

Bruised but Never Broken: The Fight for Gender Equality in Egypt and Bangladesh

Lily Sweeting

Abstract

This article examines issues of gender inequality and women’s rights in Bangladesh and Egypt. Both countries have high levels of gender inequality that have resulted in widespread discrimination and violence towards women. Additionally, religious and cultural norms and a profound patriarchal view of women as being inferior to men have led to the extensive exclusion of women from the workforce and political participation. Failure to adequately enforce legal practices and protections has further encouraged discrimination and violence against women and will continue to do so without governmental action. Social, political, and economic empowerment is needed for the women of Bangladesh and Egypt, but such empowerment is not happening due to the current societal norms in these two countries.

I. Introduction

According to a report by the World Bank (2019a), only six countries (Belgium, Denmark, France, Latvia, Luxembourg and Sweden) give women equal legal work rights as men; a typical country only gives women three-quarters the rights of men. Issues of gender inequality are continually pervasive throughout most of the developing world. Women are often subject to violence and discrimination, lack equal access to basic systems such as health care and education, and face fewer opportunities in the workforce. Cultural, societal, and religious norms, as well as governmental failures to provide adequate protections have allowed these issues of inequality to continue for generations at the expense of millions of women around the world.

Both Egypt and Bangladesh are examples of countries where the inherent sexism and inequality have continued to thrive, leaving women and girls vulnerable and excluded from decision making regarding their own quality of life. This article will examine the rife gender inequality that has enabled discrimination and violence against women to prevail in Bangladesh and Egypt. This will be achieved by first attempting to understand the cultural and religious norms, as well as the legal structures and political conditions that are responsible for much of the inequality, and then examining the efforts to increase equality in both countries and the obstacles blocking significant progress from being made.

Following this introduction, this article begins with a brief literature review of some of the publications on gender inequality and women’s rights in each of these two countries. Section III

will provide some socioeconomic background on Bangladesh and Egypt, and Section IV will analyze relevant facts on gender inequality for both countries. Section V will offer an ethical analysis of the existing framework to combat inequality and the results of said framework. Section VI will offer final points and conclude the article.

II. Literature Review

There has been a substantial amount of literature produced in recent years regarding gender inequality and women's rights in developing countries, due to an increase in global understanding of the necessity of equality. This brief literature review will summarize a few of the significant literary contributions focusing on gender inequality and women's rights in Bangladesh and Egypt. Anju (2011) and Panday (2008) focus on Bangladesh, while Coleman (2011), Megahed and Lack (2011) and Vericat (2017) focus on Egypt.

- Anju (2011) studies positive discrimination of women in Bangladesh through a primarily legal lens. Positive discrimination, or as it is known in the United States, affirmative action, is a right granted to women in the Bangladeshi constitution, as well as in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In addition, the government of Bangladesh has instituted several laws to help drive the advancement of women's rights within the country. Despite this, women in Bangladesh still face high levels of inequality and discrimination. The author credits this to insufficient implementation efforts by the government, a strong patriarchal mindset within society, and adherence to traditional gender roles. According to Anju, equality between men and women is a distant goal that will only be achieved through societal shifts and stronger government action.
- Coleman (2011) discusses the struggles faced by Egyptian women following the Arab Spring and the fall of the Mubarak regime. The increasingly conservative Islamist society has made gender equality a much less attainable goal. There are deep divisions within the Muslim Brotherhood, which holds considerable power in the country, with respects to women's rights, and it remains a strongly debated issue. Coleman also highlights Egypt's Salafi movement as a major barrier to gender equality, as well as their exclusion from the political process and lack of representation in parliament. Coleman concludes that women's rights in Egypt will remain a highly contentious issue for years to come, and that a broad coalition of civil leaders is necessary for progress.
- Megahed and Lack (2011) evaluate the colonial legacy that remains in Egypt and how it has impacted women's rights and gender-educational inequality. According to the authors, the state of women's rights and gender inequality are heavily influenced by three factors: "Islamic" teachings and traditions regarding the roles of women, a Western European colonial perception of women's rights, and national gender-related policy reforms. The article examines the conflicting factors and opinions that have stalled the progression of gender equality and led to an increased hostility towards women's rights within society. Megahed and Lack conclude that the Egyptian government needs to promote genuine gender-oriented educational reforms, and that religious and non-religious interest groups need to shift their efforts towards obtaining equal rights and freedom for all.
- Panday (2008) discusses women's political participation in Bangladesh. The Bangladeshi government has instituted several quotas for women in Parliament to increase female political participation and expand women's rights within the country. At present, 50 out of

345 seats in Parliament are reserved for women. Despite these measures to increase representation of women in politics, actual participation by women remains a significant issue. According to Panday, women's participation in politics is hindered by the following factors: educational backwardness, lack of economic resources, inadequate mobility, structural deficiencies, religion, culture and patriarchy. In order to increase women's political participation, educational reforms and policies to empower women should be enacted by the Bangladeshi government.

