

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Hossain, Dewan Mahboob, Alam, Md Saiful, Mazumder, Mohammed and Amin, Al (2021) Gender-related discourses in corporate annual reports: an exploratory study on the Bangladeshi companies. *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, 17 (3). pp. 394-415. ISSN 1832-5912

Published by: Emerald

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1108/JAOC-01-2020-0006> <<https://doi.org/10.1108/JAOC-01-2020-0006>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/45325/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

# **Gender-related discourses in corporate annual reports: an exploratory study on the Bangladeshi companies**

## **1. Introduction**

Gender inequality is one of the major concerns in the corporate sector irrespective of the contexts and cultures. Though the situation appears to be improving, women's earnings are still significantly lower than that of men for comparable work (World Bank, 2019). Even in the Fortune 500 listed companies, women hold only 6.6 per cent of CEO positions (Zillman, 2019) and represent an average of 22.5 per cent of global board positions (Deloitte, 2018). The disparity is further intense among businesses operating in the developing economies (Jayachandran, 2015). Albeit gender diversity can benefit businesses in the form of improved return, enhanced competitiveness and public image (Warth, 2009), elements of persisting inequalities still prevail. To address this concern, organizations increasingly provide gender-related disclosures to demonstrate the status of women within their workforces and signal their commitments to the greater transparency (Bernardi *et al.*, 2002; Grosser and Moon, 2008). Gender reporting allows the stakeholders to assess how an organization respects and contributes to gender parity in everything that it does (GRI, 2009). Considering the growing awareness of gender disparity in the corporate sectors and public accountability to women, this study explores the gender disclosures of listed companies in Bangladesh, an emerging economy.

The importance of gender in accounting literature has long been recognized (Hopwood, 1987). Nevertheless, most of the earlier gender-related studies focused on the women's position in the accounting profession (e.g., Collins 1993; Haynes, 2017; Komori 2008) as well as the boardroom gender diversity (e.g., Ben-Amar *et al.*, 2017; Haque and Jones, 2020; Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2019). Few studies, mainly in the domain of corporate social responsibility (CSR), explored the gender-related initiatives by analyzing the contents of corporate disclosures (e.g., Adams and Harte, 1998; Ben-Amar *et al.*, 2020; Benschop and Meihuizen, 2002; Bernardi *et al.*, 2002; Grosser and Moon, 2008; Kuasirikun, 2011). Drawing from content analysis, these studies identified the presence of gender-related disclosures, rather than exploring the tone and sense of such disclosures. Content analyses are useful to identify 'whether' the companies report gender issues and 'what' they report. However, there is a need to decipher the underlying meaning of languages used in corporate narratives. To this end, recently, there has been a call to explore further the 'how' question and understand the underlying meaning of gender disclosures (Haji and Hossain, 2016; Hossain *et al.*, 2017a, 2017b; Tregidga *et al.*, 2012). Our study responds to that call and applies Sociological Discourse Analysis (SDA) on the gender-related disclosures in the annual reports of Bangladeshi listed companies.

Contextually, Bangladesh represents a society where social inequalities of varied nature are rampant (Alam *et al.*, 2011; Belal, 2008; Hossain, 2013; Siddiqi, 2003). Among those, gender

inequality is an area of significant concern. Under the progressive leadership of the female head of the state in the last 30 years, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in empowering women. However, a recent report on gender equality suggests that women still have limited access to financial resources, family inheritance, information and technology (ADB, 2017). Also, very few women occupy leadership roles in the corporate sectors (Ullah *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, apart from government, it is the social responsibility of businesses to address gender inequality by creating more space and privileges for women. One of such initiatives is disclosing gender issues in corporate narratives. Previous CSR studies on Bangladesh, report none or remain silent on ‘how’ gender-related issues are addressed in corporate disclosures. Belal and Cooper (2011) report that gender-related disclosures are one of the under-researched CSR areas in the context of Bangladesh. One of the primary reasons could be the corporate unwillingness to address gender issues in the corporate disclosures (Belal, 2008). To explore the present situation, this study examines the gender-related discourses on corporate annual reports in the context of Bangladesh.

Unlike prior studies on gender disclosures, this study applies SDA, which goes beyond the textual presentation of any corporate disclosures and uncover the meaning in a broader context. This study employs the three-level SDA framework of Ruiz (2009), which explains the gender disclosures in three perspectives: textual, contextual and sociological. While the textual perspective describes corporate initiatives on addressing gender inequality and highlights the main characteristics of the text, the contextual and sociological perspectives give a more in-depth understanding of why organizations need those disclosures. The study combines Ruiz’s (2009) framework with the impression management tactics of Sandberg and Holmlund (2015). Following Sandberg and Holmlund (2015), this article shows how Bangladeshi listed companies, with the articulate and strategic use of language skills in their annual reports, manage the impression of the stakeholders and gain legitimacy. Throughout the analysis, the study follows an interpretive gene.

The contribution of this study is, therefore, threefold. First, this study attempts to understand and interpret gender disclosures using discourse analysis, an emerging technique of investigating corporate disclosures. Second, the study theoretically contributes to the ongoing discussion of organizational legitimacy through impression management. As such, it conducts a sociological discourse analysis in combination with an impression management framework. Finally, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study in the context of an emerging economy like Bangladesh that addresses gender issue in corporate communication.

The remaining portion of the article is structured as follows. In section 2, a review of the prior literature on gender disclosure is presented with particular reference to gender inequality, organizations’ CSR practices. The research gap is also identified here. Then, the theoretical framework of the study is illustrated in section 3. The methodology of the study is presented in section 4. Section 5 elaborates the findings of the study with regard to the textual, contextual and sociological analysis. In the end, based on the findings and analysis, the conclusion of the study is drawn in section 6.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 *Inequality, gender and CSR*

Inequality is a common social problem in the world (Henslin, 2011; The United Nations, 2013) where discriminations are made on social class, income, race, ethnicity, gender and some other factors (Newman, 2012). Among existing inequalities, gender inequality has remained one of the most significant social problems in human history (Macionis, 2012). Patriarchal nature of different societies explains why women endure misfortune, lower rank and discriminatory treatment in the world (Abott *et al.*, 2005; Hossain, 2013). Gender roles are socially constructed (Eitzen *et al.*, 2009) where family, school, peer group, organization, media, religion and other social institutions play important roles (Witt, 2004). From early childhood, children notice different roles of their parents and learn about the gendered nature of clothing, toys and games (Hossain, 2013).

Despite women's increasing participation in the mainstream workforce, they face diverging nature of discrimination (Cooper and Bosco, 1999). Studies suggest that women are stereotyped as less capable and less productive (Henslin, 2011) and thereby face discrimination in recruitment and promotion (Hakim, 1996). In their private lives, women also suffer from poverty, ignorance, illness, despotism, violence and sexual harassment (UNESCO, 2012). Corporatization of all walks of our life exacerbates women's position in society and creates more inequality. Nevertheless, corporations display their awareness and promise to ensure equal opportunities for women (Grosser and Moon, 2008). Due to the interdependence of the business and society, business organizations are concerned about social inequalities and show their commitments through CSR activities (Aberu *et al.*, 2005). Women empowerment and welfare are one of key CSR activities (Hossain *et al.*, 2016; 2017a). In order to communicate corporate value and action to the wider community, companies voluntarily report on gender-related issues through websites, annual reports, and corporate social and environmental reports. This study focuses on these gender disclosures.

### 2.2 *Gender in accounting: prior literature*

Gender is not a new phenomenon in accounting (Hopwood, 1987). Accounting researchers have explored gender issues in the past few decades (see for a review Haynes, 2017; Lehman, 2012). Most of the prior gender research explored either the women's participation in the accounting profession (e.g., Collins 1993; Haynes, 2017; Komori 2008) or their representation in the corporate board (Ben-Amar *et al.*, 2017; Haque and Jones, 2020; Lewellyn and Muller-Kahle, 2019). Only a few studies focused on how gender issues are addressed in corporate disclosures. One of the reasons could be the corporate reluctance to address gender issues in the corporate disclosures. For example, drawing from major British banking and retail companies, Adams and Harte (1998) document that companies provide little gender disclosures and mostly focus policy declaration rather than their performance achievements. Similarly, Hossain *et al.* (2016) find that

sustainability reports of selected Fortune 500 companies do not disclose several gender issues, as suggested by GRI (2009).

