

Globalization and Women in Bangladesh: A Review of Socio-Economic and Cultural Impacts

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Abstract

We live in an 'age of globalization'. The impact of globalization has brought about positive as well as negative effects on almost every societal aspect in the present day world. Globalization affects developed and developing nations differently. It also affects different groups of people in different ways. Women clearly stand out among the distinct groups of society upon whom globalization's impact has been most significant. In this paper an attempt has been made to present an overview of the socio-economic and cultural consequences of globalization on women in Bangladesh from various angles.

Keywords: Globalization, Women, Changing economy, Society, Culture.

1. Introduction

Globalization is a complex, unavoidable and dynamic phenomenon. It is difficult to define precisely because it is not a unitary process. Rather, it is a complex process that consists of many facets and affects different groups of people differently in different places. Globalization refers to the increasingly global relationships of culture, people and economic activity. Depending on one's view point, the scope of globalization affects the economy, polity, technology, culture, and society of a nation. During the last three decades, globalization has created a tremendous impact on the lives of the people in developing nations. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the effect and impact of globalization on the life and livelihood of women in Bangladesh.

This paper is a literature based review. It is totally based on secondary data. The data was drawn from various sources. Various issues were obtained by consulting the websites concerned. The paper is organized as follows. The first section deals with the conceptual analysis and different dimensions of globalization. The second part investigated the impact of globalization on women in Bangladesh from economical, social and cultural perspectives. Several points have been analyzed in this section to assess the gendered impact of globalization. Finally the third section concludes by proposing the way forward to improve women's conditions within globalization.

2. Globalization: Conceptual Analysis

In development discourse, the term 'globalization' has been widely discussed and debated. Globalization has become one of the world's most employed concepts to characterize the dynamics of the present era. But it is not a new phenomenon. For some historians, its seeds were sown as early as the fifteenth or sixteenth century (Robertson, 1992). However, it has emerged as a dominant international system at the end of the twentieth century and affected everyone in the world directly or indirectly.

Generally, Globalization is a process through which an increasing portion of economic, social and cultural transactions could take place directly or indirectly between different parties among different countries and markets (Radice, 1999).

In the word of Moghadam, globalization is "a complex economic, political, cultural and geographic process in which the mobility of capital, organizations, ideas, discourses and people has taken a global or transnational form (Moghadam, 1999).

Blackmore describes globalization as, "increased economic, cultural, environmental and social interdependencies and new transnational, financial and political formations arising out of the mobility of capital, labor and information, with both homogenizing and differentiating tendencies (Blackmore, 2000).

McGrew (1992) explains globalization as 'the multiplicity of linkages and interconnections between the states and societies which make up the modern world system. It describes the process by which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have significant consequences for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe'.

Globalization the ongoing process of greater interdependence among countries and their citizens is complex and multifaceted. It is not a single process but rather a bundle of different economic, cultural, technological, political and ecological processes. People from different academic disciplines use the term 'globalization' from different perspectives. But whatever definition one accepts, from whatever approach one might take, globalization is, obviously, a multi dimensional process, which is looked at from diverse perspectives-----social, cultural, political, economic, environmental, technological, and so on.

2.1 Dimensions of Globalization

Economic globalization – this central dimension of globalization is reflected in the increasing amount of cross border trade in goods and services, the increasing volume of international financial flows and increasing flows of labor. For economists, globalization is concerned with international trade, investments and capital market flows and participated by nations, large corporations, and financial institutions (Zafarullah and Huque, 2012).

But globalization is much more than an economic phenomenon. Though often defined in strongly economic terms, globalization has wide variety of other dimensions: technology, information, military, environmental, sociopolitical and cultural (Friedman, 2000). The technological and political changes that derive the process of economic globalization have massive non economic consequences. In the words of Anthony Giddens, “Globalization is political, technological and cultural, as well as economic” (Giddens, 2002).

Globalization is also a social and cultural process in which individuals of different cultural backgrounds interacts with each other in all spheres of life more intensively than before (Ergil, 2010). Cultural globalization may be perceived as a spread of cultural practices---and habits, values products, experiences, ways of life---from certain dominant places to others (Tomilson, 2003) or, for the people of the developing world, the Westernization or Americanization of their cultures.

It highlights the connections among languages, ways of living and fears of global homogeneity through the spread of North American and European languages and culture. ‘Globalization of culture’ at its most profound level sees the growing development of a monolithic consumer culture, a moral vision that seems to encourage a global vision of the world. (Kalam, 2002).

Environmental globalization includes the increasingly global effects of human activity on the environment.

Political globalization connects the expanding role of international governmental institutions and increasing political interdependence of nation states where as social globalization refers to inter exchange aspects of social life (Berner and Conyers, 2003/2004, cited in Haque, 2006). Hoogvelt (2001) defines globalization ‘as a new social architecture of cross-border human interactions’.

The above definitions and dimensions reveal that, globalization is a comprehensive term which encompasses a wide range of issues and phenomena. However, the discussion of this paper will be concentrated especially on the economic and socio-cultural aspects of globalization.

