

Review

Empowerment of Women In Bangladesh Air Force

M Nurul Islam *^{1,2,3}

¹ Group Captain, Bangladesh Air Force, Bangladesh

² Chief Psychologist, Inter Services Selection Board, Bangladesh

³ Bangladesh University of Professionals, Bangladesh

***Corresponding Author :**

M Nurul Islam

Tel: +8801769973621

E-mail: nuru8448@yahoo.com

Published online : **19 September, 2018**

Abstract: Presently women empowerment is a very popular notion. Bangladesh Air Force (BAF) is the pioneer defense service to induct female officers in the year 2000. BAF started empowerment of women through this induction. Today quite a good number of female officers are working here beside their male counterparts. Active participation of female in BAF has not only empowered them in the office but also enhance their dignity and status at home and in the society. Presence of female officers in the working environment of various arenas of BAF encouraged other womenfolk of our country to come forward and work beside males in this patriarchal society. As a result, it reduces the age-old prejudiced attitudes of males towards females. Overall it helps empowering women not only in BAF but in the society as well.

Key words: Empowerment, Women, Male-Female Officers, Bangladesh Air Force

Introduction

No doubt still ours is a conservative male dominated society. We could not think of just fifty years back that females are working outdoors. Here traditionally females are responsible for household works. They raise children, look after the aged and helping husbands. They cook food and serve to family members. That's all we saw years after years. Reversely, males were the main breadwinner. They did all outdoor works; official, manual or laborious whatever the

work might be. By the influence of culture of work and property relations, the psyche of women was home bound and dependent, but the psyche of men was independent and controlling women. Earlier, women could not take independent decision without the consent of men even it was related to reproductive health and pregnancy (Aslam and Naseem, 2015). By ratio women are almost fifty percent of our population. Statistically we have 1020 males per 1000 females. Moreover, we live densely in limited land especially in cities and towns. Bangladesh has an estimated population of 166.37 million and 1151.9 people live per square kilometer (2018).¹ Accordingly, it is 9th most populous country in the world and ranks 10th by per square living.² Thus, without the progress of women, we cannot achieve sustainable development. It is said that educating a woman means educating a family. This concept of philosophy for development felt by our political authority just after independence. Consequently, traditional attitude of male to subordinate female is diminishing but slowly. Today more females are working outdoor beside males. Our working women (almost 80%) in Ready Made Garments (RMG) made revolutionary change in our economy (Farhana et. al. 2015). Today they are working in administration, agriculture, aviation, business and many more fields. They are working in police, border guard and even in defense. Today they gradually become leader in house and in the society as well. Women's participation in military has a long history of four hundred years. Despite war is traditionally men's arena, women played many roles in military. Few women fought in combat cross-dressed as men. Generally nursing, laundry, clerical works etc were the main roles of women in military. But these roles changed in 1970's when the Western nations began recruiting women on active duty. Intake of women in active service as officers of our military started in the year 2000 by BAF. Today quite a substantial number of female officers (approximately 13%) are working here beside their male colleagues (Air Secretary, Bangladesh Air Force, August 2018).

Methodology

This article is prepared using the information from different articles, journals and periodicals published in different forms, news media, websites and records. Information has also been gathered from the stakeholders, informal discussion with officers of BAF and electronic media. Only commissioned officers of BAF except medical branch have been considered

¹ http://countrysimeters.info/en/Bangladesh#population_2018

² <http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/bangladesh-population/>

here. The purpose of this writing is to show women empowerment through their presence in BAF.

Women Empowerment

Women empowerment is a broad term. It is being noticeably used after 1990's due to movement of womenfolk for their rights. It has many connotations. No single definition is found enough. However, 'women's empowerment is the process in which women expand and create what it is that they can be, do and accomplish in a circumstance that they previously were denied.'³ On the other, 'women empowerment is the process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices.'⁴ United Nations (UN) general assembly created 'UN Women' in July 2010 where UN entity for gender equality and the empowerment of women was felt. In doing so, UN member states took a historic step in accelerating the organization's goals on gender equality and the empowerment of women. Thus, empowering women to participate fully in economic life across all sectors is essential to build stronger economies, achieve internationally agreed goals for development and sustainability and improve the quality of life for women, men, families and communities.

