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Changing Expectations of Gender Roles in Bangladesh: The Case of Female Field Staff of BRAC

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BRAC/RED publishes research reports, scientific papers, monographs, working papers, research compendium in Bangla *(Nirjash)*, proceedings, manuals, and other publications on subjects relating to poverty, social development and human rights, health and nutrition, education, gender, environment, and governance.

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to analyze the situation of female staff of BRAC working at field level. Here, the study tried to find out how women were negotiating between their traditional gender roles and the new roles offered by that organization, as well as the gap between gender policy of the organization and the reality women were experiencing. The study took theoretical reference of different forms of patriarchy, gender division of labour, the public-private dichotomy, national imaginary of ideal woman of Bangladesh, as well as the literature about the endeavor of BRAC to bring out women from their traditional image. Qualitative techniques (In-depth interview and informal discussion) had been used for data collection. To interpret and analyze the content of both interviews and discussions, the technique of content analysis was used. The findings reveal women's experience in workplace which was dominated by the patriarchal ideology in spite of the organization's effort to make the workplace women-friendly through its policies. The findings suggest that any organization that aims to bring social change and gender relations needs to work both at ideological and policy levels to make the policy more effective and to ensure a women-friendly workplace.

I. INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGO) in Bangladesh are working in diverse field of development. Their significant areas include microfinance, non-formal primary education, essential health services, community empowerment, human rights, and environmental issues, and serving marginalized groups, such as women and poor (Quddus, Ahmad and Khan 2009). The NGOs target women as their beneficiaries in most cases. Bangladesh is a country of patriarchal society. Especially in rural areas, people are conservative and women are not preferred to closely communicate with males outside family. This scenario has made the NGOs prioritize females in recruitment because of their easy access and acceptance to rural women. Consequently, with the emergence of these NGOs, the new opportunity of women's employment has increased, which also affects their life-style. The type of work, as well as the ideas NGOs are spreading through their female staff, challenges the traditional gender roles and the overall patriarchal system in rural Bangladesh. It has deep impact not only on women beneficiaries, but also on women who are working for these organizations.

This study analyzed the experience of women working in the field level in the world's largest development NGO named BRAC. BRAC aims to produce new social meanings and identities not only for its beneficiaries, but also for the actors associated with them. Although some studies were conducted on the issue of development workers, this paper gives exclusive focus on the challenges, and especially problems faced by female staff of BRAC in maintaining their family life as well as in coping with the new roles assigned by BRAC. Therefore, the findings of this study are expected to provide important insights from gender perspective regarding the topic of women's challenges in the workplace with their changing expectations.

The situation of women in BRAC is closely related to the situation experienced by many working women in the world. The study also offers a new insight into how women are being trapped in the idea of stereotypical gender roles in spite of gender sensitive policies, aiming to create a women-friendly workplace, promoted by the organization they are working for. This research is expected to add value to social institutions and professionals working and addressing this topic, as well as in the context of Bangladesh in general, where thousands of women are being recruited in the development NGOs. The findings will help to understand how women workers' needs and interests should be addressed to ensure their full participation in the public space, especially in the workplace.

Conceptual framework

Patriarchy

Patriarchy is defined as the male-dominated structures and social arrangements where women are systematically excluded from the productive or economic spheres of life and where women's sexuality is always a matter of scrutiny. Here, dominance is not always coercive, rather it leads to a passive consent by the subordinated group where this group (women) accept to be dominated considering their status as natural (Hartmann 1981).

Patriarchy is composed of six structures: paid work, the household, the state, male violence, sexuality, and culture, to which special attention must be paid (Walby 2010). Culture determines gender ideology which assigns rights and responsibilities for its members, and defines what are the 'appropriate' behaviours for women and men. Society has developed in the last one hundred years from private to public patriarchy. In private patriarchy women are denied all access to paid employment and are directly oppressed by their father or husband. On the other hand, although rhetorically women have access to both public and private arenas in the public form of patriarch, they remain subordinated within them. The contemporary form of patriarchy is more of public (Walby 2010).

According to Lisa Adkins and other feminists' studies of work organizations, the concept of the worker is based on two dichotomies in the male dominated social structure: the abstract versus the concrete and the man versus the woman (Cited in Kvande 2005:76). Here, a worker is imagined as someone who is gender-neutral or who does not have body or gender identity. Therefore, a woman who is associated with her body due to expectation of 'femininity', and who is expected to have other commitments and obligations in the private space, is not considered as an ideal or complete worker. In this sense, when a woman becomes pregnant, she disrupts the environment of 'ideal' workplace (Kvande 2005).

Increased movement to the paid work by women has not succeeded in increasing the amount of non-paid work done by men at the same proportion (Crompton and Harris 2003). This unequal distribution of labour within the household has greatly challenged and considered as one of the major site of women's oppression by Marxist feminists. They argue that unless women are not freed from their heavy domestic duties including childcare, it would be a step away rather than a step forward towards liberation if they participate in the labour force (Tong 1998).

The public space and women's human rights

Although by the concept of human rights, all rights of any individual should be considered as human rights, it is only in 1993 when women's rights were officially recognized as human rights at the World Conference on Human Rights held in Vienna (Gaer 2002:100). International human rights laws are often criticized for their male-oriented notion of equality with its focus on the public sphere, denying the fact

that oppression within household was a large factor behind women's inequality in all spheres: in government, politics, economics, and the workplace, which are areas traditionally associated with men (Cook 1994:11). On the other hand, the private sphere of home and family, the main site of women's oppression, remains outside the scope of both national laws and international human rights (Charlesworth 1995:106).

The literature has usually divided human rights into several generations that have always been criticized by feminists who think that women's full human rights are always being denied in each generation. The first generation of human rights that places greater emphasis on civil and political rights failed to address women's interest, since women are not included in the western and liberal definition of 'citizens' who are implicitly male or masculine. Here, it is male citizens who can enjoy civil and political rights (Facio 1998:20). The second generation dealing with social, economic and cultural rights seems to offer more to women's life, realities of which denies the distinction between the public and private division of rights (Charlesworth 1995:108). Nevertheless, the definition of these rights set out in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights did not clearly address the interconnectedness of the rights between public and private spheres. Therefore, it also failed to take the economic, social and cultural realities under consideration, in which most women live (Charlesworth 1995:108). In the case of the workplace, article 7 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights recognizes the right to the enjoyment of just and favourable conditions of work, regardless of sex. But it is confined to work in the public sphere (Charlesworth 1995: 108). On the other hand, works performed by women in private sphere have been rendered invisible and unrecognized (Charlesworth 1995:108).

Adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is an international human rights treaty that recognizes the necessity of changing the stereotypical gender roles for both men and women. The convention identifies culture and tradition as one of the major barriers to women's equality. It imposes obligation on state parties to take appropriate measures to eliminate discriminatory laws and practices at all levels of life. Articles 5, especially 10(c) of the convention clearly require state parties to modify their educational system by eliminating concepts of stereotypical gender roles from text books, revising text books and school programmes, encouraging co-education as well as adopting new teaching methods (Nweze, 2010:51). In the case of employment, Article 11 of CEDAW affirms equality in employment by demanding state parties to take steps to ensure that women have the same employment opportunities, the right to free choice of profession and employment, right to promotion, job security, as well as the right to equal remuneration along with the right to have the same capacity building training as men. They must have equal rights to enjoy the same benefits and allowances as men during their retirement or in the case of their incapacity to work (*ibid.*, p. 54). This article further requires state parties to ensure equality in the workplace by undertaking measures to stop dismissal of women workers on the ground of pregnancy, introducing paid maternity leave without the loss of seniority or other benefits or career opportunities, providing

special protection for women during pregnancy as well as ensuring social support services to allow parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities (Rehman 2010:529).

The third generation rights, which include self-determination, as well as the right to development, peace, a healthy environment, and the right to intergenerational equity, has also turned a blind eye to the real context of women's lives. It also has the same flaws of supporting male economic dominance at the expense of women's interests (Sweetman 1998:60).

Therefore, it is obvious, in the case of the workplace, how women are the victims of the explicit division of work in the public and private spheres. Here, International Covenant only addresses the issue of equality in public workplace, but their work and contributions in the private sphere remain invisible and unrecognized. This results women having to work double day. Moreover, traditional and cultural assumptions about gender roles, along with the notions of religious rights, often justify and reinforce a distinction between public and private worlds that perpetuate women's oppression and subordinate status in both spheres (Charlesworth 1995:108).

State, patriarchy and the notion of ideal women in Bangladesh

Women's bodily purity or 'chastity', as well as their distinctive ways of behaviour and dressing, that symbolize the group's cultural identity and its boundaries, are always kept under keen observation and monitored by the state or nation. Therefore, in this process, notions of the ideal society are linked to the notions of the ideal woman (Yuval-Davis 1997b: 196).

