

## Occupational stress, social and family difficulties and job contentment of working women: Bangladesh perspective

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**Abstract:** It was a practice that women would principally do the household tasks, bringing up families and men would work to impart financial supports to the families. But in course of time due to declining population, education, economic welfare and women liberation movement, that convention has changed gradually. Women now seek out careers for livelihood and earning money as well as for identification, development and self-actualization and self esteem. They do not focus on just supplementing the earnings of their family but also feel like to make a fuller use of their talents and skills to secure for themselves and their family members the best of nourishment, education and cultural life. However, although the recent practice of women working bring financial independence, it also exalts difficulties and stresses to the working women's lives in terms of various elements of the job situation such as lack of job security, social protection, interpersonal relations at work, responsibility conflict and uncertainty, lack of autonomy and participation at work, organizational arrangement and atmosphere, career prospects, work and family balances issues, disproportionate work load, health and safety risks, low wage etc. The present study contains the information and situation on working women, the hazards and occupational strains they face at work and in family life in many developed and developing countries including Bangladesh. Besides, this study has also tried to illustrate where the difficulties are and how far these for working women can be solved by giving them emotional sustenance, voicing against the long standing harassment of women and advocating equality for them.

### 1. Introduction

The economic development of any country requires an integration of both male and female labor forces. This means that beside men, women have to contribute to development process of the country as the labor of women contributes to economic growth and poverty reduction. Consequently from coffee to computers, women workers endow with the work that creates the goods that act out the world's supermarkets and

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departmental stores. Women usually labor more hours irrespective of the household's income status. They also relish less leisure than men, often carrying out several tasks concurrently in both house and outside. Women working time range from 16 to 18 hours including child rearing and household management as indicated in various household surveys. Women's participation in formal sector employment was negligible until the recent past. In the industrial sector, women's participation is widely visible in the construction, industry, electronics, garments and shrimp processing. Local textiles, shoes, cosmetics and such other consumable production units have also employed women. The garment- manufacturing sub-sector, which is the largest employer export earning sector, is the largest employer of women. More than 2 million women work in about 3500 garment units and they continue over 90 percent of the total labor force in this sector (Ziegler, 2004). While women's income has increased; there is still a significant gap between total male and female earnings. Women continue to earn substantially less than men. In 2000-01, female wage and salary earners working full-time received, on average, only 84 per cent of the amounts earned by their male counterparts, with women's mean gross weekly earnings lower than men's across all age groups. (Department of family and Community Services in Australia, 2004). And working out has increased the burden of women's work.

Given the intensity of working in the lowest point and that the work is shared with household duties and sometimes multiple economic activities, it would come into view that the coir workers lives are extremely arduous. Economic insecurity may restrain women to continue in situations where their rights are being debased, for example, through domestic violence. Women are particularly exaggerated by feelings of "Subjection" in the face of abuse and conventional channels of authorized right often are, or look as if, out-of-the-way or ineffective, to underprivileged women. Most of the women are exposed to regular pressures as part of their normal day to day lives with detrimental affects. And Occupational stress is increasingly recognized as a cause of serious personal injury for women in both the workplace and personal life. There is no simple way of predicting what will cause harmful levels of stress. Workers especially female workers respond to different types of pressure in different ways. Problems identified most frequently as causing stress at work are unrealistic targets and workloads, excessive hours being continually worked uncertainty, poor communication and lack of support at work. Stress can also be caused by staffs pushing themselves too hard in the belief that this is what is required. While it will not be possible for organizations to remove all the stressors it is important that employees and managers identify which aspects of the working environment are causing most difficulties and work together for improvements. Stress is not an indication of weakness. Everyone at any time may experience stress for a variety of reasons. However, the paper focuses on identifying

working women's job stresses and contentment as well as the social and personal difficulties they undertake in life and is also indicating some measurements to avoid them.

## **2. Objectives of the study**

The current study mainly aims at demonstrating job situation for working women and, stresses and difficulties that women experience. It also tries to imply how to resolve occupational stresses by promoting effective management practices, improving interpersonal relations at both profession and home etc. that concern working women.

