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Exploring the Socio-economic Challenges Faced by Women from Dependent Families in Sylhet Sadar Upazila, Bangladesh

Muhammad Monirul Islam¹, Harun Ar- Rashid Mamun^{2*}, and Salma Begum¹

¹Dept. of Anthropology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh; BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh; and ²Dept. of Anthropology, Shahjalal University of Science and Technology, Bangladesh.

*Correspondence: rashidmamuncou40@gmail.com (Harun Ar- Rashid Mamun, Fellow, Teach For Bangladesh and BRAC Institute of Educational Development, BRAC University, Dhaka, Bangladesh).

ABSTRACT

The renowned feminist Begum Rokeya once said, "Leave your daughter by giving education, they will manage their livelihood." This statement holds not only in Bangladesh but also in many parts of the world, where the development of women is a critical issue. However, this qualitative study seeks to explore the socio-economic challenges faced by women in Sylhet, particularly those who have lost their fathers at an early age and have been living with dependent family members. By using in-depth interviews and life history methods through purposive sampling, this study aims to identify the factors that hinder women's self-sufficiency and well-being and provides valuable insights into their potential for social and economic mobility. Additionally, the study highlights the importance of education and leadership skills in promoting women's empowerment and reducing social insecurity. The research findings have important implications for policymakers, practitioners, and academics, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive policies and programs that address social inequality and gender discrimination.

Keywords: Dependent families, Conservative, Insecurity, Milieus, Socio-linguistic, and Empowerment.

INTRODUCTION:

In conservative societies like Sylhet, Bangladesh, girls, and women are often subjected to discriminatory and oppressive social norms and expectations. From an early age, they are taught to be silent, talk less, and avoid certain behaviors that are deemed inappropriate for females. Menstruation is considered a shame, and girls are told not to eat fish heads or laugh loudly. In such a patriarchal and conservative society, women are mainly dependent on men and the socio-cultural constructions of gender roles. *Sylheti* culture is known for its dependence on citizens who are living in foreign countries. Both the boys and girls seek to marry a person from their clans who are living in America or London. However, this tendency is changing rapidly, and women

are becoming more skilled and capable. Despite this progress, women's work is often undervalued and dismissed, and they are not given the same opportunities as men rather they do jokes as a 'Beti'. In comparison with other districts *Sylheti* girls are different; they never wish to be police, major, or officer. For conservativeness, *Sylheti* women can't express, can't claim, keep defilade, and anguished inwardly. They are obeying everything with a muzzle. So, it has appeared as an important research subject how some women among them faced these barriers and noticed significantly themselves as a potential person in society (Fieldwork, 2019).

Women in rural Bangladesh exhibit remarkable resilience despite growing up in a patriarchal society that often discriminates against them. Many of these

women, including single mothers, leave behind their homes, families, and loved ones without hesitation to earn a living. Despite facing significant challenges and obstacles, they are determined to succeed and provide for themselves and their families. Their ability to overcome such adversity is a testament to their strength and perseverance (Marium, 2018). From the socioeconomic background of Bangladesh, women are a part of the greater society (Alam *et al.*, 2019). Existing aristocratic patriarchal inheritance of this subcontinent, in the system of patriarchy Bangladeshi women, are subordinate in families and societies. In male dominant society, women mainly depended on males and others. Women were victimized as a persecuted class of exploitation, deprivation, and oppression for a long time, now they are segmented (Kuddus & Shakil, 2003). Voices from Bangladesh on IWD'18 and other delegates said, in rural societies, people believe that a woman's role is restricted to taking care of the household, the family, and the children. Today, with the evolution of gender roles and the world at large, women may not have a strong role to play, but they are contributing, and doing their part, and people have begun to finally take notice. A recent study has found that almost half (48 percent) of Bangladeshi women report that their husbands are the sole decision-makers regarding their health. Similarly, 35 percent of women in Bangladesh report that their husbands make all decisions regarding visits to family and friends (UNICEF, 2007). These findings highlight the significant gender disparities that persist in Bangladeshi society, particularly in terms of decision-making power within the household. Such inequities can have a profound impact on women's health and well-being, as well as their ability to access social support and maintain social connections. Addressing these disparities and promoting gender equality is essential for advancing the rights and empowerment of women in Bangladesh (Habib and Hasan, 2021).

