

Empowering Women: Understanding Divorce, Equality, and Competition between Genders

Ishraq Hassan

Master of Arts in English Literature, World University of Bangladesh, Dhaka, BANGLADESH.

Corresponding Author: ishraq.hassan.94.2@gmail.com

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-3020-4625>



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ABSTRACT

Women's empowerment and gender equality have come a long way over the last century. Today, many societies pride themselves on having made considerable strides towards egalitarianism. However, even the most egalitarian societies admit that gaps still exist. Developing countries are also on course to achieving gender equality. A case study of Bangladesh presented in this research reckons that Bangladesh is a global example. This research aimed to establish the feminist perspective on issues of gender equality and empowerment, divorce, and gender competition. To achieve these objectives, the selected methodology comprised two case studies, one for Bangladesh and another for the UK, which served the purpose of making comparisons. The findings indicate that Bangladesh has made significant progress but lags behind many egalitarian Western societies. Bangladesh's efforts to achieve equality and empowerment have also caused divorce rates to rise, unlike in the UK. Lastly, gender competition fails to explain the remaining gender gaps.

Keywords- egalitarian(ism), gender equality, women's empowerment, gender competition, divorce.

I. INTRODUCTION

Background:

Gender equality and women empowerment agenda has been around for almost a century. Countries worldwide have made significant milestones in this regard, with some recoding more progress than others. Feminism movements have played a critical role in mobilizing the gender equality agenda as contained in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The fifth goal of the SDGs is to achieve gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. The SDGs target institutions, socioeconomic and political environments, and movement-building processes (Sen, 2019). Even without the SDGs and other policies directing this agenda, it is important to acknowledge that the empowerment of women and achieving gender equality act as a catalyst in

human development (Odera & Mulusa, 2019). In other words, empowering women equates to empowering the entire society.

Feminist movements were not present during the development and framing of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and SDGs. However, they have been actively involved in the United Nations (UN) and its conferences and agendas on gender equality and women empowerment (Sen, 2019). With other civil society organizations, feminist movements have always advocated for the equality of women. This has taken place in several waves. The first wave was called liberal feminism, which was based on the liberal contract theory that holds that people are equally capable of reason. The second wave, standpoint feminism, called for a societal transformation to discard the patriarchal social structures that were oppressive, destructive, and led to violence

against women. The third wave rejected the idea of a common female identity and embraced intersectionality and diversity. This wave was also driven by other social issues, including colonization, racism, and discrimination (Heger & Hoffmann, 2019). Across the three waves, feminists have attempted to change society to make it more accommodating for women, embrace the freedom and independence of women, and ensure equality of women across all social constructs. Therefore, it is difficult to ignore the historical significance of feminism in gender equality and women empowerment discourses.

Countries like Bangladesh have made significant achievements in gender equality and women empowerment. Some news outlets and other government and non-government reports indicate that the country has set an example for the world. For example, recent statistics show that the number of Bangladeshi women in employment rose to 18.6 million in 2016-2017 from 16.2 million in 2010 (Chaity, 2018). Bangladesh also ranked 47th among 144 countries in 2017, according to The Global Gender Gap Report (Chaity, 2018). Neighboring countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Pakistan, rank way lower than Bangladesh in 108, 109, 111, 124, and 143, respectively (Chaity, 2018). The UN indicates that Bangladesh has closed 72.6% of the overall gender gap, which ranks it 50th out of 153 countries globally. Even though this means that Bangladesh ranks above all its South Asian neighbors, it still ranks lower than most Western Countries, especially in Europe. For example, The Global Gender Gap Report indicates that the UK has closed 78% of the gender gap, while Norway, Finland, and Iceland have closed 84.5%, 86%, and 90.8%, respectively (Waitzman, 2023). This may indicate that Bangladesh still has a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the world.

Women's empowerment brings about other issues that are hardly addressed in the discourses of feminism, gender equality, or women's empowerment. Examples include divorce and competition among genders. In essence, it can be expected that embracing and implementing women's empowerment means women are able to compete with men across many walks of social life, including politics, leadership, and the workplace. However, the extent to which this is the case in such contexts as the workplace is questioned by observations that both genders view competition differently. Women are less competitive than men, translating into performance levels and gender gaps in earnings (Kesebir, 2019; Buser et al., 2021). However, the perceptions of competition do not fully explain the remaining gender gaps. However, this phenomenon can explain that there are gaps in women's empowerment that can be addressed by ensuring that women can compete at the same levels as men.

Many people question whether increasing women's empowerment is the main cause of increasing divorce rates. Some argue that promoted women are likely to divorce, even in egalitarian countries, which is not the

same case for men (Savage, 2020). These arguments emanate from recent research published in the American Economic Journal by Johanna Rickne, a co-author of the research and a professor at Stockholm University. Rickne argues that women often find themselves in a situation where they have to choose between family and a career, while men hardly find themselves in similar situations. This is besides the notion of men being perceived as the main supportive spouse in someone else's career. Other studies indicate that women's empowerment helps them access divorce and incur fewer costs to divorce (Bargain et al., 2020). In Bangladesh, recent statistics indicate that the divorce rate per 1000 individuals increased from 0.7% in 2021 to 1.4% in 2022, indicating a major transformation in the marital landscape of the country (Tribune Desk, 2023). However, the explanations for these shifts in the marital landscape remain unexplained, and the links to women's empowerment remain blurred.

II. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The case of Bangladesh echoes the global state of affairs regarding women's empowerment, gender equality, and unintended consequences of divorce. The figures given above indicate that while Bangladesh has become a global example of women's empowerment, there are still massive gender gaps that need to be addressed. Stats from other countries indicate the same problem, meaning that the first concern is to explain the gaps and figure out a solution that would lead to full empowerment. While gender competition is given as an explanation for the gender gaps, available literature fails to offer adequate evidence on how it causes gaps in such contexts as leadership and the workplace. There is also the potential for mixed results in this regard, which calls for more clarity. Divorce can be considered an unintended consequence of women's empowerment and the quest for gender equality. However, the extent to which divorce emanates from women's empowerment and gender equality must also be clarified. Understanding why divorce occurs or why divorce rates are on the rise needs to be explained.

When dealing with women's empowerment and gender equality, it is difficult to leave out the role of feminist movements. In this case, there is a need to examine the feminists' perspective of divorce and gender competition and the underlying factors causing divorce or hindering equal competition among the genders.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is the feminist perspective on women's empowerment, gender equality, and gender competition?
- To what extent does gender competition explain gaps in women's empowerment and gender equality?
- To what extent does women's empowerment explain the growing divorce rates?

- How does Bangladesh compare with the egalitarian countries of the West regarding women's empowerment, gender equality, and gender competition?

IV. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE RESEARCH

Women's empowerment and the quest for gender equality have recorded great successes. However, the journey is not yet complete since there remain significant gaps in this regard. Even so, it is time that the discourses in this field be expanded to cover emerging issues that help explain gaps and justify new solutions. In this case, divorce among empowered women remains largely unexplained, leaving questions about whether divorce is an indicator of empowerment or an unintended consequence. Other unanswered questions include why promoted women in the workplace are twice as likely to divorce as men, why women perceive competition differently than men, or even the extent to which gender competition explains the gender gaps. With limited literature addressing these questions, research is urgently needed. This study takes an important step toward answering some of these questions. Most importantly, the study will lay the foundation for future studies by justifying why research in this field is necessary.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review chapter presents a critical overview of the discourse alongside the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning the research topic. Key concepts and variables are introduced, and their relationships are examined. The current research topic is considerably broad since it discusses issues surrounding divorce, women's empowerment, gender competition, and gender equality from a feminist perspective. This makes it challenging to draw the links across all these concepts. Therefore, this chapter will introduce the feminist perspective and theory to provide a lens through which the rest of the concepts are explored. After examining all concepts, the chapter will outline the literature gaps found in the current literature to make a case for this research. It is important to clarify that the chapter adopts a general view of the subject, targeting scholarly developments revolving around the various concepts. This means that the literature review will not target the specific case of Bangladesh or the comparison case of the UK. After outlining the available literature, data specific to these cases will be presented in the findings and discussion chapter.

VI. THE FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE AND THEORY

The basic idea behind feminism is that women deserve equal rights to men in terms of decision-making,

career, politics, and having children. In other words, women must share equally in society's scarce resources and opportunities (Mohajan, 2022). To achieve this objective, feminism proposes directions for change in the environmental and social factors that have restricted women to their perceived second place in society. With about half of the global population being women, it is in everyone's interest that women are empowered to occupy equal positions as men in society. However, it is important to emphasize that modern feminist theory is not only about women as it engages critical intersectional perspectives (Ferguson, 2017). This means that although feminism was traditionally used as a tool for women to fight for equality, it has evolved to include other forms of social inequalities revolving around gender and identity.

Feminist has no fixed definition because the term and its conceptual implications have been used differently in varied contexts. Some of the major contexts in which feminism is used include political, social, cultural, and religious perspectives (Mohajan, 2022). As a result, feminism often comprises a diverse, opposing, and rivaling set of political movements, moral philosophies, and social theories. The dictionary definition of feminism is the belief that women deserve the same rights, opportunities, and power as men (Mohajan, 2022). In practice, feminism is dualistic thinking that seeks to neutralize existing power relationships (Ferguson, 2017). In contemporary practice and pedagogy, new forms of feminist activism have emerged where men and women demonstrate the need to eliminate sexist oppression (Bell et al., 2018). In this case, it remains apparent that the starting and the end result remain the same – society must change to demolish existing patriarchal power relationships and afford equal rights and opportunities to all genders and social identities.

If feminism is no longer just about women, it is prudent to explore its scope and what theorists say about it. In 1984, Gloria Jean Watkins (famously known as bell hooks) published a book titled *Feminism theory: From margin to center*, which critiqued the feminist discourses that existed in her time. Bell hooks believes that since various oppressions were interrelated, there was a need for a framework that evaluated culture. Such a framework would start off with the black working class experiences and bring in everyone to explore common representations and images using such interrogation techniques as oppositional gazing (Biana, 2020). Hooks was not the first to introduce the idea of multiple oppression since the Comprehensive River Collective (CRC) had released a statement in the late 1970s articulating this notion (Munoz-Puig, 2023). These notions laid the foundation for the concept of intersectionality, introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw in 1989 to illustrate how monistic definitions of discrimination rendered compound discrimination inadmissible (Carastathis, 2014). From a feminist perspective, intersectionality becomes the predominant way of presenting the links between systems of oppression emanating from multiple identities.

Women Empowerment and Equality

Women's empowerment and equality is a broad topic, especially when the two elements are discussed alongside each other. However, literature often separates them and addresses each in great depth. Women empowerment seeks to increase women's social, economic, and political power (Reshi & Sudha, 2022). Gender equality simply pursues equality between men and women, especially with regard to political empowerment and economic opportunities (Profeta, 2020). Therefore, it can be argued that gender equality and women's empowerment are intertwined and that they seek the same broad objective of ensuring that women can enjoy economic, social, and political resources on an equal basis as men.