Our present government is committed to attain the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 2015 of gender equality and empowering women as well as implementing the Convention on Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action.⁵ Our constitution grants equal rights to women and men in all spheres of public life [Article 28 (2) and 29 (1)].⁶

Moreover, UN General Assembly (UNGA) in its seventieth session on 21 October 2015 adopted the outcome document of the UN summit for the adoption of the post 2015 development agenda: Transforming our World – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) where the SDG Goal No 5 explains the agenda for empowering all women and girls.⁷

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_empowerment

⁴ <http://eige.europa.eu/rdc/thesaurus/terms/1102>

⁵ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>

⁶ http://bdlaws.minlaw.gov.bd/print_sections_all.php?id=367

⁷ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/70/1&Lang=E

Status of Women in Bangladesh

Our society is moving forward from the traditional view that women are an economic liability, today they are asset. Most women live in rural areas. They borrow money from non-governmental organizations (NGO) and are involved in microfinance activities. Whatever small profit they earn, they spend for the family after repaying the loans. This is a sense of empowerment through participation in family economic affairs. Our RMG industries are the largest export earners for the country where more than 80% workers are women. These women workers are the main strength of this sector (Farhana et. al. 2015). By this they have achieved some status in their family level at least economically as well as socially.

Our country has substantially achieved MDG-3 which secured gender parity in primary and secondary education. This development has occurred due to government interventions focusing on specific issues on girl students like stipends and exemption of tuition fees for them. So 'Bangladesh has made significant progresses in promoting the objectives of ensuring gender equality and empowerment of women.' – United Nations Development Program (UNDP).⁸

Women of higher echelon of our country are also progressing day by day. Female seats in the parliament has increased, women have joined in bureaucracy in more number, they joined in Border Guard of Bangladesh, Police, Ansar etc. They are found in driving bus, train, taxi and in many more professions. They now have chosen risky jobs like air lines pilot, career in military like army, navy and air force etc. Despite all progresses, quite a large number of women faces superstition, erotic social value and attitude, torture and gender-based violence all over the country. We are yet to establish full-fledged social empowerment of women.

Female Officers in BAF

Echoing with the government slogan equal rights of women in all spheres, BAF was the forerunner to employ female officers in her every branch except general duties pilot and navigation. It has been started in the year 2000. Following us, Bangladesh Army (BA) and Bangladesh Navy (BN) has also started recruiting female officers in their respective officer cadres. Today quite a significant number of female officers are working within BA and BN like BAF. BAF is also a pioneer defence service to induct combat pilot in her operational branch. This enrolment of combat pilot started in 2015. Today BA is taking women soldiers

⁸ <http://cri.org.bd/2014/09/01/development-of-women-empowerment-in-bangladesh/>

in certain support branches. BAF has also active consideration to enroll females as airwomen. Presently except General Duties (Navigator) branch, all branches of BAF has female officers. Branch wise strength of female officers (in percentage) are as follows:

Table-1: Branch-wise Ratio (approximately) of Male and Female Officers of BAF⁹

Branch	Male (%)	Female (%)
General Duties (Pilot)	98.6	1.4
General Duties (Navigator)	100	0
Engineering Branch	81.2	18.8
Logistics Branch	80	20
Administrative Branch	86.3	13.7
Air Traffic Control	68.4	31.6
Air Defence Weapons Controllers	81	19
Education Branch	83.9	16.1
Legal Branch	81.5	18.5
Finance Branch	71.4	28.6
Meteorological Branch	54.8	45.2

The above table (Table-1) shows the participation of female officers in different branches of BAF. Except General Duties (Navigator) branch, female officers are available in all branches. Officers of Medical branch in BAF are seconded from BA, so it is not mentioned here. But quite a good number of female medical officers are working in BAF under this Medical branch on secondment. Rank wise ratio (in percentage) of male and female officers of BAF (except medical branch) are as follows in the table below:

Table-2: Rank-wise Ratio (approximately) of Male and Female Officers of BAF¹⁰

Rank	Male (%)	Female (%)
Air Vice Marshal	100	0
Air Commodore	100	0
Group Captain	100	0
Wing Commander	97.3	2.7

⁹ Air Secretary, Bangladesh Air Force, August 2018

¹⁰ Air Secretary, Bangladesh Air Force, August 2018.