Despite this limitation, few studies have managed to explore gender disclosures to identify not only ‘what’ is disclosed but also ‘how’ it is disclosed by interpreting the tone or meaning of the disclosures. For example, in the context of Netherland, Benschop and Meihuizen (2002) investigated the gender representations in the annual reports by examining the texts and images. For them, companies have stereotyped women by focusing on the traditional gendered division of labor and reinforcing male power and domination in organizations. Bernardi *et al.* (2002) also suggested that Fortune 500 companies tend to inform stakeholders about the growing presence of women on board through photo-graphic disclosures. Another study on the sustainability reports of selected Fortune 500 companies reports that “discourses on women and gender carry the traditional patriarchal notions and women were presented as a distressed species and companies tried to portray themselves as the saviors of women” (Hossain *et al.*, 2017a, p. 262). Exploring the inherently embedded meaning of texts in the CSR reports of 15 Korean Multinational Enterprise, Lee and Parpart (2018) note that women's voices are silenced and marginalized in the CSR reports. Similarly, Ben-Amar *et al.* (2020) report that Canadian corporations strategically use 'merit' and 'diversity' to obfuscate the exact representation of women on the corporate board. Although these shreds of evidence are essential to understand the nature and motive of corporate gender disclosures, little (Kuasirikun, 2011 is an exception) is known in the emerging economy context. Our study aims to fill this gap by drawing evidence from an emerging economy— Bangladesh.

### *2.3 Gender inequality and corporate disclosures in Bangladesh*

Bangladesh has achieved remarkable progress in various indices of women development (World Economic Forum, 2020). Nevertheless, gender inequality prevails like many other emerging economies. Despite their equal constitutional rights, Bangladeshi women face discrimination in “food sharing, education, work, property, decision making and independent thinking” (Hossain, 2013, p.25). Here, women are considered as ‘economic burdens’ (Sultana, 2010, p.31). Families consider sons permanent members as they are the ‘providers and perpetrators of family name’ (ADB, 2001, p.4). Daughters, in contrast, are temporary members as they move to husband’s house after marriage (Sultana, 2010). In married life, women also suffer from domestic violence and forced prostitution (ADB, 2001). Drawing from garment sector, few studies suggest that women work for long hour at low wage (Alam *et al.*, 2011), do not get proper maternity leave, have to work in an unsafe condition and also frequently face sexual harassment (Siddiqi, 2003). In many of these cases, justice is denied due to the absence of both social and political will (Huq, 2003). However, no study attempts to explore how companies in Bangladesh are addressing these gender disparities.

Broadly, CSR researchers in accounting cover voluntary corporate disclosures, including gender issues. Research on Bangladeshi CSR practices and reporting has started from the late nineties, but it has become intensive and more engaging in the past two decades (see, for example,

Belal and Owen, 2007; Deegan and Islam, 2014; Islam and Deegan, 2008; Momin and Parker, 2013). Most of the prior studies contend that CSR of Bangladeshi companies is insufficient, self-laudatory, and lacks ethical information. Belal and Cooper (2011) also report that gender-related disclosures are one of the under-researched areas in the context of Bangladesh.

Like Bangladesh, in the context of other emerging economies, there is scant evidence on how gender issues are addressed in corporate disclosures. To the best of our knowledge, Kuasirikun (2011) is the single study that examined gender disclosure by analyzing the photographs in annual reports of Thai companies. The research suggests that Thai companies tend to present women in a subsidiary role to that of men. More evidence on gender disclosure is required from an emerging economy context. Therefore, this paper aims to add evidence on 'what' and 'how' gender issues are addressed in corporate disclosures in the context of an emerging economy—Bangladesh.

### **3. Theoretical framework**

In qualitative tradition, corporate narratives and textual disclosures have been explored through the lens of legitimacy (Adams *et al.*, 1998; Brown and Deegan, 1998; Dumay *et al.*, 2015; Kuruppu *et al.*, 2019; Lupu and Sandu, 2017), impression management (Edgar *et al.*, 2018; Higgins and Walker, 2012; Li and Haque, 2019; Neu *et al.*, 1998; Solomon *et al.*, 2013), media attention (Brown and Deegan, 1998; Deegan and Islam, 2014), and stakeholder orientation (Adams, 2006; Belal and Owen, 2007; Islam and Deegan, 2008) among many other theories. Some of these studies have drawn evidence based on theoretical triangulation—combining constructs of multiple theories while interpreting the narrative disclosures (see, for example, Dumay *et al.*, 2015; Edgar *et al.*, 2018; Kuruppu *et al.*, 2019). This paper explores the gender-related corporate narratives in the context of an emerging economy-Bangladesh through the theoretical triangulation of impression management and legitimacy.

In general, business organizations need the mandate of the society and hence, should operate within the bounds and norms of the society (Brown and Deegan, 1998). The success and existence of the business will be at stake if people in society have a negative perception about their operations. Business organizations, therefore, perform activities that are perceived as 'legitimate' by people in society (Islam and Deegan, 2008). Any negative perception of business operation can create a legitimacy gap, which may bring disastrous effects for organizations. For example, organizations may face lawsuits, customers may stop buying their products/services, and the very existence of firms can be at stake. Corporate narratives are considered as an essential tool to minimize the legitimacy gap (see, for example, Adams *et al.*, 1998; Dumay *et al.*, 2015; Kuruppu *et al.*, 2019; Lupu and Sandu, 2017). To illustrate how a firm gains, maintains and repairs legitimacy, Kuruppu *et al.* (2019) provides evidence from an environmentally sensitive firm. The study suggests external reporting features the legitimacy efforts when the concerned issue is visible to the public, regulators and media. They also identify the superficial use of several communication

strategies in external reporting to maintain legitimacy. These communication strategies are used to manage the impression of the stakeholders.

Impression management practices are not new in accounting research. In an early study of environmental narratives in the annual report, Neu *et al.* (1998) have raised a concern whether environmentally sensitive Canadian public companies emphasize positive environmental actions while obscuring adverse environmental effects. Moreover, the perceived benefits of socio-environmental activities induce firms to engage in the symbolic representation of their CSR performance (Bansal and Kistruck, 2006; Higgins and Walker, 2012). Recently, researchers show the use of impression management to maintain organizational legitimacy in the context of financial services (Edgar *et al.*, 2018) and manufacturing services (Li and Haque, 2019). Drawing from the annual report narratives of UK private sector private finance initiative (PFI) companies, Edgar *et al.* (2018) contend that there are four underlying reasons of the impression management: to legitimize during volatile periods for PFI public policy, to alleviate concerns, to make the policy credible and to legitimize the private firms' involvement in PFI. Similarly, Li and Haque (2019) illustrate how Taiwanese electronic manufacturing service providers deliberately use the rhetorical form of impression management both in published and in spoken employee-oriented corporate narratives to obscure the employee incidents and maintain their legitimacy. While these studies are important to understand the close link between the impression management tactics and legitimation process of the firm, they lack to explore one critical element in corporate narratives—gender disclosures. Our study aims to fill this gap in the context of an emerging economy—Bangladesh.

While illustrating the legitimation through communication strategies alias impression management, the extant evidence largely depends on linguistic analysis of corporate communication. Researchers have employed several approaches for linguistic analysis: linguistic hedging (Li and Haque, 2019), persuasion (Nwagbara and Belal, 2019), intertextuality (Lupu and Sandu, 2017), and critical discourse analysis (Nwagbara and Belal, 2019). However, some studies directly refer to the impression management theory (for example, Goffmanesque frame used in Solomon *et al.*, 2013). We have done both by conducting a sociological discourse analysis through a framework of impression management. We employ Sandberg and Holmlund's (2015) impression management tactics as the analytical framework of discourse analysis [elaborated in the next section]. Therefore, our theoretical contribution is two-fold: first, we contribute to the ongoing discussion of organizational legitimacy through impression management; and second, we conduct sociological discourse analysis in combination with an impression management framework.