- Vericat (2017) examines Egypt's women's movements and organizations that emerged from the Arab Spring uprisings and the obstacles they faced in regard to women's rights and gender equality. Lack of equal job access, wage disparities, higher rates of illiteracy, and lack of representation in parliament are some of the primary factors that have obstructed progress for women in Egypt. These factors have persisted due to a culture of discrimination towards women that is deeply engrained in society, as well as governmental actions that have upended equality efforts. Vericat concludes that policy reforms and increased protections for women are necessary to secure gender equality in Egypt.

III. Socioeconomic Background

Egypt is an Arabic-speaking nation located in Northern Africa, with approximately 90 percent of the population being Sunni Muslim. Egypt is an extremely homogenous country, with over 99 percent of the population being of Egyptian ethnicity. Egypt gained full independence from the British in 1952 and is currently a presidential republic. In January of 2011, a revolution erupted within the country as part of the Arab Spring uprisings. The revolution resulted in the overthrow of the Mubarak regime, and the military was given power over the country. Six months later, the Muslim Brotherhood assumed power, and Islamist Mohamed Morsi was elected president of Egypt in June 2012. Mass protests broke out once again in June 2013, this time against the Morsi presidency. Morsi was removed from office by a coup led by General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, who was then elected president in 2014. Currently, Egypt has an estimated population of 99.4 million people, with an estimated population growth of 2.38 percent.¹

Bangladesh is a small country in terms of land area, located on the Bay of Bengal, bordering India and Myanmar. Approximately 90 percent of the population are Muslim, and nearly 99 percent of the population speak the official language, Bangla. Bangladesh became an independent country in 1971 and is a parliamentary democracy. In August 1975, Prime Minister Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated by the military, which triggered a series of coups that led to many changes in power until the country returned to full democratic rules in 2008. In 2014, the World Bank reclassified Bangladesh from a low-income country to a lower-middle income country. Currently, Bangladesh has an estimated population of 159.5 million people, of which over 98 percent are of Bengali ethnicity. The estimated population growth of the country is 1.1 percent.²

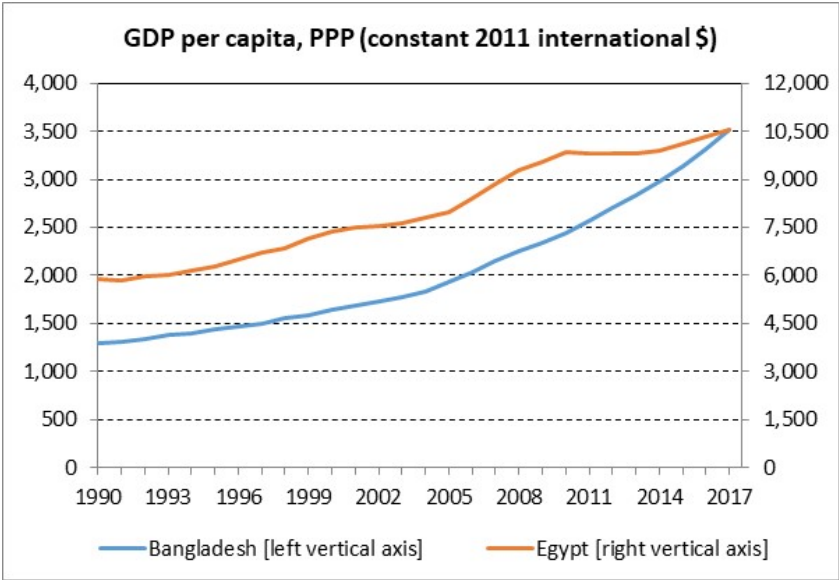
As shown in Figure 1, both countries experienced a steady growth in GDP per capita, adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), from 1990 to 2017. In 1990, Bangladesh's GDP per capita (shown on the left vertical axis) was \$1,288. By 2006, it had reached \$2,031, and continued to increase at a higher rate than Egypt, reaching \$3,524 in 2017. Egypt (shown on the right vertical axis) had a

¹ This paragraph is based on information provided in the CIA World Factbook section on Egypt.

² This paragraph is based on information provided in the CIA World Factbook section on Bangladesh.

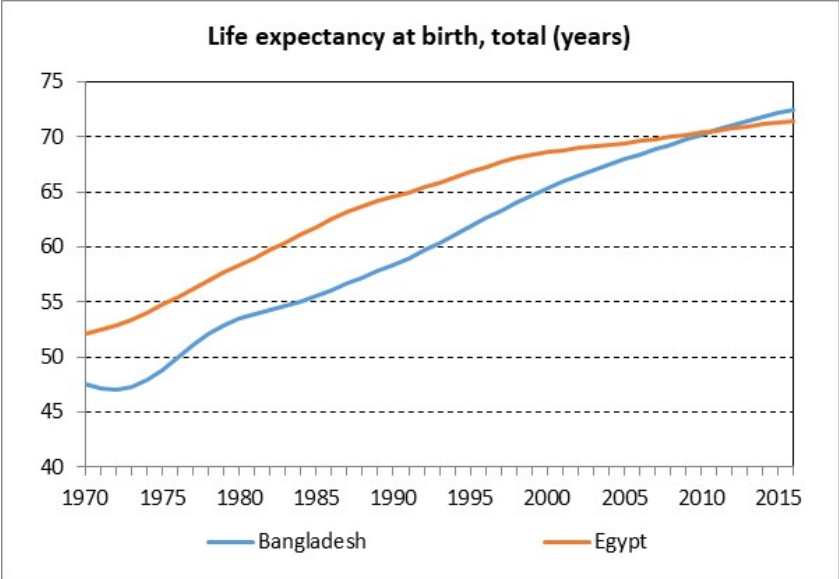
significantly higher GDP per capita than Bangladesh during the whole period for which we have data. In 1990, Egypt's GDP per capita was \$5,909, which is more than four times that of Bangladesh. It increased at a fairly steady rate until 1999, when the growth rate slowed down. From 2000 to 2006, Egypt's GDP per capita increased by less than \$200 annually. It suffered a slight decline from 2010 to 2013 but began increasing again in 2014. In 2017, Egypt's GDP per capita was \$10,550, nearly exactly three times that of Bangladesh.

