

WOMEN'S PRIVATE AND PUBLIC SPACES IN BANGLADESH: QUESTION OF COLLECTIVE MOBILIZATION AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract: In Bangladesh, women are being discriminated in terms of access to health, shelter, clothing, employment, education, assets and other necessities of life. This has some definite and direct spatial manifestations in terms of uses of private and public spaces. Moreover, the women do not demand for their required spaces both at private and public lives. The present article discusses the constitutional provisions of spaces for the women, the existing system of availability of private and public spaces for women, arising problems due to absence or non-availability of such spaces, and, collective efforts of the women required to realize their rights of using of spaces, and how collectively they can be mobilized to address these problems.

Key words: Public space, Private space, Reproductive ages, Religious values, and Collective mobilization, Resistance

Introduction

In Bangladesh, the woman constitutes about 49 percent of the population. Various socio-cultural and economic indicators show that the status of women is much lower than that of men. Traditional socio-cultural practices limit their opportunities in education, skill development, employment and participation in the overall development process of the country. As a result, women are being discriminated as far as the access to health, shelter, clothing, employment, education, assets and other necessities of life are concerned. The deprivation of all these necessities of the women has some definite and direct spatial manifestations in terms of uses of private and public spaces. In recent years, in many third world countries, women are involved in varied aspects of productive and reproductive processes particularly in cities and as such new and more visible relations between women and space are observed (Brydon and Chant, 1989).

The concept of space refers to object physical space with its social and psychological dimensions. A space that can only be understood by monitoring the way space is being made and remade at intersection of development process and everyday life. A space has two facets – a physical phenomenon and a condition of mind both influenced by social process. Physical space can be understood easily by the senses but mental space needs to be interpreted.

A number of studies clearly indicate that women's concept, experiences and uses of spaces are different from those of men. (Little *et al.*, 1988). Most of the women in Bangladesh are deprived of the privileges of using required spaces by themselves for the purposes of private and public uses. Even realizing the need for such spaces, the women do not feel to raise their voices against the discrimination in the uses of spaces, which is required for the decent living of the women. In this context, it is pertinent to discuss the existing system of availability of private and public spaces for women, arising problems due to absence or non-availability of such spaces, and, collective efforts of the women that required realizing their rights of using of spaces. However, the present article has made a modest effort to highlight some of the pertaining issues and problems relating to the women's public and private spaces and how collectively they can be mobilized to address these problems. At the outset, it is to be mentioned that the subject-matter of the article is very wider which requires a wide range of primary level factual data and information for an in-depth analysis. In fact, due to shortage of time and resources, this sort of exercise has not been done. Nevertheless, the authors have tried to present some relevant information concerning the women of Khulna City from their own professional experiences and ideas.

Constitutional Provisions

As regards the fundamental-rights of the women, the Article 10 of the Constitution of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh (1996) reads as follows:

“Steps shall be taken to ensure participation of women in all spheres of national life.”

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Further, the Articles 28 and 29 of the Constitution of the Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh read as follows:

"The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth" [Article 28(1)]

"Women shall have equal rights with men in all spheres of the State and public life" [Article 28(2)]

"No citizen shall, on ground only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institution." [Article 28(3)]

" Nothing in this Article shall prevent the State from making special provision in favour of women or children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens." [Article 28(4)]

"There shall be equality of opportunity of all citizens in respect of employment of office in the service of the Republic." [Article 29(1)]

In pursuance of these Constitutional provisions, it can be said that the women have equal rights and opportunities as of men including activity space uses.

Statement of the Problem

The literacy rate of women is only 25.5 per cent in Bangladesh, much lower than that of men (which is 39 per cent); life expectancy is 58.9 years for men and 58.0 for women. Excess mortality of women has resulted in an unbalanced sex ratio in the population whereby there are 104 men for every 100 women (Planning Commission, 1997). Nutritional status of women and girls is marked by sharp differentials with men and boys. Health care for women is often restricted to their reproductive health. General health of women at all stages is often neglected. Women are married at a much lower age than men; mean age at marriage of women being 19.9 while that of men is 27.9. Early marriage, repeated pregnancy, long child bearing spans have serious implications for women's low nutritional status and high maternal mortality rate (4.4 per 1000 live births). Women's visibility in the public service has been negligible. Their participation in institutional development and decision making is also minimal. Women's high work participation in agriculture and cottage industry is not reflected in mainstream data collection system. Wage differential between men and women are very high in case of wage employment. Violence against women is alarmingly increasing (Planning Commission, 1997).

All these have definite linkages with spaces. Space is the physical manifestation and expression of the human social, cultural, and economic activities and actions on the surface of earth. And as such the women and space can be looked at from two viewpoints: firstly, the public, i.e., the outer space; and secondly, the private i.e., the inner space. The extent of women's activity space also varies by their age, culture, and tradition of the area, status in the society and the income level of themselves or the family.

In Muslim society, the presence of women in public places is generally discouraged and considered as offensive (Mernissi, 1975). The patriarchal household structure has virtually prohibited the women from going to public places. Women are only permitted to move around within the indoor spaces of the houses but not to be seen outside. Public spaces are meant for the men's places of economic, social, cultural and political life and activities (Adnan, 1988; Paul, 1992). Such gender-based differences in space use have risen some discriminative behavioural attitudes towards the women's dependence. The socio-cultural values and norms also greatly affect the need for private and public spaces by the women.

Due of lack of adequate private and public spaces, the mental as well as physical development of the women is being retarded. As a result, the women i.e., almost half of the country's effective and potential human resources tend to remain aloof from the mainstream of the socio-economic development process and mechanism.

Women in Private Space

Women's mobility and choice of activities are free to some extent in private space where they do most of their household tasks. These activities are different in view of their age, family economic status, family educational background, household type and other parameters and social and economic outlooks. Women's most important task in the private space are post harvest operations, cooking, childcare, washing clothes and other household works. As regards the availability of private spaces for the women, the problem is more acute among the poor families. One survey results conducted in Khulna city show about 64 per cent of the all members of the poor households live in one room (Murtaza, 2001).

From religious point of view, the women in Bangladesh are not generally allowed to go outside and they spend their time looking after household activities. Exclusively, there is no separate private place for the women to move according to need and choices. Due to rapid urbanization, the availability of private space in the larger cities such as Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna is reducing to a great extent.

Due to general poverty in the country, most of the women both married and unmarried do not have their separate bed rooms as well as separate toilet facilities. The women require some private places at home at certain times during their ages of child-bearing capacity. During a woman's life course, the area of her private space increases through childhood and usually reaches to a great extent during her productive years.

In the lower income settlement areas in the city i.e., in the bastees there are no separate bathing places for the women. They have to share toilets with men.

Women in Public Space

In Bangladesh and particularly in the larger cities the women recently are increasingly forced to seek employment outside home to support their families and to improve better living conditions. The values and norms of the social life are changing. This type of change in the societal pattern, the activity space requirement is expanding. The women need to go outside for different purposes. In outside also they are being discriminated in using public spaces. It is observed that there are no provisions for separate toilet and other places for the women in markets, parks, community centres, city centre areas, roadsides, primary and high schools, bus and launch stations, etc. In some of the railway stations there are separate toilet facilities for women but the condition of these toilets are deplorable and not suitable for uses. In various public areas the women are also in need of space exclusively for them.

A survey shows that in many government, autonomous and semi-government offices in Khulna city, there are either separate prayer rooms or mosques for men whereas there is no such separate place for women. Even from the religious viewpoints, there is discrimination between man and woman in providing physical spaces.

Table 1: Existence of Prayer Rooms for Women (Sampled)

Types of Offices	Status of Having Separate Space for Prayer		Total
	Yes	No	
Government		10 (100%)	10
Semi-Government		7 (100%)	7
Private		8 (100%)	8
Total		25	25

Source: Field survey, 2001

Note: Parenthesis figures show the percentages of the total

In Bangladesh, public activity space is larger for a man than a woman. The women's access to public spaces is strongly controlled by a number of physical and social constraints. One of the important constraints on women's use of public space is the long- enduring social attitudes which restricted women in all classes. Women are traditionally prohibited from activities in public space and this is perpetuated by both social and personal attitudes. Women are at risk of kidnapping, acid throwing and sexual assaults (Jahan, 1988). In Dhaka City, women do not feel secured outside their home. It was reported that men even throw rubbish at women. In terms of space uses, some women are also indiscriminately treated in the offices.

Problems of Collective Mobilization and Resistance

Two terms viz. collective mobilization and resistance used in the article are vitally important which need elaborate clarifications. The collective mobilization here denotes formation of a mass for their mutual benefit to putting into active service. This also refers to people's awareness and collective feelings and initiatives, tendency towards united action to achieve some targeted objectives for common benefits. On the other hand, resistance is the ability, power, act of oppose certain societal activities which go against somebody's interests.

It is also observed that the women in Bangladesh are neither significantly organized for mass mobilization to stand against the discrimination existed in society in terms of uses of private and public spaces between men and women. The following problems are visualized as far as the collective mobilization by the women for retaining adequate private and public spaces are concerned:

Lack of realization and understanding of the problems by the women themselves that they currently encounter;

- Religious prejudices, dogmas including misuse of *fatwas* against women, etc are other important barriers from which the women in Bangladesh cannot easily come out and as such they cannot resist;
- The family background of the women does not permit to resist against all these discriminations prevailing in society in the uses of spaces at home and outside by the women;
- The Government does not have specific policy on the use of private and public spaces by the women and as such the women cannot mobilize themselves legally to establish their rights in this respect;
- The women having strong commitment and the ability of leadership are seriously lacking in Bangladesh;
- The illiterate women living in rural and low income settlements areas in urban areas are not adequately aware about the problems;
- Sometimes the men are reluctant to understand the problems of the women; and
- Due to existence of inherent poverty, the women in Bangladesh are struggling for mere survival and as such they realize the issue of space as one of their problems; whereas they cannot stand collectively.

However, the question of collective mobilization of the women in using spaces in public and private places is essentially a wider issue. It has wider implication in terms of realization of the fact of social discrimination between men and women living in the same socio-economic groups.

Some Recommendations

There is need for amendments in the Local Government Ordinances so that it is categorically mentioned that separate facilities and services would be provided by different local bodies. Separate public toilets should be constructed for the women at the different public gathering places with female caretakers. The NGOs in association with women activists and social workers can sit for dialogue with concerned authorities so that these organizations prepare plans and programmes for separate public places for the women. NGOs should include the advocacy programmes to address these vital and important problems of private and public spaces for women.

The problems relating to women private and public space are to be addressed in a holistic manner. The issue of lack of adequate private and public space has to be looked at from the point of view of our socio-cultural and economic perspectives and dimensions. Enabling capacity of the poor women in the society has to be strengthened through effective micro-credit facilities. At the same time, the level of understanding of the women so that they themselves realize that which one is the realistic option for them to improve their quality of life.

Concluding Observation

The pursuit of equal opportunities between women and men as envisaged by the Bangladesh Constitution is an important goal in its own right. It is also increasingly recognized that development objectives such as accelerated economic growth, poverty alleviation and employment creation cannot be achieved without the contribution and participation of women. And these are important useful programmes which enable the capacity in terms of economic well being of the neglected women in the society. If these are attained, they themselves will come forward to resist all social bindings and barriers. However, the benefits of action on issues of women's equality and development are generally accepted in principle. Still, the actions are limited in this direction. It may be concluded that social attitude towards women in terms of private and public activities and their space needs are to be understood properly since now more women are seen in public places than in the recent past.

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