

Dedicating the day to the female garment workers

DILARA CHOUDURY

MARCH 8, A commemorative Day. Today is International Women's Day. Women from all over the world often divided by national boundaries and by ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic and political differences come together to celebrate a tradition of protest and political activism through which they have been trying constantly to participate in society on an equal footing with men. It represents their struggle for equality, justice, peace and development commiserating the central organizing principle of the work of the United Nations that "no enduring solution to society's most threatening social, economic and political problems can be found without the full participation, and the full empowerment, of the world's women."

It was born at the turn of the 20th century and at a time when industrialised world was experiencing great turbulence and crisis and when women, in the midst of all kinds of political, economic and social restrictions, were entering paid work in great number mainly in the textiles, manufacturing and domestic services where the working conditions spelled more than disaster and wages worse than depressed. Year after year, men and women in Europe and in the United States attended rallies in and around March 8 to push for women's political, economic and social rights. They chanted for women's voting rights, pushed for Women's Trade Union League to help organise women in paid work around their political and economic welfare. Today it has assumed a new global dimension, strengthened by growing international movement and UN support and the day is now commemoration for rallying efforts to demand women's rights and full participation in the political and economic progress. It is a day to reflect and draw inspirations from past achievements, and express solidarity with our sisters in order to look for future directions.

Like any other developing and developed country Bangladesh also celebrates the day with due honor and dignity. Solidarity with women's demands for equal rights to participate in the political, social, economic process on equal footing with men would be expressed

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through rallies, and other activities. Major issues that need to be addressed to make women live productive would be highlighted. One of the issues, I feel, must draw our attention this year should be the predicaments of the female garment workers of our country whose untiring work has so richly contributed to our national exchequer. The irony is that though Bangladesh is never tired of impressing upon the investors and the donors about the success of its garment sectors but neither the government nor the owners of the industries have ever tried or bothered to comprehend or give due recognition to the labour of the workers whose sweat and blood have made the industries so profitable and successful. It seems that thoughts have ever crossed the minds of the relevant people that they too, along with the glowing tributes paid to the success stories of RMG sector, need the basic or minimum recognition in terms of better salaries, security and better working conditions.

There are in all 3700 garment industries in and around the capital city of Dhaka and elsewhere in the country, which employ about twenty lac workers, of which 80 percent are females. Their tender age—mostly between 14 and 25—due to their lack of education and skill to

both male and female workers have wretched working conditions but the female face the similar situations at home as well. According to a newspaper report their lives at home are raven by poverty and violence.

Besides the job insecurity and horrible conditions at home and work these women are subjected to violence in the form of sexual harassment both at work and while traveling to and from work. While traveling they are mostly harassed through eve teasing, which is considered to be normal male behaviour and condoned by the society that refuses to recognise that such male aggression is detrimental to women's physical and psychological health. However, it is at work that they are sexually harassed most. In a recently conducted study, it has been found that the female garment workers face intense sexual harassment like quid pro quo negotiations, reprisal for refusing sexual advances and physical assaults for preventing attempted rape. The men in authority also commit extreme type of harassment like rape. Phenomenon like grabbing, touching, leering and suggestive comments have also been common. The female workers usually tolerate such acceptable male behaviour in silence due to societal norms, lopsided male-female power relationship and economic necessity. There has also been no specific law for dealing the perpetrators of such violence. In sum, they lead a life that is full of indignity and injustice.

The above is just a bird's eye view of what the female garment workers go through day in and day out. The issue of the female garment workers must then be addressed in a meaningful way. On March 25, 1911, tragic Triangle Fire in New York killed 410 working girls that had a significant impact on labour legislation in the United States, and the working conditions leading up to the disaster were invoked during subsequent observances of International Women's Day. On this day of reckoning, let us pledge that we would not allow to go in vain the lives of the female garment workers that have been lost in KTS Textiles Industries fire, and that their loss will make us more determined to fight for their rights, which remained elusive while they were still living.