The notion of 'our women'[1] in Bangladesh has changed noticeably over time. Due to the country's history of being part of the Indian subcontinent, the ideal image of 'our women' bears the attributes espoused by Gandhi for ideal Indian women as 'selfless and motherly, stemming from the demands of childbearing and child dreaming' (Mack 1986 Cited in Fruzzetti and Perez 2002:45). At the same time, their involvement in the nationalist movement at many levels in the nineteenth century created a debate on women's position (Azim 2010). After independence in 1971, as a Muslim majority country, the image of the ideal woman has always been Muslim. The identity of being *Bangali* and Muslim has been juxtaposed by another iconic image created during the 1971 war of liberation, the image presenting women as militant (Azim 2010). Like in any other nations, 'women's chastity' is always the central element of *Bangali* nationalist imagination (Brownmiller 1975:38). 'Our women' follow a specific dress code, *sari* or *salwar-kameez,* which cover almost all

[1] The national imaginary of ideal women have to meet specific criteria or have specific qualities determined by a nation or culture. Women fulfilling these requirements are considered as 'our women' or 'nation's women' who preserve nation's 'honour' by maintaining the stereotypical gender roles as well as safeguarding nation's culture and traditions. Women who fail or deny to be 'ideal women' are not considered as 'our women', rather considered as someone 'abnormal', 'bad', 'deviant' or not having 'appropriate' behavior, even as 'perverted'.

parts of the body, prescribed and admitted by the law of Islam. In 1970s, the sole state-run television and other forms of popular culture vividly held the image of ideal women, who has been associated with the image of 'a middle class woman, with the settled home, but who now has to foray into the outer world to take her place there' (Azim 2010:265). The ideal female figure of this period can be seen as 'secular yet traditional, educated and docile, participating in rather than challenging nationalist aspirations and desires' (Azim 2010:265). In the contemporary world, where Islam has acquired a new international perspective along with the rise of new mass media and globalization, the image of 'our women' becomes more complex, because religion occupies a prominent place in this refashioning (Azim 2010). Therefore, the notion of 'our women' becomes related to the image of women who are imagined as 'modern' religious people. Here, religion 'is used to fashion woman in her new role, as wife and mother, but also as a citizen of a newly emerging state' (Azim 2010:267).

Gender in development organizations

Today the protection and promotion of women's human rights has become one of the major development agenda for many development organizations, state and NGOs. According to the framework developed by Marge Schuler, there are three interdependent elements which need to be considered to analyze gender in the context of development organizations. These are: 'the substantive (laws, or organizational policies); the structural (procedures and mechanisms to enforce the substantive level); and the cultural (beliefs and attitudes held by wider society, including the women and men who work in the organization)' (Cited in Sweetman 1999:2). According to this framework, it is not adequate to adopt gender policies as 'a statement of goals and principles' of the organizations, when there is no clear guideline or mechanism to translate these policies into practice. Here, it is also imperative to work on the beliefs and attitudes of the individual working for the organizations, as well as that of the whole society through providing various gender training and awareness raising initiatives.

BRAC in Bangladesh

BRAC, previously known as Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, is a private NGO focused on development efforts in rural Bangladesh. By many measures, this organization is currently considered as the world's largest development organization (Todaro and Smith 2009:574). Through its multifaceted programmes and activities, BRAC at present spreads over all of the 64 districts of Bangladesh. According to the data of 2010 from Human Resource Division website, BRAC employs 192,536 staff with 42,861 full-time staff. Among the total staff 37, 356 are male and 155,180 are female. Women represent 19 percent of the full-time staff (BRAC Human Resource Website 2012).

BRAC, established by Sir Fazle Hasan Abed, has been working since 1972, soon after the independence of Bangladesh, having the vision of rebuilding the country destroyed by the War of Independence. Soon it moved from its relief approach to a long-term development approach. Currently empowerment along with poverty

alleviation and social justice is one of the major areas where BRAC works on. To complement and finance its activities, BRAC has created a number of commercial enterprises that include a dairy and food project and a chain of retail handicraft stores.

The activities of BRAC are not only confined to the national level, it also maintains offices in 10 countries throughout the world (BRAC Human Resource Website 2012). Thus, BRAC is helping millions of women through its programme on credit, appropriate technology, education, health services, and other benefits (Mannan 2009:89).

BRAC and women workers

The core programme of BRAC, that is, the micro credit programme, revolves around the credit and savings schemes and women receive 70% or more of the total loan (Mannan 2009:92). Up to 1990, most of the clientele of this programme were male. After 1990, the organization shifted their strategy to a predominantly female clientele for this programme (Goetz 2001:83). During this time, the organization had started to recruit women at the field level in large numbers, due to the greater acceptance and easier access for women worker by rural women in a *purdah*[2] culture compared to male staff (*Ibid.*, p.82). Donor pressure at the time of hiring women also added to this effort of recruiting women in large numbers (*Ibid.*, p.82). Closer and intense supervision by staff is needed to maintain the large credit programme, the core programme of BRAC, since the 'circulation of cash creates more opportunities for misappropriation' (*Ibid.*, p.104). Working in this programme requires frequent field visit, even at night without any pre-schedule and sometimes putting pressure, or even threat if necessary, for defaulters to maintain the smooth flow of repayment from borrowers.

One of the other main programmes is BRAC Health Programme (BHP). The job responsibilities of the Programme Organizers (PO) include supervising BRAC volunteers working in the catchment area, conducting refresher programmes, making work-plan for the next month, maintaining records of sale proceeds of health products and essential medicines sold by the volunteers (Ahmed 2008:40). It must be mentioned here that the programme has a monthly target to sale certain amount of health products and essential medicines.

In BRAC Education Programme (BEP) most of the teachers are female with 10 years of education having the Secondary School Certificate (Mannan 2009:94). Like BHP, BEP also has the target of selling a certain number of BRAC education materials each month. The POs, most of whom are female, are responsible to achieve the target along with their other job responsibilities like monitoring BRAC school

[2] *Purdah* is a traditional Muslim and Hindu system to keep women staying out of the sight of men or strangers. *Purdah* is observed in two forms: one form is not to appear physically in front of any man except very close family members, like father, husband or brother. Another form is to cover up the whole body and the head, in some instances the whole faces other than the eyes, using certain clothes or veil, of women before appearing in the company of other men or in the public.

teachers, making monthly work-plan, conducting training for teachers, motivating people about the programme.

The BRAC promotes gender equality and encourage women to join BRAC. Although, as Goetz remarks 'the number of female staff in professional positions is yet to reach a modest proportion, it represents a significant shift in the employment choices of young middle-class women in Bangladesh' (2001:105). Donor pressure for ensuring equal opportunities at the organization as well as at the programme level is one of the main factors that are making the organization hire a greater number of women development professionals (*Ibid.*, p.105).

BRAC: engendering the organization

Since BRAC has strong commitment to mainstreaming women at both staff and beneficiary level, it identified gender sensitization as an essential area of concern to achieve its goal. As 97% of BRAC's target group is women, it started recruiting women staff at field level since late 1980s keeping the religious and cultural barriers of *purdah* (veil), faced by male staff in reaching rural women, under consideration. But their retention was low (BRAC Gender Policy 2007).

To identify and readdress the barriers of effective participation of female staff in organizational activities, BRAC formed a Women's Advisory Committee (WAC) in 1991. In 1994, it adopted a policy for female staff so that they can hold the managerial position quickly. In 1995, the Gender Quality Action Learning (GQAL) programme was initiated to improve its staff as gender sensitive and to establish the organization as women-friendly. BRAC introduced 3 months of paid maternity leave in 1996, which was increased to 4 months in 2002. This leave was again increased to 6 months in 2011. BRAC adopted a Gender Policy in 1997, which was reviewed in 2007. Considering women's childcare responsibilities, a subsidized *Crèche* was set up in 1997 at its head office for children of BRAC staff. BRAC took another step towards gender equality by introducing 7 days of paternity leave in 2004. In the same year, sexual harassment elimination policy was introduced. In 2005, Gender Equality and Diversity Team (GEDT) was formed for ensuring proper implementation of the gender policy. In the same year, BRAC established a Gender Justice and Diversity Unit (GJ&D) under its Human Resource Department to improve gender relation and create a gender sensitive working environment within its premises. This unit provides technical support in mainstreaming gender issues at both organizational and programme levels (BRAC Gender Policy 2007: 26-28).

Final thought

Bangladeshi society can be seen as a typical example of patriarchy, where women are relegated to domestic spheres with limited rights, while relatively powerless in the public sphere. Here, dominant patriarchal ideology has established male superiority as the 'norm' or natural order of things. Women are considered as reproducers solely dependent on men, the economic producers. Like in other patriarchal societies, in Bangladeshi society, women are expected to be good wives and

mothers by possessing the qualities of obedience, patience, endurance and sacrifice, since traditionally, the roles of women are considered those of daughter, wife and mother. Here, men enjoy greater power and authority simply because they are male. In Bangladesh, women's functions are to give birth, nurse and raise their children and manage the household chores. Thus, women's gender ideology seems to be greatly influenced by patriarchal ideology which justifies the inequality as 'norm' (Schuler *et al.* Cited in Sultana 2010:123). In this context, we see that the new roles offered by BRAC to its female staff go against the traditional patriarchal ideology as well as the national imaginary of ideal women or 'our women'. This reality put women in a difficult position where women feel pressure to meet the expectations of the organization they work for on one side and societal expectations on the other.

When analyzing gender in the context of development organizations, BRAC is an interesting example to examine women's experience. This particular organization has gender sensitive laws and policies, along with its structural elements in contrast to conservative cultural beliefs and attitudes existing among the people of the wider society, including men and women working in the same organization.

Objectives of the study

NGOs working for women's empowerment are expected to play major role in the realization and protection of equality rights recognized by the Bangladesh Constitution and international documents ratified by the government. However, there is a lacuna between the laws on paper and the practice, as women working in NGOs are trapped between the dominant patriarchal structure and the structure adopted by the NGOs they are working in. This study aimed to explore the situation of field level female staff of BRAC in the context of changing expectations of gender roles in Bangladesh. The challenges and problems faced by such women were also explored.