#### **4. Research design**

This study is qualitative in nature and follows an interpretivist perspective. A Sociological Discourse Analysis<sup>1</sup> (Ruiz, 2009) is conducted on the gender-related disclosures in the annual

---

<sup>1</sup> Sociological Discourse Analysis (SDA) has several advantages. First, it employs three level of analysis to understand the social reality. Second, it identifies the diverse linguistic representation of the phenomenon. Finally, it discovers

reports of Bangladeshi companies. This section delineates the sampling and methodology of the study in detail.

#### *4.1 Sample and data*

The annual reports of the companies listed under the Dhaka Stock Exchange (DSE) are taken for the SDA. Annual reports are considered as a credible source of corporate narratives in prior studies (see, for example, Dumay *et al.*, 2015; Edgar *et al.*, 2018; Kuruppu *et al.*, 2019; Li and Haque, 2019; Lupu and Sandu, 2017; Nwagbara and Belal, 2019). The latest annual reports (mostly of 2017) are downloaded from official websites of listed companies between 22nd December and 31st December 2018. As on 22nd December 2018, the total number of listed companies in DSE is 320. Out of 320 companies, the annual reports of 204 companies are collected from their websites. This sample is 63.75% of the population which is higher than that of some earlier studies (e.g., Ousama *et al.* (2012) reports 20%). Sample companies cover different sectors (see Table 1):

### **[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]**

Gender-related texts are manually collected from the annual reports of sample companies. Two coders first independently work in the data collection process to ensure that nothing important is left out (consistent with Haji and Hossain, 2016) and build two corpus—a collection of relevant texts (Wodak and Krzyzanowski, 2008) by a thorough reading. Each corpus includes all gender-related extracts from the annual reports. The two coders then meet and prepare the final corpus through comparison, discussion and consensus.

#### *4.2 Data analysis: SDA*

The term discourse can be defined as the ‘text in context’ (Dijk, 1990, p.164). Ruiz (2009) defines discourse as an exercise in which people permeate with reality and meaning. We can find texts in both verbal and written form. Discourse is the social activity that deconstructs the language (Lemke, 1995). Unlike content analysis, discourse analysis focus on ‘how’ voluntary issues are reported in corporate narratives (Higgins and Walker, 2012; Hossain *et al.*, 2017a, 2017b; Lupu and Sandu, 2017; Nwagbara and Belal, 2019). However, none of these studies (except Hossain *et al.*, 2017a) highlight gender disclosures. This paper analyzes the language of annual reports from a sociological perspective.

Data is analyzed through the three-level SDA framework of Ruiz (2009): (1) the textual level, (2) the contextual level and (3) the sociological level. At the **textual level**, the discourse

---

deeply held social-constructionist views of (corporate) narratives. Nevertheless, SDA suffers from few limitations. First, subjectivity exists as the analysis depends heavily on the interpretation of researchers. Second, the contextual diversity and the subjectivity hinders the generalizability of the research findings. Finally, it requires a large amount of time and effort.



analyst focuses on what the discourse is conveying. At the **contextual level**, discourse is considered to be produced in the milieu of subjects who have their specific discursive intentions. At the **sociological level**, discourse is an ideology or social product and hence should be analyzed from the social context in which it is created. This study has analyzed discourses in the context of gender issues in Bangladeshi society. For textual analysis, this study has employed the impression management categories of Sandberg and Holmlund (2015), who have identified two categories of impression management tactics: presenting actions and writing style. In total, there are eight Organizational Impression Management (OIM) strategies that are potentially used in sustainability reports. These strategies are summarized in Table 2:

**[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]**

## **5. Findings and analysis**

In this section, gender-related corporate disclosures are viewed through the lens of impression management strategies as identified by Sandberg and Holmlund (2015) and analyzed using the three level SDA framework (textual, contextual and sociological) of Ruiz (2009).

### *5.1 Text analysis*

In this sub-section, the main characteristics [in relation to Sandberg and Holmlund's (2015) impression management tactics] of the text produced by the companies on women and gender-related issues were identified. This is the first stage of the SDA proposed by Ruiz (2009). Only 65 (31.86%) of the 204 sample companies, mostly banks and financial institutions, disclosed some information on gender issues and women.

**[INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]**

Table 3 presents the various gender-related issues disclosed by the sample companies through corporate narratives. The most common gender-related disclosures include the male-female ratio in the workplace (13.73% of the sample size), products/services specifically designed for women (12.75%), policy related to equal opportunity and gender diversity in the workplace (10.78%) and corporate giving activities such as helping women through education and healthcare facilities (10.78%). Companies also provided disclosures on issues of women empowerment and women's welfare (6.37%), special rights and facilities (e.g. maternity leave, protection against sexual harassment etc.) provided to women in the workplace (6.37%), and special programs arranged for women such as celebrating women's day (4.41%). Some companies also provided information about initiatives for career development of the female employees (0.98%) and their

salary structure (0.49%). The overall findings clearly show an improvement from earlier Bangladeshi evidence of complete absence of gender disclosures (see Belal, 2008; Belal and Cooper, 2011). The findings reported in this sub-section adequately summaries the ‘what’ question, i.e., what gender-related issues are highlighted. We further focus on the ‘how’ question, i.e., the way companies presented these issues.

#### 5.1.1 Concern for women empowerment and women’s welfare

Companies, in general, showed their concern about women empowerment and women’s welfare. They emphasized the need for women’s development in society without much description of their activities. Here are two examples:

Example 1:

SJIBL is very much conscious about *the prevailing conditions of the women in our society*. Keeping this in view *it takes various programs for empowering the women* like awareness building, training, financing etc. [Shahjalal Islami Bank Limited, Annual Report 2017, p.161] (Author’s emphasis)

Example 2:

Despite almost 50% of the population of Bangladesh comprising women, *the participation of women in economic activity is minuscule*. In this context, *gender equality is not only important for ensuring the fair representation of women in all aspects of life but also in unleashing economic potential and growth*. At Green Delta Insurance, *we are among the strongest proponents* of gender equality. [Green Delta Insurance Company Ltd., Annual Report 2017, p.50] (Author’s emphasis)

Both examples identified the distresses of women through the negatively charged words such as ‘prevailing condition’ and ‘minuscule’. These are the evidence of ‘positive’ and ‘emotional style’ of writing, which trigger the sentiments and sympathy of the readers towards gender inequality in the society (Higgins and Walker, 2012). They also pointed out their eagerness to work for this social problem and create a positive impression in the minds of the readers. As such, they used the ‘positively charged’ words such as ‘empowering’ the women and ‘strongest proponents’ of gender equality. This portrayed the organizations as socially responsible and put them in the ‘best possible light’ (Brennan *et al.*, 2009).

Moreover, some companies noted the concern of their Board members about the welfare of women. For instance:

Example 3:

Ms. Shireen Scheik Mainuddin joined as a Director of AB Bank Limited on January 4, 2018 ... *She has been a founder Member of “Shakti Foundation for Disadvantaged*

***Women”, an urban micro Finance Institution.*** [AB Bank, Annual Report 2017, p.21] (Author’s emphasis).

Example 4:

He is equally compassionate about social responsibility and contribution in ***philanthropic services for the underprivileged children and women.*** [Dhaka Bank Limited, Annual Report 2017, p.22]. (Author’s emphasis).

While example 3 exhibits the ‘description’ of the social welfare-related activities of one director, example 4 provides unspecific information through ‘vague’ writing style. For description, the company presented ‘Shakti foundation’ and its microfinance operation. Presentation of specific facts enhances the clarity and integrity of the statement (Higgins and Walker, 2012; Hossain *et al.*, 2017b). Alternatively, example 4 is mostly rhetorical in nature (Hossain *et al.*, 2017b). It only focused on a Director’s philanthropic contribution to the less privileged women in society. This is an ‘impressive’ statement without much ‘tangible’ information (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015). In both cases, we see the use of ‘emotional style’ of writing which showcased directors’ contribution for ‘disadvantaged’ and ‘underprivileged’ women to trigger the emotion and sympathy of the readers (Higgins and Walker, 2012).