## **3. Methodology**

The paper is mainly based on the secondary data received from research articles written on working women. The core concern is the stresses of working women in decision making processes that affect their lives and livelihoods. The archives and documents preserved by government and non government agencies (NGO) have widely been consulted. The paper has also interacted with data and statistical references from Bangladesh Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, United Nations, World Health Organisation (WHO), and National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in U.S.A, Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre in Australia, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) in Australia etc. and other authentic national and international sources. Moreover, the internet resources have been extensively reviewed which have made this research outfitted with the most current information.

## **4. A psychoanalysis of occupational stress, social and personal difficulties and job contentment of working women**

The association among femininity, job and stress is multifaceted as in practice; women are still being discriminated against. Economically they are less privileged because in many cases they are not considered fit for productive employment and economic activities. Several factors appear to amplify the brunt of pressure on women, principal among them being the preponderant role that women still play in the provision of family care. Household Labour frequently involves caring for family members: children, the sick and the elderly. Even where men share the caring function, it is usually the woman who is the primary carer, and she may suffer additional health risks. These may be physical (for instance, muscular-skeletal problems caused by lifting) or involve extreme tiredness, stress or depression. Women predominate, too, as paid carers health workers of different types – and encounter many of the same problems in that role (Kane, 1999). It is well-

established that the total workload of women who are employed full-time is higher than that of full-time male workers, particularly where they have family responsibilities. On average, in South Asia, women work 13 hours more per week than men. (Simeen, 1992). The table below showed the proportional study of working condition among men and women in south Asian countries and depicted the discrepancy between male and female in terms of economy activity.

**Table: Time use in three Southern Asian countries, 1989/92**

Hours per week of economic activity

	<b>Paid</b>	<b>Subsistence</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Hours per week of Housework</b>	<b>Total work hours per week</b>
Bangladesh Ages 5+					
Women	14	8	22	31	53
Men	38	3	41	5	46
India Ages 5+					
Women	28	7	35	34	69
Men	43	4	47	10	57
Nepal Ages 5+					
Women	18	17	35	42	77
Men	29	12	41	15	56

(Source: The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.95.XVII.2) Chart 5.3.)

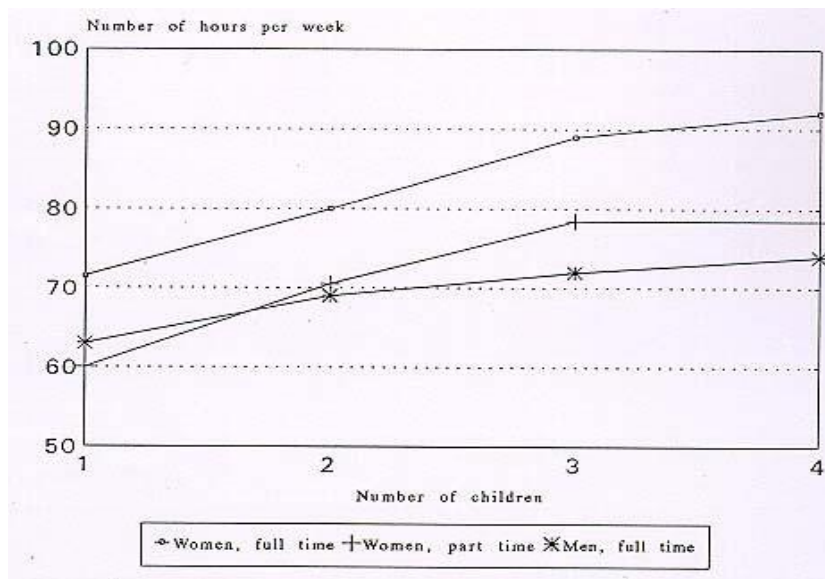
Many women have to feel troubles in taking on full time jobs because of certain unavoidable and strong family obligations as to many male parents or husbands experience difficulties in accepting the change in women's role - parents or husbands can accept that women have to work but they do not readily accept the fact that women ask more of their help in doing the household chores; they resent this and quarrels ensue because of it. This in turn puts a strain on marriages, family as well as children. Besides, many working women are also forced to undergo through many difficulties and pressure with their earnings - they sometimes do not have control on their income and strings of their purses are in the hands of their husbands or male parents. As far as their places of work are concerned women employees do not even feel safe and secure at. In office, they

often have to face malicious insinuations of her male colleagues. Sexual harassments by their male counterparts are common place for many working women.