The specific objectives of this study were:

- To analyze the situation BRAC field level female staff were going through in adopting professional roles assigned by the organization in contrast to stereotypical, traditional gender roles,
- To study the challenges and problems these women were facing in maintaining their family life and workplace,
- To analyze the opinion and vision of male staff regarding the potentialities and limitations of their female colleagues,
- To examine the policies adopted by BRAC to establish a women-friendly workplace,
- To study men's perspectives regarding the affirmative policies and other provision taken by BRAC to promote women,
- To examine if female workers were getting benefits from the affirmative policies taken by the organization and to what extent,
- To understand the reasons behind the gap, if there was any, between reality and policies.

II. METHODS

Target population

The target population of the study was the female POs, area managers and trainers having direct interaction with the BRAC beneficiaries, working at BRAC field offices. The male staff working in the same positions were the additional source of data on the situation of their female colleagues. The female staff working at BRAC were selected for two reasons. Firstly, a literature (Goetz 2001:110) on women's employment in rural development suggests that a significant rise of NGOs, in terms of both number and the area of interventions, has created a huge employment opportunities for women from rural and urban lower middle and middle classes in South Asia. Therefore, women are choosing non-governmental development organizations or the development field for making their careers. Secondly, when they come to work in an NGO, they are assigned to do particular activities which go against the traditional values and gender roles.

Study area

The study areas were selected purposively. It was assumed that women's experience at workplace were not influenced by the geographical locations where the respondents were working. Female staff for interview were selected from five districts: Gazipur, Manikganj, Rangpur, Jessore and Pirojpur. Male staff with whom the informal discussion had been conducted were working at the same office where female respondents were located.

Sample selection

Twenty female staff meeting specific criteria were selected from the samples of a larger survey on the working condition of female staff at BRAC for the study in hand. It was also planned that the number of interviews to be conducted would depend on the information received from the interviews. That is, when additional information would not be received from subsequent interview, the study would stop interviewing. By following the strategy the interviews were conducted one after another and the repetition of information provided by interviewees started from the seventh interviewee. Thus, the sample size for this study was seven. There were a few criteria that had been taken into consideration in selection process. Female staff who were working as regular staff of BRAC and also working for the organization for more than three years were accepted as key informants. Regular staff who were entitled to get the benefits of the organization were taken under consideration. This was done in order to explore the effectiveness of the policy in everyday experience of the lives of female staff. It was also assumed that work experience for considerable time period may provide valid ground to generalize women's experience in their workplace of

BRAC. Here, less than three years of work experience was not considered during the time of selecting respondents.

Since the study dealt with staff working only for the three core programmes of BRAC which were, microcredit programme, health programme and education programme, while selecting the key informants it was taken as a policy that at least two respondents should represent each programme. The issues dealt in this study were sensitive, thus the level of rapport building had great influence on the decision of respondent selection.

In case of male staff, although the level of rapport building had great influence on selection process, it was also maintained that they came from all three core programs of BRAC as well as had their job confirmed. As a condition for the selection, male staff also worked for the organization for the same time period as female staff selected for the study.

Data collection

Primary data were collected through in-depth interview of female staff. Data were also collected from male staff through informal discussion to know their perspective regarding the issue. The justification for using two methods to collect data from two groups of population is that it was found impossible to know the real situation from the male respondents when they were fully aware of the objectives of the study. They also showed their reluctance to sit for formal in-depth interviews on such an issue. Due to various affirmative action and pro-women policies taken by BRAC, the general attitude of male staff is that the organization had already been enough women-friendly; therefore, there was no need to conduct any study on the issue. As such, it seemed justifiable to conduct informal discussion with the male staff to know their opinions and views regarding the situation and environment of the workplace for female staff.

In-depth interview. All the interviews were conducted in the form of conversations, but I always tried to make sure that all the key issues of my research were ultimately covered in the course of our conversations. Several hours were spent for each interview to get the information needed for the study.

Checklist. Topics included in the checklist for data collection from female staff during in-depth interviews were as follows:

- Problems faced by female staff
- Everyday life in their workplace
- How they are negotiating their roles in their family and workplace
- The positive side of the organization they are working for
- Suggestions to create a women-friendly workplace

Informal guideline. During the time of informal discussion with male staff an informal guideline was used which includes the following topics:

- Problems faced by male staff in their everyday life in the workplace
- Their opinion about the potentialities and limitations of their female colleagues
- Their opinion about the affirmative action for female staff
- The positive side of the organization they are working for
- Suggestions to create a women-friendly workplace

Data analysis

In the case of interview data, transcript was made from the recorded interviews. Notes were also collected during data collection to prevent losing significant points coming from the interviews. These notes were analyzed along with the transcript. Only notes were taken during informal discussion with male staff, as it was assumed that the process of recording might disturb the informal environment of the discussion.

The qualitative technique of content analysis was used to analyze the data collected from the respondents through in-depth interviews and informal discussions.

Rapport building

A qualitative researcher acknowledges the integration of her own values, feelings and emotions, which are the result of her own culture, background and belief, into the research process. This consciousness of her own subjectivity allows her to build a particular relationship with the respondents based on empathy and trust. Here the subjectivity of a researcher becomes an analytical tool that makes the research open to public scrutiny. Therefore, readers, reviewers and other researchers can discover the subjective idea of the investigator, which makes the research open to 'alternative explanation' (Holloway 1997:149).

While collecting the data I was working in BRAC Head Office in a higher position in terms of power, remuneration and other facilities than the respondents. Therefore, at the beginning my relationship with my target group was uneasy. I had to clear my position to them as someone whom they could trust to share their problems; as someone who would not manipulate any of their comments to degrade them before the management. However, I had to take all the responsibilities to overcome the power relation existing between me and the respondents, by convincing them about the benefits of sharing their experiences with me. Therefore, I tried to build good rapport with the respondents by spending several hours before starting the interview. To gain their trust and friendship, I shared my experience regarding the workplace with each of my respondents. After spending several hours sharing my personal feelings and experience about the workplace as well as my personal life, I got a feeling that I developed a good rapport with my respondents and they accepted me as their *apa* (elder sister).

While creating rapport with male staff, I had to face more challenges as I am a female staff, as well as due to the topic of the discussion, along with the disadvantage of being someone working in the same organization at a higher rank. In this case, I was

not fully explicit about the objectives of the discussion; rather I was asking their opinion about the issues of my interest informally over a cup of tea or in an informal environment according to their convenience. I always tried to convey the message about the good intentions of my curiosity about certain topics. Here, I must admit that I used the advantage of being someone working in the same organization in a higher level to overcome the disadvantage of my female identity. Here, men simply think themselves superior only because of biological reasons due to the patriarchal ideology they are brought up with. In this case, the fact of being someone from the Head Office helped me to be accepted by these men who would not cooperate with me the same way under other circumstances.

III. FINDINGS

Respondents' profile

Seven female staff were selected for in-depth interviews to explore the problems and barriers faced by BRAC's female field staff. Of them, one was 28 years old, five were 30+, and another one was 40 years old. Three of them were working in BEP among them, one as area manager working for Government Partnership Programme (GPP) in Manikganj, one as PO (Adolescent Development Programme) in Rangpur and one as BEP Trainer in Jessore BRAC Learning Centre (BLC). Two were working in BHP as POs while two respondents were working in BDP as POs. Among seven female respondents, three had education up to HSC, two had masters degree, while the other two had an bachelor degree. Six out of seven respondents were married, while one was unmarried.

In the case of male respondents, six were selected as key informants. Of them, five belonged to the age group 30-35 years, while one was 45 years old. Five had masters degree, while only one had bachelor degree. Among six, four were working as managers and as POs. Six of them belonged to pay level VIII and one was in level VII. Three belonged to BDP, one BHP and two BEP.

The conflict between traditional gender roles and the new roles

In rural Bangladesh, which is conservative by nature, the new image of women, which is different from the social expectation of 'femininity', is particularly noticed and commented upon (Goetz 1999:18). This puts any development organizations in a very delicate position where they must respect the social values in order to accomplish their work since they need local support. On the other hand, in order to achieve their development goals, they go against cultural norms and practices by involving in works which are a symbol of 'progressive' and 'modern' character of the organization.

BRAC consciously projects this 'progressive' and 'modern' image through its female staff. The organization assigns women to ride bicycles and motor cycles as well as requires women staff to live and work with male colleagues in offices in rural areas, away from their immediate family (Goetz 1999:18). This study focuses on the major problems faced by female staff with their new roles.

Undermining marriage prospect

In Bangladesh, the degree of control women have over their sexuality and reproduction as well as over their mobility is seen to be the core indicators in determining their position in the society. They are regarded as the bearers of

'honour' for their families and communities. Anthropological works have shown how patriarchal and cultural ideologies of purity and pollution, shame and honour, and *purdah* put an emphasis on women's bodies and their sexuality (Mandelbaum 1988 cited in Sonpar and Kapur 2003:48). The notion of 'good' women as mothers and less so as wives, is the central focus of this ideology that restricts women's sexuality and mobility by making the assumption that female sexuality is 'easily aroused, uncontrolled, insatiable and dangerous and likely to bring shame to the family if not tightly reined in. They may be in danger of upsetting the patriarchal order' (Sonpar and Kapur 2003:48).

