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The life and work of Simeen Mahmud



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The life of a researcher often goes unnoticed. But for Simeen Mahmud, who passed away a year ago this month, her contemporaries and colleagues in the world of development academia in Bangladesh and worldwide, speak volumes of her work and about her as a person. She has been paid rich tributes at conferences and sessions where she once participated and is now commemorated.

As described by one of her longtime colleagues, Dr Pratima Pal Majumder, Simeen Mahmud was “one of the pioneers of gender research in the country”. Colleagues abroad said in official tributes that she was “one of very few scholars of her stature in South Asia” and that “her

scholarship and thinking have helped guide work on Bangladesh (and beyond) for so many years”.

A demographer by training, Simeen was educated at the University of Dhaka and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. She was also a MacArthur Fellow at the Harvard Centre for Population and Development Studies.

Simeen started her career at the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS) in 1974 where, among other interests, she studied the relationship between fertility and women’s status and work. She would soon come to focus her life’s work on gender-focused development as an interdisciplinary researcher.

A search on Google Scholar yields numerous entries; her articles appear in *The Lancet*, *Population Studies* (of the London School of Economics), *Feminist Economics* and the *Oxford Development Studies Journal of International Development*, among other journals. Simeen has also written numerous book chapters in books published by Oxford University Press and Routledge.

One of the first global research programmes Simeen worked on was as country coordinator for the Citizenship DRC, a global research collaboration investigating how citizens claim their rights and hold institutions accountable. John Gaventa, director of research at the Institute of Development Studies (IDS), University of Sussex, out of which the Citizenship DRC was based, said in a message following her death, “[H]er writings and publications have influenced our partners, students and others around the world. Her wisdom, insights, and collegiality have had an impact on us all.”

Simeen worked on issues of women’s empowerment, women’s work and labour force participation and gender norms in Bangladesh, long before conversations around recognising unpaid care work and the economic value of women’s work which are only now merely starting to take place among policymakers and development practitioners.

Another significant long-term collaborative research project Simeen was part of was the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment. “We soon had an identity in Bangladesh, people knew us as working on issues of women empowerment and that this was a place where good research, critical thinking and ideas was coming out of,” says Maheen Sultan, senior fellow of BIGD, who

was part of this team. They were the South Asian hub for the programme, which aimed to understand and influence efforts to bring about positive change in women's lives.

Going beyond the usual press conference to present research findings, Simeen and her colleagues adopted creative methods such as holding a photography exhibition to raise awareness about unpaid care work, making participatory videos and documentaries with the women they interviewed, and holding a citizen rights fair to raise awareness of the work of NGOs on citizenship rights.

“Despite being a demographer, how to spread research so it would reach a wider audience was a big concern for her. She wanted to get out research messages out in a different form,” says Lopita Huq, a fellow at BIGD. This included taking research back to the field and the subjects of the studies. “She had a close relationship with the field and wanted to know who the faces were behind the numbers. This was very important for her.”

This body of work in gender and development eventually materialised into the Centre for Gender and Social Transformation (CGST), of which Simeen was co-founder and coordinator. The centre is housed at what is now the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development at BRAC University. In the initial months of the centre, Simeen and her fellow founders went without pay while trying to build a full-fledged research centre. Of topmost concern? “Simeen apa was always particular that we had to be taken as serious researchers—we couldn't compromise with quality,” says Sultan.

She was affiliated with numerous research and development institutes around the world, including the acclaimed Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Sussex, the Effective States and Inclusive Development research centre, and the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester. Simeen was also chairperson of the board of trustees at Central Women's University, founded in 1993, stepping in to fill her mother, Kulsum Huda's, position as trustee.

Sajeda Amin, senior associate at the Population Council in New York, first encountered Simeen as a graduate student interning at BIDS. “I truly appreciated Simeen apa's meticulous devotion to survey detail, her commitment to rigour in research, our shared interests in demography as a discipline, and in our conviction that it can be usefully mobilised to both improving our understanding as well as the quality of women's lives.”

That Simeen was a genuine and dedicated mentor is evident when you listen to what younger researchers who worked with her have to say. Huq who worked with Simeen over a period of 18 years, said she was taken in hand and taught to do quantitative research ‘haat e kolom e’. “She was an incredible mentor. She would fight for us—so that we were able to work on our interests and to ensure the conditions in which we did research.”

In her personal life, she displayed the same curiosity she did in her research. Huq remembers being asked to regale Simeen with stories of what she’d seen and places visited while she’d been off doing research. She remembers that Simeen would read her field diaries with great interest, saying that these, too, were as illuminating as the detailed research that she was used to conducting. “She wanted us to enjoy doing research,” says Huq.

Sohela Nazneen, a former fellow of BIGD and now research fellow at IDS, said in an official tribute, “Simeen has nurtured generations of young social science scholars in Bangladesh and through her leadership in various international research consortia enriched the intellectual debates on development, citizenship and gender... There are very few scholars who evoke the kind of respect, admiration and love as she did.”

Simeen died an untimely death in March last year, leaving behind unfinished work but a legacy of young researchers who are ready to take up the important work she started back in the ‘80s. This includes her own daughter, Ayesha Mahmud, also a demographer, with whom she jointly presented papers at several previous annual conference for demographers in the US.

“What I miss most about Simeen is our daily discussions about various research ideas, mostly around breakfast time before she headed for her office,” says her husband, economist and retired professor at the University of Dhaka, Wahiduddin Mahmud. That theirs was both a life’s and an intellectual partnership was widely known.

One of these breakfast discussions, he remembers, revolved around why their household staff were borrowing money off of their advance salary rather than saving each month and using that money for large expenditures. Indicative of larger trend in a country where the poor are constantly in a cycle of debt borrowing from microcredit agencies which charge a relatively high interest rate, Mahmud says he used his wife, Simeen’s findings from a 2011 gender norms survey in, and dedicated to his wife’s memory to, a book he co-authored based on this, *The Theory and Practice of Microcredit*.

Read about Simeen's extensive work on gender with Naila Kabeer, who Simeen Mahmud had a longstanding and close working relationship with, detailed in Kabeer's tribute here <https://www.thedailystar.net/star-weekend/spotlight/news/whom-the-bell-t...>