

From Graduation to Joblessness: An Analysis of the Determinants of Unemployment among Educated Women in Bangladesh

Kazia Yesmen¹

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ABSTRACT

Although Bangladesh has made great strides in female education, graduate women continue to face unemployment in large numbers, suggesting an extreme gap between education and job opportunities. This paper examines the socio-cultural, economic and institutional causes underlying the unemployment of graduate women. It particularly targets to find out the current trends in female education and female employment, and analyse the most significant obstacles to ensure that educated women can find appropriate jobs. Data were collected using a qualitative methodology, and data were collected in the form of in-depth and key informant interviews with unemployed and employed female graduates and employers at Dhaka University and Jagannath University. The analysis of the interviews employed in the study helped identify two broad groups of barriers, including common and indigenous, including, but not limited to, males-dominated interview boards, discrimination based on marital status, focus on physical appearance, and job and education mismatch; and indigenous, including family favoritism to sons, bribery, politicised recruitment, Dhaka-centric job examination, and question paper leakage. These results explain how the education level is not enough to find a job among women since the stereotyping of genders and the dysfunction of the system multiply the disadvantages. The research provides contextualised knowledge on female graduate unemployment in Bangladesh, and the examination proposed measures towards combating unemployment based on evidence, such as decentralizing job exams, gender balance in hiring committees, encouraging women to take up technical courses and implementing anti-discriminatory measures. By narrowing the education to employment gap, the study supports the values of structural and policy changes to enhance gender inclusive development and increase the involvement of women in the labour market.

1. Introduction

In the past 30 years, Bangladesh has achieved a truly extraordinary stride in female education but this stride has not been proportionately converted into job opportunities among educated women in the country. As national statistics say,

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, Jagannath University, Dhaka-1100, Bangladesh.
Email: ky.kakoly90@yahoo.com

the rate of female education even up to the tertiary level has soared significantly, nevertheless, the rate of female employment performs far much lower. As an example, the enrolment of women in higher education increased between 12.43 and 41.7% between 1990 and 2020, respectively (Banbies, 2020; Dhaka Tribune, 2020; Knoema, 2021). Besides this, female student admission rate in certain academic session hit 52% (Reaz, 2023). Nevertheless, the level of female employment is still low 36.21% in contrast to 81.51% among men (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics [BBS], 2022).

Historically, Bangladesh has survived a number of socio-economic problems since its independence in 1971 such as war-related destruction and natural disasters. Through concerted efforts by different governments and the NGOs, certain areas including health, GDP and literacy have improved tremendously. In the field of education, such efforts as free education, female scholarships, or the work of NGOs and schools led to the rapid increase in female literacy (BBS, 2022; Grameen Bank, 2021). As a result, society has been able to give women greater social engagement, liberties and independence (Reaz et al., 2023). But this educational advancement is opposed in the employment statistics. The labour force representation of women has still not been entirely opened up and most of working women are still in the low paying sectors like agriculture (usually unpaid) and garment industries where they experience wage gaps and poor career behaviours (Rahman, 2024). Although there are provisions contained in the constitution (Articles 10, 19, 28) and other policies such as the National Women Development Policy 2011 and the employment quotas, there are gaps in structure. Lack of proper policy implementation, insensitivity among the employers towards gender issues and insufficient monitoring are one of the reasons why many female graduates are left jobless or underemployed (MOWCA, 2011; Parvez, 2018). Such women end up having pressure upon them by their family, neglect by society, mental strain on them and there are instances when they remain unemployed and even cancelled their marriages (Rashid, 2004).

Globally, studies affirm that education is a strong determinant of employment. The positive association between education and employment, especially among women, is supported by Human Capital Theory (Nafukho et al., 2004) and by studies by Panigrahi et al. (2015), Brewer (2013), and Yousefy and Baratali (2011). Globally, in developing nations such as Vietnam, the use of higher female education shows that both the male and female rates of labor participation are almost equal (Banerji et al., 2018). Nevertheless, worldwide statistics demonstrate that half of the women work as opposed to three-fourths of men (ILO, 2018), which means that there are still obstacles. Lack of technical skills and cultural limitations are commonly mentioned as the causes of the low number of women employed (Lata et al., 2021). The studies of female

unemployment in Bangladesh are few with a high level of uncertainty with regard to educated women. General causes of women unemployment identified by previous researchers include low pay, patriarchal culture, lack of support mechanisms, family responsibilities and poor labour markets (Rahman, 2016; Ferdaush & Rahman, 2011). Nevertheless, there is a lack of studies on the reasons why graduate women are not employed in disproportionate numbers when compared to their male counterparts, even though they are academically bright (Parvez, 2018; Ali et al., 2015). There are also significant off-putting factors such as cultural requirements, genderized discrimination in employment, absence of childcare, and personal security (Khatun, 2018). Moreover, women are not allowed in the workforce due to the societal male norms and structural patriarchy. Policies in favour of female employees do not mean that employers cannot favour men because of their prejudices or logistics (Banks, 2013; Kabeer, 2011; Chowdhury, 2010). This kind of marginalization can only be eradicated through gender equality in the labor market, according to Cotter et al. (1998), which would help to encourage inclusion in economic development.