Women are major victims of violence, at both the home and workplace. A research estimates that 38 per cent of the adult female population had experienced one or more incidents of physical or sexual violence since the age of 15. For the majority of women (2.5); a man perpetrated the violence (Domestic Violence and Incest Resource Centre (DVIRC) 2002). The incidence of violence has an obvious and serious impact on women's capacity to maintain health and the capacity to work either at home or in the paid work force.

In a research carried out in Sweden (which is shown below in Figure 1) it is found that the total workload of women employed full time is much higher than that of men employed full time, and that the total workload for women employed part time is as much as that of men employed full time. Sweden is a country in which 86 per cent of women are in the workforce, but the division of labor between spouses at home has remained much the same (Stochholm, 1991).

**Figure 1: Total workload of women and men as related to the number of children living at home**



**Source:** The measurement of the total workload of men and women M. Franken Steiner, Stochholm, 1991

In addition to their family responsibilities, other factors also tend to make women more vulnerable to work-related stress. These include: lower levels of control in their jobs, since the great majority of women still tend to occupy less senior jobs than men; the higher proportion of women who work in precarious forms of employment; the proliferation of women in high-stress occupations, such as nursing, teaching and work with visual display units (VDUs); and the prejudice and discrimination suffered by many women who are in more senior positions, such as managerial jobs, both as a result of organizational and corporate policy and from their colleagues at work. (Stochholm, 1991).

In a survey carried out in 1992 of nearly 1,300 full-time employees in a random sample of private companies in the United States, it was found that gender, among other factors (the level of the employee in the organization, income, occupation and family situation), accounted for differences in job stress at the workplace. The survey found that stress affects women more than men, and that they are significantly more likely to report burnout, stress-related illnesses or a desire to resign from their jobs. The researchers suggested several reasons for this. In the first place, women are often paid less than men for their work, even if they have college degrees. Many organizations also lack policies which respond to family issues. Single women with children, along with low-paid college graduates, are at highest risk of burnout. Some 50 per cent of single women with children reported burnout, compared to 31 per cent of married women with children (Employee burnout: Causes and cures, Part 1: Employee stress levels, Northwestern National Life Insurance, Minneapolis, 1992, as reported in *Work in America*, Vol. 17, No. 6, June 1992).

Stress at work is a growing problem for all workers, including women. In one survey 60% of employed women cited stress as their number one problem at work. Furthermore, levels of stress-related illness are nearly twice as high for women as for men. Many job conditions contribute to stress among women. Such job conditions include heavy workload demands; little control over work; role ambiguity and conflict; job insecurity; poor relationships with coworkers and supervisors; and work that is narrow, repetitive, and monotonous. Other factors, such as sexual harassment and work and family balance issues, may also be stressors for women in the workplace. Job stress has been linked with cardiovascular disease, musculoskeletal disorders, depression, and burnout. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in USA (NIOSH) is conducting studies to identify workplace factors that are particularly stressful to women, and potential prevention measures. Three-quarters of women of reproductive age are in the workforce. Over half of the children born in the United States are born to working mothers. NIOSH conducts both basic research and population-based studies to learn whether women may

be at risk for reproductive health hazards related to their work environment. An estimated 180,000 new cases of breast cancer and 12,000 new cases of cervical cancer will be diagnosed in 2000. Workplace exposures to hazardous substances may play a role in the development of these types of cancer. NIOSH is studying several hazardous substances to determine whether there is a link to cancers that affect women, such as cervical and breast cancer. Besides, ninety-two percent of the 4.3 million nurses and nursing aides in the U.S. are female. In addition to being at risk for incidents of musculoskeletal disorders, workplace violence, and exposure to hazardous substances, health care workers face other hazards including latex allergy and needle stick injuries. (Fact Sheet: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, USA; 2001).

Australia has a workforce that is highly segregated by gender, with women clustered in certain industries and occupations. In 1999, women comprised just over one in ten construction workers, but almost eight in ten workers in health and community services and seven in ten in education. Similarly, women made up fewer than one in four managers and administrators, less than one in ten workers in trades and related areas but almost nine out of ten advanced clerical and service workers (office of the Status of women (OSW), 2002). It has been an established view that this contributed to the fact that women receive low pay, poorer working conditions and poorer opportunities for career advancement.

