

A Review of Major Administrative Reforms in Bangladesh: Gender Focus

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Abstract

Gender remains a focal issue generally in the wider perspective of the society and within the development circles in particular. The very basic pre-condition of the development agenda is connected with the mainstreaming of women through gender specific policies. It is therefore imperative that women's concerns be placed high in the policy agenda of the government. The issue of development of women, the grossly under privileged section of population depends largely on the policies and practices of the government. There is a widespread recognition that administrative reform has become a core development strategy around the world. Bangladesh has a long history of administrative reform committees /commissions. The purpose of this paper is to review the major administrative reform efforts in Bangladesh in order to understand how and how well women's development issues were addressed in the context of policy reforms in the administrative arena. Accordingly this paper briefly reviews the major administrative reform efforts in the country and after that it tries to assess the gender sensitivity of these policy reforms.

Keywords: Administrative Reform, Gender, Women, Development, Policy

Introduction

There is a growing recognition of the critical importance of women's participation in development. Everybody agrees that the development agenda is bound to fail unless effective steps are taken to eradicate gender disparity that characterizes the Bangladesh society for centuries. The presence of gender-gap in society manifests itself in the form of disempowerment of women as far as their political, social and economic status and roles are concerned. Violence, injustice and other forms of discrimination against women are a common phenomenon in Bangladesh due to the patriarchal

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socio-economic system, structure and mindset of its people. However, despite the constraints, women are increasingly getting involved and playing an important role in the development process.

Mainstreaming women through gender specific policies is an acknowledged precondition for achieving meaningful development in any developing country like Bangladesh (CPD, 2001:1). It is therefore, imperative that women's concerns be placed high in the policy agenda of the government. Yet it is only recently that this issue has been recognized as such in the context of policy reforms in the administrative arena. In an era of globalization and the information society, administrative reform (AR) has become one of the core development strategies around the world (Kim & Monem, 2008:1). Bangladesh is not an exception. AR has been a major concern of the Government of Bangladesh (GOB). Almost every government in Bangladesh has instituted AR Committees/Commissions since its independence.

This paper attempts to review the major AR efforts in Bangladesh in order to understand how and how well women's development (WID) issues were addressed in those reform measures. In other words it will try to assess the gender sensitivity of the policy reforms in the administrative arena. A review of women's development components in the reform reports would therefore be relevant to determine the extent of commitment of the GOB to realize gender equality and mainstreaming women in the administrative process. The study is solely based on secondary documentation.

Conceptual Framework

Before embarking on a discussion, some clarification is necessary about the concepts-administrative reform, gender mainstreaming, women in development, gender and development, and gender sensitive and gender blind policy.

Administrative Reform (AR)

The term AR has acquired widespread usage and recognition in the literature pertaining to government and public administration. AR is the administrative reorganization of the state institution that aims at rationalization of the administrative machinery, which improves the quality and capacity of civil service (Kalimullah et.al.2013:280). Khan(1980:57) defines AR as "those efforts which call for or lead to major changes in the bureaucratic system of a country intended to transform the existing and established practices, behaviors and structure within it". The essence of AR is change and improvements. It is meant to encourage an effective administration capable

of bringing about economic and social development through process of change in the administrative structure and procedures.

Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD)

WID aims to include women in development projects in order to make them more efficient. GAD addresses inequalities in women's and men's social roles in relation to development.

Gender Mainstreaming

Gender mainstreaming is a process or a strategy to work toward the goal of gender equality. It is a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women as well as men an integral part of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal affairs so that women and men benefit equally (ECOSOC, 1997: 2, cited in Khan, 2005:256& Jahan, 2006:43).

It seeks to ensure that institutions, policies and programs respond to the needs and interests of women as well as men, and distributes benefits equitably between them. It leads to greater fairness, equity and justice for women and men and thus contributes to social and economic progress.