The literature on women's empowerment and equality is extensive and diverse in terms of context. Scholars choose countries, industries, or regions as the basis on which to explore successes, gaps, or trends in women's empowerment and gender equality. For example, a recent study by Akter et al. (2017) explored women empowerment and gender equality in agriculture, focusing on the Southeast Asian perspective. The findings indicate a great level of involvement of women in agricultural groups in the Philippines and Thailand and less so in Myanmar and Thailand. A similar study explored women's empowerment and gender equality in Asia and Africa's agricultural value chains (Quisumbing et al., 2021). The findings indicated that involvement in the markets did not necessarily indicate greater gender equality. However, the scholars established that training and education were more positively correlated with women's empowerment (Quisumbing et al., 2021). However, both studies indicate that different countries actively implement mechanisms that help uplift women economically. Even though the success rates may vary, the signs are positive that the whole world acknowledges the need to empower women and push them to achieve greater gender equality.

As mentioned earlier, the links between empowerment and equality indicate overlapping objectives. As such, some scholars believe that gender equality is a means to achieving women's empowerment (Onditi & Odera, 2016). Considering that women's empowerment targets broader objectives than gender equality, it can be argued that arguments that gender equality is a means to achieving empowerment are valid. The rationale is that women's empowerment can be conceptualized as an increase in their capabilities across various dimensions (Sharaunga et al., 2019). In this regard, the ability of women to have equal rights and opportunities as men is a form of empowerment. Empowerment seeks to ensure that women have equal capabilities as men in society to achieve fairness and eliminate gender inequalities. Other gender-based problems that necessitate the quest for empowerment include sexual and gender violence (Lwamba et al., 2022). Equality means that men have no power to subject women

to violence, further illustrating how equality helps achieve empowerment.

From a feminist perspective, women's empowerment evolved from the feminist consciousness-raising and collective actions of the 1970s. The feminist movements of the 1980s and 1990s preached women's empowerment as a radical approach to transforming power relations to align them with gender equality and women's rights (Cornwall, 2016). Feminists have been a key mobilizing factor in formulating the gender equality agenda of the SDGs (Sen, 2019). The SDGs have a broader perspective that targets the socioeconomic and political environments, movement building, and institutions. Goal 5 of the SDGs targets gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. The fact that feminists are credited with such developments indicates that gender equality and women's empowerment have been the primary feminist agenda all along.

Divorce

The problem of divorce has been approached from diverse perspectives, including culture, public health, children's welfare, legal, and socioeconomic perspectives. These studies mostly fail to link divorce to the quest for gender equality and women's empowerment. A few have made an attempt to link divorce to empowerment. For example, some studies find that women felt more empowered after going through a divorce (Mendoza et al., 2019). However, it is important to understand the context of such studies and consider the possibility or dangers of generalizing such findings. The study by Mendoza et al. (2019) is based on Egypt and the broader Arab world. In this context, Mendoza et al. (2019) established that the main reason for divorce was early marriages, proving that forced marriages are a form of oppression and that empowering women helps them move away from such oppression. Consider other countries, including Indonesia. Despite Islam being the predominant religion, similar to the Arab world, economic factors in Indonesia were established as the biggest reason for rising divorce rates (Latifah & Ritonga, 2022). This contradiction illustrates that divorce rates do not depend on cultural norms and practices and that empowered women can live well without the binds of patriarchal marriages.

Empowerment is likely to cause a rise in divorce rates for several reasons. First, empowered women do not have to withstand domestic violence for fear that leaving marriage leaves them challenged and vulnerable economically. Women who can make a living without relying on men will be more likely to divorce when marriages become oppressive. Similarly, empowerment improved the prospects of divorced women, meaning that even those with little income do not fear leaving abusive partners (Bulte & Lensink, 2020). These findings apply across different countries and cultural contexts. For example, studies focusing on African countries indicate that empowered women have higher levels of freedom and are less likely to experience oppression from their

husbands (Bengesai & Derera, 2021). Similarly, they are more involved in decision-making processes, which help them navigate through such issues as family planning and other issues that potentially subjugate women (Muluneh et al., 2021). For these women, divorce becomes a tool to escape such inequalities. Even in egalitarian societies, studies establish that the economic costs of divorce fall more heavily on women than men (Leopold, 2018). With empowerment, women are freed from such economic costs, making divorce more accessible and appealing to women facing gender-based challenges in their marriages.

Statistics indicate that divorce is indeed on the rise across all societies. The links between empowerment and divorce are yet to be fully explored. However, it is possible to conclude that empowered women will prefer to face divorce than oppressive marriages. Additionally, such women will be more capable of handling divorce challenges, which also frees them from violent partners. A feminist perspective on divorce is currently missing or based on studies published several decades ago. However, it can be argued that feminism has led to legislation that removed prior double standards to equalize grounds for divorce (Hamilton, 2022). This means that divorce is now as easily accessible to women as it was to men. As such, feminism explains why divorce initiated by women is centered on strong beliefs of inequality in marriage.

Competition between Genders

Empowering women and affording equality with men means that women can now compete with men for opportunities and society's scarce resources. However, this is an area that has been grossly neglected in literature. The few attempts at this topic have tried to examine gender differences in competitiveness, meaning they adopt a psychological perspective on competition. Most of these studies have established that men are more competitive or are more willing to compete than women (Hanek et al., 2016). This observation is explained by gender socialization research, which established that female peer culture prefers harmony and the appearance of equality, while male peer culture values hierarchical ranking (Lee et al., 2016). With such differences, it is possible that women working alongside men will be undermined by their inability or dislike for competition. This also explains why some commentators propose that women can win at work if they stop competing with men (Makagon, 2018). Such a commentary may be based on the findings of recent research by Harvard, but it lacks the credibility that comes with a scientific study. However, it is apparent that men and women deal with competitive pressures at the workplace and in other contexts differently.