Figure 1: GDP per capita (PPP-adjusted, constant 2011\$) 1990-2017



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019b).

Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth (in years), 1970-2016

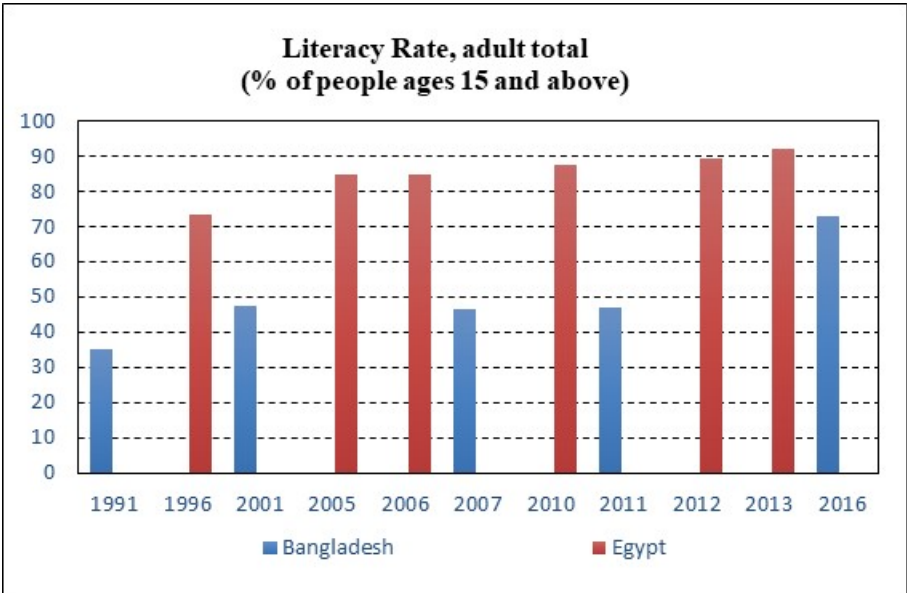


Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019b).

Figure 2 shows life expectancy at birth in years for Bangladesh and Egypt from 1970 to 2016. With the exception of Bangladesh during the early 1970s, both countries experienced steady increases in life expectancy. Egypt’s life expectancy has increased from 52 years in 1970 to 71.5 years in 2016, which is in line with the world average life expectancy, which increased from 65 years in 1990 to 72 years in 2016.³ After the decline from 1970 to 1972, Bangladesh’s life expectancy increased at a slightly higher rate than both Egypt and the world average. In 1972, Bangladesh’s life expectancy was with 47 years far lower than the world average. However, by 2016 Bangladesh’s life expectancy reached 72.5 years, surpassing Egypt slightly and meeting the world average.⁴

While data surrounding adult literacy in Egypt and Bangladesh is sparse and sporadic, a difference between the two countries is still visible, as shown in Figure 3. There was no year in which data was provided for both countries, so an exact comparison is not possible. From 1991 to 2016, five years’ worth of data is available for Bangladesh, which shows that adult literacy doubled from 35 percent in 1991 to 73 percent in 2016. For Egypt, data is available for six years, showing an increase in adult literacy from 73 percent in 1996 to 92 percent in 2013.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy (in percent)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019b).

IV. Analysis of Facts

IV.1. Overall Analysis of Gender Inequality

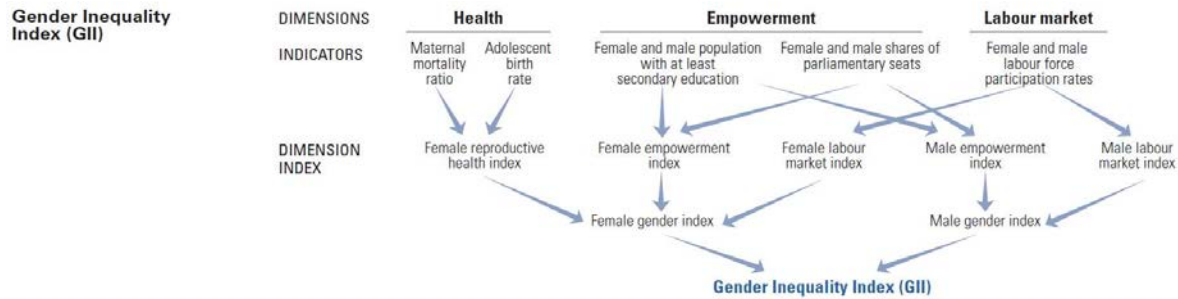
The 2019 UN Human Development Report’s Gender Inequality Index (GII) measures gender inequality in three important aspects of human development: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic status. Using these factors, each country is assigned a GII value between 0 and 1.