Gender Sensitive and Gender Blind Policy

As a tool for helping practitioners and policy makers to determine to what degree a project or a policy is explicitly working towards transforming unequal gender relations (social relationships between men as a sex and women as a sex), Naila Kabeer (1992) classifies policies into the following types.

Gender-blind policies: This type of policy recognizes no distinction between the sexes and incorporates biases in favor of existing gender relations and therefore tends to exclude women.

Gender-aware policies: These recognize that women as well as men are development actors, and that they are constrained in different, often unequal, ways as potential participants and beneficiaries in the development process. They may consequently have differing and sometimes conflicting needs, interests and priorities. Gender-aware policies or gender-sensitive policies can be further sub divided into:gender-neutral policies, gender-specific policies and gender-redistributive policies (March et.al, 1999; 108).

Brief Review of Major AR Efforts in Bangladesh: Gender Points

Since independence, a number of commissions/committees were constituted by different governments in Bangladesh for AR and reorganization to suit the

needs of their respective policy declarations (CPD, 2001:2). More than 20 reports on AR have been prepared by these commissions and committees. Moreover, several reports were prepared by the development partners particularly the World Bank (WB), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Department for International Development (DFID) and the US Agency for International Development (USAID). A review of the major reform reports in terms of their main focus, incorporation of gender issues and women's development implication is summarized below.

Committees and Commissions formed by the Government of Bangladesh

Civil Administration Restoration Committee (CARC), 1972

To face the challenges of a newly independent country, the government formed CARC in 1971 to examine and suggest ways for organizational set-up for the government after emergence of Bangladesh. The provincial secretariat was transformed into the national secretariat with 20 ministries and related directorates/departments and corporations according to the recommendations of CARC (Kalimullah et.al, 2013:282).

No gender issue was apparently raised in the report.

The Administrative and Service Reorganization Committee (ASRC), 1972

The ASRC was formed with the mandate to reassess the existing structure of the civil service and suggest measures to establish a unified civil service according to the needs of the nation. (Khan, 2013:298). The committee recommended a single classless unified grading structure containing ten grades and inculcation of professionalism dividing all posts into specialized functional posts and generalist area group posts. It also called for democratization of administration at all levels and elected local governments in district, thana and unions. However, recommendations of the committee were not implemented due to resistance from within the civil service (Khan, 1998).

There was no gender point in the report.

Pay and Services Commission (P&SC), 1976

The P & SC was appointed with a broad mandate to examine both the pay and service structure and recommend suitable ones. The then- government implemented some of the recommendations of the commission in a modified form resulting in the creation of 28 cadres of the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS), constitution of the Senior Services Pool (SSP) and the introduction of 21 grades and scales of pay (Kalimullah et al 2013: 282).

One gender issue can be detected in the recommendation of the commission. It was mentioned on the report that, “Regarding sex, there is a constitutional provision forbidding discrimination on grounds of sex. However, within the limits of this provision, government has the power to vary recruitment conditions where considered unavoidable. We believe that it is fair to recognize that women have special aptitudes for some jobs, while men are more suited for others. We suggest the government should examine the nature of work of the various occupational groups and determine whether any particular sex is capable of bearing the physical or mental stress and strain in relation to any of those occupations and fix recruitment conditions accordingly” (cited in Steps Special Feature, 2002:17).

***Martial Law Committee to Examine set up of Ministries/Divisions/
Departments/Directorates and other Organizations under them (MLC),
1982***

The martial law government of General Ershad appointed this committee to review the charter of duties of different public sector organizations and to scrutinize existing and sanctioned manpower for the purpose of rationalization and efficiency. The committee recommended for reduction in the number and size of all governmental and semi-governmental bodies. The recommendations were accepted and implemented.

The committee under the administrative set up of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Women Affairs allocated the following business to look after women issues.