Squadron Leader	81	19
Flight Lieutenant	81.3	18.7
Flying Officer	83.8	16.2

The table (Table-2) shows more number of female officers are existing in the rank of Squadron Leader and then Flight Lieutenant. However, female officers are yet to be promoted in higher ranks of Group Captain and above. Now the branch wise tasks and overall performance of female officers in line with their empowerment are depicted below:

a. **General Duties (Pilot).** Less than two percent of female pilot is working in this branch. At present there are seven successful female pilots in BAF. Among them three are in transportation stream and another four are in helicopter stream. More number of female officer cadets are undergoing training at BAF Academy. BAF is yet to decide option for female pilots in the fighter stream. But that dream is not far away. Despite professional risks and challenges, two female pilots recently joined UN mission in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) for the first time in BAF history in 2017. This endeavour shows equal opportunity is open for females in the challenging jobs. This is a footstep for empowerment of women in operational activities of BAF not only inside nation but international arena also. This epoch-making event of BAF is playing a vital role to implement Government's pledges in women empowerment and introduce a new era in advancement of women in Bangladesh. With this elaboration, let us have a brief description of our pride two female pilots joined in UN mission:

(1) Squadron Leader Nayma Haque: She was commissioned in BAF in December 2011. She did basic helicopter conversion flying training in Bell-206 helicopter. On successful completion of ground and flying training, she joined in her squadron as the proud squadron pilot. She is operating Mi-17 helicopter in the mission area in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo) for carrying emergency medical support, patients and casualties. She is a success history in BAF for the empowerment of women in combat role.

(2) Flight Lieutenant Tamanna-E-Lutfi: She was commissioned in BAF in December 2012. She also did her basic helicopter flying training on the same types of aircraft. She also successfully completed her flying and ground training with her colleague pilot Nayma Haque.

Like her, she became the proud squadron pilot. She is also operating Mi-17 series helicopter in DR Congo as part of UN peace keeping mission to take challenge in her hands.

b. **Engineering Branch.** BAF is altogether a technical service. Technological know-how is a must for her personnel to keep BAF operational. Bangladeshi women are not lagging behind on any technological aspects. This branch is a mixed-up of diversified engineers such as electronics, aeronautical, electrical, avionics, communication etc. Around 18.8% engineers of different majors of this branch is female. They are working in the field level for maintenance of aircraft and many other technical jobs shouldering responsibilities with male colleagues. They are taking independent technical decisions as and when required which proved their worth as parity with males and their empowerment.

c. **Logistic Branch.** A war cannot be thought without the support of logistics. Same goes for operational capability of BAF in peace time as well as in war. There are approximately 20% female officers are available in this branch. As a logistics officer like males, females are also responsible for provisioning of aircraft spares, transport, fuel, armament, explosives, clothing, rations etc. Female officers are successfully running day to day operation of logistics for the organization and sustaining of manpower. They manage all these efficiently in the cost-effective manner not only within BAF but in the mission area also.

d. **Administrative Branch.** Approximately 13.7% officers of this branch are female. An administrative officer is responsible for the efficient management of man and material resources. Female officers are doing the same as male officers of this branch. To some extent, they are more approachable for airmen, they take steps to solve conflicting problems with more patience and tact. Female officers are successfully managing man and material management of BAF in their assigned duties and responsibilities.

e. **Air Traffic Control.** Presently around 31.6% officers of this branch are female. Their basic responsibility is to maintain an orderly flow of air traffic, airspace management and controlling of military aircraft pilots for conducting smooth flights in safety within allowable weather conditions. These jobs are to be done timely with calm attitude. Our women air traffic controllers are doing excellent in this area not only within country but in the mission area also.

f. **Air Defence Weapons Controllers.** These controllers are doing their jobs in the air defence radar unit of various locations of our country. At present approximately 19% officers of this branch are female. They are responsible for close contact and supervision between the aircraft and radar for effective airspace management. They are also responsible for fighter aircraft control to counter the enemy threats from air in any direction. All these jobs of a controller like male officer are accomplished by a female officer successfully which make them empowered and equal to male in this sophisticated area.