#### 5.1.2 Policy related to gender diversity in the workplace

Most of the policy statements on gender diversity are highly ‘rhetorical’ and written in a ‘vague’ style without specific details. The companies attempted to manage the impression with these rhetorical policy statements. Here is an example of impression management tactic called ‘praise’:

Example 5:

HRMD ***champions the diversity and inclusiveness*** in the Bank by having processes in place by which all individuals irrespective of their ***gender*** get equal opportunity in terms of recruitment, positions and career progression. [AB Bank, Annual Report 2017, p.86] (Author’s emphasis).

Here, the company is praising itself as the ‘champion’ in maintaining diversity and inclusiveness in terms of gender. Self-proclaimed supremacy is communicated in an ‘overly favorable manner’ (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p. 682). Some companies included other diversity issues as well:

Example 6:

Uttara Finance and Investments Limited believes in equal opportunity in workplace irrespective of ***race, religion, sex and age*** ... UFIL is ***one of the leading companies*** in the country that takes good care of a ***comfortable working environment*** for the ***female employees***. [Uttara Finance and Investments Limited, Annual Report 2017, p. 61] (Author’s emphasis).

The company uses the tactic of ‘praise’ through ‘positive style’ of writing. Several ‘positively charged’ words (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p.684) [such as ‘leading’, ‘comfortable’ and ‘good care’] were used to create a positive impression among the readers. Moreover, the company is ‘presenting its actions in a successful light’ ( p.682) and claims them as a ‘leading’ Bangladeshi firm in taking care of the female employees.

#### 5.1.3 Male-female ratio in the workplace

The companies used different techniques such as narratives, graphs, tables and charts (mostly pie charts) to present the ratio of male and female employees in the workplace. The following is an example of narrative presentation:

##### Example 7:

There are 1,195 posts of officers and 2,448 of staff against the approved total manpower of 3719. 987 *officers* among, which **877 male & 110 female** and 1,265 *staff* among, which **1,139 male & 72 female** that is a total number of 2,252 persons were employed as on 30 June 2017. [Titas Gas Transmission and Distribution Company Limited, Annual Report, 2016-17, p.84] (Author’s emphasis).

It is an application of ‘description’ where the company presents facts in terms of the number of male and female in both ‘staff’ and ‘officer’ levels. Bansal and Kistruck (2006) termed this kind of presentation with quantitative data as ‘demonstrative’ impression management technique. Presentation of facts improves the integrity and clarity of the report (Higgins and Walker, 2012). Although the statement shows a huge difference of gender-mix in the workplace, the company did not apply the tactics of ‘admission’ (admitting that it failed to act in a desired manner) or ‘defense’ (putting excuse for this failure) in this case. The following is a similar example:

##### Example 8:

GDICL has been ***maintaining a very balanced male and female ratio***, which was ***not only reflected in the board of directors but also in the organization’s management*** at different levels. Among our female colleagues **1 is in top level management, 13 in upper mid level, 38 in Lower mid level and 86 in Others**. [Green Delta Insurance Company Limited, Annual Report 2017, p. 167] (Author’s emphasis)

Just after this narrative disclosure, the company presented a detailed table (p.167) which shows that there are 496 male employees and 138 female employees. Though an ‘imbalance’ is conspicuous in the table, the company did not admit this failure through ‘admission’ or ‘defense’. Instead, the company applied a ‘positive style’ of writing and presented the situation in an ‘overly

favorable manner’ (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p.682) by claiming that they are maintaining ‘a very balanced male and female ratio’.

Here is another example:

Example 9:

ICB *always believes in gender equality and women empowerment*. At **present** the participation of female employees (grade-9 and above) is **17.51%** and ICB has a plan to increase this percentage to **25% by 2020**. It is further mentionable that **2 (two) female executives have been promoted to the post of General Manager (grade-2)** in FY 2016-17. [Investment Corporation of Bangladesh, Annual Report 2016-17, p.57] (Author’s emphasis).

Here the company not only applied the ‘description’ tactic but also gave a ‘futuristic’ target to increase the percentage of female workers. But, this was an ‘incomplete description’ as the number of male employees who got promoted was not mentioned. The readers will not understand whether ‘equality’ was practiced or not from this ‘one-sided’ writing style.

#### 5.1.4 Products/services designed for women’s welfare

Only three categories of companies reported on their products or services designed for women’s welfare: (1) Banks, (2) Financial Institutions and (3) Insurance. The following is an example:

Example 10:

It is now *globally accepted that empowering women facilitates economic growth*. We are a **great believer of women empowerment**. We have *special products for women* entrepreneurs at **special discounted loan pricing to provide growth support**. Women clients **can avail EBL Mukti loan up-to BDT 25 Lac without any collateral and up-to BDT 50 lac with collateral**. EBL not only provides financing but also guides women clients on various business issues such as **financial record keeping/accounting, sales routing through bank account, trade license, taxation, marketing, insurance etc.** [Eastern Bank Limited (EBL), Annual Report 2017, p.148] (Author’s emphasis).

The company presented them as a ‘great believer of women empowerment’ and portrayed as ‘noble with high morals’ (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p. 682). Thus, by using ‘praise’ tactic, the company pointed that it’s ‘existence somehow benefits society’ and contributed to the ‘economic development of the society or local community’ (p. 683). Moreover, the company used ‘description’ of the loan and other assistance to women. However, the description of ‘discounted’ loan is an ‘incomplete description’ since the discount rate is not mentioned. The company followed a ‘positive’ and descriptive’ style of writing to create a favorable impression of its operations. For instance, loan products were named as ‘*Mukti*’ which means freedom. As if, the company is working for the ‘emancipation’ of women in society. The following example illustrated an insurance policy for women:

Example 11:

To cater to this customer base, we have created an exclusive product, *Nibedita, which represents a holistic platform to provide holistic risk protection with a number of beneficial side benefits*. Nibedita has been extremely well-received in the market and as on 31 December 2017, we had *a total of 5840 Nibedita customers in the country*. [p.16]

Nibedita- A *personal accident insurance scheme* which provides economic security to women irrespective of their income, occupation or vocation. This product is exclusively designed for women as *today's women's are exposed various hazards related to the occupations and social issues*. An Insurance like this *might give women to think independently* in terms financial protection or revive the business if she encounters any accident. [p.18]

At Green Delta Insurance, we are among *the strongest proponents of gender equality*. Our *most visible manifestation* of this is the fact that we launched *South Asia's first customized insurance scheme* exclusively for women under *Nibedita*. [p.50] [Green Delta Insurance Company Limited, Annual Report, 2017] (Author's emphasis).

Here the company used both 'description' and 'praise' tactics. The company described the women-centered 'personal accident insurance scheme' called '*Nibedita*'. Facts and numbers were presented about the customers of this scheme and a unique app – *Nibedita app*. These 'demonstrative' disclosures (Bansal and Kistruck, 2006) may enhance the integrity and credibility (Higgins and Walker, 2012) of the reports. Moreover, the company 'praised' itself by claiming them as a 'pioneer' of this initiative in the South-Asia and 'strongest proponents' of gender equality. The scheme, as the company claimed, is 'extremely well-received' in the market and was evidence of 'successful light' (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p. 682) for them. All of these depicted the firm as 'noble with high morals' (ibid). The emotional style of writing is also visible here. The identification of women's exposure 'to various hazards related to occupations and social issues' and the introduction of women-only insurance scheme presents the firm as a 'feeling-being' (ibid) and draw the attention of the readers (Higgins and Walker, 2012).

#### *5.1.5 Special rights of and facilities provided to women in the workplace*

Regarding special rights and facilities available for women, companies reported policies on sexual harassment, maternity leave, transport facilities, daycare centers and gender designated washrooms. Here is an example of sexual harassment-related company policy:

Example 12:

Equality in employment can be *seriously impaired when women are subjected to gender specific harassment* such as sexual harassment at workplace. ... *The following rules are therefore applicable, regarding this matter*.

Company should provide a procedure for resolution, settlement or prosecution for acts of sexual harassment, by taking all steps required. For this purpose, sexual harassment includes such unwelcome sexually determined behavior as ...

