

## **Women Civil Servants in Field Administration of Bangladesh: Current Status and Challenges**

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### ***Abstract***

*In the highest echelons of Bangladesh civil service, women are underrepresented in comparison to men. Field experiences boost one's professional advancement as it adds extra weight to one's performance and thus help to climb up the job hierarchy. Unfortunately, many women are forced to choose between sacrificing their professions and remaining in the central or major divisional office because there is little to no help available to care for their families. This study argues that female officials in Bangladesh find it more difficult to work at the field office than in the central office because of a variety of issues, including the difficulty of balancing work and home, workplace safety, an unpleasant working environment, public attitudes, and political pressures.*

**Key Words:** Bangladesh, Civil Service, Field Administration, Women

### **Introduction**

Women make up half of the total population of Bangladesh. However, they are generally denied equal access to and participation in resources and opportunities. There is a huge disparity between male and female participation in Bangladesh civil service. The government of Bangladesh has adopted and signed several conventions and treaties asking for gender equality like the World Conferences on Women, the UN Conference on Human Rights, the World Summit on Social Development, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Labor Organization and so on. Furthermore, Bangladesh has implemented numerous initiatives and policies to encourage equality and equity for women's empowerment. The constitution, the national Labor Code (2006), and the National Women's Development Policy (1997) provide essential policy provisions for gender equality, including special measures for women in the civil service. Since 1991, the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition have both been women. A woman also serves as Speaker of the House.

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Over time, there have been more female MPs elected. The civil service, however, has a shockingly low proportion of women in senior leadership roles.

Women's participation in leadership and decision-making is crucial because of the implications for both people and society as a whole. It is usually seen that women encounter more obstacles to advancing their careers than men do individually as a result of occupational exclusion. The barring of women from leadership positions in the professional hierarchy generates questions of social justice at the societal level. There is also a huge pool of unused human resources (Russell et al., 2017). To ensure that women's interests are fully taken into account and effectively addressed, it is thought that there should be at least 30 percent of women in leadership roles. Additionally, more women in public service are needed for democratic government and truly inclusive growth (UNDP, 2014).

Women in Bangladesh are experiencing various legal, economic, and social restrictions. They are victims of violence; debarred opportunities from taking part in the labor force, and therefore underrepresented in public and professional life; are deprived of access to political offices. Although the government of Bangladesh has launched several affirmative actions to upgrade the status of women in recent years, they still lag in the areas of decision-making positions in the public sphere. The Bangladesh civil service currently has over one million personnel; however, women are marginal in the civil service; they are not represented in the policy and decision-making positions. This article aims to analyze the current status of women in the civil service of Bangladesh. It also sheds light on the problems they have to deal with while working at the field stations. It also prescribes some recommendations to improve the status of women in higher positions in the service. More specifically, this study focuses on Class I female civil servants belonging to the BCS Administration cadre working in the field administration of Bangladesh.

### **Methodology**

The primary method used to gather data for this study was desk research, which involved looking at and reviewing published and unpublished papers, books, journals, circulars, reports, publications, and newspaper stories about women in the civil service. As a result, secondary information made up the bulk of the data. Furthermore, data was gathered via the internet. Besides, primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews with 26 women in civil services working in the field between March to April 2022 to gather information regarding their job environment and other challenges.

## **The Administrative System of Bangladesh**

For over 200 years, British India included Bangladesh. After India and Pakistan were divided in 1947, this nation was ruled by Pakistan for 24 years before becoming an independent nation in 1971 following a brutal nine-month war with Pakistan. Therefore, the Indian Civil Service and Pakistan's Central Superior Services, both of which were created and expanded by the British Empire, leave a legacy behind for Bangladesh's civil service. Currently, the government of Bangladesh operates on a two-tiered administrative structure. The upper tier is the national central secretariat, which consists of ministries and divisions that develop policies and serve as a clearinghouse. The second tier is made up of 'line' departments or directorates that are affiliated with ministries and divisions and are mostly in charge of general administration, service delivery, and implementation of development programs at the field level (Ahmed, 2002; Jahan, 2017). There are now 31 ministries, 27 divisions, 353 directorates, and attached departments, 8 divisions, 64 districts, and 492 Upazila in Bangladesh (Government of Bangladesh, 2022).

A minister is in charge of a ministry and serves as its "political leader." There is at least one division in a ministry. The administrative head of the ministry is usually a secretary or, in his absence, an additional secretary. In infield administration, the division is the most important administrative unit. Bangladesh is divided into eight divisions: Rajshahi, Dhaka, Khulna, Barisal, Chittagong, Sylhet, Rangpur, and Mymensingh. A Division is overseen by a Divisional Commissioner of the rank of a joint secretary or an equivalent officer from the Bangladesh government. On behalf of the central administration, the official in charge of the Division is responsible for all administrative functions. Each Division has several districts under its jurisdiction, the second most important administrative unit of field administration in Bangladesh. Bangladesh is divided into 64 districts. A district is usually administered by a Deputy Commissioner who is a deputy secretary. A district is made up of some Upazila, the lowest administrative tier of field administration. An Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) is a senior assistant secretary of Bangladesh who is in charge of Upazila.