A woman can be educated about health and safety issues but it is important to educate the males to match the perspective of the betterment of livelihood. We should have emphasized on reformation of the education system not only for women but also for men especially those living in rural areas, to ensure safety and equality in the informed decision-making power of rural women. In Bangladesh, women bear many of the marks of a "disadvantaged minority" in the social, economic, and political

realms (Mahtab, 2007). Women's position and socio-status are attributed to the thought of development and modernity by capitalists and they acquiesce to that namely (Kabeer, 1999). Discursive discourses can cause individuals to become displaced from their true position, resulting in the creation of a new identity that does not reflect their true selves. This double displacement occurs when individuals adopt and conform to these discourses, leading to a sense of dislocation from their own identity. By accepting these discourses, individuals create a new position that is further removed from their true position (Ward, 2014). It affects women's socioeconomic conditions such as self-beliefs, education, income, and socio-status (Kabeer, 2001). Feminism is the advocacy of women's rights based on the equality of the sexes, the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. But many people don't seem like that. They claim we are not physically equal or the same but have natural differences, ergo how it will be equal (Karim, 2019) by comparing with a man (Caprino, 2017). Society to society, culture to culture these thoughts can be varying because of cultural traditions, practices, and rituals. Women are often kept under strict social constraints, including wearing veils and facing various social obstacles. However, some women can become independent and financially stable by gaining education, awareness, courage, and skills. These women establish their knowledge, skills, and values, which they assert in a significant manner in their personal lives, families, society, economy, and various other sectors (Islam & Sarker, 2020). There is little research or literatures available on women who are free from male dominance and have achieved success by relying on their skills and qualifications to support themselves and their families. This study explores the experiences of women who have lost their fathers in childhood or have husbands who are unable to work or are irresponsible, and who are responsible for supporting dependent family members. While these women have faced challenging circumstances, this research offers an example of how they have been able to rise above their situations. So, the primary objective of this study is to understand how women in a conservative society cope with obstacles and manage to thrive. The research delves into the beliefs and actions of women who have lived in a patriarchal society for an extended period without male support. It was anticipated that the displacement and

double displacement theories could be beneficial to *Sylheti* women and enable them to pursue feminism as other societies worldwide have done to attain equal rights to men.

This study can contribute to academic discussions in fields such as development anthropology, social inequality, and classic ethnography. Using qualitative methods at a micro-level, the research offers insights into the real experiences of the participants. The findings of this study may serve as an inspiration to other women in similar situations, particularly widows & those who are struggling to make ends meet.

Review of Literature

In Bangladesh, like many other developing countries, women from dependent families face numerous socio-economic challenges. These challenges are particularly acute in conservative societies such as Sylhet Sadar Upazila, where patriarchal norms and values are deeply ingrained. Despite efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, women from dependent families continue to experience discrimination and marginalization. However, research on the socio-economic conditions and empowerment of women is a crucial issue all over the world (Rahman *et al.*, 2020). A review of the literature indicates that in Bangladesh, women's empowerment has been a subject of discussion (Rahman M. A., 2018) and research for a long time. The country has made significant progress in terms of women's education, health, and economic empowerment in recent years (Mahmud, Shah, Becker, & Luseno, 2019). Moreover, gender inequality remains a significant issue, especially in patriarchal conservative societies like Sylhet, where women are primarily dependent on men and socio-cultural constructions (Khatun & Rahman, 2020). Recent research on women's empowerment in Bangladesh has shown that women in rural areas face more significant challenges in terms of education, employment, and access to resources than their urban counterparts (Nahar & Hamid, 2020). A study conducted by (Rahman *et al.*, 2020) found that women's empowerment is strongly linked to their access to financial resources and decision-making power in the household (Rahman, Islam, & Hossain, 2020). Other studies also highlighted the importance of women's participation in the labor force and their access to formal education in enhancing their socioeconomic status (Akter *et al.*, 2020). Previous research has