³ World Bank (2019b).

⁴ World Bank (2019b).

The GII is used to measure the human development costs of gender inequality, meaning that a higher GII value indicates more disparities between men and women, and thus a greater loss to human development. Figure 4 shows the three main dimensions and the five indicators, which are used to calculate the dimensions index of the GII.

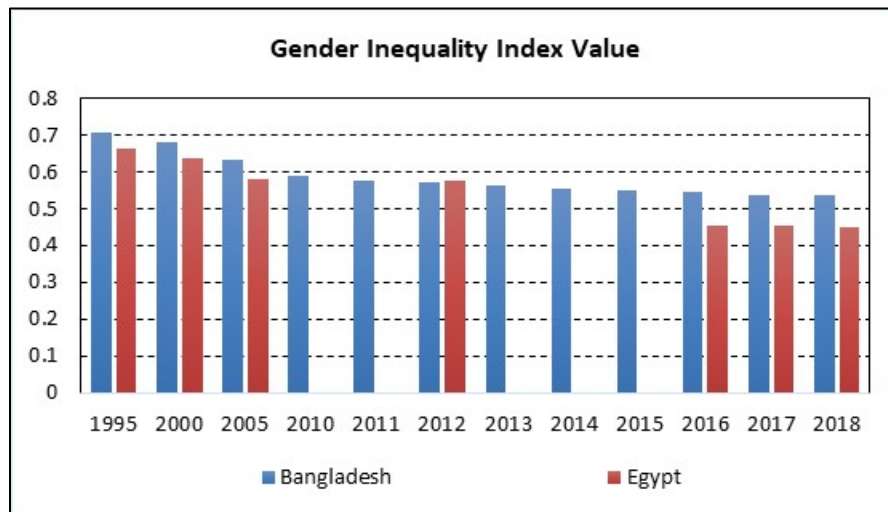
Figure 4: Indicators of the Gender Inequality Index



Source: The United Nations (UN) Human Development Report (2019).

According to the UN Human Development Report (2019), Bangladesh had a GII of 0.536 in 2018, while Egypt had a GII of 0.450 in 2018. For reference, the highest-ranking country for gender equality in 2018 was Norway, which had a GII of 0.044. Of the 162 countries for which the GII had been calculated, Egypt was ranked at 102, while Bangladesh ranked 129th.

Figure 5: Gender Inequality Index Values for Bangladesh and Egypt (1995-2018)



Source: Created by author based on the Human Development Report's GII (2019).

Figure 5 shows the evolution of GII values for each country from 1995-2018. Bangladesh's GII value decreased from 0.708 in 1995 to 0.536 in 2018, and Egypt's GII value decreased from 0.665 in 1995 to 0.450 in 2018. While the overall decrease for both countries shows significant improvement in reducing disparities between men and women, this should not be taken as a sign that either Bangladesh or Egypt is remotely close to reaching gender equality. Both countries still

have high 2018 GII values and ranked very poorly among the 162 countries for which the GII had been calculated.

IV.2. Contributing Factors to Persistent Inequality

There are many factors that contribute to this persistent gender inequality. This sub-section examines the ways in which different dimensions have halted progress towards equality in Bangladesh and Egypt, focusing on a) the lack of adequate safety and protections from violence for women and b) female exclusion from the workforce and political participation. Though not examined in detail, forced and early marriages also play a major role in preventing women from achieving equality in Bangladesh and Egypt.

IV.2.a. Violence Against Women

Incidents of violence against women are extremely common in both Bangladesh and Egypt. However, women experience different types of violence in each country. In Bangladesh, the most common type of violence experienced by women is intimate partner violence. In 2015, 54.2 percent of Bangladeshi women reported experiencing some form of physical or sexual violence by their husbands in their lifetime.⁵ Table 1 shows various incidents of violence towards women in Bangladesh by age group and locality.