All managers or persons in-charge of work place are required to take appropriate steps, to prevent sexual harassment. [Shahjibazar Power Company Limited, Annual Report 2016-17, p. 7] (Author's emphasis)

Here the company portrayed itself as 'moral' and 'feeling being' through 'emotional' style of writing. It not only identified the harms caused by sexual harassment but also applied the 'description' tactic to delineate the harassment management 'procedure' in place. Here is another example:

Example 12:

***Any harassment or discriminatory behavior directed at female employees in the form of derogatory or provocative comments, physical violence, horseplay/ inappropriate jokes, unwanted physical contact, use of epithet, comments or innuendo, obscene or harassing telephone calls, e-mails, letters, notes or other forms of communication and any other conduct that may create a hostile working environment is strictly prohibited. IPDC exercises zero tolerance in this regard.*** [IPDC Finance, Annual Report 2017, p. 123] (Author's emphasis)

Here, the company provided a detailed 'description' of the acts that represent harassment or discriminatory behavior. However, the company used a 'vague' writing style through unspecific, rhetorical statements (Hossain *et al.*, 2017b) and empty phrases that 'sound impressive but have little meaning' (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p.685). Without specifying their actions for sexual harassment, they used empty phrases like 'strictly prohibited' and 'zero tolerance' policy.

The following example illustrated company's maternity leave policy:

Example 13:

Time to time, the Bank conducts a variety of ***safety and wellness activities***. The Bank also ***extended the maternity leave from 03 months to 06 months for its female employees.*** [p.159]

Maternity leave: As per bank's policy, ***any female employee who has been in the continuous service of the bank is entitled to get 6 months maternity leave with regular salary and allowances ... The annual performances, increment, promotion of respective employee are not affected for this long term leave.*** [p. 163] [Mercantile Bank, Annual Report 2017] (Author's emphasis)

The company expressed its concern about employee safety and wellness, which portrayed them as a 'noble' company with 'high moral'. The company not only 'described' the procedure of existing maternity leave but also pointed out the extension of the maternity by 3 months which

would not affect annual performances, increments and promotion. This is a clear representation of ‘feeling being’.

The following example reported the day-care services for female employees:

Example 14:

In present days, country’s *women folks* are *coming out in the social and professional circle* in increasing number and *playing commendable role in nation building activities*. Both the educated and illiterates of this segment of the population are *aspiring to be self reliant* in their *struggle* to cope up with the rapid changing social and economic world. *Women having babies*, particularly bank employees are *sometimes faced with serious difficulties in looking after them during working hours*. In order to find a solution, as per directives of Bangladesh Bank, *we have established a Day Care Center in Motijheel Commercial Area in association with five other banks*. Now the female employees of these banks can *keep their babies at this Centre and work carefree* in their workplaces. This has also helped in *enhancing their skill and efficiency level*. [NCC Bank, Annual Report 2017, p.53] (Author’s emphasis)

An ‘emotional style’ of writing is followed to identify the problem of work-care balance of female employees. Women, as addressed here, are going through ‘struggle’ to cope with the rapid socio-economic changes and thereby facing ‘serious difficulties’ in taking care of their babies. This caring attitude creates sympathy among readers (Higgins and Walker, 2012; Hossain *et al.*, 2017b; Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015). The company also portrayed them as a ‘savior’ of this problem as they, along with five other banks, established a daycare center for ensuring women’s ‘carefree’ work. However, we see the use of ‘rhetorical’ statement (Hossain *et al.*, 2017b) when it claimed that the introduction of the daycare facility had enhanced the skill and efficiency of women. This ‘vague’ statement sounds impressive but lacks evidence of whether the increased skill and efficiency is a result of the daycare center.

#### 5.1.6 Special programs or arrangement focusing women

Companies arranged special program to celebrate International Women’s Day. A company reported:

Example 15:

Every year, we celebrate womanhood on the occasion of the International Women’s Day through real life experience sharing by inspirational women across boundaries. We also *present greeting cards and goodies to all the women across the organization to make our female colleagues feel energized and celebrated*. Our initiatives and endeavors for encouraging a gender-diverse organization have recognized us with many *National and International awards*. We have been awarded with the ‘*Diversity Impact Award*’ at the Asia Best Employer Award 2017. .... These are *the true testament of BAT Bangladesh’s agenda in developing and empowering female managers for leadership. The female leaders of BATB are creating positive impacts in the society by leaving their footprints*



*of success in the national and international arena.* [British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB), Annual Report 2017, p.151] (Author's emphasis)

The company provided 'description' of facts on its arrangement of International Women's Day program. This 'demonstrative' disclosure (Bansal and Kistruck, 2006) enhanced the clarity and integrity (Higgins and Walker, 2012; Hossain *et al.*, 2017b) of the report. Overall, the company followed a positive style of writing. It created a positive impression of its operations by using 'positively' charged vocabulary such as 'energized and celebrated', 'positive impacts in the society' and 'footprints of success'. The use of 'praise' tactic is also evident as it noted the achievement of 'Diversity Impact Award' as evidence of company being 'superior to other actors' (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p. 683).

#### *5.1.7 Corporate giving for welfare of the women in the society*

Companies reported on 'corporate giving' (Hossain *et al.*, 2017a) particularly towards women's health, education, sports and others. The following example shows a company's contribution to women emancipation:

##### Example 16:

In 2017, Southeast Bank spent **total BDT 241.77 million** for education, sports, art, culture, promotion of national heritage, improvement of the condition of autistic children, **women emancipation**, health-care, financial assistance to disadvantaged people, donation for national disaster-victims, help for poor peoples' medical treatment of serious diseases, community development, relief operation, winter-clothes for the cold-hit poor people, etc. [Southeast Bank Limited, Annual Report 2017, p.209] (Author's emphasis)

Through facts and numbers, the company reported its contribution in various CSR activities. However, the statement lacks individual quantitative figure for activities including 'women emancipation'. Moreover, it is unspecific 'what' activities the company performed and 'how' they spent the money. Thus, even after reporting with quantitative figures, the statement mostly remains 'unspecific' and 'vague'. Further, the company combined women's issues with other 'distressed' groups in the society to trigger emotion and feelings of the readers. This is another example of 'emotional' writing to present the company as a 'feeling being'. The following example demonstrates the contribution to women's education:

##### Example 17:

Rajdhani Mohila College, Mirpur, Dhaka had been built under the leadership of some **courageous sponsors** to provide **quality education** to the **female students of lower income families** in the area. Since beginning it is doing well for **developing the society with quality education**. To develop the College lab facilities further, DBH took an initiative and provided them **Tk. 3.50 lac** during the year. [Delta Brac Housing (DBH) Finance Corporation Ltd., Annual Report 2017, p.84] (Author's emphasis).

The company used positively charged words such as ‘courageous sponsors’ and ‘quality education’ to create a positive impression among the readers. Also, the statement claimed that many female students of this college came from the ‘lower income families’ which not only depicted the firm as socially responsible but also elicited emotions and feelings of the readers (Higgins and Walker, 2012).

#### *5.1.8 Initiatives for career development of the female employees*

On the career development, Companies mainly identified the training facilities available for female employees. For example, Bank Asia, in their Annual Integrated Report 2017, provides a ‘demonstrative’ disclosure of its ‘Training by Gender’ (p. 178). The company presented the number of males and females who were trained in 2016 and 2017 along with the data of total training hours for both genders. The company used ‘numbers’ to describe the ‘action’ (the training). Here is another example:

Example 18:

Women in BAT Bangladesh *receive many trainings and development programmes such as ‘WILL TO LEAD’, ‘WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP’, etc.* ... These platforms also allow them to experience a *development opportunity* and *network* with female colleagues across different regions. As a part of developing the future potential leaders within BATB, female managers also receive mentoring from senior managers and top team members. The mentorships are extended beyond day-to-day work and into *fulfilling their potential*, which has *a very positive impact* for both the mentor and the mentee. [British American Tobacco Bangladesh (BATB), Annual Report 2017, p.151] (Author’s emphasis)

Despite the company’s claim of running ‘many’ career development training programs, they ‘described’ only two: ‘WILL TO LEAD’ and ‘WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP’. It also demonstrated the importance of mentor-mentee interaction in network building and skill development of female workers. Use of unspecific expressions like ‘many’, ‘etc.’ demonstrated the ‘vague’ style of writing. The interesting matter is the whole statement was written with ‘positively’ charged vocabularies such as ‘developing opportunity’, ‘fulfilling their potential’ and ‘very positive impact’, which would create a positive impression of its operations (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015, p. 684).