This research gap is evident by the comparison of male and female graduate employment. Although there are 2.5 million male graduate employment, the figure is 0.6 million for women, even though the female graduate rate is 42% (BBS, 2020). These imbalances signify the fact that education is not a sure way of ensuring women are employed in Bangladesh. The literature gap that must be filled well is the issue of female graduate employment, which appears to be hampered by local and socio-cultural factors considerably. This research would seek to find out those underexplored factors and local factors that led to graduate women unemployment. It attempts to provide the following urgent response: Why are not qualified women getting jobs and in such a manner that can be discussed as being commensurate with their educational performance? Moreover, the author believes that unless these issues are resolved, the nation will be at a threat of regressing towards the stage of education, weakening economy, and failing to achieve Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those, which are focused on gender equality and decent work. Then, the low level of education against the level of employment and education rate of women in Bangladesh is a significant socio-economic issue.

2. Objectives of the study

1. To identify the current trends of women's education and employment in Bangladesh;
2. To assess the common and indigenous economic, socio-cultural, and institutional factors that influences to the unemployment of educated women in Bangladesh.

3. To explore the experiences and challenges of the graduate unemployed women involving the job market, including skill mismatch, discrimination, and societal expectations.
4. To recommend effective strategies and policy interventions that can improve employment rate of the educated women and build up bridge between the education and employment attainment.

3. Methodology

Research Approach: The research used a qualitative research design which is considered the most appropriate in examining the deeper and subjective experiences of graduate women who are unemployed in Bangladesh. In comparison with the quantitative research types that are related to numbers and quantifiable results, the qualitative approaches are more descriptive and interpretive, which enables more in-depth study of the lived realities (Creswell, 2007). This approach was suitable considering the fact that the current body of qualitative studies in this area is limited, and voices and storeys should be captured. The work that fits the definition of International Development Studies with its focus on feminist and social orientation.

Study Area and participants' selection: The study was carried out in Dhaka city at Dhaka University and Jagannath University. The research utilised the snowball and purposive methods of sampling, which are popular in qualitative studies (Lenaini, 2021). A sample of 13 individuals was chosen: six unemployed graduate women, four employed graduates and three employers. These organizations were selected to facilitate triangulation of the views. All respondents were graduate students of Dhaka or Jagannath University.

Table 01
Summary of methodology

Methods		With whom	Area	Issues of inquiries	Total respondents
Qualitative	In-depth interviews	Graduated unemployed and employed women	Graduated from Dhaka and Jagannath University	Trends of women's education, factors of unemployment, experiences of job interviews, and effective strategies.	10

KIIs	Employers	UNK	factors of unemployment, policy recommendations	03
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Data Collection and analysis: Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and Key Informant Interviews (KII). Interview guides were created in three groups: the unemployed graduates, the employed graduates and the employees. The collection of data took place in January 2022. Participants were interviewed, and the records were transcribed and translated into English with their permission. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity of the participants. The data were interpreted using thematic analysis. The reviews of the transcripts were done repeatedly, and literature and interview responses were used to develop themes. Two general themes have been identified: common (global/universal barriers) and local ones (context-specific to Bangladesh).

Validity, Reliability, and Ethics: validity in a qualitative study is the proper representation of the reality of the participants. The study maintained a high level of validity based on triangulation, consistency, and ethical research, such as reporting on informed consent, confidence, and respectful and open, clear research, alongside the APA guidance (Smith, 2003).

4. Results of the study

This section reflects the results of the interviews carried out with 13 people of the three groups (3 KIIs). The graduate women were questioned on the causes of unemployment, and the employers were questioned on whether they discriminate against women as against their male counterparts. The findings are classified under themes and sub-themes that were created through the findings of the literature review. Two theme sets were found (see Table 2). The theme (I) describes that there are general factors which cause unemployed women after graduation. These are not Bangladesh-specific factors but also include the entire world. The second theme (II) points to the local or aboriginal factors in Bangladesh that have not been reported before. These are some of the newly recognised causes of unemployment amongst Bangladeshi women with graduate women.