Table 1: Proportion of Ever-Married Women Experiencing Partner Physical and/or Sexual Violence During Lifetime and In Last 12 Months, by Age-Group and Locality

Background characteristics	Physical violence (%)		Sexual violence (%)		Physical or Sexual (%)		Total Ever married women interviewed
	Life time	Last 12 months	Life time	Last 12 months	Life time	Last 12 months	
Age group (years)							
15-19	37.5	23.8	21.9	15.1	42.8	28.4	542
20-24	48.4	28.1	29.3	18.3	54.4	35.4	2449
25-29	51.1	24.5	26.6	16.6	55.6	32.2	3263
30-34	50.7	23.4	28.3	15.4	55.5	30.8	3475
35-39	49.3	20.8	26.1	12.8	53.4	27.1	2969
40-44	49.4	16.5	26.9	11.0	54.0	21.6	2232
45-49	50.2	15.5	28.1	8.2	53.8	19.7	1489
50-54	50.4	17.0	26.3	9.7	54.3	21.2	1239
55-59	47.8	13.7	23.5	5.9	50.3	16.0	849
60+	50.5	13.2	29.4	9.8	56.1	18.2	1480
Locality							
Rural	51.8	21.5	28.4	13.7	56.6	27.8	10691
Urban	42.2	18.5	23.5	12.2	46.5	24.2	9296
City corporation	29.4	13.0	14.4	7.6	33.3	17.2	4509
Other than city corporation	48.5	21.2	27.9	14.4	52.9	27.7	4787
Total	49.6	20.8	27.3	13.3	54.2	26.9	19987

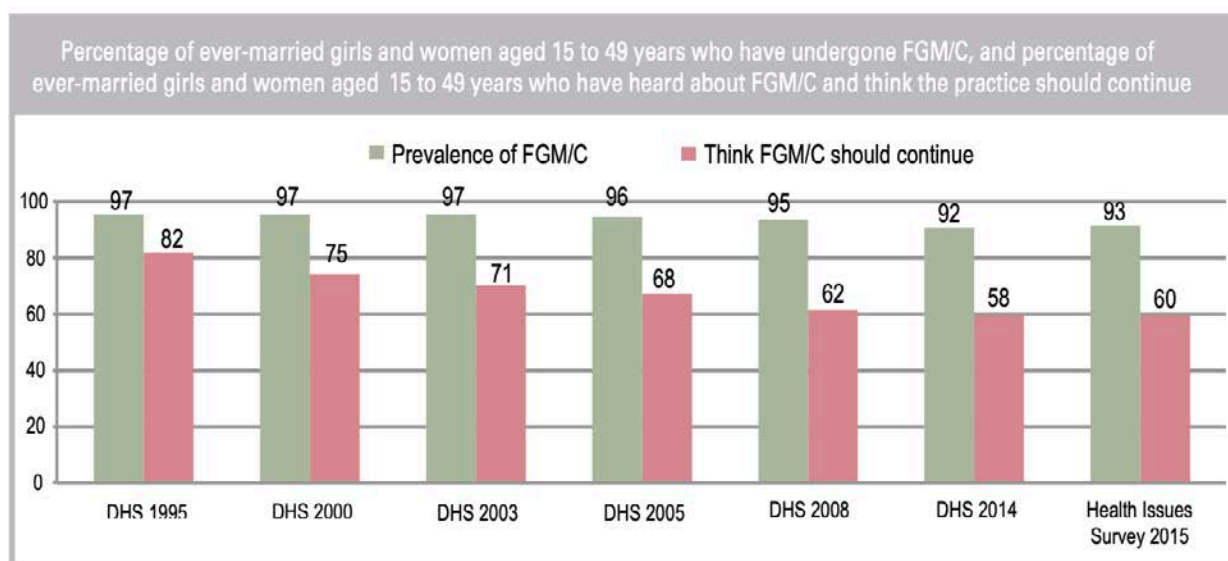
Source: Gender Statistics of Bangladesh 2018 (BBS 2018).

While intimate partner violence is a problem in Egypt, the most frequent type of violence experienced by Egyptian women is female genital mutilation (FGM). In 2015, an astonishing 93

⁵ Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2018).

percent of women aged 15-49 had undergone some form of genital mutilation.⁶ FGM is still widely practiced in many African and Middle Eastern countries, despite the fact that it has no proven medical benefits to women, can lead to serious health complications (such as severe bleeding, infection, infertility, and increased newborn deaths), and is a violation of the human rights of girls and women.⁷ Figure 6 shows how widespread the practice of FGM still is in Egypt, as well as opinions on if the practice should continue.

Figure 6: Percentage of Women and Girls Ages 15-49 Who Have Undergone FGM and Percentage of Women and Girls Ages 15-49 Who Support the Continuation of the Practice (1995–2015)



Source: UNICEF Statistical Profile on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting – Egypt (2016).

As evidenced by the statistics shown in Table 1 and Figure 6, violence towards women continues to be a significant issue in both Egypt and Bangladesh. It is absolutely critical that measures are taken in both countries to provide protections for women against violence. Violence increases the power imbalance between men and women by instilling fear and psychological harm, which in turn hinders gender equality.⁸