From in-depth interviews with both married and unmarried female staff, it was revealed that they thought that the nature of BRAC work undermined their marriage prospects. Even the respondents, most of whom were married, opined that they went through a difficult time regarding this issue. High mobility, riding a motorbike or bicycle, long working hours, frequent tours and transfers were perceived as factors that made women undesirable and very unusual participants in the marriage market. Therefore, all the respondents declared that they knew, from their own experience and from many of their colleagues' stories that men never wanted to marry women who were working for BRAC. Even if a man chose someone working for BRAC, his family did not want him to marry her. In social context of Bangladesh, where from childhood most girls are prepared to be ideal wives and mothers, it is a very big and serious problem for a woman and her family.

This fact was reflected in the comments of an unmarried female staff:

> I am riding a motor bike and have to be occupied with my office work all the day. Considering this hectic routine, who will marry me? My family is trying very hard to get me married. In most of the cases, at the beginning, man's side shows interest in me because of my good family background and also because of my look. But when they come to know about the nature of my job, they don't show interest anymore. My family always asks me to leave this job. But I need to earn money to support my mother. How can I leave the job? Now I am getting older (above 32) and I am not married yet. My family is really worried about me.

The above statement, where the respondent mentioned economic need as the cause of her engagement in BRAC work, indicates that many female staff did not enjoy working in this organization due to the feelings of being empowered in terms of mobility or crossing the social barriers and expectations. In fact, it seems that they were accepting the new roles out of their economic need, not out of the desire to challenge the patriarchal order.

It has been revealed that male staff were also considered as not 'qualified' in the marriage market and experienced rejection by families of the bride side, because parents of prospective partners often did not consider BRAC work as a stable or high status job. The degree of rejection was not the same for male and female staff since the sexuality and virtue of female staff was under suspicion by the community

due to the nature of their work, especially due to high mobility, riding bikes as well as staying outside at night, away from their families with non-kin men when necessary. This put women, especially the unmarried ones, in a very difficult position since the culture gives the premium of preserving women's 'chastity' or virginity before marriage. It should be mentioned that, according to Sharma (1985) and Nur (1987, cited by Goetz 2001:106), female staff working at field level in the development organizations in Bangladesh, come from the families that express the greatest concerns about the marriage prospect of their unmarried daughters by protecting them from public exposure after their puberty). So this type of work, in the case of female staff, is considered to be as work which goes against the bounds of traditional morality.

Therefore, the personal integrity and morality, set by the society, of female staff were always questioned due to the nature of their work. They were expected to preserve BRAC's progressive image. At the same time, they must preserve their own as well as their families' 'honour'. Thus, the pressure from both sides for meeting the two different and almost 'contradictory' expectations appears to be as a trap where they had to pay an extremely personal cost.

Health problems

Intensive fieldwork, along with strict target and mental stress, made both male and female staff exhausted and fatigued at the end of the day. Therefore, the respondents of both sexes reported that at the end of the day they hardly had any stamina left for their family. However, the problem again differently affects the lives of female staff. Female respondents mentioned some health problems they were facing due to riding motorcycle and late marriage, which had very high impact on their family as well as social life. They mentioned several physical problems like menstruation-related problems, difficulties in child bearing and delivery, problems during intercourse and back pain. Here, it must be stressed that there is no medical evidence that riding a motorcycle causes the above-mentioned problems. Therefore, the fact appeared in the study that women themselves had the tendency to relate their physical problems to riding a motorcycle, without having any evidence that the particular problems were caused by ridding motorcycle or for anything else, due to being socialized in a patriarchal society which regards riding motorcycle as a harmful activity for women. However, it cannot be denied that in Bangladesh women's gender ideology is greatly influenced by the patriarchal ideology that teaches them that certain activities, which go against the prescribed gender roles, are harmful for women.

According to female respondents, it is very common among BRAC female staff at field level to have problems in getting married in due time because of the nature of their work and in most cases, if they do, they get married late. Therefore, they have to go through difficulties in child bearing and delivery. It is needed to be mentioned here that as in any Muslim majority country early and universal marriage is customary in Bangladesh. Despite some noticeable changes in recent years, the mean age of marriage for women is 14.3 years. This is the violation of the laws enacted by the

government of Bangladesh in 1976 that set the legal age at marriage as 18 years for females and 21 years for males. Still, this law is hardly observed in rural Bangladesh (Rahman *et al.* 2005:73). In this context, the female workers who get married at the age of 30 or above are really late in entering their marriage life, while Bangladeshi women, in most cases, have more than one child by that age.

Another problem that has been revealed in these interviews is related to toilets. There were no separate toilet facilities for women in the field setting. They reported that it was impossible for them to use free places or bushes like their male colleagues due to the social and cultural expectations of 'femininity'. In the office male and female staff had to share the same toilets. It made women feel uncomfortable and embarrassed because of their mindset about sharing such a private space with non-kin men. As a result, they avoided drinking water during their working hours to avoid using toilets. As it has been mentioned before, their working hours were so long (more than 12 hours a day) that it caused them suffering from dehydration and urinary tract infections, as well as difficulties in managing menstruation.

The female staff reported that as they had to stay long hours in the office, they felt the necessity of having a common room of their own for privacy, due to their physical vulnerability and sensitivity. They did not have such restrooms in their work place. However, for biological reasons and, particularly for culture and tradition, Bangladeshi women have different requirements for resting, especially when they are menstruating or pregnant. It must be mentioned here that in Muslim and patriarchal society, from childhood the girls follow certain norms (for instance how to speak, how to dress, for whom to dress up, how to sit and behave in presence of males). Women are also being looked upon by their male colleagues in the workplace. Therefore, in this context, the need of a room, where female staff can take a rest during their break is considered.

Moreover, female staff reported to have both physical (pain, irregularity) and psychological (feeling of embarrassment, shyness and fear of exposing blood and so on) problems related to menstruation. In both cases, they thought the problem was the result of their high mobility and riding motorbike, as well as of not having adequate toilet and restroom facilities.

Body and appearance as a condition for promotion

In the case of workplace, which is male dominated and highly gendered, identity of women workers is likely to be linked with body than that of men. Thus, on the one hand women are expected to give their effort to become as 'equal' workers as men who are seen as the abstract, ideal workers, who are body neutral and not deviant. On the other hand, these are women whose appearance and body are always commented upon and judged by their colleagues and employers. In this regard, the study showed that while BRAC was trying to develop its female staff as development agents who challenge the traditional and stereotypical gender roles, the working culture of evaluating the success of female staff still depended highly on their looks and so-called 'femininity'.

All the respondents complained that it was very common in BRAC that their supervisors preferred flatterers for promotion. They reported that for a long time they had not been promoted, while their other colleagues who kept good relationship with their supervisors got promoted. According to one of the female respondents who was an area manager in Manikganj:

> Always keep a bottle of oil near you and give it to your supervisor, then your supervisors will be happy and ultimately that will make you the happiest of all.[3]

According to the female respondents, the term 'keeping good relationship with supervisor' has got another meaning. The supervisor preferred those female staff who were good looking and kept good relationship with their supervisors by flattering.

Thus, the findings also confirm the fact that staff were experiencing the reality of appearance discrimination in the workplace (Maine and Kelly 2005:58). Although both male and female staff accused their supervisors of preferring flatterers during promotion, for female staff being 'good looking' also brought another dimension to this act of flattery. In this case, it can be assumed that women who were not 'good looking' and flatterers systematically passed over for promotion here.

Housing problems

During in-depth interviews and informal discussions, most respondents mentioned housing as one of the major problems faced by BRAC field staff. The house rent provided by BRAC to their field staff was not enough or very low in the present context. It was also revealed by most of the respondents that as they lived separate from their families their living cost became double, e.g. they had to send money to support their families and at the same time they had to bear their own costs in place where they lived near workplace. They also had to pay house rent in two places which doubled all the expenditures and it became burden on their limited income.

On the other hand, single female staff faced housing problem in another way. As the office, due to the limited accommodation facilities, does not provide accommodation for all staff from field level, except branch managers (who belong to a higher level than POs), female staff coming from another area/district faced accommodation problems not only in terms of costs, but also in terms of safety and security. Sometimes, they had to share housing with families or rent houses in group. Then, they were always at risk of being the victims of rape, sexual harassment, and criticism in the socio-cultural context of Bangladesh. All the respondents, both male and female, reported this factor as one of the reasons of female staff dropout in the early years of joining BRAC field level.

[3] Metaphorical use of 'oil' in Bengali language, which refers to flatter someone with the ultimate motive for obtaining favour or advantage unfairly.

Undermining women's opinion

In a patriarchal society like Bangladesh, male dominance is so common and acceptable that women consider it normal and do not think it as discriminatory. It was reflected in the comment of one respondent (PO) working in a savings programme in BDP:

> *Apa* (sister), do you want to deny the fact that your brother's opinion is more valued by your parents than yours? It is also true in the case of workplace. It is a very natural and usual thing.

Therefore, the study indicates that women's voices were still devalued and undermined by their male colleagues working in the same positions with them during the meetings and the process of decision-making due to the culture of a highly gendered workplace. In some cases, female staff themselves did not perceive this issue as a form of discrimination. These findings also in part explain why discrimination is so widespread in the workplace despite of having policies to ensure equal participation at all levels of decision-making. It seeks attention to the influence of deeply rooted patriarchal ideology on people's mind, both men and women, that justifies male dominance and superiority over so many generations. Patriarchal ideology shapes and reinforces this mindset in such a way so that this ideology exists as a social stronghold resistant to any opposition (Nguyen 1997 Cited in Rowley and Yukongdi 2009:242). Therefore, female staff, in many cases, accept the environment of their workplace, which reflects traditional values and gender role stereotyping as normal.