Women empowerment is intended to ensure men and women are on the same level in accessing opportunities and resources. In the problem statement, the researcher expressed that gaps are yet to be filled. Even though not many scholars explain why the gaps remain unfilled, the studies of gender competition offer a clue and a partial explanation. According to (Buser et al., 2021),

gender differences in the labor market can be attributed partly to the gender gaps in willingness to compete. This means that competitiveness in the labor market is a potential deterrence against women's entry into various jobs, as women prefer to avoid jobs with higher levels of competition (Flory et al., 2015). Even in contexts outside the workplace, studies establish that men remain more competitive when stakes are high. Women avoid competing with men, and men also anticipate lower competitiveness of their female opponents (Buser et al., 2023). If the result of the competition includes rewards in the workplace, including pay rise and promotion, then men would keep rising higher than women.

The studies have been criticized for various reasons, as some scholars seek to shift from essentialist knowledge production. One such critique is that the studies have reduced gender to perceived biological sex and are based on the assumption that competition is static, self-evident, and easily measurable (Mavin & Yusupova, 2020). Considering the arguments of intersectional feminism, such arguments appear valid. However, it can also be argued that empowering women will require the term 'woman' to be defined in specific terms. Additionally, competitiveness is measurable, however subjective it may seem. In this case, the notion of gender equality means that genders have been identified and differentiated from each other to facilitate the empowerment of the gender that is perceived as oppressed. The gender of competitors is important even in real-world settings and not just in the field or lab experiments (Buser et al., 2023). Until studies prove that gender is not a predictor of competitiveness, the argument that the unwillingness to compete causes gender gaps will stand.

VII. RESEARCH GAPS

The literature has attempted to explore the current state of literature on the feminist perspectives of women's empowerment, gender equality, divorce, and gender competition. Women's empowerment and gender equality can easily be explained by feminist theory. However, gender competition and divorce can only rely on making circumstantial inferences. This hints at a significant gap in research where divorce can be perceived as an unintended consequence of feminism and gender competition a new frontier in feminist movements. The rationale is that if feminists seek to achieve equality between men and women, then their empowerment efforts must prepare women to compete against men and embrace competition as a tool to achieve ultimate empowerment.

Even with current literature highlighting great successes in women's empowerment and gender equality, differences between countries, cultures, religions, socioeconomic and other factors remain unexplained. For example, it has been outlined that in Asian and African countries attempt to educate women and facilitate their involvement in industries to empower them. However,

they have not achieved full equality, similar to egalitarian societies that boast among the highest rates in filling gender gaps. However, explaining the differences between countries may require to establish them first. This makes a good case for this research, which used Bangladesh as the primary case and the UK as the comparison case. The two societies are different in terms of national cultures and socioeconomic, religious, and political outlook.

VIII. METHODOLOGY

Approach and Philosophy

A qualitative approach is preferred for this research due to the advantages it offers the researcher. Qualitative research can be defined as social action focusing on how people interpret and make sense of their experiences. This helps understand the social reality of individuals. Qualitative research is also inductive in nature, as the researcher seeks to explore insights and meanings in given situations (Mohajan, 2018). In other words, the core feature of qualitative studies is that they examine how people make sense of their concrete, real-life experiences. This allows the researcher to adopt a more neutral stance and avoid biases emanating from personal values and beliefs. When examining issues surrounding women's empowerment and gender equality, the nature of qualitative research makes it possible to explore how societies handle the issue and their experiences in that regard. The researcher will not be guided by personal beliefs or values but by the beliefs, values, and opinions of the people being studied.

In scientific research, scholars are guided by various philosophies. The term research philosophy can be described as the development of study assumptions, knowledge, and nature (Žukauskas et al., 2018). Assumptions entail preliminary statements of reasoning based on the knowledge and insights of the researcher's intellectual activity. As a result, different scholars have different assumptions regarding the nature of truth and how knowledge is formed. The four main philosophies in scientific research are positivist, interpretivist, realistic, and pragmatist research. Interpretivism is selected for this research because it holds that society and reality can be understood through the experiences of others. Interpretivism is based on the principle that a researcher only observes the social world to understand how people interpret the world around them. From this perspective, it is possible to understand how the Bangladeshi and UK societies perceive, understand, and interpret issues of women's empowerment, gender equality, gender competition, and divorce.

Design

The current research topic is considerably broad, which may undermine the ability of the researcher to conduct detailed research, as it is the nature of qualitative studies. However, this issue can be addressed by selecting the right study design. This is because the design offers a

framework or a set of procedures and methods used in the collection and analysis of data regarding the variables of the study. In this case, women's empowerment, gender equality and competition, and divorce are to be understood from the perspective of Bangladeshi society and compared with a Western country. Therefore, the best design for this research is a case study, which restricts the focus to Bangladesh and the UK. A case study is a qualitative design where a scholar explores in depth one or more individuals, a program, an event, a process, or an activity (Priya, 2020). The cases are bound by time and activities, and the researchers focus on collecting detailed data using selected methods and procedures. A case represents the phenomenon, process, event, or anything about which the data is collected. Bangladesh and the UK represent the two cases used for comparison in this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Qualitative data can be collected using different methods. In this case, the data required is secondary and can be gathered from multiple secondary sources. The research topic comprises issues that have attracted massive debates, commentaries, reports, and scholarly inquiries. Therefore, it is possible to obtain all necessary data from government reports, activist reports, reports from other civil societies, past studies, news media, Internet sources, and social media where posts and discussions appear in abundance. Websites and blogs are particularly interesting because women's rights and gender equality activists use them as platforms for sending messages and updating on the progress and emerging issues. The news media also provides adequate information, especially opinion pieces and news reports on such issues as divorce and women's rights issues.