- a. Matters relating to women’s status, shariah, and other social and legal rights.
- b. Attending to the problems and affairs of women.
- c. Looking after welfare of women including employment opportunities of women.
- d. Motivating women to carry out their responsibilities beyond themselves, their families and the society at large.
- e. Organizing women in a manner that they become effective citizens of the country participate actively in socio-economic development.
- f. Formulating policies on women’s affairs and taking measures for their effective implementation.
- g. Matters relating to the Bangladesh Jatiyo Mahila Sangstha and all voluntary organizations exclusively devoted to women’s welfare.
- h. Matters relating to: Women’s Affairs Development, Bangladesh Shishu Academy and Bangladesh Women’s Rehabilitation and Welfare Foundation.

The committee kept the provision of a branch with three sections in the ministry to look after these businesses (Steps Special Feature, 2002; 18).

Committee for Administrative Reorganization/Reforms (CARR), 1982

The CARR was assigned with the responsibility to review the structure and organization of field level administration. It recommended for installation of elected local governments at district, upazila and union levels for the transfer of development functions to these elected local bodies (CPD, 2001:2). The government constituted another committee named National Implementation Committee for Administrative Reform and Reorganization (NICARR) to suggest ways and means for implementing the recommendations of CARR. The government implemented most of the recommendations which resulted in the creation of upazila administration at the local level.

No specific gender issue can be detected in the report. The CARR casually recommended in its report that village organization based on five occupational groups namely farmers, women, youths, landless and other vocational groups be promoted and given all support (Steps Special Feature, 2002:18).

Committee for Examination of Irregularities in Appointment and Promotion of Officers and Staff in Government (CEI), 1983

The committee was assigned to examine the irregularities made in the appointment and promotion of officers and staff and suggest ways and means to streamline recruitment and promotion. The key recommendations were: framing of new recruitment rules and strengthening of the public service commission which was partially adopted.

While discussing the recruitment rules, at one stage, the committee mentioned about the quota for women candidates along with the total distribution of vacancies.

Cabinet Sub-Committee (CSC) for the Review of Senior Service Pool, 1987

It was formed to recommend policy measures for implementing recommendations of the Special Committee on the structure of the senior service pool (SSP) and the Secretariat Committee relating to the problem of unequal prospects of promotion of officers of different cadre services. The government adopted the recommendations and abolished the SSP in 1989.

The committee did not consider any gender issue.

Commission for Review of Local Government Structure, 1992

The committee was appointed to review the local government system and structure and recommended a representative, participatory and

accountable local government structure for the country. The key recommendations were: a two tier system of local government, constitution of Gram Shava at each village and Thana Development and Coordination Committee. The recommendations were partially adopted.

The issue of women's representation in the local government was discussed in the report. The commission recommended for inclusion of directly elected women members\commissioners in gram shavas, union parishads and pourashavas\city corporations. Women members were also to be included in the zila parishad but nothing was done about the elected zila parishad.

Cabinet Committee for Administrative Reform (CCAR), 1993

It was formed to recommend proposals for an effective, transparent and accountable administrative system that was suitable to the contemporary needs of Bangladesh (Azizuddin, 2008:18). Improving the quality of staff, efficiency, accountability, reducing inter-cadre conflict, creation of Efficiency Unit in Prime Minister's office, Efficiency Cells in six important ministries were among the major recommendations of the committee.

The committee gave much importance to the role of women in public administration sector and emphasized on better working environment, safe transportation and day care centers for the convenience of working mothers. But it did not specify any particular action to be taken in this regard.

Administrative Reorganization Committee (ARC), 1993

ARC was assigned to review the government's administrative structure and staffing patterns in ministries, to ascertain actual personnel needs and to make proposals for reorganizing the machinery of government (Khan, 1998:113). The key recommendations were: reduction of the number of ministries and administrative organizations, provincial structure for the office of the ombudsman and creation of a secretariat for the Supreme Court. The recommendations were not adopted.

