The Bangladesh Paradox: In what ways has social progress been achieved despite poor governance and high corruption?

blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/06/24/the-bangladesh-paradox-in-what-ways-has-social-progress-been-achieved-despite-poor-governance-and-high-corruption/

2016-6-24

Gender indicators in Bangladesh show significant improvement despite other development indices not displaying similar success. ***Juli Qermezi Huang*** *recently spoke at an event hosted by the South Asia Centre, the LSE Gender Institute, and the Eva Colorni Memorial Trust entitled* Tales of the Unexpected: Gender Equality and Social Progress in Bangladesh *exploring this paradox, and here discusses the progress made on gender equality and the unexpected features of this change.*

In December 2013, a month before Bangladesh's latest and controversial general election was due to take place, a train derailed violently as it passed through the area in northwestern Bangladesh where I conducted part of my doctoral field research. A group of opposition parties was protesting the upcoming national elections because the ruling Awami League was failing to heed demands that it resign and establish a neutral administration to oversee the polls. The protests (*hartal* and *oborodh*) were forms of mass demonstration that meant the shutdown of workplaces, offices, shops, and roadways sometimes for a week at a time. Shutdowns were often enforced violently by felling trees across highways, throwing firebombs at vehicles daring to travel, and, in this case, sabotaging railway tracks.

Amongst this political chaos, four young women were called early in the morning to the scene of the incident, where local officials instructed them–as technology experts–to photograph the deceased and aid in their identification. Such a task is one among myriad responsibilities of a growing cadre of private service-sector women entrepreneurs in rural Bangladesh. The women's work is a product of recent trends in international development, including in Bangladesh, that prioritise the mechanisms of the market over those of public-sector and NGO-aid programs and that seek to "help the poor to help themselves." The women's work–especially in this instance–also exemplifies what some people have identified as the "Bangladesh paradox" of poor governance, high corruption, low income, and yet rapid social progress, particularly regarding women and gender parity. Such indicators include a decline in maternal and child mortality and a higher rate of girls attending school and gaining employment outside the home, statistics that contribute strongly to Bangladesh's successes in achieving its Millennium Development Goals.

On 3 June, Professors Amartya Sen, Naila Kabeer, David Lewis, and I participated in a panel discussion entitled, "Tales of the Unexpected: Gender Equality and Social Progress in Bangladesh" to consider the Bangladesh paradox. We reflected on the unexpected features of change and the reasons why gender indicators seem to show improvement despite other development indices not displaying similar success. Naila Kabeer emphasised women's agency as a significant factor in driving development and reducing the gender gap, for instance through pursuit of family-planning methods, a decline in preference for sons, a priority on educating daughters, employment in the garments industry, and participation in microcredit activities. David Lewis spoke about Bengal's history of radical social movements, the government's intentional combination of state and non-state actors in policy making and social-service delivery, and women's entry into the global economy via the garments industry. Crucially, he added, Bangladesh's culture of internally driven experimentation–while often unplanned, contested, and unpredictable–produces innovations that yield advantages over externally driven planned interventions. Amartya Sen, characteristically humble and humorous while offering deep insight, stimulated reflection about the ways in which we build development theory and ask questions of our data. Do we miss important elements of social change by examining separate factors? In what ways does social change manifest differently at various scales and under multiple units of measure? For instance, education may show little impact at the level of the individual, but its effects become greater as we move outward to consider village and district levels.

Anthropological field research is one means of apprehending the complex interaction among many factors, at multiple scales, and over long periods of time. Ethnographic methods also uncover the ways in which people actually experience the changes signaled by macro-level indicators and statistics. In my own doctoral research–conducted over two years and focusing on three social enterprises in northeastern India and northwestern Bangladesh–I explore the socio-structural features and relational effects of market-driven approaches to poverty alleviation.

Situating social enterprise within Bangladesh's history of experimenting with diverse development models, I write about the role of development resources in constituting the country's new middle classes and patron-client relations. The core of my work focuses on young women (such as the four mentioned above) who participate as ICT entrepreneurs in market-driven women's-empowerment initiatives. I show how embarking on these ventures represents personal, kinship, and ethical projects of improvement in the context of rural families' increasing economic precariousness.

As they undergo entrepreneurial training, young women confront ambivalent experiences. On the one hand, the capacity to earn and provide for their families, travel freely, and make their own decisions significantly shape the ways in which they agentively consider and construct their own futures. The recent ubiquity of mobile phones has enabled women to conduct business at home and coordinate with clients. (It also allows them to engage in what they call "wrong-numer" mobile-phone relationships, in which young men dial random numbers until they hear a young woman answer and engage her in conversation. Such relationships usually remain in the digital realm, and they facilitate young women to reflect and act on the kind of future family circumstances they want to have). On the other hand, women entrepreneurs engage in what many people consider to be undignified work, they face organisational patriarchal control, and they often bear increasing burdens of family patriarchal practice such as needing to finance their own dowries via entrepreneurship debt. Mobile phones in this case also serve as devices of surveillance–by NGO and social-enterprise staff members and by male relatives–and control over women's activities.

As I emphasised at the panel event, as researchers we cannot consider technologies such as debt and mobile phones (or even activities such as adopting accountability measures in governance or undertaking garments work) to be inherently positive or negative. They are always embedded in existing social relations and power dynamics, and the ways in which such technologies interact with the life constraints and possibilities for people is always an important empirical question. Such devices, interventions, and experiments can yield many unintended and unexpected features of change, such as the proliferation of "wrong-number" mobile phone relationships among young people in Bangladesh and the devolvement of dowry responsibilities from male relatives onto young women. As a country that has faced radical transformations since its independence in 1971, Bangladesh continues to offer important lessons for development praxis and social theory, and I hope many people will be inspired to explore the many unexpected facets of change.

Catch up with Tales of the Unexpected: Gender Equality and Social Progress in Bangladesh *in full with the video/podcast, available here. You can also find the Storify here.*

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read ourcomments policy before posting.

About the Author

Juli Qermezi Huang *is a PhD candidate (defending her thesis next week!) in the Department of Anthropology at the London School of Economics. Her research–-based on two years of ethnographic field work in northeast India and northwest Bangladesh–explores the socio-structural and relational effects of social entrepreneurship and other market-driven forms of poverty alleviation. She is the author of Tribeswomen of Iran: Weaving Memories Among Qashqa'i Nomads.*

- Copyright © 2016 London School of Economics