Regarded as efficient workers for having 'feminine' attributes

The idea of stereotypical gender roles was reflected in the opinion of male staff about the potentialities of their female colleagues. They identified women's softness, patience, and sincerity as the most positive strengths of their capabilities. As BRAC works mostly with women at grassroots level, in the present socio-cultural context of Bangladesh, female staff were thought to have better acceptability, due to their sex, in the community of handling and discussing as well as following up, issues like pregnancy, menstruation, family planning to female beneficiaries. According to male staff, their female colleagues were able to give better motivation to villagers in any development programme. They used to have more patience than men do, which was a very important factor for working with people from community level whom BRAC works for. Therefore, women were seen to be suitable and better workers in the case of health-related issues and other development programmes of the organization where the work of the staff was to give motivation to villagers. Female staff were also better in desk job, male staff opined.

Regarded as 'not' efficient workers for not having 'masculine' attributes

Male staff thought that the job requiring financial transactions, collecting money from villagers, threatening defaulters, in the case of the microcredit programme, was not

suitable for female staff. Sometimes borrowers took advantage of the politeness of female staff when they went to them to collect their repayment. Male staff also opined that, as female staff could not go to the field at night or in the dark, they were not suitable to work for micro credit programme because in this programme staff did not have any time schedule and they had to work day and night in the field. It must be mentioned here that BRAC does not encourage supervisors to let their female staff go to the field at night because of their vulnerability to physical attack and sexual harassment. Besides, due to stereotypical gender roles, female staff have to worry about leaving children uncared or other family obligations at night. Again, the micro credit programme is structured in such a way that it cannot give staff break for even a single day but has to be continuous over the year because of its weekly target of receiving repayment from borrowers, rather it may demand staff work even on the weekends, if any crisis occurs (Goetz 2001:220). Here, male staff pointed to the maternity leave as a problem in recruiting women in this programme at field level. In this regard, most of the male staff with whom the informal discussion was conducted considered the job of PO of micro credit programme as totally unsuitable for women. The degree of disliking women in the mentioned programme was reflected in the comment made by one BDP manager:

> If a female staff is assigned to work at night then two male staff have to be assigned as her bodyguards to protect her.

From the above-mentioned statement, it was revealed how women's potentialities became the object of jokes by their male colleagues, whereas female staff were working hard and taking as much responsibilities as their male colleagues, and were never entitled to take 'body guards' in the field, as their male colleagues opined. The statement also indicates that how an unsecured position of women in society as a whole has impact on individual male worker's attitude to female workers by considering her presence as troublesome to some extent.

Male staff opined that management should not recruit women in credit programme, which involved carrying cash in rural areas, sometimes at night, and exposes staff to greater risk of attack than working in other programmes. Therefore, male staff opined that supervisors had to take extra concern and responsibilities when any female staff joined their programme, due to physical vulnerability and their gender role.

Regarded as 'unsuitable' for leadership position

The informal discussion with male staff revealed that the male staff did not think women, in general, were capable of supervising others. Instead, the comment of one male PO attracts our attention:

> Women perform well under the supervision of men.

From this comment, we got the idea that the potentialities of female staff were not yet associated to leadership qualities by their male colleagues. It also becomes clear that the traditional view of leadership excludes women as both incapable of effective

leadership and undesirable in leadership positions, in the workplace, even in BRAC, a development organization whose one of many development goals is to make changes in traditional society by bringing women in leadership position.

Motherhood as a 'problem'

Male staff opined that most of the time married female staff do not give as much output as they used to give before marriage. Even if they do, after having one child it is expected from them to become insincere and indifferent about their responsibilities in the workplace. Men considered motherhood as one of the factors that hinder women to give their full potentialities in the workplace. The male staff mentioned that pregnancy and maternity leave of female staff hamper the programme activities. Female staff always have risk of going for maternity leave for a long time. Although another staff comes as a replacement during maternity leave, the programme is hampered as the supervisor has to prepare the new staff for the work. Since every programme has strict deadlines to meet organizational demands, the male staff have to work extra.

According to the male respondents, although, as per organizational policy, the maternity leave with pay was for four months during the period of data collection, most of the time women could not work from the first day of their pregnancy due to their various physical changes and complicacy. According to the male respondents, it was the most difficult part of their pregnancy period when they could not give any output for the program and they could not be replaced. That left supervisors in a hard situation because they neither could tell the female staff to take leave nor get the required output from them. Then the male staff were asked to compensate the programme by taking extra burden of work along with their own workload.

In Bangladesh, like other developing countries, women are the victims of food discrimination. Due to various social taboos, son preference, poverty and ignorance women eat last and the least. This causes women to suffer from poor nutrition. This discrimination makes them vulnerable to various complicacies during pregnancy, including maternal malnutrition, infections and anemia.

Male staff also said that female staff generally took more leave due to various family excuses, especially due to the sickness of their children. In fact, according to one male PO working in health programme:

> To be honest, we (male staff) get upset to some extent when we are informed about any of our new colleagues who are female.

We found in this study that how female staff were being trapped in the traditional patriarchal ideology although the image of them racing on their motorbikes with an air of brisk efficiency circulated the 'progressive' and 'modern' identity of the organization. In this case, BRAC uses its female staff as the crucial element through whom the organization's value, virtue and 'honour' can be maintained and preserved as much as women are expected to preserve their family honour. Therefore, women

were seen to be trapped in meeting expectations from both sides: one side pushed women out from the conventional gender roles while the other side expected women to act according to the traditional gender roles.

Thus, the findings show how women were in a confusing and conflicting position as bearers of the progressive image of the organization on the one hand, and on the other, as bearers of the cultural and traditional values stemming from the societal expectation from 'femininity' as an individual member of a society. The facts revealed by the male respondents are particularly sufficient to indicate how women's potentialities, capabilities and commitments in the workplace are still questioned due to the existing idea of femininity, the gender division of labour, as well as the societal expectation of gender roles, ignoring the fact that women are taking equal responsibilities as men in the workplace.

Challenges in maintaining family and workplace

When looking at the workplace and the family, it can be clearly seen how these institutions are shaped to fit men's lives (Basow 2002, p134). Through creating public-private division as well as the gendered division of labour patriarchal ideology plays a powerful role in relegating women to the disadvantaged and subordinated position in both workplace and family. Here, men's economic contribution and socialization justify their dominance over women in the household without any contribution in reproductive activities, while, due to the association of femininity to the ethics of care, women are not considered as real workers in the workplace and dominated by men. Therefore, women have to take all the responsibilities of childcare and domestic labour on their shoulders, no matter they work full-time (Goetz 1999, p22). The burden of combining work and family life falls unevenly on women's shoulders, which undermines their chances to compete with men at work and develop their own capacities (*ibid.*, p22). Thus, the dominant ideology and androcentrism[4] in the family and workplace may make mothers feel guilty for 'choosing' employment (Basow 2002, p134), even if they do it for strict economic reasons.

The female respondents felt that they were juggling to keep pace between their roles in their family and workplace. They faced different challenges due to the nature of their work, which demands high mobility, night stay outside home, frequent transfer, in addition to problems faced by other working women in general in maintaining their family life. Problems faced by respondents in maintaining their reproductive and productive roles are described below.

Transfer

Frequent transfer was perceived to be one of the major problems faced by all respondents, both male and female, for maintaining their family lives. It brought extra

[4] Androcentrism is the practice or consciousness that places male human being at the centre of one's view of world, its history and culture. Here, all things outside masculinity are viewed or defined in terms of their relationship to men or men's world, or as other.

sufferings in the lives of female staff. The distant workplace from their husband and family made women think of leaving the job even if they were satisfied with their remuneration and workplace environment. A BEP trainer of Jessore, working in BRAC for more than 15 years, stated:

> I want to work here for the next five years because I like my job and workplace. But if BRAC transfers me from my present place, I will immediately leave the job because I will never let my husband abandon me.

During the in-depth interview with her, she said that she had a very bad time and had gone through serious physical and psychological torture by her husband from 1996 to 2006 when she worked in another district leaving her husband and their four-year old son here.

The common problems due to transfer as stated by the female staff were increasing psychological gap between female staff and their husbands, husband's pressure to leave job, guilty feeling, and feel like leaving the job to stay with family. However, husband's limited income prevented them to leave their job. Four out of six married respondents reported that they frequently felt depressed. Therefore, they wanted to leave their job, but could not do that due to need of money for the future of their children.

In Bangladesh, abnormal price hike of essential commodities makes the life of upper and lower middle class difficult with their limited income. The condition of poor people, some of whom do not have any income, is rather worst. This leads many women to work outside along with their husbands. Many of whom otherwise would not work outside. Men are the main breadwinners and women are responsible for taking care of their children and family. They participate in labour force for ensuring their children's proper education and nutrition, as well as for ensuring savings to tackle any family emergency in future. According to a respondent working in BHP who had a son:

> Apa (sister), if I did not need to think about my son's future, I would immediately leave the job.