IV.2.b. Exclusion from the Labor Force and Political Participation

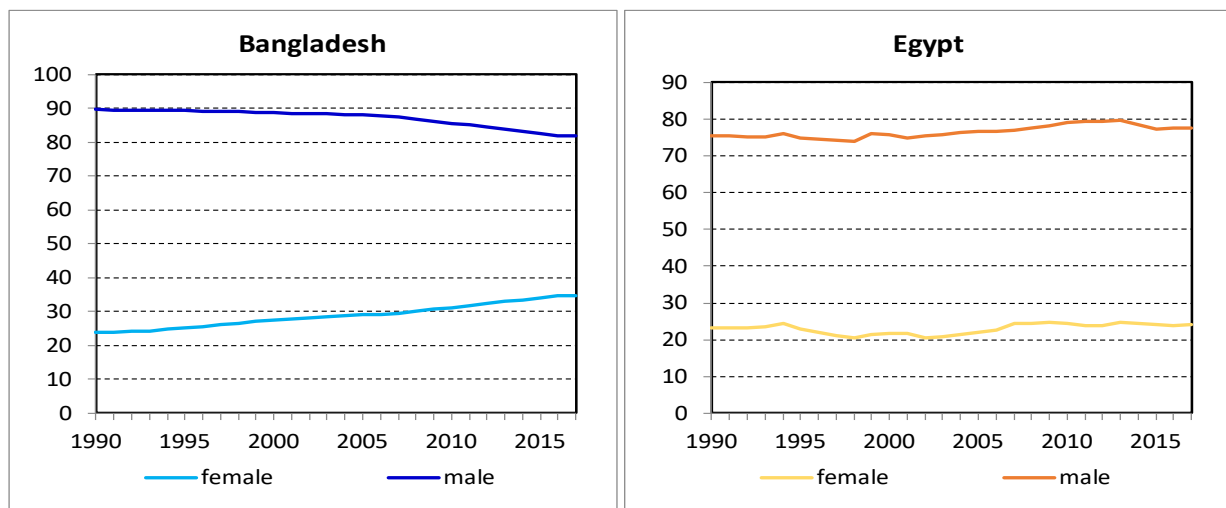
All over the world, women suffer from high rates of discrimination in the workforce, such as sexual harassment and assault, unequal pay, bias impacting hiring and promotions, and lack of equal access to job opportunities. While these are certainly global issues that need to be addressed, incidents of discrimination and exclusion from the labor force are more pervasive for women in developing countries than in industrialized countries. Egypt and Bangladesh are no exception to this fact.

⁶ UNICEF (2016).

⁷ United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Egypt.

⁸ World Health Organization (2009).

Figures 7 and 8: Female and Male Labor Force Participation Rate (% of each gender's population between ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate), respectively in Bangladesh and Egypt (1990-2017)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019b).

As shown in Figures 7 and 8, there are serious disparities between female and male labor force participation rates in Bangladesh and Egypt. While Bangladesh's numbers are certainly inadequate, the data does show an upward trend in female labor force participation, increasing from 20.5 percent of the workforce being female in 1990 to 34.8 percent in 2017. As shown in Figure 8, Egypt, on the other hand, has struggled to make progress in labor force equality. In 1990, 23.2 percent of the Egyptian women between ages 15 to 64 were part of the labor force. The female labor force participation rate increased marginally to 24.4 percent in 1994, before beginning to drop, reaching its lowest point in 2002, with just 20.5 percent of women participating in the labor force. In 2017, the ILO model estimated that 24.1 percent of Egypt's women between ages 15 to 64 participated in the labor force.

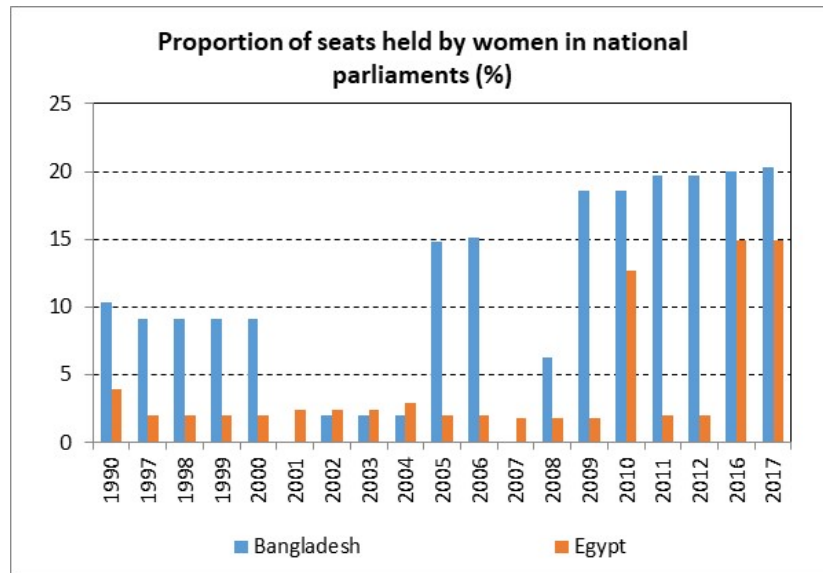
The widespread exclusion of women from the labor force in Bangladesh and Egypt is largely due to socially assigned gender roles being institutionally enforced. In cases where gender roles are not enforced by institutions, societal perceptions and expectations of women, as well as pressure from family and spouses, are also largely responsible for the lack of women in the workforce. When women cannot work, they lack economic empowerment. Lacking economic empowerment prevents women from a) having control over their own lives and bodies, b) being able to access sufficient necessities and care, and c) having an increased voice and agency in economic matters.⁹ Exclusion from the workforce severely inhibits economic empowerment for women, which is essential to achieving gender equality.