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In praise of remarkable women

YASMEEN MURSHED

"COME let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad tales of the death of Kings" so said William Shakespeare hundreds of years ago. An enticing prospect because I am not alone in enjoying stories of campaigns and battles, conquest and occupation, reversal and gain of fortune of great men and their countries. Bravery and valour on the field of battle have as inspiring a role to play in literature as they do in history and as adults we seek out the emotion stirring tales that inspired us in school and college when we studied about the death of kings.

That is one reason why war tales have been a popular genre and World War Two has been a fertile field for all kinds of writing. While doing some browsing on the subject I came upon the astonishing fact that in the Second World War the greatest number of recipients of the Victoria and George Cross medals, the highest British awards for bravery, were Indians. Of course, one knew that the Gurkha regiments had been awarded the greatest number of Victoria Crosses but it was a revelation that all South Asians had taken their colonial obligations so seriously! Or is it that bravery and valour comes naturally to the South Asian soldier? Whatever the reason, I wish more had been written by Indians about their role in the war and its campaigns.

A theatre of war that has always interested me because of its individual stories of outstanding bravery under extreme odds, has been the work of the Special Operations Executive the SOE which played such an important role after the occupation of France in maintaining close links with the Resistance. The agents who were parachuted into occupied France also included many women who braved the danger of espionage under Nazi occupation. The cover unit for the women agents was called the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry or FANY and the FANY women became known for their outstanding courage and bravery so much so that one of their supervisors catching sight of a book titled "Remarkable Women" said that the book would have to be rewritten "after these girls have done their stuff!"

There is an anonymous memorial on the wall of a chapel in Kensington to six FANY women all of whom died in concentration camps. Violette Szabo is one of the names and she is one of my favourite FANY heroines. She was posthumously awarded the George Cross, which was presented to her four year old daughter Tania Szabo by King George VI on January 28, 1947. She was also awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French Government in the same year. The best book about her is R.J. Minney's "Carve Her Name With Pride" (Pan Books, 1956). There was also a 1958 film of

the book starring Virginia McKenna and Paul Scofield but I haven't seen a DVD of it around so my younger readers may not have seen it.

In order to be dropped into occupied France, the SOE operatives had to be bilingual and even multilingual, speaking French and German like natives, so that they could masquerade as ordinary Frenchmen and women. Violette Bushell was one such girl, born of a French mother and English father, who had spent her early years in France and was comfortable in both languages. Her photos show a very attractive young woman whose eyes shine with vitality and compel a second look. Her friends recalled a popular girl who showed signs of derring do and high spirits from a very early age. About the time that the Second World War began, Violette met and fell in love with a captain in the French Foreign Legion, Etienne Szabo. They were married within a few weeks almost as if they knew what the future had in store and were frantic to snatch a

girl yet register every nuance of her appearance. She in turn would be nervous yet excited at the meeting with some inkling, surely, of what was to be suggested. The interviewer would murmur quietly that her knowledge of French and fluency in French could be useful. He would explain that he was looking for people to do "dangerous work" in occupied France. "You mean spying?" she would ask. "No, not spying, but similar," he would say in the typical British understated manner "We want people with special qualities to be trained and go into enemy occupied territory to make life very unpleasant for the Germans."

Violette would soon be too caught up in the excitement of espionage to give the danger inherent in the mission much thought. I wonder whether she had trepidations about leaving little Tania behind with her parents did she fear that she would never return and Tania would grow up without either parent. If she did have these

but Madame Szabo, seizing a Sten gun and as much ammunition as she could carry, barricaded herself in part of the house, and, exchanging shot for shot with the enemy, killed or wounded several of them. By constant movement she avoided being cornered and fought until she dropped, exhausted.

She was arrested and had to undergo solitary confinement. She was then continuously and atrociously tortured, but never by word or deed gave away any of her acquaintances or told the enemy anything of value. She was ultimately executed. Madame Szabo gave a magnificent display of courage and steadfastness.