However, it is reported that many female staff lose their commitments to work and in some cases, ultimately, compelled to leave the job. If they did not leave the job, they worked with frustration and only for money without any commitment to give their maximum potentials. Here one question raises on whether a mere increase in mobility can be count as empowerment based on the cost a female staff of BRAC has to pay in return of this organizational imposed mobility. The interviews also inferred that the respondents worked out of economic need, some of them were contributing to their parental families, and many of them were working because their husband's income was inadequate. Therefore, they chose this life out of their economic necessities, neither out of their free choices, nor for having their control over bodies and resources.

The in-depth interviews revealed that most of the female staff thought that BRAC intentionally keeps its female staff away from their families and husbands to make them involved in work all the time. Management does not consider female staff's needs of living with their family. It becomes difficult for them to accept frequent transfer or transfer in distant areas due to the societal expectation and traditional gender roles which put all the responsibilities of care exclusively on women's shoulders. Besides this family obligation, women's subordinate status in relation to their husbands also contributes in making the situation harder (Goetz 2001:105).

Workload and double work

According to a narrow androcentric definition of 'ideal' or 'proper' family, father is the main breadwinner and mother is the caregiver. Women get trapped in this narrow definition (Basow 2002:134). This narrow concept of 'ideal' family benefits men much more than women. When women enter into labour force, they feel guilty for spending 'less' time, compared to the time invested by the full-time housewife on household activities, that are assumed to be their 'main' roles. Due to the gender division of labour and androcentric idea of family, these are women, no matter housewives or women working outside, who have to perform all household chores.

It is concluded from the interviews that the respondents had to leave home early in the morning for work and had to work overtime due to heavy work pressure. At the same time, they had to perform domestic responsibilities. There are some factors associated with the workload of BRAC staff such as working hours, work at weekends, meeting target, and overnight stay outside home. These are briefly discussed below.

Working hours. They used to go to field at 7.30 a.m. or earlier. They had to register their movement even earlier in the office. Some of them needed to leave their house early in the morning depending on the distance of their home from workplace. They used to come back around 1.00 to 1.30 p.m. for lunch. After one hour, they used to go to the field again and come back at 5 p.m. Then they used to do their regular desk work like writing reports, posting information in the registers, etc. sometimes until 6.30 to 7 p.m. Sometimes they even had to work until midnight at home to complete their unfinished task.

The study revealed that leaving home early in the morning is difficult for female staff due to their domestic responsibility. It is difficult and stressful for them to come to office in due time after managing their children and household chores. Long office hours made their life over-burdened with both reproductive and productive responsibilities. Female respondents, especially those having small children, reported that they could not give full concentration in their office work. On the other hand, their husbands also did not want them to work outside in this way, although in most cases they had to let them out of their financial necessities.

According to one of the respondents working for BHP:

> It is totally impossible to maintain family life while working at BRAC. I can't blame my husband who wants me to quit this job. I think he is right as now I am always involved with my office work and cannot take care of my children and my family. Tell me, do you believe there is any husband in the world who would tolerate these things? The answer is obviously 'no'.

This statement shows how this female staff justified her husband's position for not liking her job outside for a long time of the day. This also reminds us of the patriarchal ideology existing in Bangladesh where men's superior status has been accepted as norm, and men are considered the breadwinner of the household on whom all of the family members are dependent. Here, men as the 'head' of the family are entitled to exercise their power and authority by restricting the movement of their female family members. This patriarchal ideology shapes women's gender ideology which allows men to dominate women (Sultana, 2010:123). Therefore, even in the case of women who work outside, men's control and authority over their movement and decision are considered as acceptable.

It must be mentioned here that all government offices in Bangladesh open from Sunday to Thursday for eight hours from 09.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. with 30 minutes lunch break. Private offices maintain more or less the same timetable.

Work at weekends. In most cases, their supervisors did not ask them to stay after office hour or at weekends. But they had to work and go from door to door to sell their products or collect repayment day and night, even at weekends, to save their own money as well as to save themselves from the anger and shouting of supervisors at the end of month. Because of the unemployment problem and cheap labour, it is not uncommon in Bangladesh to treat badly and shout at the staff, who work at lower levels, even for minor matters. Therefore, female staff reported to be involved in office work at their home and even at weekends to meet their target. As a result, they became psychologically isolated from their children since they did not have time left for their family. Due to the rigid gender roles, the family life of female respondents became disturbed and disrupted when they failed to meet the requirements of their family, as well as the society.

Strict and rigid target. All the male and female respondents reported that they had strict and high monthly targets to meet. As a result, they all went through serious mental stress and had serious workload. For example, POs from the micro finance programme had the target of collecting a certain amount of repayment from the borrowers each month. If they failed to collect, they had to face serious pressure, both psychological and verbal, even threat to terminate their job by their supervisors. Even at the end of the month they were compelled to pay from their own pocket to meet the target. A BHP staff has also the target of selling certain amount of health materials like medicine, *saline,* condom, etc. in their assigned areas. This also put them in mental stress and fears that they would have to pay from their own pocket if they failed to sell their assigned quantities at the end of the month.

The respondents thought that the monthly target set by each programme was too high to achieve. They also reported that the quality of health products was gradually decreasing and the price set by the programme was also higher than the market price. Therefore, they faced difficulties to convince villagers to buy BRAC products, leaving apart the moral strain for asking to buy the products that they themselves often did not think of good quality.

Living outside at night. Sometimes BRAC ask its female staff for overnight stay outside their home on official purpose. This caused extra problem for female staff in managing their children and household responsibilities. Besides, they felt discouraged to work due to their family prestige and insecurity both physical and psychological.

No leave

The respondents, both males and females, reported that, due to strict action plan and heavy workload, they could not enjoy the accrued annual leave. Even the staff who stayed far away from their families did not get two or three days extra leave with the weekend. As such, they met their families once or twice a month for one day (weekend) only. Many respondents reported that their supervisors did not grant leave even in family emergency or severe illness. They also mentioned their experiences when their close family members like father, wife and children got seriously sick but they could not visit them. They also reported that it was common for them that BRAC did not allow them to leave their workplace even if they themselves got sick.

Discrimination and verbal abuse

The female respondents reported that their supervisors criticized the female staff more rudely than male staff for the same mistake or failure. For committing minor mistakes, female staff complained that they were threatened to be dismissed or terminated. According to one of the female staff working in BHP:

> I can clearly remember, one day at the end of the month, my supervisor told that I was not capable of doing this job because I couldn't meet the target. But for the same reason, I saw my supervisor showed minor dissatisfaction on his face and said nothing to one of my male colleagues, who has been working in the same level as me with same responsibilities. So it seems, because of being a man, the supervisor thinks him capable of doing the job. What about me?

According to one of the female respondents working for BEP:

> I am working out of my necessities. So, I always try to do my job with sincerity. But in case of any mistake, no matter how minor it is, the manager threats me to terminate.

According to the female respondents, the situation was not so rude in the case of male staff. Female staff had to face verbal abuse in most of the cases when they asked for leave for sickness of their children or themselves or any family members. One of the female PO stated that:

> Once I asked for leave because my baby was seriously sick. Then my supervisor shouted at me 'it is none of my business that your child is sick or die. It is one of the many excuses women use to skip their duties.' Then I had to keep my sick baby to my younger sister's home.

Women also had to go through verbal abuses from their supervisors, as well as from their male colleagues during pregnancy when they were both physically and psychologically vulnerable. One respondent complained that during pregnancy, her supervisor intentionally increased her workloads. He also gave her pressure to go for maternity leave when she was only two or three months pregnant, because he thought her to be unproductive and unfit for office work. He also made her ride a bicycle during this time. It was also revealed that it became very common that male staff talked more in the meetings and their opinions were given more importance than that of a female staff.

It was found that women experienced some other types of harassments when their supervisors got angry with them. This include giving unnecessary workload after rude behaviors, threatening to dismiss them, increasing work burden even in the case of serious illness, compelling to give money from their salary at the end of the month for failure to meet their monthly target, always looking for the weak points or faults, and interfering in personal matters.

By connecting domestic work with the construction of 'femininity', patriarchal system relegates women to the private space in such a way that they can be labeled as 'good women' if only they fulfill their domestic duties (Crompton and Harris 2003:106). Women's and men's socialization have made the gender division of labour so established and acceptable that it appears to be impossible to change, even in the context in which women's participation in the labour force is on rise (*ibid.*, p.106). In this sense, men who are privileged by the material power and gender socialization are yet to make contribution to the household activities. Therefore, little change has taken place in the allocation of labour within the household (*ibid.*, p. 106-107)

Therefore, the above findings show how the female staff of BRAC were struggling to keep pace between gender socialization and the demand of workplace. They were taught to feel all the responsibilities of domestic chores since childhood on one hand, and on the other hand workplace expected them to work in equal terms like their male colleagues who have their female family members to take care of their families.

Gap between policy and reality

This chapter tries to explore the findings related to implementation of BRAC policies regarding the problems highlighted in the previous sections that revealed from the

respondents. Here, an effort has also been made to see into the reasons responsible for the gap between policy and implementation.

Leave entitled

The respondents reported that most of the time they could not take leave due to their heavy workload. At the same time, they also reported that they felt discouraged to ask for leave since the supervisors used to give credit to those staff who did not take leave. During the time of filling staff appraisal forms 'not taking leave' was used to be considered as a sign of committed and devoted worker. Therefore, the findings indicate that female staff became the victims of this working culture where the commitment to work of female staff who took leave was compared with that of their male colleagues who did not take or ask for leave much. Therefore, commitment and dedication of female workers were always being questioned.

