



UNDP BANGLADESH

# GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY

2023- 2026

# FOREWORD

The global polycrisis that the world is currently facing has again demonstrated how every humanitarian and development challenge is worse for women – just because they are women. In fact, gender discrimination is one of the world’s most pervasive inequality and human rights violations.

At UNDP, we recognise that women’s empowerment and gender equality are cross-cutting issues that lie at the heart of human development. When we advance gender equality, we speed up progress on all the Sustainable Development Goals. Making gender equality a reality is therefore a core commitment for us.

UNDP Bangladesh has been supporting the Government for five decades to accelerate sustainable development and women’s empowerment. Over the last 20 years, the country has made remarkable progress in improving the lives of women and girls. Women are increasingly involved in public and civic spheres, maternal mortality rates are falling, there is greater gender parity in school enrolment, and women’s groups have mobilized themselves and ensured their voices are heard.

Persistent challenges remain, however, which threaten to stall or even reverse much of the progress achieved. Poverty, corruption, discriminatory laws, gender-based violence, child marriage, and climate change are among those challenges disproportionately affecting women and girls.

These inequalities are denying women and girls rights and opportunities and slow down the development of the country. Against this backdrop, we are working with our partners toward immediate-term solutions that directly reach individuals and communities, as well as longer-term reductions in structural barriers and transformative change for gender equality.

The UNDP Bangladesh 2023-2026 Gender Equality Strategy outlines the direction of our work on gender equality and women’s empowerment and is a tool to hold ourselves accountable to integrating gender equality into every aspect of our work. It builds on UNDP’s global expertise and the experience we have gained working on these issues in Bangladesh. It invites partnerships and collaboration with national and international partners to achieve common goals of a more just and equal world.

I am grateful to the stakeholders and colleagues whose contributions helped create a strategy that is reflective of the context in which we operate.

I invite you to read the strategy and learn more about how UNDP, together with our partners, is envisioning to support Bangladesh in advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment.

Stefan Liller  
Resident Representative  
UNDP Bangladesh



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>BANGLADESH: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>OUR GLOBAL VISION ON GENDER EQUALITY</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>UNDP BANGLADESH’S STRATEGY</b>	<b>11</b>
Three Enablers	12
Gender-Transformative Programming	13
Institutional Transformation	17
Partnerships and Collaboration	21
<b>ACCOUNTABILITY, MONITORING &amp; EVALUATION</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>ACTION PLAN</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>FOOTNOTES</b>	<b>31</b>



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNDP Bangladesh's Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2023-2026 was drafted in the context of a myriad of global challenges. The localized impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global economic recession, increasing climate disasters, as well as political turmoil and democratic breakdown across the globe, threaten to halt or even reverse much of the progress that has been achieved in gender equality in Bangladesh over the past decades. Significant gender inequalities persist, denying women of rights and opportunities and slowing down the country's development.

With Bangladesh's graduation from its Least Developed Country (LDC) status ahead in 2026, the years leading up will be formative and will require increased investments into achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. After all, gender equality is not only a fundamental human right but also the necessary foundation for sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth and sustainable development for all.

UNDP Bangladesh is committed to supporting Bangladesh on this challenging but promising road ahead. This strategy outlines the future direction of our work on gender equality and women's rights as we seek to dismantle the underlying power structures and root causes that limit women's and girls' empowerment. Our strategy is aligned with the fourth global UNDP GES (2022–2025) and the UNDP Strategic Plan (2022–2025), including the Common Chapter of the Strategic Plan of UNDP, UNICEF, UNFPA and UN Women.

UNDP's approach to gender mainstreaming is three-fold: (1) to design and implement gender-specific interventions that uproot gender inequalities; (2) to address gender concerns in developing, planning, implementing, and evaluating all of our projects and programmes; and (3) to forge partnerships that accelerate the achievement of our common goals.

The approach is grounded in several core principles which guide our strategy:

**Human Rights:** Our strategy follows a human rights-based approach to development.

**Leaving No One Behind:** We consider the multiple intersections of inequalities and aim to reach those most marginalized with our work.