In addition to exclusion from the workforce, Figure 9 shows that women also face extensive exclusion from political participation in Bangladesh and Egypt. While both countries have made significant improvements over the years, the numbers shows are still abysmal. From 1990 to 2000, only about 9.3 percent of parliamentary seats were held by women in Bangladesh. By 2002, the

⁹ UN Women (2018).

number had dropped to just 2 percent of seats being held by women. A sharp increase of 12.8 percent occurred from 2004 to 2005, but by 2008 women held just 6.3 percent of seats. In 2009, there was another sharp increase, as 18.6 percent of seats in parliament were held by women. This upward trend continued for the next 10 years, with the 2017 data showing 20.3 percent of seats going to women. Egypt has also shown a general trend of increase in the number of women in parliament. From 1997 to 2009 parliamentary seats held by women remained below 3 percent. A rapid increase to 12.7 percent can be seen in 2010, but it dropped back down to 2 percent for 2011 and 2012. Data is missing for 2013-2015, but in 2016 and 2017 slightly less than 15 percent of seats were held by women.

Figure 9: Proportion of Parliamentary Seats Held by Women (1997-2017)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2019b).

As women make up approximately half of the population in each country, Figure 9 shows very clearly that women are being excluded from participating in politics. Similar to the exclusion women face from the workforce, exclusion from political participation can largely be attributed to socially assigned gender roles and attitudes toward women in positions of leadership. For example, a 2013 survey found that an astonishing 83 percent of Egyptians agreed with the statement “men make better political leaders than women.”¹⁰ Social and economic empowerment for women, which are necessary for gender equality, depend on women’s ability to participate in the political system. The incorporation and active participation of women at all levels of the political sphere is vital to reducing gender inequality in Bangladesh and Egypt.¹¹

V. Ethical Analysis

This section analyzes the existing ethical framework put in place by the governments of Bangladesh and Egypt and the work done by NGOs to reduce gender inequality. It will also

¹⁰ Moghadam (2014).

¹¹ Panday (2008), p. 1.

examine the effectiveness and success of said framework with respect to the contributing factors discussed in the previous section.

V.1. Existing Ethical Frameworks

As recognition for the global issue of gender inequality has grown, so have efforts by governments and NGOs to reduce said inequality. Additionally, analysis into the implementation and effectiveness of these efforts has also increased significantly. A prominent example of action taken to reduce gender inequality is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The CEDAW was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 and ratified by Egypt and Bangladesh in 1981 and 1984, respectively.¹²

According to the United Nations, states that adopt the convention commit themselves to undertake a series of measures to end discrimination against women in all forms, including: a) to incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women; b) to establish tribunals and other public institutions to ensure the effective protection of women against discrimination; and c) to ensure elimination of all acts of discrimination against women by persons, organizations or enterprises.¹³

In addition to ratifying the CEDAW, the Bangladeshi constitution features many provisions specifically designed to help women. The constitution of Bangladesh ensures equality of opportunity and equal protection of law for all. In 1979, a provision was made in article 65 of the constitution that reserved 30 seats in parliament for women. In 2004, this was increased to reserve 45 out of 345 parliamentary seats for women, and in 2011, it was increased to 50.¹⁴ Efforts have also been made by the government to increase spending on women's education and health and uphold the legal rights of women. Many additional laws have been created to provide protections for women and improve women's overall status within the country. According to Panday (2008, p. 498) "the government of Bangladesh has set up a comprehensive network of mechanisms and institutions for the advancement of women."

Similarly to Bangladesh, Egypt's constitution also features provisions designed to help women. The 2014 constitution includes over 20 articles specifically addressing the rights of women within the country. Some examples of these include the right to equal pay for equal work between the sexes, prohibition of dismissal by an employer due to pregnancy, and comprehensive measures to address human trafficking. In March 2017, the Egyptian president adopted the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030, which consists of the following 4 components: political empowerment and leadership, social empowerment, economic empowerment, and protection.¹⁵

Equally important to the measures taken by governments is the work of international organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in promoting gender equality in Bangladesh and Egypt. An example of this in Bangladesh is UN Women Bangladesh. UN Women Bangladesh has been working with the government and other women's organizations in the country in the following areas: a) income security, decent work, and economic autonomy for women b) women

¹² UN Women (undated).

¹³ UN Women (undated).

¹⁴ Parvin (2016), p. 815.

¹⁵ This paragraph is based on information from the UN Development Programme (2018) Report on Egypt.

live a life free of violence c) governance, national planning and budgeting for gender equality and d) women and girls contribute to and benefit equally from sustainable peace and resilience, prevention of natural disasters and conflicts, and humanitarian action.¹⁶

In Egypt, the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) works to advance women's rights by urging legislative action that promotes equality, increasing awareness among women of their rights, helping women register to vote, and recruiting and advising female political candidates throughout the election process.¹⁷ Both UN Women Bangladesh and ECWR have had significant impacts on the gender equality movements in Bangladesh and Egypt.