#### *5.1.9 Issues related to the salaries of the female employees*

Though the issue of women’s remuneration and the gender pay gap has become a burning question in today’s world (Hossain *et al.*, 2016), only one company addressed this in the report:

Example 19:

***We target a fair human resources management by using a performance based system ... There is no incident of discrimination has been occurred in terms of remuneration provided to male and female employees.*** [Al Arafah Islami Bank, Annual Report 2017, p. 149] (Author's emphasis)

The statement was written in 'positive' style with a phrase like 'fair human resources management' aiming to create a positive impression among the readers. However, the absence of 'description' about the company's 'fair' policy made the claim 'unspecific', 'vague' and 'rhetorical'.

## *5.2 Contextual analysis*

The contextual analysis contains both situational and intertextual analysis (Ruiz, 2009). While the situational analysis considers the circumstances of discourse production, the intertextual analysis recognizes texts as a symptom of ideological domination (Fairclough, 1995). The situation of both the producer and the consumer of texts is considered here. In our study, Bangladeshi companies are the producers of texts and different stakeholder groups are the consumers. Thus, the communication is happening in a 'situation' where the consumers of the texts are seeking 'accountability' from the producers. In this circumstance, the 'intention' of the producers is to discharge accountability and gain legitimacy by managing the stakeholders' impression through corporate reports.

The text analysis has already shown that the sample companies applied various impression management tactics of Sandberg and Holmlund (2015). Among the tactics, companies applied 'description', 'praise' in the presentation through 'positive', 'vague' and 'emotional' writing styles. But the tactics of 'admission', 'defense' and 'subjective' writing style was not used. The absence of 'negative' news in gender narratives demonstrates the 'selective' (Brennan *et al.*, 2009) presentation of companies highlighting 'positive' news. Favorable aspects were predominantly used to create a positive impression of their actions in the minds of the stakeholders. In some cases, though the disclosures were about 'good news', these were rhetorical, unspecific and vague. Even these 'vague' narratives were employed to create a positive impression among the readers. Therefore, the sample companies applied various tactics to signify their existence for the benefits of society and 'legitimize' their activities.

From an intertextual perspective, gender disclosures also pinpointed some common ideas prevailing in the society. Firstly, the companies identified women as a 'vulnerable' group who need help. Secondly, they portrayed the CSR activities of the companies as a panacea to social problems. The companies presented their actions in a successful light. They 'praised' themselves while describing their actions. Most of these narratives were highly 'self-laudatory' (Frost *et al.*, 2005). For example, they established an impression of creating an 'equal opportunity' environment in their organizations. They also recognized that their initiatives encouraged the women in building a successful career and their charitable acts moved women from the vulnerable position. All of these initiatives are attempted to present themselves as responsible corporate citizens with high morals (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015) that ultimately legitimize their activities.

Companies represented women as a ‘distressed’ group in society through ‘emotional’ writing. The distresses of women in the society were identified through ‘emotive symbols’ (Pellegrino and Lodhia, 2012, p. 75) to trigger the emotions and feelings (Higgins and Walker, 2012) of the stakeholders. Moreover, they showed social consciousness by illustrating their assistance to these distressed women. This is a further evidence of organizations’ ‘social license to operate’ (Pellegrino and Lodhia, 2012, p. 74). Additionally, this legitimacy seeking activity demonstrated the positive impact created by the organizations in the community (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015). Therefore, through gender disclosures, Bangladeshi companies have attempted to manage the stakeholder impression and justified their actions as legitimate.

### *6.3 Sociological analysis*

Since discourse is a social practice (Lemke, 1995), Ruiz (2009) recognizes the need to analyze the textual narratives from the perspective of the society in which they were produced. This study has explored the gender-related disclosures of the Bangladeshi companies, and thus Bangladeshi society comes into the focal point. Bangladeshi women face discrimination in both public (workplace) and private (family) lives. Moreover, they confront the challenges in gaining access to economic resources, education and healthcare facilities.

Women are usually depicted as a vulnerable group in the society, who have gone through several discriminations and sufferings. The study shows a general concern among companies about gender inequality and discrimination. The companies not only demonstrated the policy support for gender equality but also illustrated their actions regarding employment of women, sexual harassment, maternity leave, career development and transportation facilities for women. Some financial institutions highlighted the issue of economic empowerment and reported on women-centric products/services. Companies further reported on their ‘corporate giving’ activities aimed at women’s education, health, sports and other welfare. Thus, the gender narratives of companies represented them as ‘paternal benefactors’ (Higgins and Walker, 2012) who care about social problems. Moreover, such disclosures render the reporting firm as ‘noble with high morals’ (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015) and is a strategy of legitimizing the companies’ operations and existence (Pellegrino and Lodhia, 2012).

Companies predominantly applied some impression management tactics (Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015) over others. For example, sample companies did not ‘admit’ and ‘defend’ for ‘failure’ to perform as per social expectation. Like, companies reported on female workers but did not substantiate the ‘inequality’ in employment with further argument. Companies instead represented themselves as ‘pro-social’, ‘noble’, ‘moral’ and ‘feeling-beings’ with ‘positive’ statements. According to Nwagbara and Belal (2019, p. 2412): “... word choice is a vehicle that carries people’s feeling, ideology, thoughts and intentions, it can help in understanding the purpose behind language in CSR reports about what it signifies in relation to a communicator’s position, intention and ideology”. Through positive reporting, companies put their actions in a successful

light and show their existence as beneficial for the women in the society. This is a further evidence of impressing the stakeholders and gain legitimacy.

## 7. Conclusion

This study has explored the gender-related discourses in the annual reports of Bangladeshi companies. To fulfill this objective, we conducted a Sociological Discourse Analysis (as suggested by Ruiz, 2009) and interpreted the results from two interrelated perspectives: impression management (through the lens of the tactics suggested by Sandberg and Holmlund, 2015) and legitimacy. We have identified the gender-related issues that were highlighted by the sample companies and examined how impression management tactics were applied in the corporate narratives to seek legitimacy.

In general, companies report on their policies and actions relating to women empowerment, gender equality, women's participation etc. This is an improvement from earlier state of 'complete absence' of gender issues in corporate reports (Belal, 2008; Belal and Cooper, 2011). Nevertheless, the disclosures could have been much improved. Only 65 out of 204 sample companies reported at least one gender issue. Moreover, the reporting has not been consistent and hence not comparable across the firms. Due to the 'absence' of regulatory guidelines for voluntary gender disclosures, the divergence of reporting was explicit, and companies had an incentive to apply various impression management strategies in those narratives.

The study has implications in both practice and policy levels. At the policy level, the findings revealed a need for reporting guidelines for gender narratives. Although there is a global GRI proposed gender reporting guideline, there is no local guideline in Bangladesh. Our findings suggest that in the absence of proper directives, companies presented facts and figures rhetorically and qualitatively. Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission (BSEC) could come forward and propose a guideline for gender narratives to lessen gender inequality. Moreover, our findings provide practical insights for the companies in assisting the Government of Bangladesh to deal with the prevailing gender inequality and achieved gender-related Sustainable Development Goal. Through a balanced, comparable and specific corporate reporting on the various social problems (including gender issues) the government can get a clear picture of the corporate initiatives (Hossain *et al.*, 2017b).

This study contributed to the limited number of existing literature on corporate gender reporting, especially in the context of emerging economies. Moreover, this study is methodologically novel as it employed SDA to explore gender disclosures. Theoretically, the study triangulates through an SDA framework with impression management tactics to reveal how texts are strategically used to induce stakeholders and portray the company as a responsible organization. Going beyond the extant evidence on 'what' is disclosed in the annual reports, the study demonstrated a more 'meaning oriented' analysis. This study provides further evidence of how organizations achieved legitimacy and manage stakeholders' impression through the strategic use of language. Overall, the study opens the theoretical and methodological possibilities in this field.