highlighted the challenges faced by women in patriarchal societies like Sylhet, including limited access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities (Chowdhury R. I., 2013; Niaz, 2016; Khatun & Rahman, 2020). The socio-cultural norms and values of the community also play a significant role in shaping the opportunities available to women (Islam *et al.*, 2017). While there have been efforts to address these issues, there is a need to examine the specific challenges faced by women in dependent families, who have lost their fathers at an early age and have had to rely on others for support. Women in dependent families face unique challenges in terms of socio-economic empowerment, which are often overlooked in broader discussions on women's empowerment. Studying the specific challenges faced by these women can help identify targeted interventions that can enhance their socioeconomic status and empower them to become self-sufficient. Furthermore, understanding the socio-cultural factors that shape women's opportunities can inform broader efforts (Hossain, 2018) to promote gender equality in patriarchal societies like Sylhet. Prior studies have emphasized the significance of women's ability to obtain education, financial means, and authority in making decisions, as these factors can improve their social and economic status (Rahman *et al.*, 2020; Akter *et al.*, 2020). While the challenges faced by women from dependent families in Bangladesh have been well-documented, there is limited research on the specific challenges faced by women in Sylhet Sadar Upazila. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the socio-economic challenges faced by women from dependent families in this conservative society. The study will use a qualitative approach to examine the experiences and perspectives of women from dependent families, with a particular focus on their strategies for coping with and overcoming these challenges. By shedding light on the experiences of these women, this study can inform policies and interventions that aim to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in Sylhet Sadar Upazila and beyond.

METHODOLOGY:

This study utilized both primary and secondary sources of information. Purposive sampling was used to select appropriate participants for the study. Several research techniques were employed as primary sources, including key informant interviews, informal interviews, case studies, and life history approaches.

Relevant literature, articles, and books were also reviewed to enhance the research.

Participants

The study was conducted in Sylhet Sadar Upazila, Bangladesh, among a semi-urban, conservative, and migrated population. Participants were selected based on specific criteria, such as age (18-60), marital status (only married or widowed), profession (worker, business person, or entrepreneur), and potentiality for self-reliance and well-being.

Design

The design of the study utilized key informants and informal interviews, as well as case studies and a life history approach to provide a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences. Key informants were used to identify suitable respondents, while informal interviews helped establish a good rapport with the participants. Life history approaches were used to validate participants' experiences by comparing their speech with generational situations, environments, and societal conditions. Case studies were used to ensure the credibility of participants' utterances and opinions.

Measures

The study employed a checklist and unstructured questionnaire as measures. The checklist was used to track the research objectives and determine the respondents' real social conditions. The questionnaire was used to explore hidden truths about their lives.

Procedure

The study utilized purposive sampling based on specific criteria such as age, marital status, profession, male presence, self-reliance, and well-being. Interviews were conducted with all participants, and eight cases and three life histories were studied. The researcher visited each respondent individually to conduct the interviews. Life histories were studied for participants who displayed potential, skills, and the ability to manage their lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

This section presents the findings of our study on the socio-economic challenges faced by women from dependent families in Sylhet Sadar Upazila, Bangladesh. It begins by providing a brief overview of the research findings, followed by a detailed discussion and critical analysis of each of the findings. The following are the key findings of our study