Average levels of job satisfaction among women workers have been falling for 15 years, despite greater equality in the workplace and flexible working laws. Research based on about 25,000 British women employees shows that women workers used to have significantly higher levels of job satisfaction than men in the UK, but now they have almost the same level as male workers. Men's job satisfaction has remained constant over the period. The results seem to be a sign of growing pressures on women in the workplace, as women compete increasingly with men for better jobs, the study suggests. Some commentators argue that women doing such jobs feel increasingly stressed at work, suffering a serious drop in general sense of well-being. Professor Mike Rose, from the University of Bath, who carried out the research for the Economic and Social Research Council, rejected that explanation: "There is no sign of a general fall in psychological well-being among women employees since 1990." "We have excellent data there, and they show absolutely no change over the period. In fact, our special measures of general happiness show a slight upward trend." The study shows satisfaction among women, who work part-time, has fallen more dramatically than among the full-timers. (Personnel today .com, 2005).

Women's job satisfaction is lower than men's, given that women's jobs are often inferior in terms of pay, autonomy, and promotional opportunity that declines the performance and degenerates health. As women are assigned to positions that are an extension of their traditional role ( such as secretaries ,treasurers ), whilst men are groomed for managerial and leadership positions. Besides, the absence of support services such as day care facilities,which could restrain women's active participation- family friendly policies , such as paternity leave, are not given priority.

It is estimated that only a quarter of working women are eligible for paid maternity leave. There also continues to be significant workplace discrimination in relation to pregnancy, maternity leave and return to work. (Charles 1996, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) 1999, Vermeesch 2002). We find that men have the highest hours-of-work satisfaction if they work full-time without overtime hours but neither their job satisfaction nor their life satisfaction are affected by how many hours they work. Life satisfaction is influenced only by whether or not they have a job. But for women we are confronted with a puzzle. A research by the World Health Organisation suggests that women are at an increasing risk of experiencing mental illness, both in the paid and unpaid workforce. There is growing evidence linking the higher rate of depression among in marriage with that of women in paid employment suggests that it is due to increasing pressures and insecurity. The symptoms of job stress such as insomnia, loss of mental concentration, anxiety , absenteeism, depression , substance abuse, extreme anger and frustration, withdrawal from social contact, family conflict and physical illnesses as heart disease, migrane, headaches, stomach problems and back problems are very commonplace for working women due to work schedules, time-pressured work, unsympathetic treatment by management and co-workers, and lack of control over the content and organization of work.

### **5. Scenario of Women employees in Bangladesh**

Bangladeshi social order is basically noticeable by gender favoritism and women's status in society is underprivileged and they are deprived of many of their basic rights including freedom of choice. Although women are now engaged in economic activity of earning a livelihood as much as men, women have unequal opportunities in both personal and career development because men still hold a critical attitude towards women's employment. They basically work more hours per day than men irrespective of income class. As their main responsibilities are still measured to be taking care of the family and carrying out domestic chores, so income-earning activities in addition to their non paid work as mothers and home makers , often leave heavy work burden on them, have a definite impact on women's mental health, and block their prospect in line of work.



Working women often face the absence of support-services such as day-care facilities, paternity leaves which hold down women's active participation in professional development. For this, in offices, women officers are trivially represented in top managerial positions because of their low rate of promotions and reluctance to presume managerial positions.

In Bangladesh, the fact is that the employment of women and their access to credit and social arenas are encouraging, yet in all occupation categories and employment status the number of male labor force is much higher than that of female. Although women are involved in agriculture, manufacturing, construction, trade, public administration, education, health, community services and so on, a sharp gender disproportion is seen in the table below. The table clearly shows difference between male and female in terms of economic activities.