g. **Education Branch.** Presently around 16.1% officers of this branch are female. They are educated mostly having masters in a specific subject. Their basic duty is to train the airmen and officers as instructors while they are enrolled or recruited. The branch looks after all educational services of BAF including education of BAF Shaheen Schools and Colleges. Female officers of this branch are successfully discharging their instructional responsibilities in all the training institutes of BAF. One female education officer is now Wing Commander doing assessment of candidates in the Inter Services Selection Board as psychologist with a success.

h. **Legal Branch.** Legal branch officers primarily deal with legal affairs of BAF. They are having law degree from outside. At present 18.5% (around) legal officers are females. They look after legal matters of BAF civilian, airmen, officers and others and advise the commanders on any legal issues as and when required. The female officers of this branch are doing the same as male quite successfully. Recently two female legal officers are promoted as Wing Commander taking more responsibilities in their jurisdictions.

j. **Finance Branch.** Around 28.6% officers of this branch are female. They are educated and trained in financial matters. They are responsible for organizing financial management, activities and control in BAF funds. They ensure funds available for equipment, supplies and services for airmen and officers. They also perform cost estimates to evaluate BAF financial performances. Female officers of this branch are also doing all these jobs successfully with their male colleagues. There are three female finance officers are Wing Commander now taking more responsibilities in their finance jobs.

k. ***Meteorological Branch.*** Only BAF is having such branch among our defence services. Their task is to do weather analysis for safe flying. Presently almost 45.2% officers of this branch are female. Both male and female officers are highly educated and trained. They deal with atmospheric sciences focusing on whether forecasting. Depending on their forecasting, an aircraft goes to fly or landing down. Female officers of this branch are doing these tasks with utmost care and sincerity. One female meteorological branch officer is Wing Commander now having more responsibilities in her branch as Officer-in-Charge.

Female Officers in UN Mission

Participation of female officers of BAF in UN mission area is also a praise worthy decision. Up to now, BAF female officers have participated in two UN missions such as United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (UNSTAMIH) and United Nations Organization Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or MONUSCO. Their participation in peace keeping in the risky mission areas were praised from every corner. So far 66 female officers of BAF have completed their mission.¹¹ Mostly female officers worked in MONUSCO in a large number. They mainly contributed in airfield services unit of MONUSCO. They provided services of air traffic control, logistics, finance, administration, movement control, fire and safety etc. Presence of female officers in the foreign land not only show their courage in adverse socio-cultural context but also prove their empowerment as well.

Female Officers in Other Organizations

Our female officers are not only working within BAF, they are working in other sister organizations also. They worked and presently working successfully in Bangladesh University of Professionals (BUP), Military Institute of Science of Technology (MIST), Inter Services Selection Board (ISSB), Special Security Force (SSF), Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), Directorate General of Defence Intelligence (DGFI) and some other organizations also. Their presence shows not only BAF participation but prove of women capability in various sectors and services.

¹¹ Air Secretary, Bangladesh Air Force, August 2018.

Successful Empowerment in BAF

Above mentioned employed female officers of different branches are not only holding their professional responsibilities at office but they are also taking their household responsibilities as women. They are contributing family affairs as leaders at home as well as in their respective professional areas in BAF. Through their contribution, they established women rights facing challenges and gender disparity in our patriarchal society and institutions. Their successes in jobs and tasks of BAF have taken them ahead and created steps to drive forward other women to establish the rights in women empowerment.

Our female officers are playing multiple roles such as mother, daughter, sister, wife and above all a working professional with harmony and ease with male colleagues. They are functioning with a spirit of team work to render all possible cooperation like their male counterparts in meeting the targets in their respective professions. Presence of female officers in BAF not only empowering them but also sensitize the male officers with proper respect, dignity and sense of equality.

Benefits of Empowerment in BAF

Implementation of government decision to enroll women in BAF officer cadre adds to boost confidence of educated women in their ability to lead meaningful and purposeful lives professionally as well as at home. It removes their dependence on others especially on husband and parents. It obviously makes them individuals in their own choice and right. However, some of the specific benefits in terms of BAF regarding empowerment of women are as follows:

- a. It gives female officers a distinct respectful identity adding self-esteem.
- b. It allows them to gain positions of respect in family, BAF and society.
- c. It helps them to spend on their needs and desires for them and children.
- d. It benefits to make meaningful contributions to society through BAF.