**Transformation of Gender & Power Relations:** We pursue initiatives that accelerate structural transformations for gender equality and remove the institutional, societal, political, and legal barriers women and girls face.

**Engaging Men & Boys:** We recognize men and boys as allies in closing the gender gap and address discriminatory attitudes, practices and oppressive forms of masculinity that impact both women and men.

**Contextualization:** We work in partnership with the Government of Bangladesh to follow a contextualized and country-driven approach that best addresses the unique challenges the country faces.

**Monitoring & Accountability:** We hold ourselves accountable for achieving our targets through rigorous monitoring and accountability measures.

Our GES is informed by extensive research on the unique political, social, and economic context in which we operate, the lessons learned from our experience of working with and for the Government of Bangladesh since 1972, as well as thorough internal and external consultations that have shaped our approach to accelerating progress on gender equality in Bangladesh. The strategy ensures women's empowerment is integrated into every aspect of our work and enables us to take results-oriented steps towards achieving gender equality in Bangladesh.





# BANGLADESH: A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Since the World Conference on Women in Mexico in 1975, Bangladesh has been at the forefront among the LDCs in addressing gender disparities. Bangladesh's constitution recognizes equal rights for women and men in the public sphere, and a reasonably robust legal and policy framework guarantees women's rights. The National Women's Development Policy 2011 and its National Action Plan provide a base for government action to promote gender equality, and the 8th Five-Year Plan integrates gender equality issues across several sectors.

Bangladesh has experienced tremendous economic growth in the past decades and has met the criteria for LDC graduation by 2026. Similarly, it has made significant progress in women's empowerment across several areas. Bangladesh is currently ranked 71st among 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 of the World Economic Forum,<sup>1</sup> ahead of all its South Asian neighbors. The Government of Bangladesh has adopted Agenda 2030 as its development framework, demonstrating its commitment to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality and women's empowerment. Nonetheless, much more progress is needed to ensure that gender equality has a transformative and long-lasting impact on society.

We must undoubtedly celebrate the advances made in gender equality. Women are increasingly involved in public and civic spheres, with just over 20 per cent of parliamentary seats held by women (2022).<sup>2</sup> Maternal mortality rates are falling, fertility rates are declining, and there is greater gender parity in school enrolment. Women's groups have mobilized themselves and made sure their voices are heard on various issues, starting from violence against women, gender equality in securing economic opportunities and participation, equal representation in politics, reproductive rights, family law reforms and gender mainstreaming in public policies.



However, persistent challenges in Bangladesh threaten the progress achieved in the past 20 years. Significant gender gaps and discrimination against women persist, and existing inequalities have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, halting or even reversing much of the progress previously achieved. A high proportion of women still suffer gender-based violence, preventing them from reaching their full potential. Intersections of gender, class, and ethnicity lead women, especially from lower socio-economic strata and ethnic minorities, to be especially vulnerable.

Outlined below are both progress and key obstacles towards achieving gender equality and women's empowerment across different, albeit intersectional, thematic areas.

## EDUCATION

Education, especially for women and girls, is the foundation on which sustainable development is built. Bangladesh has made significant advances in this realm and has successfully achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education – now a model for other countries. However, despite high rates of school enrolment for girls, Government data shows female literacy rates to be 4.5 per cent lower compared to those of male counterparts<sup>3</sup> and dropout rates for girls at the secondary school level to remain at a high level of 36 per cent.<sup>4</sup> The main factors contributing to these lost school years include child marriage, gendered household responsibilities, high levels of early pregnancies, lack of access to appropriate information on sexual and reproductive health, gender-based violence and, most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic.



## WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Research has found a positive association between female labor force participation and economic growth<sup>5</sup> – increasing women's economic empowerment is thus not only a strategy for achieving gender equality but also for accelerating economic development for the whole of Bangladesh.

