

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

The many milestones of the women's movement



SHEEJA HAFIZA

FOR the women's movement in Bangladesh, looking ahead can sometimes be a depressing task—the challenges and obstacles that we face are numerous, to say the least. However, when I look back at the last few decades,

there also have been a number of milestones that we should be proud of, although there is always space to do better. This Women's Day, we should try and focus on a few of these positives.

Before the women's movement took off in Bangladesh, sexual harassment was not even recognised to be an issue, let alone the idea of a woman living her life in a dignified environment. Now, there has been a significant change in mindsets—the general population understands sexual harassment to be a real problem, and more importantly, women are able to come forward and speak out about sexual harassment, to the extent that in 2009, the High Court issued an 11-point directive on sexual harassment after a writ petition filed by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers' Association (BNWLA). While there is still an appallingly high prevalence of violence against women, the women's movement has also been able to demand some dignity for abused women, and their pictures and names are no longer printed in newspapers or splashed across the headlines.

Another milestone achievement for us is the streamlining of women into the strategies and policies of development organisations. Gender issues now go hand-in-hand with development, and there is a gender perspective on every project. The development sector, specifically women's organisations, along with the government, have been able to create a society where there is female entrepreneurship from the grassroots level up to the top. If you just look at the number of bank accounts that have been opened by women over the last few decades, the developments in women's economic emancipation become obvious.

However, the most positive change that has come about is in the mindsets of people, and

the society at large. Women are now able to speak out about violence and women's issues. Starting from the 70s, the voices of our activists have paved the way to laws, policies and action plans that put women at the centre, although implementation is still a struggle. This change is also reflected in the media. Once journalists would report on rural poverty, and all they would see were goats, houses, ponds—never the women! Now, the media is covering women's issues, and handling these stories sincerely and sensitively. The global #MeToo movement has even started a conversation around sexual harassment in the workplace in Bangladesh, and emboldened many women to

speak out openly. This is a huge step forward because in the past, on the rare occasion when sexual harassment was addressed in the workplace, we used to keep the identities of perpetrators confidential and they could then move on and get a job elsewhere. If women have the confidence to name and shame, this will change.

There are other demands of the women's movement that once received a great deal of traction but have, unfortunately, not come to fruition yet. One of the most significant demands is the uniform family code that provides women, irrespective of religion, class, caste and ethnicity, with equal legal

and social status and opportunities. The Bangladesh Mohila Parishad is still working on this issue and creating pressure for the removal of discrimination in the law in terms of gender, ethnicity and religion. This does not mean that no progress has been made. Only last year, the High Court ruled that the word "kumari" (virgin) cannot be used for the bride in the Muslim marriage deed, and it should be replaced with "unmarried". However, while Muslim marriage laws have been adapted to give women certain legal rights, the same has not been applied to women of other religions. The media needs to play a role here in putting focus on these disparities—it would be a positive step forward in building bridges between the different communities as well. The media has also focused on the economic emancipation of women, but it should be explored in more detail to express the contributions of ordinary women towards progress in Bangladesh—not just towards the economy, but also towards changing social and cultural institutions and creating spaces for women that did not exist before. We like to focus on the positives and achievements, as we should, but we also need to focus on their daily struggles against entrenched discrimination.

Going forward, one of the most important obstacles that we immediately need to deal with is in our law and justice system. We must review discriminatory laws with gender-sensitive eyes, especially with regard to inheritance and sexual violence. Another major field that needs to be focused on involves reproductive and sexual rights. It has been proven that sex education leads to less risky sexual behaviour. During my work, I have found that ordinary people are open to these discussions—even clerics and madrasa students—because these conversations are central to their lives, and are an important tool in reducing violence against women. Finally, we need to work on pension allowances for women aged 65 and above, to respect the sacrifices women make all their lives, especially in terms of unpaid care work despite daily obstructions, shaming, etc. The state tries in different ways to give dignity to women. This can be one of its areas of focus—an important one which can save them from being totally dependent in their old age.

In order to make the women's movement more sustainable in the future, we must acknowledge that there have been changes in how we protest over the last few decades. In the 90s, you didn't have to be a big organisation—anyone could stand up and protest. Now, the focus is more on the big names and VIPs, and less on the movements themselves. Every time there is a protest, there is a subtle competition on who turns up with the biggest banners and posters. This has created a class consciousness in the women's movement that wasn't there before, since those who have the most money will have the biggest banners. Our dependency on donor funding has definitely led to this state of events—donors want to see their branding on whatever they fund and need constant updates and reports, often with the pressure of a positive spin. This creates projects, not protests. On top of that, law enforcement authorities can also make it difficult for people to stand together, even if it is something as simple as a women's march. While all of us within the movement definitely need to look within and stop seeking the spotlight, the government also needs to understand that our protests are not anti-state, we are only against injustice.