3. Globalization and its Impact on Women

Globalization has had various impacts on the lives of the people. In the developing countries like Bangladesh, due to women’s deprivation from resources and other opportunities, they are more affected by globalization and deeply experiencing its effects. The impacts of globalization on women are more complicated. Globalization is a double edged process as far as women are concerned.

In discussing how economical and socio cultural change from globalization has affected the women in Bangladesh I should analyze the following issues.

3.1 Feminization of the Labor Force

One of the most significant socio-economic effects of globalization has been the enormous numbers of women joining the economically active population in the developing countries. Increasing trend of trade deficit among LDCs due to market liberalization, cut back of state expenditure imposed by structural adjustment programs resulted in increased participation of women in the paid labor. Globalization has caused women to become wage earners and support their families. Women’s role in the labor force has changed from traditional, agricultural and domestic roles. The traditional patriarchal households which had previously kept their women at home released their hold to allow the women to work in factories (Barkat and Maksud, 2001). Women have entered into nontraditional occupations to a large extent due to establishment of export oriented industry in Bangladesh. Export promotion and trade liberalization policies have lead to the feminization of the labor force.

What has made women highly desirable workers in the new global economy is their capacity to provide an equivalent service at a lower wage and under much more insecure conditions than their male counterparts. Women are also willing to work as part time workers. Women who do not have specialized high level education only form parts of the large pools of low skilled, low paid, insecure employees. Corporations always seek ‘cheap’ and ‘docile’ forms of waged labor and that is why increased number of women is being drawn into the labor force. In many countries, female unemployment rates in the 1980s declined relative to male unemployment rates. Export-led industrialization has contributed to the growth of low wage female employment in developing countries. Bangladesh has paved the way for greater economic exploitation of women through export processing zones (EPZs). Transnational corporations (TNCs) decrease their production costs by transferring low-skill jobs to EPZs to take advantage of low-cost labor. In most cases, women are the ones with low skills and low bargaining power. Aside from low wages, women are subjected to work in hazardous conditions that can cause health problems. They are considered as being cheaper to employ, more passive and less likely to unionize. So despite employment legislation, requiring equal pay for equal work, women are consistently paid less than men. In the manufacture sector of Bangladesh, gender discrimination in wage rate is more pervasive. In fact, the process of globalization produces feminization of poverty through feminization of cheap labor.

As women move into work force, their domestic responsibilities are not alleviated. They have to work longer hours. Dawn to dusk unpaid domestic responsibilities is accompanied by low paid, exploitative, temporary and insecure jobs. Though globalization has brought jobs to women, they are exposed to work exploitation in terms of low wages, poor working conditions and instability of employment.

The impact of commercialization and privatization of the social sector have deeper consequences on social and economic spheres of life. The withdrawal of the social welfare and security net, forces the women into an even more subjugated and deprived position (Barakat and Maksud, 2001). A decrease of public expenditure in social sector has increased the vulnerability of the poor especially the poor women.

However, there is no single meaning of economic globalization for women's work. The impact can be both positive and negative and differs by context, by industry or trade and by employment status. Access to paid employment raises self confidence and brings about empowerment among women and consequently increased their bargaining power at the household level. It is also contributing to poverty alleviation by generating extra earning for poor households (Barkat and Maksud, 2001). In this way, globalization affect on gender equality, women empowerment and building the capability of women .But globalization also has had unfavorable effects on women in Bangladesh. Some women have been able to find new jobs or new markets for their products while others have lost jobs or markets. Moreover, many women have seen their wages decline, their working conditions deteriorate or their workload increasing. There are strong indications that globalization has brought adverse effects on women's employment situation.

Economic globalization has the potential to create a variety of changes within the social structure of the country. Not only societal but intra familial issues are affected by globalization. Globalization has changed the intra household responsibilities for females, where females are given more responsibility over the survival of the family (Bacchus, 2005). Women's domestic responsibilities continue to be a source of vulnerability for them mainly because of two reasons. It is unpaid work and it also diminishes women's mobility and autonomy to design their labor market strategies. In spite of that women are becoming the bread winner in most households. There are empirical claims of women gaining a feeling of independence from traditional gender roles in society – especially in marriage and child bearing. Attitudinal changes towards women's role in the family due to good education, good job opportunities are surely helping in the development of more confident and empowered women.

On the other hand, in the face of a rapidly expanded global impact the family structure in Bangladesh is undergoing some qualitative and quantitative changes. The pattern of traditional large families is breaking into the nucleus families. More women are getting out of the family circle to join the work force. The mass influx of women into paid work and long working hours of women have resulted in family breakdown. Divorce rates are rising. Furthermore, children's dropping out of school, child prostitution, addiction to drugs are direct consequences of family breakdown.