Conclusion

Today we are living in an age of women empowerment. Now women are working shoulder to shoulder with men in all spheres of lives. Our BAF is not an exception to that. Around 13% of female officers are working side by side with male officers/colleagues in BAF.¹² They are contributing equally with their male counterparts in discharging their duties and responsibilities besides taking responsibilities of their children and family affairs. BAF took

¹² Air Secretary's Branch, Bangladesh Air Force, August 2018

efforts leading to modernization of our society through women empowerment. They are now gradually in the mainstream of development of BAF which provides advancement to the society. Their empowerment in different domains such as social, economic and professional areas make them to lead an active life that necessarily bring positive change in society. Therefore, we need to create a conducive environment in BAF so that our females become more confident to be able to articulate their thoughts and become more productive in their actions. Now it is necessary to pay proper attention of availing equal opportunities for both male and female officers in all areas of human activity for further progress of BAF in the future days to come.

Recommendations

Creation of opportunities for the enrolment of female in the fighter stream is now a matter of time. Demand may come from our courageous womenfolk to become a fighter pilot which may be accepted by BAF in the future days to come.

References

1. Aslam, F. and Naseem, F. (2015): Political and Social Status of Women in Indo-Pak Subcontinent Berkeley Journal of Social Sciences Vol. 5, Spring 2015 <http://www.berkeleyjournalofsocialsciences.com/spring2015-5.pdf>
2. Air Secretary, Air Headquarters, Bangladesh Air Force, Dhaka Cantonment, Dhaka, (information obtained in August 2018)
3. Bangladesh Air Force History, published in 2018 by Directorate of Education, Bangladesh Air Force (Accessed on 01 August 2018)
4. Farhana, K., Sayduzzaman M. and Munir MS.(2015): Present status of workers in Readymade garments Industries in Bangladesh; European Scientific Journal March 2015 edition vol.11, No.7 ISSN:1857 – 7881(Print)e – ISSN1857- 7431
5. Naz, F. (2006):Pathway of Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh, AHDPublishing House, Dhaka 2006, p 17.
6. Rahman A. (2013): Women Empowerment: Concept and Beyond, Global Journal of Social Science, Sociology and Culture, Volume 13 Issue 6 Version1.0 Year 2013 Publisher: Global Journals Inc. (USA) Online ISSN: 2249-460X.
7. ILO Report 2017 : World Employment and Social Outlook – Trends 2017 <http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/weso/2017/lang--en/index.htm>

8. <https://sistersinarms.ca/history/history-women-military/> (Accessed 03 July 18).
9. <https://www.indiacelebrating.com/article/article-on-women-empowerment/> (Accessed 04 July 18).
10. <http://www.un.org/popin/unfpa/taskforce/guide/iatfwemp.gdl.html> (Accessed 05 July 18).
11. <http://www.unsceb.org/content/un-entity-gender-equality-and-empowerment-women> (Accessed 07 July 18).
12. https://www.baf.mil.bd/?page_id=31(Accessed 09 July 18).
13. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bangladesh_Air_Force(Accessed 10 July 18)
14. <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/bangladesh/air-force.htm>(Accessed 13 July 18)
15. <https://www.usaid.gov/bangladesh/gender-equality-and-womens-empowerment>(Accessed 14 July 18)
16. http://www.risingbd.com/english/Womens_empowerment_in_Bangladesh_A_secret_of_progress/11937(Accessed 15 July 18)
17. <https://www.thedailystar.net/news/womens-empowerment-in-bangladesh-looking-beyond-the-mdgs> (Accessed 18 July 18)
18. <https://thewire.in/66576/economic-growth-bangladesh-challenge-change-women/?fromNewsdog=1>(Accessed 20 July 18)
19. <https://www.thedailystar.net/backpage/2-female-pilots-join-un-mission-congo-1500316>(Accessed 20 July 18)
20. http://www.joinbangladeshairforce.mil.bd/index.php/main_controll/newsview_baf? 1 = 1 &newsid=91(Accessed 20 July 18)