Regarding data analysis, the researcher selects thematic analysis, an approach commonly used in qualitative research. Thematic analysis is majorly used when the scholar seeks to understand experiences, thoughts, behaviors, or thoughts from a data set (Cernasev & Axon, 2023). Similarly, thematic analysis helps investigate qualitative data that offers extensive answers to the research question. Since this research is a case study, the researcher aims to gather massive data to provide the details needed to meet the study objectives. To analyze such data, thematic analysis offers a useful approach where the data is classified into broad themes followed by a detailed description of each.

Ethical Considerations

The topic of women's empowerment, gender equality, and related issues attract considerable ethical concerns. Even though secondary data may not raise similar ethical issues as primary data, the researcher still needs to be careful about how the data is obtained and used. Some data may reflect personal views and lived experiences. Even when such data is published in public databases, there is still the need to ensure that the use of such data does not cause harm or detriment to individuals. Most of the ethical issues will be resolved by ensuring that sources are accredited and plagiarism is avoided.

IX. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion chapter will summarize and expound on the data collected. As mentioned earlier, thematic analysis is used to analyze the data. However, the chapter begins with data tabulation to summarize some key aspects of the research. The tables

will present factual data on women's empowerment and equality in Bangladesh compared to the UK. In some cases, other tools will be used to present the data. The same will be done for gender competition and divorce. Once factual data is presented, it will be used to offer a narrative discussion linked to the literature. The research questions will also be used to develop the themes under which discussions will be presented.

Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh and the UK

Table 1: Summary of findings on women's empowerment and equality in Bangladesh

Source Citation	Source Type	Main Findings
(Hossain, et al., 2020)	Book Chapter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid improvements in women’s empowerment • More girls enrolled in schools • More women in the workplace • Government policies and non-state empowerment programs • Global agencies actively involved • Bangladesh still faces early marriages
(Chaity, 2018)	News Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rise in the number of working women • Increase in women's entrepreneurship, education, and health • Multiple government programs pursuing women’s empowerment • NGO, UN, and other agencies actively involved
(Sengupta, 2022)	Monthly Magazine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Bangladeshi constitution grants equal rights • CEDAW adopted in 1979 • A women’s development policy adopted in 1997 • Women’s rehab welfare established in 1974 • 2021 flagship programs to fight against women and children trafficking and sexual abuse • Legal safeguards and legislation to fight against gender violence • Acid attack cases dropped from 500 in 2002 to 21 in 2020.
(CRI, 2019)	Research Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women literacy rates reached 70% in 2016 • Women enrolment in education reached 96% in 2017 • Number of working women reached 18.6 million in 2017 • Women’s life expectancy of women is higher than in men • Rise in self-employment and entrepreneurship among women
(Rahman, 2020)		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bangladesh has had remarkable success in women empowerment. • Cultural and social norms act as a major barrier • Early marriages have a negative impact on women’s empowerment • Affirmative actions by the government to improve the status of women • Policies and programs from the government and non-state actors also help

The above table summarizes the main findings from some sources that explored women’s empowerment and equality in Bangladesh. The main findings include that Bangladesh has made significant progress since its independence from Pakistan. The progress has been facilitated by the country’s constitution and legislation that afforded equal rights for men and women. As such, the government has also developed policies to achieve the constitutional objective. Such policies have targeted the economic empowerment of women through entrepreneurship and education empowerment, which has resulted in over 96% of Bangladeshi girls being enrolled

in schools. Civil society, NGOs, and global agencies, including the United Nations-affiliated bodies, have played a critical in driving women’s empowerment in Bangladesh, making it a role model for its Asian neighbors and the whole world.

In comparison, the UK has achieved better results in this regard. For example, the UK has bridged 78% of the gender gap, ranking it 22nd globally (Waitzman, 2023). Similar to Bangladesh, the UK relies on the SDGs, the UN, and other bodies to spearhead the women’s empowerment and gender equality agenda. For instance, the UK emerged as the largest government

contributor of resources to the UN Women in 2019, highlighting what tools the country prefers to use in this regard (UN Women, 2020). The UK is an egalitarian society built on the premise of freedom and equality. Therefore, gender equality is an implied cultural element, which makes it difficult to explain why gaps still exist in gender equality. In Bangladesh, the natural culture is founded on patriarchal family structures governed by Sharia law. Therefore, only a concerted and deliberate effort can move the country toward more egalitarian stances. In other words, more efforts are needed in Bangladesh than in egalitarian states to achieve women’s empowerment and gender equality.

Divorce Cases in Bangladesh and the UK

In this section, the findings will focus on the statistics and trends around divorce in Bangladesh, which are to be compared with the UK. Other data focusing on explaining the stats will also be presented. Figure 1 below summarizes divorce rates in Bangladesh:

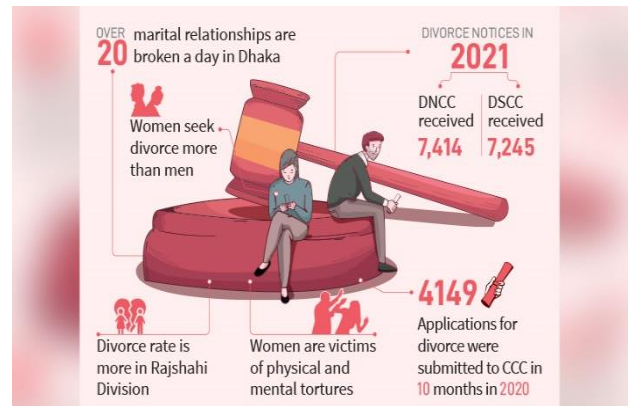


Figure 1: Divorce rates in Bangladesh (Staff Correspondent, 2022).