- 1) Linguistic representation is a significant blockage for women in families, societies, and workplaces in Sylhet.
- 2) The absence of feminist thought and the presence of displacement and double displacement approaches were found to be more effective.
- 3) The patriarchal ruling system keeps women far from the real world, limiting their independence and subjecting them to ineffective domination practices.
- 4) Conservative thought and misconceptions of Islamic rules keep women ignorant of the real scenario.
- 5) The concept of "Triple P" is effective in fitting into a patriarchal society.
- 6) Growing up as a woman, rather than a human being, builds strong obstacles to independence and self-reliance.
- 7) The life of women in conservative societies has a significant impact on their socioeconomic status (Kabeer, 1999).
- 8) Women in Sylhet face negative criticism from those involved in their daily activities, and emotional jealousy is more prevalent.
- 9) Lack of education and potential knowledge makes women more vulnerable in times of danger.
- 10) Without access to human rights and global knowledge, *Sylheti* women are left behind in the global arena.
- 11) Cultural and natural diversity in women's lives leads to social misinterpretation, causing identity crises and cultural negation.
- 12) Hardworking women are often tagged as prostitutes.

In the following sections, we will discuss each of these findings in detail and provide a critical analysis of their implications for the socio-economic challenges faced by women from dependent families in Sylhet Sadar Upazila.

A *Sylheti* mother forbids her daughter, '*Furinte machor matha khainna, hese damndor matha khai-bay.*' (A girl shouldn't eat fish heads. If she eats, then it seems she will eat her hubby's head). Just think about this sentence, a girl listens to it from childhood to adulthood which is gender discrimination (Akhter et al., 2020), social inequality, disrespect to a self-agency (Kabeer, 1999), dependency thought, patriarchy ruling, illiteracy, and nutritional discrimination. The expression of a mother like that seems to

discriminate in gender where the male body is in priority. Socially it is an inequality of girl socialization. It disrespects a person's agency, and attacks self-will, and self-interest. Informs a girl she is for a male person. She should prepare for him. She has born for his well-being of him. A mother adapts these thoughts because of the patriarchal ruling system. In a patriarchal ruling system, women are always obedient to a male body actually, they are bound to. It also shows the ignorance of the education of a mother. Nutritionally a fish head is plenty of protein, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, etc. Fish heads are also full of omega 3 which keeps our brain and heart healthy, and is good for depression and mental health (Dogra, 2020). It is also full of Vitamin A, an extremely useful food for our eyes which improves our vision (Know the Health Benefits of eating the fish head, 2018). What was predicted at first to conduct this research is proved oversight slightly at the end of the study. The approach of displacement and double displacement is effective here but feminism is absent. For a conservative mind and an effective patriarchal system, the feminist approach can't adapt here. They seem to get exact rights for a woman which helps to improve women in every sector (Fieldwork, 2019). According to the study, the participants have endured text-based harassment and spoken out against it. Women and girls experience mistreatment on the streets, at school, within their families, and at work. During transportation, individuals often touch women's bodies, and if a woman speaks up, she is often blamed for being outside of her home or suggested using a private vehicle (Andaleeb et al., 2018). Even many literate people use so many terms to address a girl's or woman's character in a noble, poem, or a story. By reading these, they believed that they are like that. And they obey and practice that. *Sylheti* natives dislike feminism rather they are informed they want women's rights. They don't interest to get rights equal for men. It's a politics to destroy *Sylheti* culture. Women's necessities are not the same as men's. Physical structures are different; there is no scope to seek equality in men's rights (Chowdhury A., 2017). Informants want human rights, women's rights, and rights as a citizen of a state. Girls and women are growing up in a narrow-minded world. They feel shy to speak (Lie, 2002). Their knowledge of other countries, such as New York or London, is greater than their knowledge of their own country.