There was no direct reference to the gender issue. But the committee recommended for creation of a new ministry named as Ministry of Women, Family Planning and Social Welfare by reorganizing the existing ministries of Women and Children Affairs, Health and Family Planning and Social Welfare.

Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC), 1996

LGRC was formed to examine the structure of local government and provide recommendations for strengthening the local government institutions. The

commission recommended for a four tier system of local government and suggested representative and participatory character of all the tiers.

An important aspect of WID issue was the recommendation of the commission for reservation of seats in all the tiers of the local government.

Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), 1997

PARC was constituted to advise the government on issues of good governance. The report of the commission was focused on improving transparency, efficiency, accountability, effectiveness of public administration and bringing institutional and procedural changes and improvement of service delivery to ensure value for money at all levels of administration in the light of New Public Management (UNDP, 2004). PARC came up with legal, regulatory and procedural changes necessary to implement reform proposals, including an institutional arrangement for the implementation of the commission-prescribed recommendations. The commission suggested some recommendations to ensure higher performance of administration (Public Administration for 21st Century, June, 2000) (Kalimullah et.al, 2013:286).

The commission discussed some important gender issues. It mentioned that in all categories of jobs, women hold fewer positions than what is available for them through the quota system. Women could be given priority in career advancement as an interim affirmative measure for a certain period. The commission also suggested that an enabling environment be created for women to work in field jobs by providing:

1. Appropriate field accommodation and transport for field visits.
2. Day care centers, health and education facilities for children.
3. Separate toilets for women employees, security arrangements and so on.
4. Access to secure accommodation and if possible, husband and wife should be posted in same locality (Kalimullah et.al, 2013:287).

Pay Commissions

Seven National Pay Commissions were constituted from time to time to deal with the matters of pay issues. No gender issues were raised or discussed in the reports of these commissions. Actually the commissions did not have scope to discuss gender issues specifically since pay structure is gender neutral.

Reports Prepared with the Assistance of Development Partners

Public Administration Efficiency Studies, 1989 -USAID

At the initiation of the Ministry of Establishment and financial support from USAID this study was made. The main focus of the study was secretariat system, relationship between ministries, departments and corporations and project cycle.

No gender issue was raised in the report.

Public Administration Sector Study in Bangladesh, 1993- UNDP

The main focus of this study was public administration reforms with emphasis on certain specific areas.

Some important gender issues were discussed in the report. It noted that although women had been in government service in Bangladesh even before independence, the percentage did not increase much over the years. The study found the ratio of women to men in the civil service as approximately 1:10 with the largest number of women in the lower ladder. Amongst the problems identified were: apprehension of getting posted in remote areas, absence of day care centers, and lack of separate rest room facilities (UNDP, 1993: Paras 5.114-15.126).

The study recommended for provision of adequate infrastructures for women officers, including attention to issues of childcare and transportation. The study team noted that women officers need comfort, facilities and onsite child care.

Towards Better Government in Bangladesh (Four Secretaries Report), 1993-DFID

A four secretaries team prepared this report which recommended for merit based public service and improving efficiency, accountability and transparency.

Regarding gender issues the report stated that out of existing 9.47 millions in the public service in January 1991, only about 74 724 were women. This was far too low (about 8%) compared with percentage of the female population. It also recommended for reallocation and improvement of women's quotas in the public service.

Local Government in Bangladesh—An Agenda for Governance, 1996- UNDP

The purpose of this study was to strengthen local governance in Bangladesh by improving the ability of the local government system.

The Findings of the Study Include Following Women Development Issues:

Most elected representatives are male. Very few local government chairpersons are women. Reserved seats allow women to raise voice on women's issues. The system of nominating women members facilitates representation but limits their ability to be effective in decision making. Nomination is associated with a second-class status and provides for representatives without an authentic constituency.

The study recommended for direct election for the reserved seats, appointment for more women to important committees with at least one woman for every two men and special training for women members of the local government (Steps Special Feature, 2002:24).

