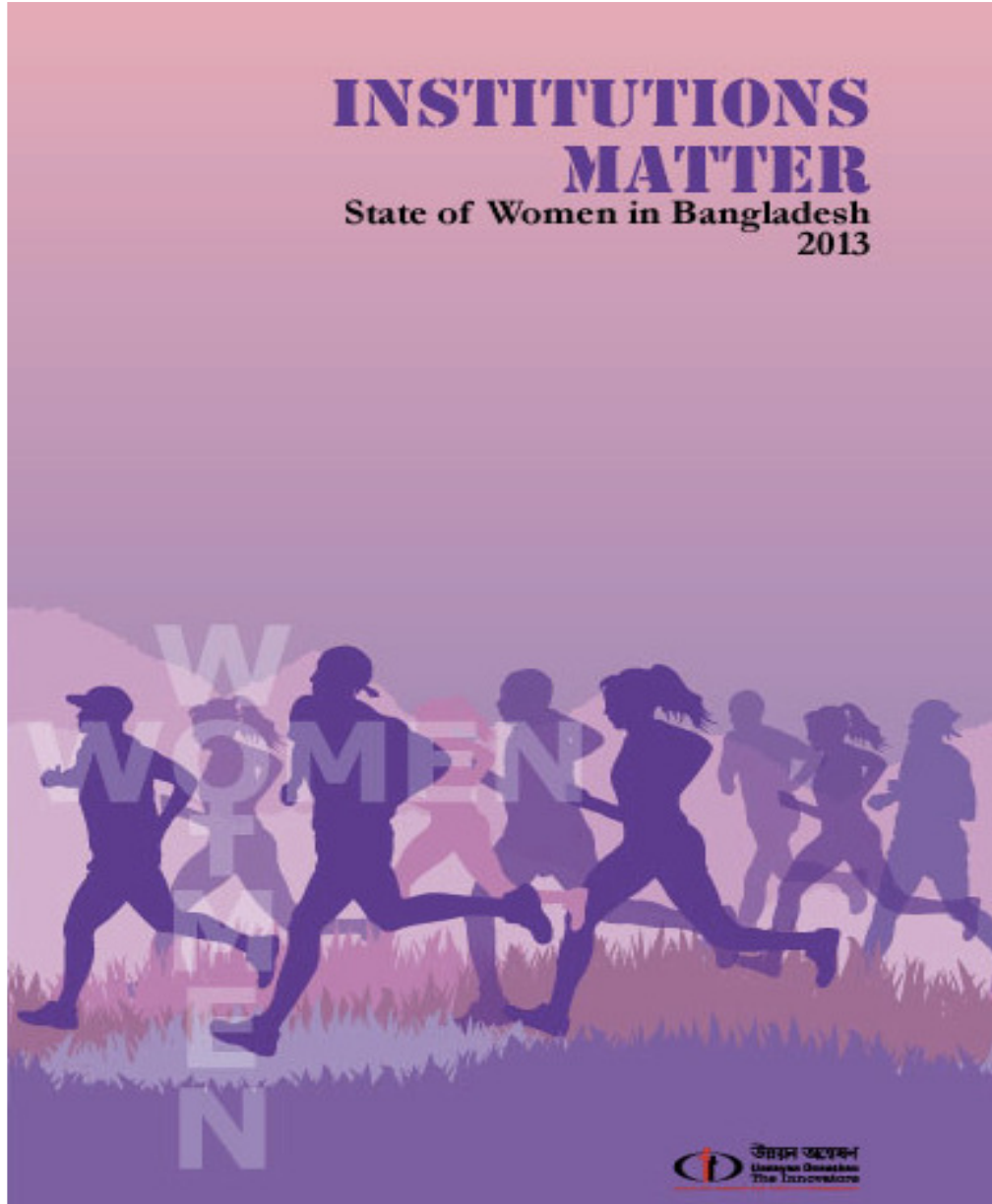
### ***From regional disparities to balanced rural and urban development***

It must be stressed that any design and strategy to improve the urban condition must correspond with design and strategy to improve the rural areas in order to stamp out the prevalence of the rural-urban inequality. In other words, tackling the issues of sustainable development and infrastructural distributions are crucial in improving the rural drift. Without ensuring a balanced development between rural and urban areas, the improvement of women's status will remain unattainable.

The lives and livelihood of the urban poor women are mostly twisted by the policies on employment, housing and land use, and services of the urban government. The interests of the urban poor women living in slum areas are, however, neglected in urban policies and planning as they remain politically marginalized and excluded from city politics. Women's issues in urban areas, therefore, need to be understood in relation to urban government and urban policies.

### ***From reduced space and manufacturing consent to vibrant resistance and movements***

The capitalist social relations of production meets out individuals with hegemonic controls over their participation in the public realm, though high rhetoric of space, voice, transparency and accountability are being dished out every moment. This has been taken to a peak by neoliberalism, but has adversely impacted the prospects of coordinated collective actions and movements. This has significantly weakened actors such as women and labour organisations, though it spins a lot about women's empowerment. The "mainstreaming" of the women organisations and the creation of new outfits in the name of so-called civil society resulted into fragmentations, and voices of the excluded find no space nor organisations to reckon with as resistances, contentions and protests lost considerable ground. These have led to formation of institutions and patriarchy, which are more subtle, opaque and repressive as demonstrated by rise in numbers of violence against women. There is, thus, burgeoning need for reconstitution of the social fabric and the reinventing of collective action, challenging the reformulated socio-economic and political landscape.



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