Several *Sylheti* women and girls are not familiar with the Sylhet Division and may even dislike speaking the Bengali language. This issue is not limited to *Sylheti* women but also applies to women from other districts of Bangladesh. This limited knowledge can hinder their ability to think broadly and can have a significant impact when they attempt to communicate or work with people from different cultures or regions. The research indicates that *Sylheti* society is patriarchal, where women are consistently dominated. Female members are often not consulted in decision-making processes, leading them to live like animals with muted voices. They are only asked to cook food, rear children, and engage in sexual intercourse. Women are not consulted in political, economic, or health-related decisions and their opinions are disregarded. Girls are not encouraged to pursue higher education or technical training, whereas boys are favored in these areas (Sultana, 2012). The patriarchal system in Sylhet results in women appearing less mature when compared to women from other regions in Bangladesh. *Sylheti* women often lack awareness about conservative practices, which keeps them from the truth. Traditionally, *Sylhetis* are highly religious, and they deeply revere shrines. However, there are many misconceptions about veiling and other rituals. Despite the benefits of maintaining veils, such as being able to work from home, the patriarchal rule makes it impossible for many women to do so. They are confined to the kitchen and childbearing. Some respondents believe that studying the life of Begum Rokeya, who also lived in a conservative society, could help women understand how to live a fulfilling life. Her brother and husband helped her discover her potential. Through the responses obtained from participants, a noteworthy concept was identified - the "Triple P" formula. This formula divides a woman's life into three stages: pre-marriage, marriage, and old age, and outlines the responsibilities of the three most important men in a woman's life - her father, husband, and son. These men can either provide support or act as barriers for a woman. The study found that some women were fortunate enough to have supportive men in their lives, while others were not. Those who were unable to overcome this formula, they may choose to become a single mother, get divorced, or distance themselves from their family and society (Fieldwork, 2019). They develop a lack of initiative and self-assurance, and over time become vulnerable

when their sources of support disappear. Girls in our society are raised with a mindset of dependence from a young age, and this is particularly prevalent in Sylhet. If a girl do any mistake in household work, family members said that '*Jamair bari gia kita korbay, koibo bafor barit kicchu hikaice nani*' (What will you do at in-laws house, then ignominy us that we didn't teach you anything girls are often discouraged from pursuing their own goals and dreams and instead are told to focus on learning how to do household work so they can find a good husband. This mentality is dangerous because nobody knows what the future holds, and a girl may end up having to support herself or her family. Unfortunately, many women end up as single mothers and burden their families because they were not allowed to become independent. This is a major obstacle for girls and shows a lack of respect for their potential as human beings (Fieldwork, 2019). Women often compete with other women and can feel envious of their success or happiness. This behavior can be influenced by the way a woman's mother or other female role models acted in her life. It's been suggested that women may experience more jealousy than men in emotional situations (Fieldwork, 2019). This obstacle is hindering women's development and empowerment. Women need to overcome this obstacle, appreciate other women's achievements, and inspire each other to reach greater heights. It's important to ignore those who are jealous of your success and hold you back with negativity. Women are continuously confined to their homes behind veils, limiting their exposure to knowledge and negative criticism. This is not their fault, but the result of social misconceptions. In some cases, we are also responsible because we don't actively seek to learn about the broader world. In Sylhet, there are fewer opportunities and platforms to motivate and guide women in the right direction (Fieldwork, 2019). The respondents interviewed have shared that they passed their life addressing as Girls or Women, not as human beings. This narrow view of women's identity can have negative implications for their lives. Women should be seen as human beings first and foremost, rather than being defined solely by their gender. With the right opportunities and support, women can achieve anything they set their minds to. Unfortunately, society and families often treat women differently, defining them only in terms of their roles as wives, mothers, and caregivers. If a woman sits