Government That Works: Reforming the Public Sector, 1996 –WB

This study focused on comprehensive administrative reform of the public sector. Privatization, reduced levels of government, accountability, personnel management systems were the key topics covered by the study.

The committee mentioned about the gender imbalance in the public sector employment and identified that women are not only under-represented in the civil service they also tend to be concentrated in the bottom of the hierarchy.

For increasing the number of women in government the report suggests the Women's Affairs Division to prepare a policy paper containing specific targets for female recruitment, plans for suitable training programs, and procedures for fast track promotion. In addition, the following recommendations were made:

- Improving the working conditions for women, including provision of day care centers, rest rooms, hostel facilities, and transport facilities.
- Introducing as far practicable the policy of posting spouses together in the same station.
- Establishing a government policy to firmly discourage the harassment of women and a process to permit redress for grievances in this area.
- Introducing mandatory training programs focusing on such subjects as gender in management, sexual harassment, and equal opportunities for women.
- Adopting interim measures, including appointing more women on contract or as consultants. (WB, 1996:130).

Taming Leviathan—Reforming Governance in Bangladesh, 2002- WB

This review analyzed the underlying causes of Bangladesh's poor governance, the consequential weak performance of public institutions and reasons for the slow response of the government to proposals for public sector reform.

There was no direct reference to the gender issue. But the report mentioned that women are pervasively dominated by men with heavily gendered socialization within an entrenched ideology of patriarchy. This circumscribes women's participation in income earning activities, as well as in public leadership roles. Men have a vested interest in the maintenance of their dominant position, exploiting female labor in the household. The low status of women in the rural areas translates into a strong supply of docile female labor in urban labor market (WB, 2002:14). But it did not recommend any particular measures to be taken.

Observations and Conclusions

There is a long list of AR committees/commissions in Bangladesh. But it is observed that WID issues were hardly addressed by those committees/commissions. Some reports referred to certain important aspects of gender related issues in their discussions but did not make any specific recommendations. Women's viewpoints were not assessed regarding particular women relevant issues and WID implications. Furthermore, women were sidetracked from the membership of those committees/commissions. Most of them did not have women members. Among the 17 committees/commissions reviewed for this study, there was women representation only in two (namely PARC, 1996 & LGRC, 1996). It was also found that there were much more specific and strong recommendations of WID issues in the reports of these commissions. Therefore it can be said that future reform committees/commissions should have equal representation of women for incorporation of WID issues and affirmative recommendations.

However, the committees/commissions formed during nineties were relatively more concerned about WID issues. The latest three commissions re-emphasized the positive role of women in the society. This may be due to government's commitment to bring women in the mainstream of development planning which was reflected in Fourth Five Year Plan and Fifth Five Year Plan. It can also be said that attention to women issues and gender sensitive policies can be best practiced in a democratic system of government. Reform committees/commissions with regard to local government were more sensitive to gender issues. All of them had specific

recommendations for women development/empowerment. But the other committees/commissions except PARC did not consider any gender issue. Again no gender issues were found in the different pay commissions reports as the pay structure is gender neutral. But most of the reports prepared by the development partners had specific gender focus and recommendations.

Major AR initiatives have not been successful so far in Bangladesh. Sometimes the reports were marked as secret and never made public. Only a few reports were considered and fully implemented and that also half-heartedly. It might be said that the reform measures are in many cases 'gender insensitive' and/or 'gender blind' to take cognizance of the socially disadvantaged position of women. Many of these measures have not contributed substantially to women's development in any special way. They did not have any specific action plan to implement the proposed reform as far as gender concepts are concerned. Reformative policies do not bring about substantive changes in women's position unless they address the strategic gender needs which determine the power relations between men and women in the society (Aminuzzaman, 2011: 154). It is an imperative that women are adequately represented in the future reform committees/commissions so that incorporation of women's critical and strategic needs can be ensured in the reform measures and women's interests in various sectors are taken care of.

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