This dry account hardly does justice to the dramatic events it describes. One has to imagine the sheer rush of adrenaline that fuelled Violette during these dangerous missions and the courage it took to make that futile stand against the Nazi troops. However, greater physical courage than ever was needed to withstand the cruel and unimaginable torture and interrogation that was to follow and to give up no vital fact or name. The young girl must have reached deep into her being to call up reserves of strength and determination to assist her in the ordeal.

After weeks of interrogation she was finally taken to Ravensbrück concentration camp where another FANY agent, Odette Hallowes, was also confined at the time. Odette survived the ordeal and gave details of the end to the authorities at the close of the war. Imagine that cold morning when the story came to an end. With two other women SOE agents, Violette was taken out through the courtyard to a bloody patch against the wall where all three were made to kneel and then shot through the back of the neck, one by one, ending the shining story of valour and bravery. Violette was only 23 years old.

I cannot end without quoting the poem made famous by the book and the film as having been written to Violette by her husband. However war documents claim that it was really written by a code-master of the SOE Leo Marks, and was used by Violette as a code poem whilst she was on the mission.

*The life that I have
Is all that I have
And the life that I have is yours
The love that I have of the life that I have
Is yours and yours and yours
The sleep I shall have, a rest I shall have
Yet death will be but a pause
For the peace of my years in the long green grass
Will be yours and yours and yours*

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TALKING BOOKS

There is an anonymous memorial on the wall of a chapel in Kensington to six FANY women all of whom died in concentration camps. Violette Szabo is one of the names and she is one of my favourite FANY heroines. She was posthumously awarded the George Cross, which was presented to her four year old daughter Tania Szabo by King George VI on January 28, 1947. She was also awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French Government in the same year.

few precious days and weeks together.

The premonition if there was overturned out to be accurate because they were fated to see very little of each other. Just a week or two during Etienne's leave in England and then he was killed in the North Africa campaign leaving behind a pregnant Violette to mourn her handsome husband. She soon had a beautiful daughter, Tania to console her and give her a reason to live but it seems that she took Etienne's death very hard. When she was singled out in the typical SOE manner because of her bilingual background she did not hesitate to join the FANYs. As the book tells it she was asked by Mr. Porter to come for an interview to an anonymous office in Whitehall. One can imagine the scene which has been immortalized by Le Carre in his Cold War spy novels about the British Secret Service, its eponymously named office the Circus and that amazing man, George Smiley. Someone like Smiley, a shadowless, grey man would have interviewed her in a cold and bare office. He would barely look up at the pretty young

thoughts it did not deter her from accepting the offer and go into training at the secure SOE training centers dotted about the British countryside. The time soon came to be dropped into France and Violette returned from her first mission successfully. Did that inspire courage or did she feel the danger more acutely? We will never know because the second mission was to end in a debacle.

Let me quote the dry and formal language of the citation printed in the London Gazette on December 17, 1946 which awarded her the George Cross.

"Madama Szabo volunteered to undertake a particularly dangerous mission in France. She was parachuted into France in April 1944, and undertook the task with enthusiasm. In her execution of the delicate researches entailed she showed great presence of mind and astuteness. She was twice arrested by the German security authorities, but each time managed to get away. Eventually, however, she was surrounded by the Gestapo in a house in the south-west of France. Resistance appeared hopeless,

Bangladeshi women awarded for dedicated work

MIKE O'BRIEN

THERE is a declared "international day" for most events these days, but probably the one most deserving of reflection, and most worthy of celebration, is International Women's Day, which falls each year on the 8th of March.

Two Bangladeshi women have been rewarded for their dedicated work in the service of others on International Women's Day 2006. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), in collaboration with the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS), made presentations of 10,000 Taka each to two recipients as a token of thanks for their long and valued service to others.

The choice of the two 2006 recipients for Women's Day awards was not an easy one because there are so many dedicated and loyal women in Bangladesh who are working in the service of humanity. Two very special recipients were chosen this year: Sabina Hossain Chowdhury who is the Youth Chief at the Red Crescent Society, and Dilara Begum Dewan who is the principal at the B.A. Siddiky Red Crescent Nursing Institute. Others, equally deserving, will be recognised in the years ahead.