Table 02*Themes, sub-themes, and responses of the participants*

Themes	Sub-themes	Responses (10)
4.1 General factors	Interview boards with male dominance	9
	Marriage and family impacts	8
	Physical appearance	5
	Education structure	7
	Employee benefits	8
4.2 Indigenous factors	Marriage, family, and job preparation are closely interconnected	
	Bribery and favoritism among siblings within the family	10
	Complex job recruitment process	8
	Lobbying and politics create barriers to women's employment	10
	Leaked job examination questions	7
	Dhaka (Capital city) based job examination centre	9

4.1 General factors

Interviews with unemployed graduates revealed common factors similar to those widely recognised in other developing countries like Bangladesh.

Interview boards with male dominance

Interview boards, as the final step of recruitment, often show bias. Findings reveal that women are reprioritised, as board members assume men can commit more time, while women will focus on household and childcare duties, leading to intentional gender-based discrimination. Participant E had experience with male-dominant interview boards:

I've taken so many job exams I've lost count and faced six interview boards. Though some rejections were due to written tests, three interviews went very well—at a private bank, a government office, and a private college. I was confident, but didn't get selected. I believe gender bias played a role. The boards usually had three males and one female, and they mostly chose male candidates. In fact, many of my male friends were hired despite performing poorly in interviews (Participant E).

The interview board is important for getting jobs for women. Graduated women sometimes have bad experiences with male-dominated interview boards.

Marriage and family impacts

In addition to male-dominated interview boards, the marital status of female candidates influences their evaluation. The study findings reveal that married women encounter greater challenges in securing employment compared to their unmarried counterparts. Participant A mentioned that:

I believe my biggest challenge was being married and having children. The interview board seemed to form a negative perception of me as soon as they saw my marital status (Participant A).

This is not fair that women, who are married, face problems in getting jobs. Employers always try to avoid them.

Physical appearance

The study found that attractive women often receive favourable treatment from interview boards, while male candidates' appearance has little impact. This raises questions about internalised oppression, though women aren't responsible—rather, men tend to discriminate among women based on looks. Numerous examples highlight how physical appearance influences job interviews for women.

Physical appearance for women is important in interview boards for both government and private organisations. If my appearance is not good, I will not be able to present myself nicely in front of customers. As a result, the company tries to pick good-looking women (Participant F).

Physical appearance is a vital factor for women on interview boards. Women with beautiful faces are given priority in private jobs. During my job in a mobile company, there was an unwritten rule of the Human Resource department that good-looking women are given priority (Participant H).

An unspoken bias favours attractive women in interviews, often leading to higher scores and, at times, unofficially reserving certain positions for them, regardless of their actual qualifications (Participant M).

Education and employment structure

Bangladesh possesses a wide range of education systems with general, technical, madrasah, English medium, or qawmi. The majority of women end up graduating in humanities, and employment happens to demand either science or technical or commerce, almost all of which are dominated by men.

I graduated in Islamic History and Culture, but only 2–4% of it is relevant to job exams, while science students have over 50% relevance, making it hard for me to fully prepare (Participant C).

Bangladesh's education system is unfriendly to women, with parents and schools choosing study groups without considering the preferences of female students.

4.2 Indigenous factors

The study identified key local factors in Bangladesh that hinder graduated women's employment, as revealed through interviews with unemployed and employed participants.

Marriage, family, and job preparation are closely interconnected

In Bangladesh, women over 30 face difficulties marrying and social stigma if unmarried. Thus, many aim to marry before 30. After marriage, balancing job preparation with family and children becomes challenging for women. Participant F shared a similar experience.

Our tradition expects women to manage household work while men work outside. After graduating, I married and focused on my home, but job recruitment limits the age to 30. I often feel torn between prioritising family or preparing for a career (Participant F).

Bribery and favouritism among siblings within the family

The bribe is not legal, but the parents support the son in bribing. The results of the interview reveal that parents give the bribe money to their sons but refuse to pay the money to their daughters. Participant B shared family incidents about bribery:

Besides political connections, bribery hindered my job prospects. While some say both genders face this, I believe women suffer more. Parents often pay bribes for their sons but refuse to do so for daughters. Men find ways to manage, but women struggle to do so (Participant B).

Complex job recruitment process

The job recruitment process in Bangladesh varies by organisation. While some private companies manage it efficiently, most government and non-government agencies take 3 to 4 years to select candidates. Men often have the patience to endure this, but many women, after graduation, focus on family responsibilities. Economic constraints make hiring help difficult, making it challenging for women to continue the lengthy recruitment process, especially for government jobs, as noted by participants.