However, the study is not free from limitations. This is an exploratory study focusing on cross-sectional data. Future researchers can work with longitudinal data to see the changes and developments in gender reporting practices over the period. Researchers can compare the reporting practices of other developing and underdeveloped economies, where gender inequality is severe. Future research can undertake in-depth interviews of stakeholders to get better insights into the problems and prospects of corporate gender disclosure.

## References

- Aberu, R., David, F. and Crowther, D. (2005), "Corporate social responsibility is urgently needed in health care", *Social Responsibility Journal*, Vol. 1 Nos 3/4, pp. 225-240.
- Abott, P., Wallace, C. and Tyler, M. (2005), *An Introduction to Sociology: Feminist Perspective*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.
- Adams, C. A. (2006), "The internet and change in corporate stakeholder engagement and communication strategies on social and environmental performance", *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 281-303
- Adams, C. A. and Harte, G. (1998), "The changing portrayal of the employment of women in British banks' and retail companies' corporate annual reports", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 8, pp. 781-812.
- Adams, C. A., Hill, W. Y. and Roberts, C. B. (1998), "Corporate social reporting in Western Europe", *British Accounting Review*, Vol. 30 No. 1, pp.1-21.
- ADB (2001), *Country Briefing Paper: Women in Bangladesh*, Programs Department (West).
- ADB (2017), "Bangladesh gender equality diagnostic of selected sectors", available at: <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/395641/bangladesh-gender-equality-diagnostic.pdf> (accessed 10 June 2020).
- Alam, K., Blanch, L. and Smith, A. (2011), *Stitched Up Women Workers in the Bangladeshi Garment Sector*, War on Want, London.
- Bansal, P. and Kistruck, G. (2006), "Seeing is (not) believing: managing the impressions of the firm's commitment to natural environment", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 67 No. 2, pp. 165-180.
- Belal, A. R. (2008), *Corporate Social Responsibility Reporting in Developing Countries: The Case of Bangladesh*, Ashgate Publishing, Aldershot.
- Belal, A. R. and Cooper, S. (2011), "The absence of corporate social responsibility reporting in Bangladesh", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 22 No. 7, pp. 654-667.
- Belal, A. R. and Owen, D. L. (2007), "The views of corporate managers on the current state of, and future prospects for, social reporting in Bangladesh: an engagement based study" *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 472-494.
- Ben-Amar, W., Bujaki, M., McConomy, B. and McIlkenny, P. (2020), "Gendering merit: how the discourse of merit in diversity disclosures supports the gendered status quo on Canadian corporate boards", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Preprint, doi: [10.1016/j.cpa.2020.102170](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpa.2020.102170).
- Ben-Amar, W., Chang, M., and McIlkenny, P. (2017), "Board gender diversity and corporate response to sustainability initiatives: evidence from the carbon disclosure project", *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 142 No. 2, pp. 369-383.
- Benschop, Y. and Meihuizen, H. (2002), "Keeping up gendered appearances: Representations of gender in financial annual reports", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 27 No. 7, pp. 611-636.

- Bernardi, R.A., Bean, D.F. and Weippert, K.M. (2002), "Signaling gender diversity through annual report pictures: a research note on image management", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 4, pp. 609-616.
- Brennan, N. M., Guillamon-Saorin, E. and Pierce, A. (2009), "Impression management: developing and illustrating a scheme of analysis for narrative disclosures – a methodological note", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 22 No. 5, pp. 789-832.
- Brown, N. and Deegan, C. (1998), "The public disclosure of environmental performance information – a dual test of media agenda setting theory and legitimacy theory", *Accounting and Business Research*, Vol. 29 No. 1, pp. 21-41.
- Collins, K. M. (1993), "Stress and departures from the public accounting profession: a study of gender differences", *Accounting Horizons*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 29-38.
- Cooper, E.A. and Bosco, S.M. (1999), "Methodological issues in conducting research on gender in organisations", Powell, G.N. (Ed.), *Handbook of Gender & Work*, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, pp. 477-493.
- Deegan, C. and Islam, M. A. (2014), "An exploration of NGO and media efforts to influence workplace practices and associated accountability within global supply chain", *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 46 No. 4, pp. 397-415.
- Delloitte. (2018). "Missing pieces report: the 2018 board diversity census of women and minorities on Fortune 500 boards", available at: <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/center-for-board-effectiveness/articles/missing-pieces-fortune-500-board-diversity-study-2018.html> (accessed 8 July 2020).
- Dijk, T. A. (1990), "The future of the field: discourse analysis in the 1990s", *TEXT*, Vol. 10 Nos. 1/2, pp. 133-156.
- Dumay, J., Frost, G. and Beck, C. (2015), "Material legitimacy: blending organisational and stakeholder concerns through non-financial information disclosures", *Journal of Accounting & Organizational Change*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp.2-23.
- Edgar, C., Beck, V. M. and Brennan, N.M. (2018), "Impression management in annual report narratives: the case of the UK private finance initiative", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol.31 No. 6, pp. 1566-1592.
- Eitzen, D.S., Zinn, M.B. and Smith, K.E. (2009), *Social Problems*, Pearson, Boston.
- Fairclough, N. (1995), *Critical Discourse Analysis*, Longman Group UK Ltd, Harlow.
- Frost, G., Jones, S. and Vand der Laan, S. (2005), "A survey of sustainability reporting practices of Australian reporting entities", *Australian Accounting Review*, Vol. 15 No.1, pp. 89-96.
- GRI (2009), "Embedding gender in sustainability reporting", available at: <https://www.globalreporting.org/resourcelibrary/Embedding-Gender-In-Sustainability-Reporting.pdf> (accessed 19 September 2019).
- Grosser, K. and Moon, J. (2008), "Developments in company reporting on workplace gender equality: a corporate social responsibility perspective", *Accounting Forum*, Vol. 32 No. 3, pp. 179-198.



- Haji, A.A., and Hossain, D.M. (2016), "Exploring the implications of integrated reporting on organizational reporting practice: evidences from highly regarded integrated reporters", *Qualitative Research in Accounting & Management*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 415-444.
- Hakim, C. (1996), *Female Heterogeneity and the Polarisation of Women's Employment*, Athlone, NJ.
- Haque, F., and Jones, M. J. (2020), "European firms' corporate biodiversity disclosures and board gender diversity from 2002 to 2016", *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 52 No. 2, pp. 1-17.
- Haynes, K. (2017), "Accounting as gendering and gendered: a review of 25 years of critical accounting research on gender", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol 43, pp. 110-124.
- Henslin, J. M. (2011), *Social Problems: A Down-to-Earth Approach*, Allyn & Bacon, Boston.
- Higgins, C. and Walker, R. (2012), "Ethos, logos, pathos: strategies of persuasion in social/environmental reports", *Accounting Forum*, Vol 36 No. 3, pp.194-208.
- Hopwood, A. G. (1987), "Accounting and Gender: an Introduction." *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 12 No. 1, pp. 65-69.
- Hossain, D. M. (2013), *Gender Attitudes Toward Female Co-workers at the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh: A Case Study*, Unpublished Master Degree Dissertation, International Islamic University Malaysia.
- Hossain, D. M., Ahmad, N. N. N. and Siraj, S. A. (2016), "Marxist feminist perspective of corporate gender disclosures." *Asian Journal of Accounting and Governance*, Vol. 7, pp. 11-24.
- Hossain, D. M., Ahmad, N. N. N. and Siraj, S. A. (2017a), "Power relationships in gender-related disclosures: exploring language in selected Fortune 500 companies' sustainability reports", *International Journal of Business Governance and Ethics*, Vol. 12 No. 3, pp. 262-288.
- Hossain, D. M., Ahmad, N. N. N. and Siraj, S. A. (2017b), "Rhetoric as a form of persuasion in disclosing poverty-related CSR activities in corporate disclosures: the case of Bangladesh." *Asian Journal of Business and Accounting*, Vol. 10 No. 2, pp. 105-135.
- Huq, S. P. (2003), "Bodies as sites of struggle: Naripokkho and the movement for women's rights in Bangladesh", *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol. XXIX Nos 3/4, pp. 47- 65. *in the Workplace and Beyond*, Paper 26, CPD and UNFPA, Dhaka.
- Islam, M. A. and Deegan, C. (2008), "Motivations for an organisation within a developing country to report social responsibility information: evidence from Bangladesh", *Accounting, Auditing and Accountability Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 6, pp. 850-874.
- Jayachandran, S. (2015), "The roots of gender inequality in developing countries", *Economics*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 63-88.
- Komori, N. (2008), "Towards the feminization of accounting practice: lessons from the experiences of Japanese women in the accounting profession", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 21 No. 4, pp. 507-538.