V.2. Implementation and Realities of Ethical Frameworks

It is important to note the difference between de jure gender equality and de facto gender equality in Bangladesh and Egypt. While the measures taken by their respective governments have certainly helped to advance gender equality in each country, societal and religious norms that define gender roles and a lack of enforcement of these measures continues to prevent significant progress from being made.

In regard to the CEDAW, though Bangladesh and Egypt ratified the convention nearly 40 years ago, both countries continue to hold reservations towards specific aspects of the document. The government of Bangladesh currently holds reservation towards articles 2 and 16(1)(c), while the Egyptian government holds reservation towards articles 2, 16, and 29 paragraph 2.¹⁸ Broadly put, Article 2 of the CEDAW articulates that all parties to the Convention take appropriate legislative action to combat all forms of discrimination against women. Article 16 of the Convention concerns combatting discrimination against women in regard to marriage and family relations. More specifically, it states that men and women shall be equal in rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution.¹⁹ Basically, Bangladesh and Egypt hold reservations towards defining aspects of the Convention, and such reservations undermine its fundamental purpose.

Bangladesh and Egypt are both Muslim-majority countries and have secular constitutions which state that all laws relating to personal status (i.e. marriage, divorce, child custody) shall be governed by Islamic law (Sharia). Because of this, both countries' reservations exempt them from abiding by any obligations of Article 2 that contradict Sharia. Additionally, both countries have stated that equality between men and women in marriage and divorce does not comply with Islamic law, and they are therefore exempt from the obligations of Article 16 of the CEDAW.²⁰

As discussed in the previous subsection, Egypt and Bangladesh have both enacted provisions and strategies that serve to promote gender equality within each country. Unfortunately, lack of sufficient enforcement and societal opposition have rendered many of these provisions futile.

In Bangladesh, quotas have been included in the constitution that reserve 50 parliamentary seats for women in order to increase women's participation in the political process. While women do hold the reserved seats, they are often undervalued and criticized by men who disagree with the

¹⁶ UN Women Bangladesh (undated).

¹⁷ UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (undated).

¹⁸ United Nations Treaty Collection (undated), Chapter 4.

¹⁹ UN Women (undated).

²⁰ Brandt and Kaplan (1995), pp. 118-126.

quota system, sexually harassed by male counterparts, and prevented from contributing to political discussions.²¹

Furthermore, deeply engrained patriarchal mindset places significant restraints on many women trying to have careers. In many cases, women are forced to leave their jobs by their husbands and other family members. Women are generally regarded as inferior, and as is the case in most Muslim-majority countries, women are expected to be mothers and homemakers, and it is the responsibility of the husband to provide for the family. This system bars women from reaching any kind of economic empowerment and makes women completely reliant on their husbands. This reliance often leads to women being viewed as property, rather than people, which further perpetuates the already endemic problem of physical and sexual violence against Bangladeshi women.²²

Egypt faces similar issues as Bangladesh regarding patriarchal views of women and religious laws. As previously discussed, female genital mutilation (FGM) is an extremely widespread practice in Egypt. Though the practice was deemed illegal in 2008, the government does not enforce the law strongly and hence, FGM continues to be a serious issue. Moreover, Egypt has no laws specifically related to domestic violence, and marital rape and polygamy are both legal. Adultery, however, is a punishable offense, and perpetrators of honor killings (in the case of a husband killing his wife upon learning she has committed adultery) are subject to reduced sentences of no more than three years in prison.²³

Egypt and Bangladesh are very much alike in their extensive exclusion of women from the workforce and political participation, and so the patriarchal societal norms and expectations of women that promote this exclusion in Bangladesh are much the same in Egypt. Egyptian women are generally expected to be mothers and homemakers, and to be almost completely reliant on their husbands to provide for them. For the small percentage of women that comprise the Egyptian workforce, they are frequently undervalued and sexually harassed, which understandably drives many women to leave their professions.²⁴

VI. Conclusion

By analyzing and discussing the many contributing factors, this article illustrates the realities of violence and discrimination caused by gender inequality still faced by women in Bangladesh and Egypt. Though progress has certainly been made, it will be a long time before women in either country are considered equal to men.

Sharia law and societal views of women are the primary drivers of persistent inequality in Bangladesh and Egypt. A profound patriarchal mindset is firmly established among both populations and is largely responsible for the perpetual violence against women and the exclusion of women from the workforce and political participation. Additionally, the lack of enforcement and protections for women is unlikely to change due to the religious and societal norms that place men in positions of authority over women.

²¹ Anju (2011), p. 504.

²² Chowdhury (2009), pp. 606–609.

²³ UN Development Programme (2018), p. 9.

²⁴ Women's UN Report Network (2013).

Gender equality cannot be achieved without the social, political and economic empowerment of women. It is critical that efforts are increased to abolish harmful stereotypes and gender roles. More efforts are also needed to support and elect more women to all political bodies and to end the widespread reliance on men for economic stability. Through perseverance, education and empowerment, there is hope for equality for the women of Bangladesh and Egypt.

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