When I was in Nepal in 2004, I was pleasantly surprised to see a huge women's march organised by the Nepali government, with the participation of key women's organisations. In 2008, the Bangladesh government also announced that it would celebrate March 8. I personally was happy to see this initiative, and I wanted to support the government to make the movement reach the grassroots. But within the women's movement, this created a divide that we are still struggling with. I understand the danger of having our movement co-opted by the state, but I believe that change must also come from within the system. It is now up to civil society, as the more forward-thinking and independent group, to support the state, monitor its activities and constructively critique the steps that are being taken. Change is possible if there is political will from the state, and civil society can lead the way by providing the utmost support.

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COLLAGE-ILLUSTRATION BY KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Our journey towards 'Balance for Better'



KEDAR LELE

THIS year, we are celebrating 25 years of the United Nations' Beijing Declaration on women's rights and empowerment. Adopted with a determination to advance the goals of equality, development and peace for all

women, it has guided nations of the world to make progress in enhancing women's participation in all spheres of the society. However, this is not good enough.

According to the World Economic Forum's latest Global Gender Gap Report, benchmarking 153 countries on their progress toward equality of the sexes based on four categories—economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, as well as political empowerment—it will take another 99.5 years to achieve global gender equality. And despite all the social reasons for this lack of progress, there is a strong financial reason for doing it. Closing the gender gap would add USD 28 trillion to the value of the global economy by 2025—a 26 percent increase. As governments and societies do their bit, it is equally important for private sector and larger business community to commit themselves to the diversity and inclusion agenda. A Boston Consulting Group (BCG) study found that companies with more diverse management teams have 19 percent higher revenues due to innovation. This is significant for tech companies, start-ups and industries where innovation is the key to growth. It shows that diversity is not just a metric to be delivered, but more importantly, it is an integral part of a revenue-generating business.

A survey conducted by Pew Research Centre found several areas including politics and business where women were stronger than their male counterparts. For example, women are more capable than men in working out compromises, they are likely to be more ethical and honest while also better at mentoring and nurturing talent. Employing women to drive better balanced organisation is a sound business strategy, not just a moral obligation. McKinsey's most recent Delivering Through Diversity report found that corporations that embrace gender diversity in their executive teams were more competitive and 21 percent more likely to experience above-average profitability. They also had a 27 percent likelihood of outperforming their peers on longer-term value creation. It is clear that different perspectives on assessing customer needs, product improvements and company wellbeing fuel a better business. Simply put, societies and organisations are more likely to grow and prosper when women gain greater financial independence. Period.

Closer home, at Unilever, for the last 90 years, we have been committed to making

sustainable living commonplace with our products and brands in service of our consumers across the world. However, the imbalance between our male and female workers was significant to a point where it worried us greatly. In 2010, Unilever made a commitment to empower over five million women across our own operations, in our extended supply chain and in the communities where we operate. We believe there is no stronger weapon of progress than the empowerment of women. As we step into 2020s, we unveil the fabulous news of achieving gender balance (50 percent women) across our management at a global level; and a non-executive board with 45 percent of positions occupied by women. Unilever's gender balance milestone follows a long-standing commitment to drive gender equality in the workplace. A dedicated Diversity & Inclusion team has implemented several initiatives, including a Global Diversity Board and a network of nearly 100 "Diversity & Inclusion Champions", who have set the benchmark for how a community can power an inclusive culture across markets. Tools are also being used to drive gender equity in recruitment, including gender-balanced interview slate requirements, robust Diversity & Inclusion goals, and the Gender Appointment Ratio—a measurement which tracks senior leaders' records in appointing women. Unilever is also driving the Unstereotype Alliance convened by UN Women, which aims to eliminate harmful stereotypes in the workplace and across the advertising industry.

In Bangladesh, while we are still short of being a gender-balanced organisation, we have made some great progress supported by sustained focus and organisational commitment towards the cause. Women participation among Unilever Bangladesh's managers went up from less than 10 percent to 37.3 percent over the last three years.

It is easier to get diversity in the workplace but more difficult to drive a sense of inclusion in thought, behaviour and action. We have decades of research proving how diversity and inclusion boost financial performance, innovation, market share, team collaboration, and more. However, facts and data don't change people's minds and opinions.

Just celebrating our success to achieve gender balance would be unfair if I do not highlight the favourable conditions that Bangladesh has created for women's empowerment and progress. As per the WEF's report, Bangladesh (overall score of 72.6 percent) with 50th rank is the only one of the seven South Asian countries studied to feature in the top 100 of the Global Gender Gap Index. Ahead of Nepal (101st) and Sri Lanka (102nd), and some 60 places ahead of India (112th).