unrolling her legs she is tagged as (*Bessa*) prostitute by her family members, even by her mother. For instance, 'why did you sit like a prostitute'? It also ignores another group of women. In family and society, we grow up with restrictions, rules, and regulations with a term Woman, Girls, and *Beti* (*Sylheti* terms to address a woman) not human beings (Fieldwork, 2019). A woman gets fewer opportunities to study. Less amount of girls get the opportunity to take higher education (Akter et al., 2020). Girls in this society rarely pursue higher education without immense determination. One individual shared that she got married and during her Master's exam, she had to sit in an ambulance. After one and a half hours, she gave birth to a boy and then completed her exam while taking care of her new-born in the exam hall. In most cases, mothers or female family members focus on household work and prioritize the well-being of men, which results in girls lacking proper education and knowledge. Women suffer greatly from these deficiencies. However, we found that most of the respondents have developed different skills that have helped them survive and adapt to this society. Having academic and technical knowledge is essential for anyone, but for women, it is mandatory. Without this knowledge, women cannot thrive in this social structure (Ahmed & Sharma, 2019). Most women in Sylhet lack knowledge about their rights, human rights, and citizenship. They are unaware of their rights as women in society and within their families. Due to the lack of global knowledge, *Sylheti* women are not advancing as much as other women. While other women are becoming police officers, cadres, and majors, *Sylheti* women are absent in these fields. This lack of knowledge also causes them to lose their confidence and be unable to raise their voices and demand their rights from their families, society, and the state (Fieldwork, 2019).

Menstruation is a natural event, that affects women's and girls' life of reproductive age (Mathews, 1995). It god gifted, and happens naturally. But in society, it seems a shame (Mathews, 1995), a hidden matter. Many girls are afraid of it and don't go out (Mathews, 1995). In some cases, they are neglected in families even my mother, Grandparents, Mother in law with so many taboos (Ihsan, 2010). Most women do not feel comfortable sharing their problems with anyone other than their mothers. This support and encouragement from mothers are crucial for women

to feel relaxed and confident. However, in our society, even within families, girls are not always safe due to various misconceptions. Early marriage is often a result of girls dropping out of school, which in turn creates socio-economic barriers for them. Women are often seen as belonging to male properties such as their father's house or their husband's house, but not having their property. In our social context, women typically have to adapt to two different environments, which can create obstacles for them to lead a smooth life. This socio-cultural diversity is unique to women's lives. In this society, hard work is often equated with prostitution. When someone returns home from work in the evening, they are often stared at as if they are an alien. Some individuals with bad intentions may even offer them 'oironi' (do you interested in do sex! Laugh loudly). If she is a tenant, the home lender may ask 'koi taki kamai korio aila go' (from where by earning did you come lately!). Even family members may ask her with whom she spent the night if she arrives home late due to work pressures. These situations are particularly common for women involved in production work that requires working late for urgent orders. Although there are many obstacles that women in Bangladesh face, the study has focused on identifying the obstructions that *Sylheti* women experience in their families and society, which negatively impact their socioeconomic status. The study arrived at these findings by studying the life histories and case studies of various professional women who have overcome these barriers.

CONCLUSION:

Sylhet is known for its religious conservatism and the presence of many migrants. A significant portion of the area's income comes from remittances sent by *Sylheti* foreigners. *Sylheti* culture is strong in areas such as tradition, ritual, and language. Understanding other cultures and traditions is important for a society to mature and become more capable. From a young age, children are dependent on their families and society. Girls are often raised differently from boys, leading to the suppression of their self-will and independence. Research shows that women are responsible for perpetuating this dependency. Mothers have a critical role to play in changing this pattern and empowering their daughters. Many successful women lack formal education but possess strong self-esteem, self-power, and a strong work ethic. These women are fighting for change and overco-

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ming societal prejudice. Although there are differences between their views and those of feminism, these women desire the establishment of women's rights in their country and culture. Ultimately, a woman's goodwill, hard work, and developed mindset are essential to achieving self-reliance and prosperity. These women should be respected for their achievements. This research was conducted in Sylhet Sadar Upazila and would benefit from further examination of other districts in Bangladesh. Future research could explore the techniques women use to overcome obstacles and become change-makers. The study revealed the everyday obstacles women face, which can be helpful for widows and other women struggling in Bangladesh.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST:

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest related to this article.

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