I believe Bangladesh's job recruitment system is toughest for women. Three years ago, I passed the public service preliminary and written exams, but never got an interview or a health check-up. At 29, I worry about marriage—if I marry, how will I prepare for interviews and manage job opportunities? (Participant D).

This is true that the job recruitment process is very lengthy. In my current job, more than two years were needed to complete the procedure (Participant J).

Lobbying and politics create barriers to women's employment

Bangladesh's student politics often show corruption and partiality (Kuttig, 2019). Political connections strongly influence job opportunities, giving candidates with political ties extra advantages. Many jobs are highly politicised. Most participants attributed their unemployment to the flawed political system and favouritism within these networks.

The political system harms our youth. Candidates with political ties gain job advantages. For example, a friend involved in student politics secured a job at an autonomous institute through a minister's recommendation to the board members (Participant C).

Leaked job examination questions

The leakage of job examination questions has been a critical issue over the past 15 years. Zaman et al. (2019) documented several such cases in Bangladesh. Most beneficiaries, about 95%, are men, while only 5% are women. This ongoing malpractice, common in government, bank, and autonomous organisation exams, is damaging national integrity. Participant D shared how this unfair system disqualified deserving candidates like them from job opportunities despite being qualified.

I can give many examples of leaked questions before job exams. Among our 98 classmates, 55 were boys. At a recent picnic, we found that 40 boys had jobs, while only 11 girls did. Some male friends secretly admitted they had access to the questions beforehand. They claimed 98% of leaked questions go to men, and getting them required strong lobbying and connections (Participant D).

Dhaka (Capital city) based job examination centre

Most government and all private job exams are held in Dhaka. Women from remote areas face challenges with long travel, safety, and overnight stays. Due to these issues, some cannot attend all exams. One participant, who lived outside

Dhaka for a few months, shared her experience of missing job opportunities because she couldn't travel to the capital in time for the examinations.

The job exam centre location was a major issue. While living in Rajshahi, most exams were in Dhaka. Due to the 10–12-hour journey, I missed about 50% of the exams (Participant E).

I had very few experiences of job examinations. Now I see the graduated women from my college go to Dhaka every week for job examinations. The system is bad for women because Jamalpur to Dhaka takes 5 a 5/6 hours and has limited seats (Participant G).

Four years ago in Dhaka, a woman came for her oral exam scheduled at 4 PM. Around 1 PM, she approached me, requesting to be examined earlier. When I asked why, she said she had nowhere to stay in Dhaka and needed to return to her village soon, as travelling after 10 PM was unsafe for women (Participant K).

5. Discussion and conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The aim of this research was to obtain the major causes of the unemployment of women in Bangladesh. The results of interviews with unemployed and employed graduates and employers found that the problems of women in employment are predetermined by both global (universal) and regional (local) factors. These were also of gender-based or non-gender-based problems.

5.1.1 Common Factors

The research shows that gender- and gender-independent factors are common in the unemployment of the graduated women in Bangladesh, which is in agreement with other developing nations. The patriarchal nature of the society limits women to household areas and thus preparing a job involves becoming a wife instead of executing a job (Rahman, 2021; Ferdaush & Rahman, 2011). Moreover, male-dominated interview boards are usually biased, and women candidates are not given sufficient attention during the hiring procedures (Claringbould & Knoppers, 2007). The status of marriage is also a limiting factor because most companies prefer unmarried women, as they believe that married women are unable to balance work and family life (Jordan et al., 2012). The family management, which is traditionally a role of women, is also a barrier to employment (Mahmud, 2003). What appears to be accidental, but one crucial point is the focus on looks, where looks are usually given a lot of weight in job interviews, disparaging equality even amongst women (Kabeer, 2011). Besides

gender, the absence of technical or vocational education also becomes one of the factors, where most female graduates are educated in humanities and social sciences, which are not highly demanded in the private sector (Ahmed, 2016; Dewan & Sarker, 2017). With the assumption that women do not have the technical skills or the flexibility to suit the job demands, employers usually give preference to those who have specialised skills. These similarities are based on structural, educational, and cultural issues, which reflect the multifaceted character of the relations between gender and employment overall, which complicates the participation of women in the labour force in Bangladesh.