In this feature we profile three Bangladeshi women. These women are not selected because they are high profile members of society whose actions are highly visible to us; but rather because they deserve to be known in their community after years of doing what many women doworking quietly in the service of family, community and the nation in order to ease the hardship or suffering of others. Little by little these special women make Bangladesh a better and happier place to live, and they are fine examples of the Red Cross and Red Crescent spirit.

Sabina—the volunteer youth leader

Many people work long hours for not very much pay, but there are not so many people who are willing to work long hours, week in and week out, for no pay at all! The volunteers of the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society, the premier humanitarian organisation of Bangladesh, do exactly that. In times of natural disasters the volunteers of the BDRCS are amongst the first to step in to assist victims and the effectiveness of the support that the Red Crescent Society provides depends directly on the quality, commitment and training of volunteers.

Sabina Hossain Chowdhury is only in her early 20s but already she is a veteran with more than 12 years in the ranks of the BDRCS volunteers. Like many of her colleagues

she was introduced to the Red Crescent youth through her school, and spent time learning critical skills such as first aid, and doing traditional Red Crescent Society work such as providing relief to the needy. After continuing her commitment to the Red Crescent beyond university, Sabina was elected as the Youth Chief, and she now spends up to 50 hours each week in unpaid voluntary service overseeing the training and humanitarian activities of Red Crescent youth volunteers.

Sabina is recognised on this International Women's Day as one of two women to receive annual achievement awards from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. The award recognises Sabina's voluntary service to the people of Bangladesh, through her work as Youth Chief with the Red Crescent Society.

From trainee to trainer—decades of service to nursing

In 1953 the Holy Family hospital was established and in 1957 it opened its doors for the first intake of trainee nurses. In 1978 young Dilara Begum Dewan commenced her nursing training at the hospital and an almost three decade association commenced, during which time



Sabina Chowdhury (centre) surrounded by her young charges

Dilara made the long journey from Trainee Nurse to Principal of the prestigious B.A. Siddiky Nursing Institute.

Dilara has not stopped learning despite reaching the top of her profession at the Institute. She is completing a part time Masters in Public Health. In response to being asked what might be improved for her profession she reiterates that "nursing is a respected profession in Bangladesh but the opportunities for professional development throughout a career in nursing are unfortunately quite limited. More needs to be done to attract and develop talented students who are willing to make a long career of nursing."

Dilara is recognised on this International Women's Day as one of two women to receive annual achievement awards from the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society. The award recognises Dilara's long and dedicated service to the people of Bangladesh, through her work as a nursing trainer at the B.A. Siddiky Red Crescent Nursing Institute.

Three decades of keeping families in touch

There is not so much public exposure in our community for those that work quietly in the service of others. Despite doing the same

difficult and at times frustrating humanitarian work for over 30 years, Monowara Sarker and her "tracing" team at the Bangladesh Red Crescent Society (BDRCS) remain dedicated and enthusiastic about her work which involves finding family members who are reported "missing" as a result of conflicts or natural disasters, or helping those who are separated to keep in touch.

"I started working as a Tracing Assistant with the International Committee of the Red Cross in 1971 when, at the time of liberation, there were a large number of people displaced; and from 1976 I continued this work with the Red Crescent Society," the softly spoken Monowara explains.

The work of the Tracing Department includes attempting to find Bangladeshi people who are missing as a result of conflicts around the globe, and keeping families in touch by passing Red Cross messages when they are separated sometimes as a result of being detained in foreign countries.

Asked what makes her work interesting and satisfying Monowara says that "We deal with a wide variety of problems including tracing missing family members overseas, helping to identify the remains of those killed in disasters such as ferry sinkings, and maintaining family contact with detainees, such as the two Bangladeshis still held at the US detention centre at Guantanamo Bay."

Monowara believes that she has been well rewarded for her humanitarian work in the service of others; she met and later married her husband as a result of him being one of her tracing "clients" back in 1971.