**Table 3: Gender inequality in economic activities**

			2003
Employment by economic activity (%)	Agriculture	Women	77
		Men	53
	Industry	Women	9
		Men	11
Contributing family workers	Services	Women	12
		Men	30
	(% )	Women	81
		Men	19

**Source:** Human Development Report 2005, P-313.

According to the table, the employment of women in agriculture (ages 15 and above) in 2003 is 77 percent, in industry 9 percentage and in service only 12 percentage. In terms of contributing family work in the same period, female rate is 81percent. The reason behind the disparity is that women have less access to employment since women are still relegated to positions of home makers and child rearers and their roles outside are considered trivial and home the essential (A point to be noted here is that women are not paid for their contribution in household activities). Besides, in many cases they are not considered fit for gainful employment and economic activities. And the number of women on higher positions is appallingly low. Mostly they are stenographers, teachers,

nurses, salespersons, and receptionists, computer operators or hostesses – they are not safe and protected at their places of work as they are often subjected to much exploitation, domination and harassment by their male counterparts and stresses at workplace threaten women's personal insecurity that ranges from their psychological to physical domains. A study on women in Bangladesh showed that the sex ratio for mental disorders was 2:1 and that for suicide was 3:1 (Bangladesh: Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, 1999.)

In Bangladesh, women wage workers are paid regularly in kind, which amounts to one third to one half of men's wage, typically considering less energetic and productive. An estimated 1.5 million women are employed in the garment industry, but are paid half of what male workers earn for the same work. They are forced to work longer hours and working conditions are typically very bad. Twenty women are reportedly burned to death in January of 2005 when a fire erupted in a garment factory. (Bhatti, 2005).

Luthans, Robbins, Davis, Griffins, Mullins and other writers on organizational behavior suggest that job satisfaction is an important component of the psychological well-being of workers. A study conducted by Majumder (2001) found a wide gap between the female workers' expectations and actual realization in the RMG sector, with negative consequences on their mental health. Women are mostly employed in low skilled and hazardous jobs like operators and helpers. The work is not contractual, and they get no appointment letters only identity cards, which allow them entry into and exit from factories. Job insecurity is, therefore, a constant fear lingering with them. The study found that 50 percent of the garment workers worked in the factory in a tense mood. Comparatively more female workers suffer from tension than male workers. 61 percent of the female workers, as opposed to only 20 percent of the male workers, reported while working they were always occupied with various worries, such as how to reach home safely at night, how to protect themselves from their supervisor's anger, and how to save their jobs. In the absence of day care facilities, mother workers are always worried about their small children. It may be mentioned that the existing labor laws of the country allow for day-care provisions, but there is none so far in the RMG factories. It is found that psychological insecurity is closely linked to physical insecurity. Most of the factories are ill-planned and there is inadequate provision for air and ventilation; fatigue and tiredness are common complaints of factory workers. Employment in the garments sector may bring temporary relief or material well-being to the women and their families, but its long-term implications are quite dire. It appears that they take up these jobs for the sake of survival rather as a matter of choice given the lack of options. They leave the jobs due to physical impairments and with little prospects for future jobs due to their physical conditions (Amin, 2006).

In Bangladesh the mechanisms and institutions maintaining male supremacy through domestication of women and strict control over their mobility, sexuality and labour are sex-role stereotyping during childhood socialisation, gender-division of work, segregation of the sexes in space through *purdah* and different allocation of resources and activities (Amin, 2005). Roushan Jahan observes that, 'in the patriarchal, patrilocal, patrilineal society of Bangladesh, socio-cultural values sanction segregation of the sexes, impose strict gender division of labour and foster a systematic bias of male supremacy.' A survey conducted in 1976 among a cross-section of 270 men in Dhaka city, capital of Bangladesh, found that they considered household work and domestic employment to be the most suitable for women. Next in order of preference was teaching, followed by medicine. The respondents felt that in these occupations women would be able to cater for female clients. They would "avoid conversing with men and therefore preserve the chastity of women" (Chowdhury, Ahmed, 1980). Although this survey was made almost thirty years ago, the attitude remains unchanged today, for most women interviewed in the study mentioned a similar attitude in their husbands which limited their scope of work. For example, the women respondents who were doctors were constantly harassed by their husbands because their work involved men. If this is the attitude of educated men living in urban areas, what would be the attitude of rural men, who hold a more conservative outlook regarding the employment (Amin, 2005).