### **Civil Service System in Bangladesh at a Glance**

The civil service has been divided vertically into four groups namely class I, class II, class III, and class IV considering variables like levels of responsibility, educational qualifications, and salary ranges. Class I and a fraction of class II officers are referred to as "gazetted officers," while the rest are classified as "non-gazetted." The phrase 'gazetted' refers to officers whose appointment, transfer, promotion, and

posting, among other things, are announced in the official gazette (a periodic official publication of the Bangladesh government). Officers who have been gazetted usually have more authority, responsibilities, and benefits. Moreover, the service is again divided into two groups: cadre and non-cadre. The cadre service is made up of a very small number of civil servants in the public service. Class I cadre posts are further divided into six ranks: secretary, additional secretary, joint secretary, deputy secretary, senior assistant secretary, and assistant secretary (Ahmed, 1986).

Bangladesh has a closed entry system in which class I officials are hired directly into the cadre services after passing an open competitive examination known as the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) Examination, which is administered by the Bangladesh Public Service Commission (BPSC) for positions like the assistant secretary or equivalent. In Bangladesh's civil service, there are now 26 cadres. The cadres are separated into general and technical or professional cadres based on the required educational degrees (Ara, 2021).

### **Recruitment Rules of Bangladesh Civil Service**

In 1982, the first comprehensive recruiting regulations, the Bangladesh Civil Service Recruitment Rules (1981), were published for the appointment of officers to various cadres of the Bangladesh civil service, and the BCS Examination was held. The Bangladesh Civil Service (Age, Qualification, and Examination for Direct Recruitment) Rules 2014 are now in effect for direct recruitment at the entry level. In Bangladesh, there are three types of recruiting procedures for various civil service cadres: (i) Direct recruitment at the entry-level through an open competitive assessment (ii) Promotion, and (iii) Transfer or deputation (Ara, 2021).

It needs to mention that until 2019 both merit and quota were employed in the recruitment process in Bangladesh. According to the quota system, 44 percent of open positions would be filled on merit, with the remaining 56 percent filled by district quota. The district quota was then distributed as follows: 30 percent for families of liberation fighters, 10 percent for women, 10 percent for backward areas, five percent for minority ethnic groups, and one percent for disabled people. However, following criticism from academics and researchers, as well as a nationwide movement by students and job seekers against quotas, in 2019 the government of Bangladesh declared that quotas in public servant recruitment for classes I and II would no longer be available. As a result, the Bangladesh Public Service announced that recruitment in the cadre services would be completely based on merit and made it effective from the 40th BCS Examination held in 2019 (Senior Correspondent, 2020).

## **Selection Procedure for the Cadre Officials**

The recruitment of cadre officers is primarily the responsibility of the Bangladesh Public Service Commission. Generally, the concerned ministry informs the Bangladesh Public Service Commission of the number of vacant posts through the Ministry of Public Administration. Following that, Bangladesh Public Service Commission publishes adverts in daily newspapers inviting individuals to apply for the open positions. A candidate for the class I cadre service must be a Bangladeshi citizen between the ages of 21 and 30, except freedom fighters, disabled individuals, and health cadre applicants, who must be between the ages of 32. The age limit for BCS (education) and BCS (health) is also relaxed for tribal people up to 32 years. To take the examination, the applicant must have at least a second-class bachelor's degree. Eligible candidates are invited to take a 200 marks preliminary exam. Those who pass the preliminary examination are required to take a written examination. Qualified candidates who pass the written exams are then subjected to a viva-voce and a psychological examination. The results of the written exam and viva are combined to create a merit list (Ara, 2021).

## **Women in Bangladesh Civil Service Cadre: A Brief Picture**

Women have been working in the civil service of Bangladesh since 1972, but they did not join the mainstream civil service in Bangladesh until the early 1980s. There were a handful of women in the civil service till 1982 even though women in Bangladesh were never forbidden from joining the civil service except for the police force. This ban was removed from the 15th BCS held in 1993 (Karim, 2008), and some female officers were recruited into this police cadre through the 18th BCS (Jahan, 2017).