Since 1990, women's labor force participation has been steadily increasing but remains at an unsatisfactory level of 36 per cent (2020).<sup>6</sup> Their participation remains highly concentrated in the informal sector and low-paid jobs, such as in the RMG sector, where approximately 63 per cent of workers are women.<sup>7</sup>

Microfinance has had a tremendously empowering effect on women: 92 per cent of borrowers are women,<sup>8</sup> increasing their economic independence, social inclusion, and political participation. Nevertheless, systemic barriers continue to prevent women's economic empowerment: women account for only 5 per cent of Bangladesh's businesses are owned by women<sup>9</sup>, and only 25 per cent of women have an account at a formal financial institution.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, regardless of whether they are employed, they continue to take on the majority of unpaid domestic care work. Women are also disproportionately affected by unemployment, underemployment, and vulnerable employment.

Moreover, in Bangladesh, inheritance rights are governed by religious laws that are unequal and discriminatory towards women, affecting their economic and financial conditions. While Bangladesh is a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), it has expressed reservations about Article 13 (a) of the convention, which grants equality to women regarding the right to family inheritance, as well as Article 2 which requires states parties to take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to eliminate discrimination against women and Article 16.1(c) which concerns women's equal rights to choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent.<sup>11</sup> Equal rights of women in all spheres in Bangladesh



is not only a question of women's development but also a fundamental human right that is yet to be guaranteed by the state.

## WOMEN'S POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

In Bangladesh, women's political participation has been widely recognized as a driver of democracy and women's empowerment. Headed by the longest-serving female head of state, Bangladesh has 50 reserved seats for women in the parliament. The seats are allotted to the parties based on their proportional representation in parliament, but they are not elected and have no constituency. Women's political participation has thus not yet reached a satisfactory level, both at the national and local levels. Persistent gendered social norms and stereotypes, as well as early marriage and familial duties, act as barriers to women's rise to political leadership in Bangladesh. Increasing women's participation in the political sphere requires a whole-of-society approach that dismantles these barriers effectively.

## GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING

Recognizing the importance of public investment in the advancement of women to achieve equality and sustainable development, the Government of Bangladesh introduced gender-responsive budgeting in 2009. Gender-responsive budgeting is now institutionalized across 43 ministries. However, financial constraints in the Ministry of Women and Children Affairs (MoWCA) mean that there is a lack of human resources to effectively coordinate and monitor the activities of other ministries in addressing gender-specific needs. Moreover, the capacity of gender focal points across the ministries for gender-responsive budgeting is low. A lack of gender-disaggregated data and gender auditing of projects further weakens the initiative.

## PERVASIVE SOCIAL NORMS AND STEREOTYPES

Patriarchal values, social norms, and gender-based discriminations permeate all levels of society in Bangladesh, acting as invisible barriers to long-term, comprehensive progress towards gender equality. These

norms and values tend to privilege men and boys' access to opportunities and control over resources. Studies in Bangladesh indicate that participation in income-generating activities positively affected women's ability to make household decisions such as major purchases, healthcare for themselves and their family members, and engagement in recreational activities.<sup>12</sup>

Women with higher levels of education and income-generating activities are more likely to be involved in decision-making with their partners and are more likely to seek out sexual and reproductive health services than those with lower levels. This underscores the importance of tackling social norms preventing women from accessing opportunities and controlling resources.

## GENDERED IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Climate change is not a gender-neutral issue. The impacts of climate change are largely gendered, exacerbating the pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities women in Bangladesh face, including entrenched gender norms and reproductive responsibilities.

Women's lack of control over capital, limited economic opportunities, and lack of voice in decision-making further impede their ability to adapt to and overcome challenges posed by climate change. As their average income is much lower, female-headed households spend 30 per cent of their income on addressing the effects of climate change,<sup>13</sup> double than households headed by men, further entrenching gender inequalities. Enabling women to adapt to climate change by recognizing their vital contributions to decision-making and giving them control over resources will significantly accelerate climate action. While Bangladesh has strong stand-alone policies in both climate change and gender equality, there remains a gap with regard to recognizing the interlinkages. The newly formulated Bangladesh Climate Change and Gender Action Plan aims to enable the gender-responsive implementation of the National Adaptation Plan (NAP) and the Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC).