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### **Bangladesh: Solving Food Insecurity One Woman at a Time**

Would people entrenched in long-standing social norms and ideologies be willing to change their views for the sake of the wellbeing of their country? This is a prevailing issue in the country, Bangladesh, where social norms are preventing food security, the “availability and adequate access at all times to sufficient, safe, nutritious food to maintain a healthy and active life” (“World Food Programme”). While Bangladesh is largely agriculturally-based, many sociocultural factors contribute to food insecurity. Barriers to total food availability, access, and utilization allow for the existence of poor diets and malnourishment to prevail. One of the most significant barriers to sufficient food for all citizens is gender disparities and inequality. Social norms and traditional gender roles prevent women from reaching their full potential, as women are marginalized and denied a proper chance in influencing the food security of their children and communities. However, if women were empowered through education and supported economically, then the women of Bangladesh would have the power to greatly influence and resolve the nation’s current state of food security within their homes and throughout their society as a whole.

Bangladesh is located in the eastern region of the Indian Subcontinent. It has a subtropical monsoon climate characterized by three distinct seasons: “a hot, humid summer from March to June; a cool, rainy monsoon season from June to October; and a cool, dry winter from October to March” (Weatheronline.co.uk). This climate is favorable for agriculture, which allows for a large population. The population of Bangladesh is approximately 160 million, who inhabit a landmass of only 56,977 square miles. This places serious stress on the development of this country and the wellbeing of its inhabitants, as the country has a population density of around 3000 people per square mile (Framework 16). As the population continues to grow at a rate of 2.6 percent each year (“Bangladesh” galegroup.com), land availability decreases, which substantially lowers the availability to feed the population. As a result, an estimated 30 million live in extreme poverty and “malnutrition - in terms of rates for stunting (41% of children under 5), underweight and wasting - remains high” (Framework 30).

Although Bangladesh is predominantly an agrarian country, around 41 million people live in urban areas. 7 million of these urban dwellers inhabit the slums, or the poorest areas, of Bangladesh cities (Westhof 9). According to the 2005 Census of Urban Slums, slums are areas of poor housing, very high population density and room crowding, poor environmental services, low socioeconomic status for the majority of residents, and lack of security of tenure (Westhof 9). Although access to healthcare has improved (“Summary: Access to Healthcare in Bangladesh”), merely 7.3 percent of slums have a public health clinic (Westhof 16) and in all of Bangladesh, “there are an estimated 3.05 physicians per 10,000 population and 1.07 nurses per 10,000 population” (“Bangladesh” WHO.int). In addition, women do not receive equal access to healthcare, as social prejudices and standards prevent them from using these services (“Summary: Access to Healthcare in Bangladesh”). Educational services and availability differ greatly in slums as compared with other areas. The national average for net attendance in secondary education is 48 percent in rural areas and 53 percent in urban areas. Although there have been national improvements in education in recent years, slum dwellers have limited access to schools and only 18 percent participate in secondary education (Westhof 7).

A typical family inhabiting urban areas consists of an average of 4.4 persons per household (“Bangladesh” galegroup.com). Since it is a patriarchal society, the men are the head of the household and the family life is heavily influenced by the patriarchy. For example, families consist of “paribars”, which are groups of blood-related people, who are dependent on the head male of the household. This

patriarchal society means that gender inequality exists, constraining women to have the only social status of a wife and mother (Rozario galegroup.com). Bangladeshi diet consists of cereals (mainly rice), some vegetables, a few legumes, and occasionally small quantities of fish (Bhattacharjee et al.). As “about half of the population can not reach the minimum dietary energy requirement” (Begum et al. 264), the amount of malnutrition is even greater in women due to cultural norms of the men receiving the better quality and larger proportions of food (Bhattacharjee et al.). Many urban dwellers work in factories, which are often categorized as sweatshops. The law states that the legal workweek is 48 hours with one mandatory day off. However, this law, along with worker safety standards, is rarely enforced, resulting in work-related accidents, fires, and even deaths. Their minimum wage ranges from \$43 to \$132 per month (“Bangladesh” galegroup.com). Although it is discouraged, child labor is legal and remains a serious problem, as “children are employed in agriculture, as domestic servants, street sellers and beggars, restaurant helpers, and in many other types of informal sector work” (“Bangladesh” galegroup.com).

In order to provide basic nutritional needs, many Bangladeshis grow vegetable gardens in whatever land they have available (Rashal WorldPress.org). These gardens are but one type of the many markets in the country. The other markets include open-air temporary markets, roadside shops, municipal corporation markets, convenience stores, and supermarkets (Bhattacharjee et al. 2-3). These existing food markets usually provide minimum dietary requirements, but Bangladeshis continue to struggle with malnourishment caused by “the prevailing deficit in total calorie intake,” in addition to the normal diet of Bangladeshi people being “seriously imbalanced, with inadequate shares of fat, oil and protein” (Begum et al. 264).

A typical family in Bangladesh faces several challenges regarding their food security and other basic rights. A major barrier is a result of the geographic size and climate of the country. As the population increases by 1.9 million each year, the agricultural land available is reduced by one percent. The country’s fluctuating and dangerous natural disasters, including floods, rising water levels, river erosion, drought, and cyclones, contribute to higher food insecurity and increased food prices. These climate threats also place a barrier on employment and a living wage as they result in “damaged harvests and more landless and unemployed people” (ShineTheme). Families also face barriers toward access to food markets and adequate nutrition because their diets are not diverse and are chiefly reliant on rice (“Agriculture and Food Security | Bangladesh.”). This is a result of a lack of nutritional knowledge and an “insufficient domestic production of non-cereal foods (pulses, oilseeds, fruits, meat, milk and eggs)” (Begum et al. 264), because the majority of people purchase their food at small markets with few foods of nutritional diversity (Bhattacharjee et al. 2-3).

The patriarchy in Bangladesh family structures means that there is an absence of gender equality and equal opportunity. Without the same economic and social opportunities, women are not able to reach their full economic and social potentials. These disparities are prevalent throughout employment in the country; although women make up a large percentage of the workforce, 77 percent of female workers are employed in family-based economic activity as “contributing family workers”, meaning they are unpaid and often unacknowledged economically (Ramachandran 7). Women’s advancement in Bangladesh is crucial to the maintaining of food security because “improvements in women’s power relative to men’s, both within the household and in the community, strongly influence children’s nutritional status” (Smith et al. ix). Particularly in Bangladesh and other South Asian countries, if men and women shared an equal status, “the percentage of underweight children would decline from 46 to 33 percent—a reduction of 13.4 million malnourished children” (Smith et al. ix)

Currently, a program called the BRAC is attempting to solve issues involving the marginalizing of women through skills development and training for specific jobs. Job training and entering women into the workforce is a crucial step for resolving food insecurity in Bangladesh, because “not only does women’s income boost household income, it also meets global societal objectives such as increased

spending on food and children's goods" (Ramachandran 14). Similarly, when gender inequalities occur in receiving productive resources and equitable wages, "effective maintenance and sustainability of cultivable land" is prevented (Ramachandran 14). BRAC has given many women jobs in Bangladesh, "with over 5 million microfinance clients," making it "a leader in development services" (Rhyne). Women with these jobs are thus able to have an economic influence within their community; however, despite BRAC's success in job creation, this program does little to increase women's decision-making and overall status, as a "majority (53%) handed over their loan money to male household members" (Ahmed et al. 11). Without equal decision-making power, gender disparities prevail, causing "the existing socio-cultural norms, values, beliefs and practices in rural Bangladesh" to abstain receptiveness "to these BRAC affected changes in women's lives" (Banu et al. 43).

Because women do not have equal power in decision-making and still act under control of the patriarchy, the trends for solving the issue of gender equality remain constant, although some strides have been made, including achieving "political empowerment, better job prospects, and improved education" in recent years ("Janina Jaruzelski..."). Improving the social and economic status of women is crucial to not only the progression of Bangladesh, but the world as a whole because "a world with zero hunger can be achieved only when everyone has equal opportunities, equal access to resources, and equal voice in the decisions that shape their households, communities and societies" ("Gender Equality" WFP.org). Specifically, "Bangladesh cannot expect to achieve its full potential until all of its citizens [...] are achieving their full potential" ("Janina Jaruzelski..."). Along with societal and cultural norms, other major issues, especially climate change, affect gender equality because gender "determines their access to the resources and processes needed for dealing with climate change." Likewise, reduced access to food caused by climate change affects women in that they "are often more vulnerable than men in conflict situations and will thus be affected more than men when access to food is threatened" (Nelson et al. 1 & 22).

Improving food security in Bangladesh starts with achieving better gender relations and developing a better status for women, as this "can increase yields to a significant degree and have multiple benefits for household nutrition, education and health" (Framework 30). A way to effectively improve the status of women, and consequently, the nutrition of millions of children, is to institute empowerment programs in communities. These programs allow women to become "aware of their rights and able to claim them," (Nelson et al. 12) and involve "women having the same capacity as men to determine and shape their own lives and contribute in shaping the lives of their families, communities and societies" ("Gender Equality" WFP.org). This could be achieved locally through the aid of programs already in existence, such as BRAC.