Table 2 below summarizes divorce applications in Bangladesh between 2020 and 2021:

Table 2: Divorce applications in Dhaka (Chowdhury, 2023).

Year	Total Divorce Notice Served in Dhaka North City Corporation	Application Served by Women	Application served by Men	Total Divorce Notice Served in Dhaka South City Corporation	Application Served By women	Applications served by men
2021	7,414	4,081	1,762	7,245	5,183	2,062
2020	6,168	4,053	2,115	6,345	4,428	1,917

Figure 2 below shows the trends in divorce rates in the UK:

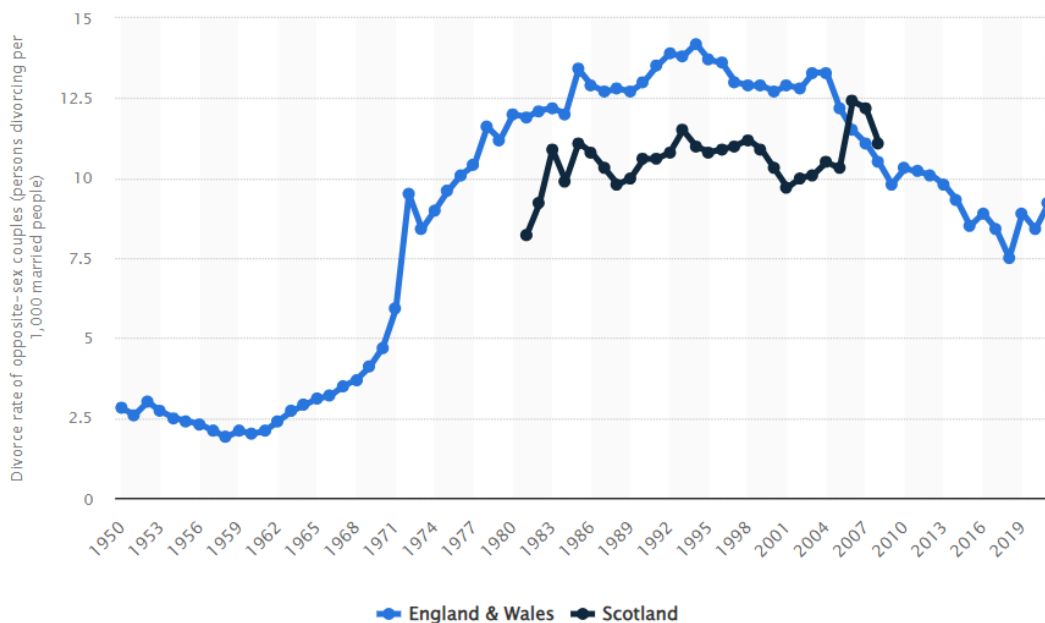


Figure 2: Divorce rates in the UK (Clark, 2021).

The findings regarding divorce in Bangladesh indicate a trend where every year sees a rise in the number of divorce applications. Additionally, many of these applications are initiated by women, indicating that they are no longer interested in remaining in oppressive marriages or patriarchal arrangements that go against their rights. Figure 1 paints a clear picture of the nature of marriage and divorce in Bangladesh, even though the stats are from its capital city. The stats indicate that over 20 marriages are broken per day, most of which involve divorce initiated by women. In Table 2, the divorce applications received by Dhaka North City Corporation (DNCC) and Dhaka South City Corporation (DSCC) have risen from 2020 to 2021. However, the main observation is the ratio of women to men initiating divorce. In 2021, the ratio of women to men initiating divorce in DNCC was 4081 to 1762, meaning that the number of women initiating divorce is approximately 2.5 times that of men (Chowdhury, 2023). Therefore, there must be something that drives these trends.

Comparatively, the divorce rates in the UK have been on the decline over the last two decades. The general

trends depicted in Figure 2 include a steep increase in divorce rates between 1958 and 1994, from when a gradual decline started going all the way to 2018 (Clark, 2021). Therefore, the recent trends in divorce rates move in opposite directions between Bangladesh and the UK. However, it can be argued that until a society achieves gender equality, divorce rates are bound to rise, as illustrated in the UK between 1958 and 1994. As for Bangladesh, the current trends could be expected to reverse when the current issues causing the increase in divorce rates are addressed. For example, Figure 1 indicates that women in Bangladesh face gender violence in their marriages, which is one of the main reasons for divorce. Once the Bangladeshi society eliminates the issue of domestic violence against women, then many marriages will survive. However, these arguments can only be inferred from the data itself. It is important to explore the main reasons for divorce in Bangladesh and compare them with the UK. Table 3 below summarizes the main reasons for the rise in divorce rates in Bangladesh:

Table 3: Summary of main reasons for divorce in Bangladesh.