Despite constitutional guarantees and government affirmative initiatives, female involvement in the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) is nearly non-existent in comparison to the country's demographic patterns. For example, barely 10 percent of top management in the civil service in 2013 was female. Of them, only 104 (among 1014) women held the position of deputy secretary, and significantly fewer held high management positions beyond the level of deputy secretary, such as secretary and additional secretary, where only 6 among 72 secretaries and 54 among 438 additional secretaries were women. In 2017, 11 out of 77 secretaries (including secretaries in charge), 74 out of 481 additional secretaries, 95 out of 810 joint secretaries, 261 out of 1552 deputy secretaries, 387 out of 1473 senior assistant secretaries, and 458 out of 1429 assistant secretaries were women, indicating a minor improvement after three years (Khair et al., 2017).

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In 2019, 10 (12.3 percent) among 78 secretaries (including secretaries in charge), 81 (14.5percent) among 560 additional secretaries, 71 (10.9percent) among 649 joint secretaries, 262 (0.2percent) among 1552 deputy secretaries, 397 (26.2percent) among 1518 senior assistant secretaries, and 432 (30.5percent) out of 1415 assistant secretaries were women, indicating a slight improvement after two years (Mouree, 2019). As of May 2022, there are eight female secretaries against 77 male secretaries, 73 female additional secretaries against 490 male additional secretaries, and 103 female joint secretaries against 654 male joint secretaries. Just roughly 13.1percentof government policy-making positions, like jointsecretaries and higher, are occupied by women (Ministry of Public Administration, 2022). This image contrasts sharply with the comparable higher level of educated women in Bangladeshi society.

### **Women in Field Administration: Current Status**

Working at a field office is a difficult job for both men and women. However, women face more difficulties than men in the field. Like poor representation in the central administration, women are underrepresented in field offices. The position of Divisional Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner (DC), or Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO) in the field administration is acknowledged as an elite position in the field-level bureaucracy. These jobs are usually filled by officials from the BCS (administration) cadre. Civil servants who work in these posts have a good chance of being promoted to the highest position in the service which is the secretary (Ara, 2020). It is found that there were no female Divisional Commissioners in 2015, only three female Additional Divisional Commissioners (17.6percent)against 14 male, three female Deputy Commissioners (4.6percent) against 61 male Deputy Commissioners, 18 female Additional Deputy Commissioners (9.1percent) against 178 male Additional Deputy Commissioners, and 85 (16.2percent) female Upazila Nirbahi Officers against 439 male Upazila Nirbahi Officers (Jahan, 2017).In 2020, the status has improved slightly; there were six (9.3percent) female Deputy Commissioners and 58 male Deputy Commissioners, 16 (7.2 percent) female Additional Deputy Commissioners against 206 male Additional Deputy Commissioners, and 106 (21.5 percent) female Upazila Nirbahi Officers against 385 male Upazila Nirbahi Officers. Additionally, a woman was in charge of Sylhet Division as divisional commissioner (Ara, 2020).

As of May 2022, there are no female Divisional Commissioners or Additional Divisional Commissioners, 9 (14percent) female Deputy Commissioners against 55 male Deputy Commissioners, 53 (22.3 percent) female AdditionalDeputy Commissioners against 184 male

Additional Deputy Commissioners, and 107 (20percent) female Upazila Nirbahi Officers against 338 male Upazila Nirbahi Officers (Ministry of Public Administration, n.d.). It can be said that women are working at field offices in greater numbers than before. However, women civil servants are lagging behind men in the leadership position of field administration. Unfortunately, no women are serving as Divisional Commissioners and only a handful as Deputy Commissioners, indicating a shortage of qualified female officials to fill these administrative positions. Along with eligibility, there is the issue of the government's desire, as patriarchal social beliefs and traditions frequently lead the government to limit the scope of female officers' ability to function in difficult field environments.

### **Barriers to Women's Participation in the Field**

Women have higher challenges in both their professional and personal lives than their male colleagues. Sociocultural and religious conventions, negative attitudes of superiors, subordinate noncompliance, dual obligation of office and family, posting of husband in a separate place, unexpected and prolonged working time, inadequate leave, unavailability of a trustworthy person to care for children, moving at night, and a shortage of supportive staff are the key obstacles affecting their performance at the field.

Women in Bangladesh have traditionally been consigned to domestic responsibilities, whether they are employed or unemployed. However, the situation is even worse for working women as they have to balance family and profession. Men believe that women should prioritize their families over their careers. The majority of men, including working men, in Bangladesh, do not share household responsibilities however expect their wives to be perfect at ensuring that everything is in order at home. Likewise, many male colleagues are not sensitive to their female coworkers' troubles stemming from domestic issues and professions in the field (Ara, 2012). The same image emerged from interviews with female civil servants. Almost 90percent of the respondents have stated that they have to balance both household and job duties, which is difficult for them and affects their work performance. Furthermore, their male colleagues mostly possess similar patriarchal attitudes towards women like the broader society.