In a world so full of turmoil and displacement it is likely that Monowara's work "Tracing the Missing" will never be finished but her dedication and endurance are an inspiration to others as she and her colleagues ensure that families are able to know the fate of their loved ones and if possible to keep in touch with them.

Mike O'Brien is the ICRC Communication Coordinator for South Asia.



Dilara Dewan receiving Award from Mike O'Brien



By Director Monowara Sarker of the Tracing Department

Widening the sphere of women's empowerment

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

SINCE 1975, International Women's Year, March 8 has been celebrated as International Women's Day around the world. The theme of this year's International Women's Day -- the role of women in decision-making -- is central to the advancement of women and to the progress of humankind as a whole. As the Beijing Declaration tells, "women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power, are fundamental for the achievement of equality, development and peace."

International Women's Day is the occasion that connects all women around the world and inspires them to achieve their full potential. It is an important day because the collective power of women is witnessed by millions, and the brave achievements of women past, present and future are respectfully honoured.

While celebrating women's achievements worldwide, we should also devote this day to remembering all the women who have suffered abuse. International Women's Day should remind us all to think about the consequences of human trafficking.

Acknowledging their struggles, we should decide what needs to be done for the future. We should also use this special day to focus on our mission, for girls and young women to discover and fulfil their potential.

When women come together something wonderful happens: an igniting of passion and possibility; hope rises, determination quickens and our bond as women deepens. This day is about supporting women to give voice to their visions. It is about speaking truth and about the deep listening that keeps us in creative solution and collaboration. It also focuses on improving the quality of life for women by empowering them to be economically self-sufficient.

Women are as affected as any man by the challenges facing humanity in the 21st century -- in economic and social development, as well as in peace and security. Often, they are more affected. Women should be engaged in the decision-making processes in all areas, with equal strength and in

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equal numbers. We have to admit that there is no policy more effective in promoting development, health and education than the empowerment of women and girls.

At the 2005 World Summit, world leaders declared "progress for women is progress for all". On this International Women's Day, let us also optine with those words. We need the guarantee that half the world's population takes up its rightful place in the world's decision-making. "By effectively increasing the impact of women on public life at all levels, the potential for change towards gender equality and empowerment of women and a more democratic and just society is increased." This was mentioned in the report of the UN Secretary-General on equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes at all levels, in December 2005.

In 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action identified women in power

making and their achievements all too often remain invisible and unacknowledged, their voices unheard. Much more needs to be done, not only to accelerate the inclusion of women into formal decision-making bodies, but also to increase their impact on decision-making.

By building strong foundations for leadership and strong networks, representing women's perspectives in decision-making circles, and seizing opportunities for change, women are meeting the challenges of change necessary to achieve equality with men in decision-making at all levels.

In case of women's participation or contribution in the political field of Bangladesh, a quota has ensured their presence in the local government and National Parliament. Despite many odds, statistics and analyses reveal a slowly growing trend towards women's political participation. However, they face an ominous challenge. There has also been a growing influence of money in Bangladesh politics, particularly in electoral politics and in guarding/promoting spheres of influence. This acts as a further constraint in women's political participation since fewer women have access to financial resources. It is very difficult for women to work effectively in this system unless such practices are eradicated.

Party affiliation depends on membership drives and on the organisational and electoral needs of each party. The actual number of women members in different political parties, however, cannot be determined, since gender-specific records are not maintained. Nevertheless, a slow trend towards women's greater participation has emerged over the decade. As party voters, especially women. Although there are only a few women in leadership positions and there is limited female involvement in party hierarchical structures, but there seems apt enthusiasm towards their increased participation. Hopefully such increased participation in power structure by women would widen their sphere of empowerment in this still man-dominated society.

Yet the pace of progress towards the equality of women and men in decision-making at all levels, is slow. Women continue to remain under-represented at all levels of decision-

making and their achievements all too often remain invisible and unacknowledged, their voices unheard. Much more needs to be done, not only to accelerate the inclusion of women into formal decision-making bodies, but also to increase their impact on decision-making.

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Shegufta Yasmin is an editorial assistant of The Daily Star.