Source Citation	Source Type	Main Points/Causes of divorce
(Chowdhury, 2023)	Journal Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dower payment is a main contributor to wife-led divorce • Wives with bad intentions demand excessive dower and later divorce their husbands
(Trivedi & Mohanty, 2019)	Journal Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harassment • Dowry • Male dominance • Poor communication • Lack of physical intimacy
(Asia, 2019)	News Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women who get employment often divorce • Infidelity • Changing family expectations
(Nowshin, 2018)	News article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extramarital relations • Dowry • Impotence • Substance addiction • Suspicious husbands • Husbands failing to return home
(Sakib, 2023)	News Article	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Violence against women • Social instability

Table 3 above summarizes the main findings regarding the reasons for the rise in divorce rates in Bangladesh from a few of the sources explored. Evidently, Bangladesh is a society that is still plagued by violence and other oppressive practices against women. Women empowerment has been successful, meaning that women can initiate divorce without fearing the consequences. For example, an article in The Economist revealed that women first get jobs and then seek divorce (Asia, 2019). Since socioeconomic factors also play a critical role, it can be argued that women with the capacity to depend on

themselves economically prefer to rid themselves of patriarchal relationships, especially when such relationships are deemed oppressive.

The findings also indicate that there is a dirty side to the issue of divorce. For example, the issue of “dower business” explored by Chowdhury (2023) indicates that some women have bad intentions of marrying, asking for exorbitant dowry, and then divorcing later. Such women are not in search of marriages or families but use dowry payments as a business to enrich themselves. Therefore, Bangladesh is a perfect case of a society under

transformation where people exploit opportunities and loopholes in pursuit of interests. Many women rightly divorce in search of equality and freedom from oppression. A comparison with the UK in this regard is not easy, especially when the trends move in opposite directions. However, it is possible to determine that attitudes towards marriage in the UK have softened such that men are no longer being pushed to marry. As a result, those who marry are “deciders” who really mean to be in a marriage (Benson, 2018). Such men find the right women for them and build stable and lasting marriages.

Gender Competition in Bangladesh and the UK

Research and other discourses may have ignored the topic of competition among genders. However, this does not escape the fact that empowering women and pursuing gender equality means sharing opportunities and

society’s scarce resources between the genders. It is rational to argue that when more women enter the labor force, the competition for positions increases, assuming that the rate of increase in laborers is not matched by the rate of rise in job creation. Figure 3 below illustrates shifts in labor force participation in Bangladesh compared to other cases and helps illustrate the trends in male and female involvement in the workplace. In the case of Bangladesh, it can be observed that men’s participation gradually declines while that of women gradually increases. This observation helps illustrate that as women become more empowered, they compete in the labor market with men. However, the same stats indicate that the number of men in the labor force still exceeds that of women.

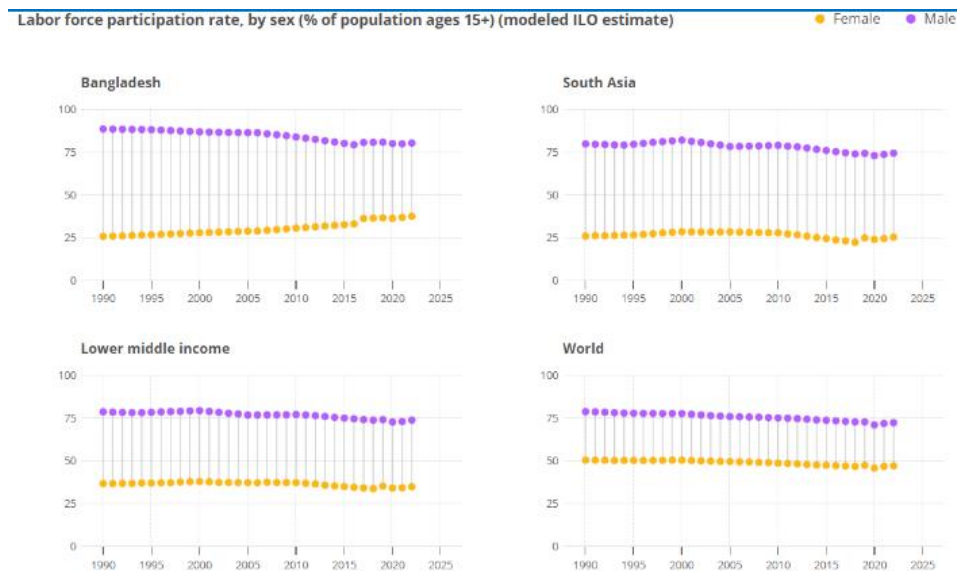


Figure 3: Labor force participation by rate (The World Bank, n.d.).

Even though such comparisons for the UK are not currently available, employment rates from that country indicate that a significantly higher number of women are employed. Rather than perceiving gender competition in the UK, the focus is on achieving equality in such aspects as pay and promotion and empowering women to occupy leadership positions in the workplace. In this regard, job availability in an egalitarian society does not favor any gender, which eliminates the aspect of completion. For an emerging economy like Bangladesh, the notion of competition emerges since the society has yet to embrace the idea of gender equality.

However, it is important to emphasize that women’s empowerment does not necessarily lead to competition for available jobs. The rationale is that economic empowerment in Bangladesh and other countries targets entrepreneurship. For example, 2020 statistics indicate that the number of small businesses owned by females in Bangladesh reached 2.8 million, equivalent to 24.6% of the total number of SMEs (Fatima,

2023). Therefore, women’s empowerment in Bangladesh helps women start businesses rather than simply competing for jobs. SMEs drive economic growth, meaning self-employment and an increase in job creation. Therefore, competition should not necessarily carry a negative notion.

Research Summary

The findings and discussion chapter has presented findings that address the various aspects of the research. In this case, it can be observed that the data collected effectively addressed the research questions, which formed the basic themes. Even though the presentation of this data had not been arranged to address each research question, it is clear that every aspect is covered. In this chapter summary, each research question is presented, followed by what the findings indicate.