No flexibility during menstruation

Women's menstruation is one of the many aspects of their body which makes them feel separated in the workplace. This is considered embarrassing and dealt with secretly. This study shows that even in the workplace which has the policy to give its female staff flexibility during menstruation, women consider it as a problem to take this facility due to an existing prudishness about menstruation, which is seen as a symbol of women's impurity. Therefore, nobody wants to talk about or draw attention to it.

Due to inadequate facilities both in the field and at the office, BRAC female staff faced problems related to menstruation. As mentioned before, they reported to have experience of discomfort, and in some cases, pain during menstruation because of physical exertion, such as riding motorcycle or bicycle. Riding motorbike requires to have physical energy. In Bangladesh, due to stereotypical expectations, women are not encouraged to do physical exercise or maintain physical strength, whereas men are allowed and encouraged to make muscles and maintain physical strength due to its association to the 'masculinity'. Considering poor toilet facilities and women's vulnerability during menstruation, BRAC has made the policy so that female staff do not suffer during that period. According to the Human Resource (HR) Policy of BRAC [1.9 (4)], female staff can do deskwork for at least two days in a month during their menstruation, but all the respondents reported that they never enjoyed this flexibility. The in-depth interviews revealed that female staff did not take advantage of this flexibility, not only because of their strict work schedule, but also because they did not feel free to tell their male supervisors about their period due to social stigma and psychological barrier. If they, somehow managed to use this facility, the supervisors, they reported, did not show very considerate behaviour during these days. The female respondents also reported that they did not feel like asking for this flexibility for another reason. That is, some of them expressed their fear of being treated as an 'inferior worker' because of taking this 'advantage' due to their biological cause.

From the informal discussion with male staff, it is evident that they also did not feel free to talk about this. They never talked directly about this issue with their female colleagues. During the informal discussion with them about the policy on the issue, that they did not even mention the word 'menstruation'; instead they mentioned the issue as 'something for which women get two days off in each month according to the policy.' It is also reported that all male respondents knew about the policy from various gender training organized by BRAC. Still they did not think much about the reason why the policy was not being implemented. According to them, under the heavy workload where staff could not get half a day off due to sickness, it was not possible for any field staff, both male and female, not to go to the field for two days every month. According to one of the male staff:

> We never saw any of our female colleagues asking for this leave. Many good things are written in the policy. If a female staff does not go to the field one day, who will do her work? How will she be able to make up all of her work in the next day?

Therefore, it is seen that women felt trapped between the right to take two days off for menstruation as per policy and the nature of work assigned to them.

Transfer

As per BRAC policy [1.17.1(6)], after having discussion with female staff, they should be transferred to the place which is convenient for them so that they can maintain their family, especially children. The policy [1.17.1(7) of BRAC HRPP] also states that female staff cannot be transferred during the period from pregnancy to post-partum.

All the female respondents reported to have an experience of frequent transfer and they were not consulted about their convenient place before getting their transfer order. This goes against BRAC policy.

Again, if we analyze the case of one of the respondents, we see the violation of the second part of the policy. She got pregnant in 2006 and went on maternity leave. When she came back after four months, she found that she had been transferred from Chuknagar to Pirojpur Sadar (88 kilometers away). Then, her daughter was very ill and got diarrhoea. She cried to her supervisor to make him understand her difficulties in moving to other place with her two months old sick child. She failed to convince him and had to move to Pirojpur with her baby.

Likewise, other respondents reported that they got transfer orders as soon as they came back from maternity leave. Then, they had to go through hard time with their infant baby as well as through physical stress.

No time for breastfeeding

The in-depth interviews revealed that many female staff could not enjoy this flexibility due to their workload. Other findings show that female staff found the flexible hour as

insufficient to breastfeed their children. As per BRAC policy [1.9(3)], field-level female staff are provided with half an hour extra time along with their two hours lunch break. They thought that during their long office hours this extra half an hour with lunch time was neither very useful nor sufficient to breastfeed their children. Besides, they had to work in far away from their home before and after lunch break. Therefore, it became inconvenient, stressful, and costly for them.

Maternity leave

A regular female staff is entitled to have six months maternity leave with full salary in advance without losing seniority according to BRAC Human Resource Policies since 2011. If necessary, they are also entitled to have six more months leave without salary. In the case of extra leave, they would lose their seniority in the job. During the period of data collection in 2008, the maternity leave with salary was four months [BRAC HRPP 3.1.4(3)]. The female respondents who went for four months maternity leave reported that whenever they asked their supervisors for promotion, their supervisors asked them to wait more, because of the long leave they had gone through.

The female staff informed that they were not well informed about the policy in detail. Therefore, they were confused about the situation instead of feeling treated unfairly.

Paternity leave

In 2004, BRAC introduced a seven-day paternity leave with pay. But according to male respondents, they could not enjoy paternity leave due to their work pressure. According to HRPP [3.1.4(4)], male staff are entitled to take this leave within one month after the birth of the child. Male staff reported that this leave was not useful to them, as they could not enjoy their leave immediately after the child's birth when they really needed to stay with their wives and newborns.

All the respondents appreciated BRAC's effort to make the policy gender-sensitive by introducing paternity leave. Nevertheless, it is also revealed that some male staff were comparing this leave with maternity leave. They also thought that women were privileged by having a long leave because of the baby. At the same time, they rejected getting even three days paternity leave, which they thought improper behaviour of BRAC towards its male staff. Some male staff thought that men 'also' should be entitled as much leave as female staff. According to a male staff:

> Women can stay with their babies until the baby calls her 'ma' (!!), while men cannot even get three days off because of any emergency; we see paternity leave only in the policy and never experience in reality.

Provision of increasing the number of female staff

According to the gender policy of BRAC (5.1) it aims to reach female staff recruitment ratio of 30% by the year 2012. To achieve this target, BRAC offers

flexible terms and conditions and other benefits to encourage women to join and build their careers with BRAC. The HRD, as well the individual programme, analyze the gender ratio of their staff before any recruitment and take appropriate steps to achieve gender balance. Interview panels, as for the policy, should be formed with equal representation of men and women and must be friendly to female candidates.

According to the male respondents, management should monitor and follow-up the process so that the right women with the required qualifications can work for the right post. Disqualified or less qualified women should not be given a chance over qualified male applicants. It is considered unfair. All the affirmative actions should be implemented in such a way that a woman cannot use these for her personal benefit unfairly.

Sexual harassment

To protect female staff from sexual harassment, BRAC has formulated the 'Sexual Harassment Elimination Policy' in 2004, which was revised in 2008. BRAC formed a unit called Sexual Harassment Elimination (SHarE) Unit which, together with HRD, is responsible for implementing the policy.

The female respondents reported that they did not experience any sexual harassment by their male supervisors. They also opined that the 'good-looking' female staff who could keep 'good relationship' with their supervisors were thought to be more eligible candidates for promotion by many of the supervisors. The female respondents also reported to have experienced comments about their looks and their relationship with other male colleagues, which they did not consider as sexual harassment. In fact, in this case they thought themselves to be responsible of maintaining their honour with 'decent' dress and behaviour.

Verbal abuse

Undermining female staff's opinion in meetings, threatening of transfer or dismissal by the supervisor for minor mistake, negative comments about potentials and sincerity of female staff for asking leave were the common things experienced by the female respondents. However, the interesting finding here was that women did not consider this abuse as something to complain to the higher authority. Therefore, although they were more or less aware of these policies through different training, they never thought of complaining about such 'trivial' matters. They accepted it as a part of women's lives. Here, we can find the mental set-up of some of these women themselves, who had been brought up in a very patriarchal family and social environment, as an obstacle for making these gender sensitive policies effective.

Therefore, it is revealed that despite having a gender policy in the workplace, the ethics of care[5] which predominates among women, costs women in an unequal working environment. Drawing on Gilligan's (1982) work on gender difference in moral development, Davar (1999b), cited by Sonpar and Kapur argues that, 'while the care orientation may represent a superior morality for human society as some feminists have maintained, it costs women clearly in an unequal society…Women are not only socialized into the care ethics but discouraged from negotiating for justice' (Sonpar and Kapur, 2003:44). The socialization or patriarchal ideology leads them to compromise on issues of self-interest, rights and entitlement, that finally make them feeling shame and guilt in the case of their failure to meet the expectations of the care of ethics ((*ibid.*).

This chapter clearly indicates that female staff failed to take the benefits of policies designed to accommodate their needs and interests due to the deeply rooted patriarchal ideology in their minds. The expectations from the stereotypical gender roles hindered them to articulate their rights to enjoy these benefits. Here women were clearly seen in a trap between the unwritten working culture that expected them to fit themselves in the concept of 'ideal' or 'abstract' workers who did not have any roles outside the workplace, and the written policies that recognized women's needs and responsibilities outside workplace and that allowed women to take leaves, enjoy flexibilities for breast-feeding as well as menstruation. In this situation, female staff found themselves in fear of being labeled as 'inferior' or 'less committed' workers if they took the benefits they were entitled.

[5] The care of ethics is a normative ethical theory that determines certain actions as right or wrong. This theory has been accused, by some feminists, of reinforcing traditional gender roles by giving the message that women are born with caring responsibilities, for example, giving birth, taking care of children and other family members, and men should go out for work in order to support family. Because of the moral development with this ideology or ethics women have tendency to become more caregivers whether or not they work outside.