3.2Feminized Migration

Globalization has resulted in huge migratory movements. In some particular migrant labor flows, women are in the overwhelming majority. Social scientists have termed this as 'feminization of migration'. Increasing responsibility to raise family income leads Bangladeshi women to migrate to oil rich wealthier states of Middle East and East Asian countries in different professions like nursing, domestic worker, child career etc. They are part of a global flow of women from poorer states to wealthier ones. Again, the expansion of industrial sector, particularly, readymade garments industry in Bangladesh led to the rural-urban migration of thousands of young women.

According to a study, migration has an empowering effect on migrant women (IOM, 2000, cited in sultana, 2002). The opportunities for women to go abroad for employment enhance empowerment. But on the other hand, women are victims of wage discrimination, heavy workloads and sexual harassment by employers in both cases of migration (Haque, 2006). Most of the women migrant workers face sexual harassment while working in Middle East countries. Some Women emigrate and know that they will become prostitute, because there are no other opportunities for them. Migrant women workers in the garment industry take shelter in slums and squatter settlements or in messes. All of these living arrangements are insecure for women. Women living in slums and squatter settlements report that they are always afraid of local touts. They face a significant possibility of being raped or harassed by local touts (Sultana, 2002). Thus, the migrant women lost their social prestige in many cases.

3.3Trafficking, Prostitution and Tourism

International marketing of sex trafficking of women and girls has become a big transnational business today. Women are increasingly being bought and sold across national borders by organized networks. It has been reported that thousands of Bangladeshi women are getting victims of sex trade in the form of sale of women, prostitution and pornography etc due to the internationalization of sex tourism (Barkat and Maksud, 2001). When government promote tourism as a currency earnings growth strategy, business Mafias count prostitution as part and parcel of it. Local young women are seen as a sexual pool for tourists, regardless of the social consequences or the health risks for the women themselves. Deadly diseases like HIV/AIDS are being spread by

travelers to the remotest part of the world.

3.4 Social and Cultural Transformation

Globalization is a social and cultural process in which individuals of different cultural backgrounds interact with each other in all spheres of life more intensively than before. So it is another area that exhibits tremendous changes in the age of globalization. Changes enter our lives through technology, consumer products, new thoughts and visions of others. Cultural globalization has increased cross cultural contacts. Life styles, dress styles, fashions, modes of behavior, foods, music and cinemas now become global.

A distinct change has taken place in traditional life patterns of women. Westernized dress, modern haircut, delaying marriage is the effects of cultural globalization on women. Globalization has contributed to dating, celebration of friendship day, valentine day and modeling. Beauty contest, fashion shows are now common in Bangladesh. More women are going beauty parlor to increase their physical beauties and even they are taking help of expensive cosmetic surgeries and laser treatment (Haque, 2006).

The entertainment and culture industry in general converts the women and her body into a commodity quite openly and nakedly. There is a distorted exhibition of the female body for the sake of commerce (Barkat and Maksud, 2001). Even in motor car exhibition people will find nice bodily exposed female who is standing beside the car to promote that goods. Females are used as commodity which degrades their dignity. Society has become more open compared to its earlier conservative look due to exposure to other cultures through cable network. Cable TV and foreign movies acted as a catalyst in bulldozing the cultural boundaries. All these technologies have changed perceptions and dreams of ordinary women.

3.5 Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Women

Globalization has been speeded up through the increasing usage of ICT. But for those people particularly women who do not have adequate literacy levels, the information society is proving to be further detrimental to their progress. Increased use of ICT not only developing world business, knowledge and education but also helping to establish crime network and trafficking of women. There has been a increase in the violence particularly against women. More availability of cheap and filthy materials, porn movies are contributing towards the increased rate of violence. Girls are being blackmailed through new technology of photography, mobile camera, internet etc. Women are being raped in moving vehicles. There is deterioration in social values as evident from the less respect for ladies, older people.

4. Conclusion

Today's prescription for development is globalization. As globalization progress, understanding under what circumstances does it contributes to the goals of development is important. Globalization is not an unmixed blessing. How Globalization has produced specific opportunities, risks and vulnerabilities for women in Bangladesh will facilitate our understanding of globalization from gender perspective. Unemployment, low paid employment, poor working conditions, poor bargaining power, family breakdown, child labor, trafficking, prostitution are the well known, visible, obvious negative aspects of globalization on women in Bangladesh. The impact of commercialization and privatization in the social sector because of globalization inevitably increased the vulnerability of the poor, especially, the poor women. As for example, private services for health and education are beyond the reach of the poor and middle class women in Bangladesh.

In fact, Globalization is a two edged sword. How a woman is affected by globalization really depends on intersecting factors such as class, race, ability, age and education. For instance, there are women in the upper class in Bangladesh who have significantly benefitted through better education, new technologies, better employment and increased purchasing power. Born in Bangladesh Irin Khan runs the Amnesty International. However, the vast majority of women are worse off now than before.

In the context of globalization policy makers have to address gender related opportunities and constraints faced by women. Unless gender issues and concerns are understood, acknowledged and addressed, globalization will only exacerbate the inequalities between men and women, even in the circumstances, where its effects are positives.

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