5.1.2 Local Factors

Besides the general international problems, this paper serves some local peculiarities of circumstance, which depend on the situation in Bangladesh, and which underlie the problem of graduated women's unemployment even more. The general high rate of bribery in the recruitment process, women are especially disadvantaged, barely able to access the financial resources as well as family support in making illicit payments. Although both sexes are influenced by bribery, the men are more likely to gain as the society is ready to invest in bribing to get a better chance of employment (Mair & Marti, 2007). Another issue that can be hidden but creates severe psychological and logistical pressures among women is the conflict between marriage, family duties, and job preparation that causes significant pressure on women, particularly during their prime working years (Ahmed et al., 2016). Moreover, women simply stay out of the field or jobs that do not suit them to have office-based employment, which is not numerous (Connley, 2021). In a non-gendered area, political favouritism is also likely to be given to applicants who are members of a certain party, an area where women are grossly underrepresented (Hossain et al., 2014). Their recruitment procedure in the public sector takes a long time, up to four years, and this further puts off women who have an age limit and family commitments during that time (Jahan, 2012). Hiring practices are also dominated by lobbying and favouritism, whereby men are more capable of using political or personal connections to get jobs (Rashid, 2019). Worryingly, the possibility of leakage of job examination questions is an unfair advantage to the related applicants, the majority of them being men, thereby compromising selection based on merit (The Daily Star, 2019). Lastly, women can also be prohibited through Dhaka-based systems of recruitment that fail to cover women in rural or remote regions because of security reasons, unstable transportation, and financial limitations (Banks, 2013; Rahman, 2024). Since such local structural, cultural and procedural barriers critically limit access of women to job opportunities, even in instances when the women are qualified and interested.

5.2 Contribution of the Study

The research has generated numerous significant contributions at both methodological, practical, and policy levels, particularly in the perception of subtle impediments to the employment of graduate women.

5.2.1 Methodological Contribution

- The research fills a critical literature gap by exploring graduated women's unemployment in Bangladesh using qualitative methods.
- A new framework was developed that incorporates education, agency, and socio-cultural and local factors, offering a holistic view missing in previous models like Human Capital Theory and the World Bank framework.
- The study's triangulation method (interviewing both job seekers and employers) strengthens its reliability and depth.
- It stands as one of the first qualitative studies on this topic in Bangladesh, and offers a replicable research approach for scholars in sociology, international development, and gender studies.

5.2.2 Practical Contribution

- The study offers practical insights for job-seeking women. By identifying barriers such as limited technical education, gender bias, and geographic inaccessibility, women can make informed choices about career preparation.
- Employers and educators can use these findings to address hiring biases, improve curriculum design, and encourage women to pursue technical fields.
- NGOs and civil society actors can draw from the findings to develop training and awareness programs for both rural and urban women.

5.2.3 Policy Contribution

- Despite having progressive frameworks like the National Women Development Policy 2011 and Labour Law 2006, these policies lack enforcement and fail to address practical hiring discrimination.
- Recommendations include:
 - Increasing the maximum job age limit for women.
 - Decentralising job examination centres to improve accessibility.
 - Mandating gender balance in recruitment panels.
 - Ensuring punitive action for hiring discrimination or policy violations.

- Introducing scholarship schemes to promote female enrollment in technical and science education.
- Implementing a quota or balance rule for female representation in both education streams and employment sectors.
- International bodies like the World Bank could support policy advocacy by aligning funding with gender-equity conditions.

5.3 Limitations of the Study and Further Research

Like all research, this study has limitations:

- **Geographic Limitation:** It focused only on graduates from two universities in Dhaka, excluding rural and regional institutions.
- **Sample Limitations:** Only women graduates and employers were interviewed. Policymakers, family members, and job agency representatives were not included.
- **Limited data:** quantitative data were excluded.
- **Framework Scope:** While informed by multiple theories, the final model is a modified framework rather than a strict application of any single theory.

These limitations offer opportunities for further research, such as:

- Expanding the job exams to divisional cities.
- Exploring the current challenges of employed women, including the role of daycare systems.
- Investigating social perceptions of working women, especially in conservative or rural settings.
- Conducting a comparative study of men's and women's job search journeys to reveal gendered inequalities in more detail.

5.4 Conclusion

The findings of this paper show that education is not the only reason why women graduated cannot find jobs in Bangladesh. The cultural requirements, biased employment, institutionalised corruption, and inaccessibility are all important determinants of the refusal to allow women equal opportunities in the labour market. Women's education is also on the increase, but employment is not. This education-to-employment gap will continue to be present without the consideration of the socio-cultural and local barriers. The proposed thesis suggests a novel conceptual framework to enable the researchers, educators and policymakers to comprehend and resolve these interrelation complexities. Employment rates among the graduated women in Bangladesh can be enhanced by enforcing policy changes, sensitising and educating women technically. The results of this research can be deemed as a diagnosis of the problems with the overall system and can be treated as an appeal to establish a more inclusive and equitable job market.

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