IV. CONCLUSION

NGOs, like any other social institutions, have both positive and less positive aspects. This is also the case of BRAC, the largest NGO in the world. The study revealed some aspects for which the organization was appreciated by its staff, along with the problems mentioned in this paper. Positive sides mentioned by both male and female staff include useful capacity building training; following a systematic 'fair' and 'unbiased' selection procedure for capacity building training; and providing job opportunities for young and fresh graduates. Due to high unemployment rate in Bangladesh, most organizations always have high demands in recruiting staff. Most of the time they prefer experienced and skilled people who can serve the organization 'better'. BRAC encourages fresh and young people to join. Thus, it helps young people to be prepared for their future career in the field of development, and makes a positive contribution in solving the unemployment problem, which is identified as one of the major barriers to the country's development.

This study sought the recommendations from staff to ensure a workplace where they, regardless of sex, can enjoy a favourable working environment. The aim of including their recommendations was to get a picture of staff demands regarding the establishment of a women-friendly workplace. These recommendations are expected to provide the policy-makers with new issues and ideas to decide the strategies to go forward towards a women-friendly workplace. Some recommendations reflect the patriarchal ideology working in the minds of both sexes. These recommendations reflect gender sensitiveness of BRAC staff. This provides us with useful insights necessary to design the manuals and contents for future gender training of BRAC staff.

The common recommendations made by most staff of both sexes include stopping unfair promotion, promote through proper assessment, as well as increasing salary and other benefits like housing, and fuel for motorbikes. They thought that BRAC should rethink riding motorbikes/bicycles by female staff which caused various physical, social and psychological problems. Here patriarchal ideology has appeared to be so pervasive that it has permeated into the vision of both male and female workers from their vindications of avoiding of the use of motorbikes/bicycles by female staff. They took this stance without considering that equality cannot be achieved if women get favorable labour conditions just because they are women. They also thought that BRAC should not recruit women in micro-credit programme which demands visiting field day and night, and which does not have a set time schedule. Both male and female workers thought that working in micro-credit programme requires staff behave in a 'masculine' way which does not suit the women. The female staff suggested to ensure their transfer to convenient places for staying with their family. They also emphasized to make the breastfeeding policy more flexible and practical. They pointed out that the efforts of making a women-

friendly workplace only by laws and policies were inadequate. Rather, they suggested to take more initiatives to make all staff, especially male staff, sensitive and aware of the benefits of creating such a workplace.

The study indicates the unequal pace in changing gender roles for both sexes. Here, women are being encouraged, or in some cases forced due to the economic need or new social expectations of modernity, to come out for work. At the same time they have to take almost all the household responsibilities related to their traditional gender roles, while men are yet to share the equal responsibility for taking care of children and household activities. In a Muslim patriarchal society like the Bangladesh one, women are socialized by an ideology that teaches them to accept certain jobs as harmful, and also are expected to preserve their 'honour' by maintaining *purdah,* and considering the domestic or reproductive activities as their main duty. Therefore, they feel alienated from their own bodies, the products of their work and their own culture, when they are assigned to do certain jobs which go against the traditional patriarchal ideology. The findings also indicate how policies taken by BRAC to ensure equality in the workplace cannot be fully effective because of the dominant ideology. Therefore, the study suggests that BRAC should make its male staff internalize the necessity of taking responsibilities of caring at home with their wives through gender training.

The findings reassert feminist challenges to the public-private dichotomy. The study shows that the respondents have to take paid employment to maintain their families. Then we see the public form of patriarchy in the practice of sexual division of labour in the family and workplace where women have to work double as paid workers outside and as unpaid workers at home. Thus, the findings also point out to the feminist claims that the private and public divide is a false distinction, rather these two are actually interrelated and connected. The female workers' experiences are seen to deny this separation of private or family life from the life in the public sphere or workplace. Rather their experience affirms the integral connection between the two spheres, since both are built upon the same patriarchal structures.

BRAC initiated many gender sensitive policies, including flexible working hours for breastfeeding and paternity leave. However, this study revealed the reality where women's maternal responsibilities and care-giving role are experienced as barriers to women's employment. It draws our attention to the reality of Bangladesh where institutional childcare is practically non-existent. The state should take necessary steps to ensure adequate support services for women, so that they not only could enter the workforce, but also could stay there as their male counterparts. This study also draws the attention to the necessity of proper monitoring to ensure proper implementation of gender policy adopted by any organization. It also shows men's attitude of considering women's body and motherhood as problematic in the workplace. In this case, the study suggests to treat motherhood as a societal issue, rather than private or family issue, from which all social and economic life spin. Likewise, the study suggests to value the 'qualities', such as, patience, empathy, nurturing or femininity, associated with the private sphere within the workplace.

Despite of all the problems and challenges reported by the respondents, the fact must be acknowledged that BRAC has significant contributions in the field of women's empowerment in Bangladesh. It has created huge employment opportunities for women in rural areas where dominant patriarchal ideology, along with conservative religious practice, keeps women subordinated in all spheres of life. The financial dependency always brings an important dimension to women's status. Here it can be said that BRAC mainly challenges rural patriarchy in three areas of traditional male authority: economy, mobility and the traditional image of 'femininity'. Nevertheless, considering the difficulties and sufferings female staff are going through in challenging the dominant social structure, BRAC should consider to be more tactful, so that women feel encouraged to go through the process of challenging patriarchy.

After all the challenges and problems that are reported to be faced by women due to the policy regarding motorbikes, transfer, staying out for long hours, high mobility, findings indicate the need of taking an apparently 'contradictory' position by BRAC. On the one hand, BRAC works against traditional patriarchal values. BRAC needs to renegotiate their initiatives to the idea of stereotypical gender roles in some cases, since women are facing social problems in getting married and having a family life due to adopting the new roles assigned by BRAC. BRAC could formulate their strategies more tactfully, rather than choosing the strategy that demands tremendous change within a short period before preparing the community to accept the changes. For example, BRAC can make the provision of riding motorbike/bicycle flexible or optional for female staff rather than making it mandatory. At the same time, BRAC should look for other forms of creating change by avoiding the policy of introducing labour advantage for women, which may produce a negative reaction among the male staff and employers that may also lead to the rejection from the potential employers.

BRAC needs to work at the ideological level along with the policy level to make the policies more effective. Thus, it will ensure a workplace where all staff, both male and female, will feel equally encouraged to give their maximum potentials both for the organization and their own career advancement. It will help the female staff to critically assess their own situation, instead of accepting discrimination as 'natural', and ensure that their needs are properly addressed. Women, who are barred from participating in equal terms as men by dominant culture, religion, and stereotypical gender roles, should internalize the necessity of coming out from this situation by accepting new roles offered by the development institutions. Women should also consider that equality cannot be achieved if they get favourable working conditions only because of their sex.

One of the most important aspects revealed by this research is the paradoxical role of BRAC. It also opened the scope for further research on the role of such NGOs in creating tension between controversial modernity and traditional way of living, and its effect on women involved in such organizations as beneficiaries and staff. This research also questions how and to what extent the development organizations and the donor agencies are pushing women to contribute to sustain capitalist and

competitive economy by setting rigid target and deadline of selling services, especially the way of selling the products of their own brand. Exploring this may also open up the new insights of how to deal and work with the concept of women's empowerment and development.

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APPENDIX

SOME RELEVANT TERMINOLOGIES

District: Bangladesh is divided into 64 districts for administrative and other purposes.

***Upazila*:** The districts are further divided into sub-districts called *upazilas* which are the lowest level of government administration in Bangladesh.

***Thana*:** *Thana* is a unit of police administration. Although after 1961 *thana* became the main centre of development activities by the government, in 1983 the Local Government Ordinance of 1982 declared the existing *thanas* as *upazilas*.

Area Manager (AM): This is the position that supervises Area Offices (AO) of BRAC at *thana* level.

Programme Organizer (PO): There are POs for each programme area who act as the grassroots level supervisor for the respective component. They work under the supervision, with some exception, of Branch Managers (BM) who are subject to supervision by the Area Managers (AM), head of the area offices.

Regional Managers: The Regional Managers (RM) are the most senior supervisors at the field level. All supervisory staff, such as the BMs, AMs and RMs, is responsible for communicating with different stakeholders, including governmental offices and NGOs, in order to keep them informed and to share control of the programme implementation.

BRAC Education and Trainers: BRAC runs the largest non-formal education system in Bangladesh as well as in the world through its BEP. Since 1985, two types of schools are being run by BRAC - Non-Formal Primary Education (NFPE) is for children aged 8-10 years and the Basic Education for Older Children (BEOC) aged 11-14 years old. Most of the BRAC teachers are village women having at least 10 years of education and locally selected. To ensure the quality of education BRAC has various initiatives to provide pre-service and in-service training to its entire staff working for the BEP. Pre-service training is provided through BRAC 'Training and Resource Centres' (now called BRAC Learning Centre or BLC). BRAC has 19 residential BLCs all over Bangladesh. Regarding any kind of in-service teacher training. BRAC usually depends on different field level trainers, like Quality Assurance Specialists, POs, Master Trainers (MT), Batch Trainers and Core MTs. Location of in-service training depends on the number of people being trained and usually takes place in ROs and AOs.

MTs are selected and trained at Head Office and then MTs train the other field level staff who in turn train the teachers, who are locally selected, gradually through the monthly refresher programmes. MTs undertake post-training follow up visits to the class room to see the level of use of training. They have to move to different training centres of BRAC to conduct training and therefore very often have to spend night outside away from their family.

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