What is the feminist perspective on women’s empowerment, gender equality, and gender competition?

This research question has been largely addressed in the literature review section. The overview of the feminist theory and the application of the theory in gender equality, women's empowerment, divorce, and gender competition reveals that feminism remains at the heart of all efforts to make women equal to men. Women's empowerment and gender equality are themes covered in the SDGs and other policies by NGOs, governments, and non-state actors. Feminists have driven such agendas or helped bodies and governments design and implement related policies. Feminist movements have evolved over the years to address emerging issues in gender equality. Notably, intersectional feminism emerged to cater to the needs of other vulnerable and marginalized social identities. Therefore, modern efforts by countries, including Bangladesh, to achieve women's empowerment and gender equality carry feminist ideology.

To what extent does gender competition explain gaps in women's empowerment and gender equality?

This research reveals that gender competition does not explain gaps in women's empowerment and gender equality. The rationale lies with the conceptualization of competition and how it applies to issues of gender. If a society takes the stance that all genders are equal, then competition for jobs occurs along lines other than gender. However, in a society like Bangladesh that is trying to rid itself of gender inequality, it is possible that women will be perceived as competitors in the labor market. The ability or willingness to compete also fails to explain gender gaps. This is because empowerment seeks to balance capabilities between the genders, meaning that anyone has the same qualifications for a particular position. As explained earlier, empowerment also seeks other objectives, including entrepreneurship. Therefore, women do not necessarily have to compete for available jobs since they can start their own businesses. New explanations for remaining gender gaps will be needed.

To what extent does women's empowerment explain the growing divorce rates?

In many countries, achieving women's empowerment may significantly explain the rise in divorce rates. In Bangladesh, this research finds that the country, unfortunately, still deals with issues of gender violence, a key reason for many divorce cases. Previously, oppressed women could remain in abusive relationships for fear of socioeconomic challenges resulting from divorce. Empowerment has ensured that this fear is eliminated and women cannot become the initiators of divorce. A similar argument cannot apply in many egalitarian societies, including the UK, where divorce rates are declining. Considering that the UK has recorded more success in empowerment and equality, divorce emanates from other problems. The nature of marriage is different since fewer men in the UK are under pressure to marry. Therefore, such a society can build stable marriages not necessarily threatened by divorce. However, the case for Bangladesh is different, and

women's empowerment and gender equality are key factors in the emerging trends in divorce.

How does Bangladesh compare with the egalitarian countries of the West regarding women's empowerment, gender equality, and gender competition?

Bangladesh differs significantly from many egalitarian societies regarding women's empowerment, gender equality, divorce, and gender competition. This research has used the UK case study to make this comparison. First, the UK has had more success than Bangladesh in filling gender gaps. Second, the UK faces declining divorce rates, while Bangladesh faces an increasing divorce rate. In the UK, women's empowerment does not constitute gender competition or cause women to seek divorce. The opposite happens in Bangladesh, where women's empowerment significantly raises competition and results in more divorces. However, Bangladesh remains a global example due to its progress, especially compared to its Asian neighbors.

X. RECOMMENDATION

This research has answered critical questions regarding gender empowerment and equality. However, it has also raised several issues that warrant consideration and further research

Protecting Marriages

Marriages are an important part of society, even when people are empowered. It is an important part of culture and social well-being. The goal of women's empowerment and gender equality was not intended to come at the cost of marriages, even from a feminist perspective. Therefore, such countries as Bangladesh, which face high divorce rates as women become empowered, need to find practical solutions to resolve the issue. In egalitarian societies, it has been established that divorce rates are declining as the nature of marriage changes. Even Bangladesh can achieve a status where marriages between men and empowered women can still become stable.

Focusing on the Male gender

Women empowerment in Bangladesh seems to create a scenario where men cannot remain married to their women. This is an indication that even as the country achieves women's empowerment and gender equality, it has failed to prepare men for such an eventuality. Many men potentially retain their traditional attitudes towards marriages, especially due to the Sharia law. Therefore, changing the situation to make women equal to men may become unsettling to many. A culture change may be necessary to ensure that men understand the importance of empowering women and that women are not inferior or subject to oppression. Preparing men psychologically may help them treat women better and avoid many divorces. A marriage should not be a power struggle between men and women. The fact that women's empowerment unsettles marriages means that the ultimate goals of empowerment remain elusive.

Explaining Current Gaps

Even in countries with great success in women's empowerment and gender equality, massive gaps still remain without adequate scholarly explanation. This research finds that gender competition does not explain the existence of such gaps. Therefore, there is a need for new research to explain why such gaps exist and how they can be filled. Any 21st-century society should dream of full equality, and new measures and strategies are needed to address the remaining gaps.

XI. CONCLUSION

Bangladesh remains a global example for its achievements in gender equality and empowerment. However, it has not achieved a similar status as many egalitarian countries, including the United Kingdom, which has better success in filling gender gaps. From a feminist perspective, the ultimate objective of the policies and initiatives in this regard was to ensure women are equal to men in terms of capabilities and access to opportunities and society's scarce resources. The fact that gaps remain in this regard means that the goals are not reached. Gender equality and women's empowerment were not intended to disrupt other critical aspects of society, especially marriage. Unfortunately, Bangladesh faces a situation where empowered women prefer to seek divorce, mainly because of violence or oppression by men. In other countries, divorce is not correlated with women's empowerment.

Additionally, gender competition does not explain gender gaps. Empowerment should make women as competitive as men. However, the slight links between the two are inadequate to justify gaps in pay and promotion in the workplace or why men are more successful economically than women.

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