These empowerment programs would focus on several aspects that specialize in educating women, as well as men and children. These types of programs educate the people on "strategies aimed at attitudinal change in women themselves, and society at large" (Ramachandran 14). One educational aspect that would be focused on for women, men, and children is nutrition education, as the current nutritional status of the country is a major threat to Bangladesh's food security. This type of education is "any combination of educational strategies, accompanied by environmental supports, designed to facilitate voluntary adoption of food choices and other food- and nutrition-related behaviors conducive to health and well-being" (Jones et al.). Nutrition education is especially essential for women, as "the nutritional status of women in Bangladesh remains alarming. Almost one-third of women of reproductive age have a body mass index less than 18.5; this means they are very underweight" ("Women and Girls in Bangladesh" 3). It is also necessary that women receive this type of education because women transfer their knowledge to their children and "are typically responsible for food preparation and thus are crucial to the dietary diversity of their households" (Nelson et al. 14). Educating women on nutrition would result in millions of people with crucial nutritional knowledge and skills.

These programs would also focus on decision-making skills, so women are able to make decisions about food for their children and family. Women would be educated on management skills in monetary spending within the household to ensure gender equity and equal decision-making power between the male and female head counterparts of the household. These skills would bring about substantial changes in food security, as “improvements in household food security and nutrition are associated with women’s access to income and their role in household decisions on expenditure” (Ramachandran 12). These educational empowerment programs would take place in buildings already present in Bangladesh. From a young age, children would be taught these skills and educated within their schools. If a child did not attend school, he or she would be able to participate in these programs with all other members of the community in local community centers. At these centers, community leaders, chosen by the women of the community, would educate their people on these topics. Men and women would be able to express their feelings and concerns on gender roles and equality in these centers through the aid of the educated community leaders. These leaders would have this knowledge from organizations specializing in education of these topics, such as CARE (Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere), UNICEF, and the World Food Programme.

Another way to get women involved and have an impact on solving food insecurity in Bangladesh would be to promote and institute Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) systems, which would focus on producing nutritionally essential foods. This type of agriculture “consists of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community’s farm, with the growers and consumers providing mutual support and sharing the risks and benefits of food production” (“Community Supported Agriculture”). Furthermore, this solution benefits communities because when community members obtain food locally, “money stays within the local community” (Kelley et al. 1). CSAs are also more reliable source of income for struggling communities because they “offer a more structured and scheduled distribution for products than auctions with growers receiving a predetermined price instead of relying on unpredictable auction sales” (Kelley et al. 1). This gives the people a sense of security, which largely supports the landless and poor because the “lack of alternative sources of rural income creates acute vulnerability” (Framework 17). Women could get involved in these programs to obtain an unbiased wage to support their families and themselves, allowing them to have a positive and beneficial role in the community. Moreover, this type of agriculture would benefit the entire community as it would promote self-sufficiency and allow communities to control their own future and food security.

Further support needs to come from families, communities, the national government, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). On a family and community level, support for these programs needs to arise from the men, as they are educated about how women positively affect society, family success, and nutritional needs. Once these men understand female empowerment, they can support their homes equally with the female head of the household, as they make positive decisions for their family. To promote male involvement, it is crucial to ensure that these programs focus on equality and open-mindedness among men and women by supporting both men and women “in the ways that allow them to make change possible” (“Women’s Empowerment & Engaging Men” 1). These methods that focus on egalitarianism and equity “engage men not only as individuals who can benefit from gender equity, but also work with men as agents of change in households, communities and with key structures and policies that influence people’s lives and choices,” which allows for women and men to be “agents of transformative change towards greater gender equity” (“Women’s Empowerment & Engaging Men”4). With the recent surge of women in Bangladeshi politics, the government should play a large role in these programs through financial support, educational program implementation, and changes in policy. However, the government would have to overcome some barriers before they could give support. Over the past eight years, “More than 320 people have been unlawfully detained or have disappeared in Bangladesh,” and the rate “of disappearances only appears to be quickening” (Editorial Board nytimes.com). To enable the government to aid in these programs, it is the role of the citizens and

organizations already working in the country to demand for justice and show the benefits of the implementation of these programs. NGOs, such as the UN and Peace Corps, that have been successful in educating and implementing such programs can partner with Bangladesh to further support developments and ensure their effectiveness, which would eventually bring about cultural change.

The solution to food insecurity in Bangladesh is empowering women through education and enabling them to have equal social, domestic, and economic power to that of men. Through empowerment programs focusing on education of nutrition, decision-making skills, and expenditure, women are able to positively impact not only their own health, wellbeing, and future, but that of their children and communities in addition. Community Supported Agriculture and the continuation of BRAC job training would ensure an economic influence from women within their communities and the nation on a large scale. The future of food security and children's nutrition in Bangladesh is in the hands of the women. Empowering women will allow them to reach new opportunities and create a future without malnutrition. If women do not feel empowered or lack the necessary skills for supporting their families and communities, then half of the nation's population is not contributing to food security, an issue with an attainable solution.

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