The Fifth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) of Bangladesh recognizes that women represent a half of the country's potential for development. The Fifth plan also recognizes that inequality between women and men in different spheres in Bangladesh limits the country's ability to achieve its full potential (Ministry of Planning, 1997). Despite this recognition and governmental and non-governmental efforts, no significant change has taken place in the overall position of women in Bangladesh. Women have continued to endure endless political, rhetoric, social shenanigan and economic marginalization. Millions of women in Bangladesh still have to work harder than men to secure their livelihood. They have less control over income and assets, have a smaller share of opportunities for human development and are subject to domestic violence. They have a subordinate social position and poorly represented in policy and decision-making (Huq, Parveen, 2006).

#### **6. Recommendations: how to reduce occupational stress, social and personal difficulties and to raise job contentment of working women**

- A. The most effective way of reducing occupational stress is to eradicate the stressors through organizational and job redesign interventions. Effective forms of job redesign include increasing job control by allowing workers to participate in decision

making, increasing skill used by expanding job activities, and reducing work role conflict by clarifying job roles and responsibilities.

- B. Women-friendly HRM policies should also be drawn up to encourage women to participate effectively in the developmental process.
- C. Organizations should introduce different programs such as career break schemes, flexi-working, mentoring programs, child care facilities and family-friendly employment policies to accommodate the needs and demands of working women.
- D. Suitable measures should be taken to enable women to work on the night shift in offices and factories. This will be accompanied with support services for security, transportation etc.
- E. Measures to prevent and punish sexual harassment at the place of work, protection for women workers in the organized /unorganized sector and strict enforcement of relevant laws such as Equal Remuneration Act and Minimum Wages Act should be taken.
- F. Special attention will be given to the needs of women in the provision of safe drinking water, sewage disposal, toilet facilities and sanitation within accessible reach of workplaces as well as households.
- G. Rules should be framed that in-service husband and wife are posted in the same place as far as possible. Break and re-entry points for women who enter a career after meeting certain family obligations should be allowed in organizations.
- H. In view of the high risk of mal nutrition and disease that women face should be paid to meeting the nutritional needs of women at all stages of life-cycles. More healthcare units for women should be set up both for urban and rural inhabitants and have access to comprehensive, affordable and quality health care.
- I. Working women should communicate with those at home and at work to discuss any problems they have and how thing might be changed. If anyone has problems with work-life balances, seek support from the management at work place or her family and consider any possible alternatives such as job sharing, unpaid leave, flexible working hours etc.
- J. Working women should define tasks to be performed and priorities based on the assessment of their importance to business. For an example, they should think positively and control their work as best as they can by sitting down ten minutes before they begin the day to review long term plans, tasks for the week, appointments and jobs for the day.

- K. Good supportive working relationships have a buffering effect against stress. In an organization, managers should be supportive and all employees are encouraged to be supportive each other. Lack of skills can cause stress, and women at work should approach their manager to discuss training and development needs at any time. And managers need to be aware of support services available to women, of how to refer women employees and of how women employees can self-refer.
- L. The male ego must be made compatible with the female identity. A husband must cooperate with working wife-he must treat her as a friend and not as money-making tool.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study analyzes that despite there is increasing number of career and professional women, women are still very much troubled and apprehensive about their present a lot and crave fundamental changes in their social, family and economic status. Although they desire to contribute towards national progress, family welfare and social prosperity on equal footing they undergo that they are not able to take part in their desired role to the maximum limit in the society only due to there has not been any fundamental change in the attitude towards them. Today's women have to work and fight on two fronts-home and employment and both men and women have similar work patterns; despite, they are both facing conflicts in their relationships for not providing extra time to share and care for the family. Women are working two shifts and which create pressure and a burden on them. At the workplace women are often subjected to the under presentation by male counterparts that produces higher levels of stress among women. Besides, less opportunities for personal development, rates of pay, keeping up with new ideas, accumulative effect of minor tasks, working hours are factors that cause the most stress for women in the workplace. The fundamental of any development strategy should be removal of inequalities and dissatisfaction among women. Women need encouragement, protection, sympathy, education, equal participation and healthy social and family environment. If women's productivity and employment are not raised and remunerative that lead to enhancement of women's position relative to men, humanity can't achieve its crowning glory and the highest achievement only when women are emancipated and without their active and willing cooperation nothing immense and lasting can be achieved.

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