- Kuasirikun, N. (2011), "The portrayal of gender in annual reports in Thailand", *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 53-78.
- Kuruppu, S.C., Milne, M.J. and Tilt, C.A. (2019), "Gaining, maintaining and repairing organisational legitimacy: when to report and when not to report", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 7, pp. 2062-2087.
- Lee, J. and Parpart, J. L. (2018), "Constructing gender identity through masculinity in CSR reports: the South Korean case", *Business Ethics: A European Review*, Vol. 27 No. 4, pp. 309-323.
- Lehman, C. (2012), "We've come a long way! Maybe! Re-imagining gender and accounting." *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 2, pp. 256-294.
- Lemke, J. (1995), *Textual Politics: Discourse and Social Dynamics*, Taylor & Francis, London.
- Lewellyn, K. B. and Muller-Kahle, M. I. (2019), "The corporate board glass ceiling: the role of empowerment and culture in shaping board gender diversity." *Journal of Business Ethics*, Vol. 165 No. 2, pp. 329-346.
- Li, Z. and Haque, S. (2019), "Corporate social responsibility employment narratives: a linguistic analysis", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 6, pp. 1690-1713.
- Lupu, I. and Sandu, R. (2017), "Intertextuality in corporate narratives: a discursive analysis of a contested privatization", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 30 No. 3, pp. 534-564.
- Maconis, J. J. (2012), *Sociology*, Pearson, Boston.
- Momin, M. A. and Parker, L. D. (2013), "Motivations for corporate social responsibility reporting by MNC subsidiaries in an emerging country: the case of Bangladesh", *The British Accounting Review*, Vol. 45 No. 3, pp. 215-228.
- Neu, D., Warsame, H. and Pedwell, K. (1998), "Managing public impressions: environmental disclosures in annual reports", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 23 No. 3, pp. 265-282.
- Newman, D. M. (2012), *Identities and Inequalities Exploring the Intersections of Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality*, McGraw Hill, New York, NY.
- Nwagbara, U. and Belal, A. (2019), "Persuasive language of responsible organisation? A critical discourse analysis of corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports of Nigerian oil companies", *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 32 No. 8, pp. 2395-2420.
- Ousama, A. A., Fatima, A. and Hafiz-Majdi, A. R. (2012), "Determinants of intellectual capital reporting: evidence from annual reports of Malaysian listed companies", *Journal of Accounting in Emerging Economies*, Vol. 2 No. 2, pp. 119-139.
- Palgrave-Macmillan, New York, NY.
- Pellegrino, C. and Lodhia, S. (2012), "Climate change accounting and Australian mining industry: exploring the links between corporate disclosure and the generation of legitimacy", *Journal of Cleaner Production*, Vol. 36, pp. 68-82.

- Ruiz, J. R. (2009). "Sociological discourse analysis: methods and logic", *Forum: Qualitative social research*, Vol. 10 No. 2, available at: <http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/1298> (accessed 15 April 2019).
- Sandberg, M. and Holmlund, M. (2015), "Impression management tactics in sustainability reporting", *Social Responsibility Journal*, Vol. 11 No. 4, pp. 677-689.
- Siddiqi, D. M. (2003), *The Sexual Harassment of Industrial Workers: Strategies for Intervention*
- Solomon, J. F., Solomon, A., Joseph, N. L. and Norton, S. D. (2013), "Impression management, myth creation and fabrication in private social and environmental reporting: insights from Erving Goffman", *Accounting, Organizations and Society*, Vol. 38 No. 3, pp. 195-213.
- Sultana, A. M. (2010), "Socio-cultural dimensions of women's discrimination in rural communities." *Ocean Journal of Social Sciences*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 31-38.
- The United Nations (2013), *Inequality Matters-Report on the World Social Situation 2013*, United Nations, New York, NY.
- Tregidga, H., Milne, M. and Lehman, G. (2012), "Analyzing the quality, meaning and accountability of organizational reporting and communication: directions for future research." *Accounting Forum*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 223-230.
- Ullah, M. S., Muttakin, M. B., and Khan, A. (2019), "Corporate governance and corporate social responsibility disclosures in insurance companies", *International Journal of Accounting & Information Management*, Vol. 27 No. 2, pp. 284-300.
- UNESCO (2012), *World Atlas of Gender Inequality in Education*, UNESCO Publishing, Paris.
- Warth, L. (2009), "Gender equality and corporate sector", Discussion paper series no.4, United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, Geneva, available at: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.184.7762&rep=rep1&type=pdf> (accessed 20 April 2019).
- Witt, S. (2004), "Parental influence on children's socialisation to gender roles", *Adolescence*, Vol. 32 No. 126, pp. 253-259.
- Wodak, R. and Krzyzanowski, M. (2008), *Qualitative Discourse Analysis in the Social Sciences*, World Bank (2019), "World development report", available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2019> (accessed 8 May 2020).
- World Economic Forum (2020), "Global gender gap report 2020", available at: [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2020.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf) (accessed 22 July 2020).
- Zillman, C. (2019), "The Fortune 500 has more female CEOs than ever before", available at: <https://fortune.com/2019/05/16/fortune-500-female-ceos/> (accessed 28 June 2020).

**Table 1.** Sector wise number of companies in the sample

<b>Sector</b>	<b>Number of companies</b>
Bank	28
Cement	5
Ceramic	5
Engineering	23
Financial institutions	21
Food and allied	7
Fuel and power	15
Insurance	31
IT	5
Jute	1
Miscellaneous	10
Pharmaceuticals and chemical	21
Printing	1
Services and real estate	3
Tannery	3
Telecommunication	2
Textiles	21
Travel and leisure	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>204</b>

**Table 2.** Impression management strategies

<b>Impression management strategy</b>	<b>Description</b>
<i><b>Presenting actions</b></i>	
<b>Description</b>	Providing information about the activities performed. The companies can report facts, give examples or describe a procedure/program that is in place.
<b>Praise</b>	Presenting the actions in an overly favorable manner. The companies try to put themselves in a successful light. They highlight the importance of their existence in society. They portray themselves as noble with high morals.
<b>Admission</b>	Admitting the failure of any action that was not performed in an expected manner.
<b>Defense</b>	Justifying the actions in which the company did not perform well.
<i><b>Writing style</b></i>	
<b>Subjective writing style</b>	Opinionated one-sided writing style.
<b>Positive style</b>	Using positively charged vocabulary and attempting to create an imbalance between positive and negative facts. Emphasizing on favorable issues. Make unfavorable aspects less negative.
<b>Vague writing style</b>	Writing in a rhetorical manner with unspecific information.
<b>Emotional style</b>	Using feeling-provoking writing style.

**Source: Sandberg and Holmlund (2015)**

**Table 3.** Issues disclosed by the sample companies

<b>Issues</b>	<b>Number of companies disclosing the issue (Sample size= 204)</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Concern for women empowerment and women's welfare	13	6.37
Policy related to gender diversity in the workplace	22	10.78
Male-female ratio in the workplace	28	13.73
Products/services designed for women's welfare	26	12.75
Special rights of and facilities provided to women in the workplace	13	6.37
Special programs or arrangements focusing on women	9	4.41
Corporate giving for welfare of the women in the society	22	10.78
Initiatives for career development of the female employees	2	0.98
Issues related to the salaries of the female employees	1	0.49