Accommodation at the field stations is a major issue for working women. The number of government apartments is limited while the available ones are mostly in poor condition. Dormitories and guest houses are in low supply and mostly unsuitable for women since they lack privacy. It is even more difficult to find a safe, comfortable, and quality place to rent. Furthermore, if a woman works in the field offices while

her family is elsewhere, she is subjected to both psychological and professional stress.

Women civil servants working in the field often have limited options to accompany their families to workstations due to issues such as their husband's employment, the lack of standard education facilities for their children, and so forth. It is seen that many times, female officers prioritize family over the profession and sacrifice their careers, sometimes leaving the job. Women who have to work outside or extended hours beyond office hours also suffer from a lack of insecurity. When they work in the field and live alone, that feeling of insecurity lingers in their minds. Many women officers' performance suffers as a result of their isolation from their families, and lack of insecurity giving the impression that they are inept. Childcare is also a key worry for working mothers. Domestic assistants are frequently the only ones accessible to look after their children. As a result, she is preoccupied with her child's safety, which impacts her performance. As a consequence, many women chose city-based occupations (Ara, 2020).

Culturally, society has yet to accept a female officer to lead the office. Women officers have a low level of acceptance among their coworkers, subordinates, authorities, and local communities. Male coworkers refuse to collaborate, subordinates attempt to defy directives, and locals attempt to exploit gender ideology. Furthermore, privacy is a big issue in many field offices. There is no separate prayer room, no separate toilet, and no restroom (Ara, 2020). Almost 80 percent of the study participants said they had an issue with their fieldwork environment affecting their performance. The workplace is overwhelmingly male-dominated; in some places, they are forced to use a shared toilet, which is quite uncomfortable for them.

Additionally, local political influences can lead to problems for female officials. Women are thought to be physically and intellectually weak, making them easy political targets. Thus, political leaders try to use female officials to carry out their agenda (Mouree, 2019). Transparency International Bangladesh reports that when it comes to fighting corruption, 43.5 percent of the 45 female Upazila Nirbahi Officers in Bangladesh have faced challenges. Upazila chairmen, local journalists, local MPs, law enforcement agencies, politicians, Deputy Commissioners, Assistant Deputy Commissioners, and the local community posed the majority of the obstacles. Around 34.3 percent of female Upazila Nirbahi Officers were pressured to commit irregularities in the distribution of relief supplies; 31.4 percent had to justify the rationality of various expenditures; 28.6 percent were forced to approve false bills; 89.1 percent of female UNOs, on the other hand, took



precautions to avoid corruption. According to the study, 40.5 percent of female Upazila Nirbahi Officers received no help from the Upazila chairman. They were, nevertheless, subjected to various forms of unethical pressure and sexual harassment (5.7 percent) by Upazila chairmen. (Times Report, 2021). However, only 4.5 percent reported to the ministry or anti-corruption commission about the corruption, and 5.6 percent reported to the higher authority about sexual harassment while doing their responsibilities (Staff Correspondent, 2021).

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

In Bangladesh, discrimination against women permeates practically every aspect of society. The conventional patriarchal society is structured in a way that promotes the subordination, submission, subjection, and isolation of women. Women are typically limited to their private lives and preoccupied with household duties. They receive little appreciation and recognition for the contribution they make to the family and society. The government of Bangladesh has taken several steps to ameliorate the underprivileged condition of women in the public sector. Despite these attempts, women hold fewer positions and a lower share of the civil service than is ideal. The study finds that discriminatory practices against women are prevailing in the civil service and most specifically at the field level. The number of women working at the field offices is still insignificant and many women try to avoid posting or transferring to the field offices because of challenges like hostile work environments, non-cooperation from family members, lack of logistic support, and insecurity that affect their performance and efficiency. The following proposals for improving women's standing in the field administration of Bangladesh's civil service may be considered.

- Posting in the same office for husband and wife with childcare facilities would help women officers travel and care for their young children while also lowering the possibility of sexual harassment. The government has issued a circular requiring a couple working in government services to be assigned to workplaces that are either the same or adjacent. However, such placement is routinely denied. Priorities must be set in these situations.
- Gender sensitization and motivational training for civil servants, government employees, and political leaders to change their attitudes towards working women. Additionally, community awareness-raising campaigns and initiatives to shift cultural and religious stereotypes towards women in a positive way need to be arranged. Furthermore, because young officers confront greater challenges in the field, sufficient training on how to deal with

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issues should be provided before they are assigned to a field position.

- Every field station should provide a daycare facility to help with childcare and education facilities for children to relieve the stress of working mothers in the civil service.
- Women working in field stations should be provided with safe accommodation, adequate transportation, personnel, and so on for field visits.
- Allocation of separate toilets and rest houses for women officers in the field must be provided.
- The actual barrier to women's participation is a lack of a comprehensive government policy and a willingness to execute policies that have already been implemented. The policies that are already in place should be modified and revised in light of an accurate assessment of women's needs, and the existing social setting.

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