It is quite remarkable how we as a country progressed in terms of breaking social barriers and stereotypical culture. Bangladesh

and is covered by government initiatives, it is increasing participation of women in the labour force that makes it easier for companies like us to drive positive action. As of 2018, 38 percent of adult women were part of the labour force (up from 34 percent in 2017), compared with 84 percent of men. I would like to mention a surprising statistic here: participation of working rural women is higher (37.6 percent) than urban women (30.8 percent), contrary to our common perception. It is a well-known fact that a large percentage of women are indeed part of the labour force, as informal farm labour or in

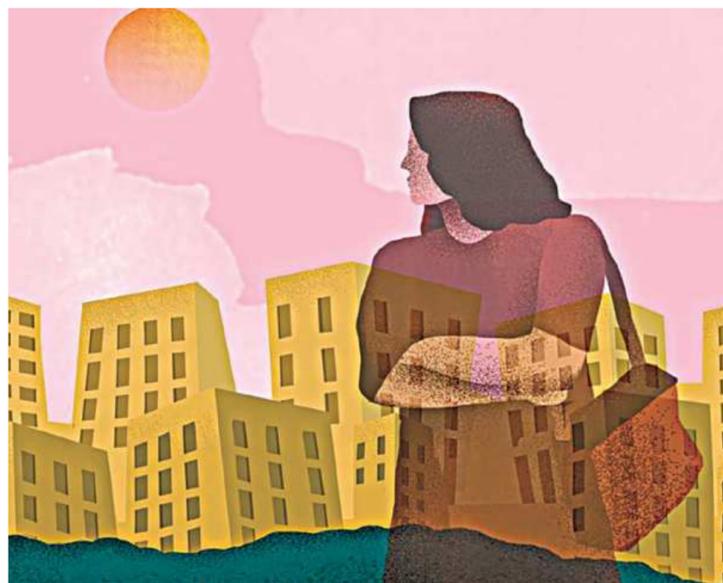


ILLUSTRATION: NOOR US SAFA ANIK

has been seeing the light of glory since its formation, but the parameter of social development has reached a new peak over the last decade. As more advancements take place, more opportunities bloom for women in this country.

While the government has made some extraordinary plans to support continued upliftment, it would need equal support from the society, families and private sector to achieve the vision of equality. The recent 7th Five Year Plan aims to increase the female ratio in tertiary education from 70 percent to 100 percent. At primary level, the enrolment rate rose from 57 percent (2008) to 95.4 percent (2017), and at secondary level, from 39 percent to 67 percent (2017). These figures show how Bangladesh is taking long strides with respect to providing education for women, aided by Female Secondary School Assistance providing tuition waivers and stipends.

While the education is fundamental

household chores, without their contribution being recognised through an economic measure.

One must acknowledge the microcredit revolution in Bangladesh for having played a significant role in helping women of this country take up small entrepreneurial projects in order to sustain livelihoods. Bangladesh also has an allocation for women created by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in judiciary, administration, defence and government jobs supporting gender diversity in formal sectors.

With increasing women participation in the labour force, organisations must become more aware about the issues of inclusion. It is easier to get diversity in the workplace but more difficult to drive a sense of inclusion in thought, behaviour and action. We have decades of research proving how diversity and inclusion boost financial performance, innovation, market share, team collaboration, and more. However, facts and data don't change people's minds and opinions.

Organisations need a comprehensive plan for supporting and advancing women. This requires a paradigm shift in the corporate culture which will include investing in employee training and giving employees greater flexibility to fit work into their lives. In order to create a workplace inclusive for everyone, organisations must deviate from what is considered "norm" to more flexible systems, work arrangements, variety of working conditions accessible to all.

At Unilever Bangladesh, we undertook a slew of systemic measures to build our female leadership pipeline across levels. Starting with a detailed talent landscape and market mapping of women for focused recruitment to create a sustainable pipeline, to creating and grooming visible role models in senior positions across functions, Unilever Bangladesh has been working tirelessly to break traditional stereotypes. Our inclusive and progressive policies like surrogacy and adoption leave, six months' maternity leave for new mothers and four weeks' paternity leave for new fathers, agile working policy, education assistance policy, operating creche facility within our office premise to provide childcare support to all our workers are shining examples of our commitment to walk the talk. Not only do we have a career break policy to support our employees at critical life stages, we also have a career re-entry programme for women who were in career breaks and want to rejoin the corporate world, rightfully called "Stride". We have been hosting a series of Diversity and Inclusion Dialogues both internally and externally to help us and others realise the unconscious biases and open our minds.

That's not all, however. Back in March 2019, our Diversity and Inclusion agenda took a new sharp turn when Unilever Bangladesh brought successful organisations together to collaborate and work towards the employment opportunities for women. This was called "Balance for Better". Taking the pledge forward, later in the year, Unilever Bangladesh initiated an external Council called INSPIRE, where purposeful diversity advocates from 7 large organisations have joined forces to co-create actions and build a more conducive environment for working women in Bangladesh. This council now plans to work closely with regulators and industry bodies to raise the bar for female workforce in the country. After all, coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success!

This Women's Day, as we celebrate a historic milestone of achieving a perfect gender-balanced Unilever globally at managerial level, our resolve for creating an inclusive workplace in Bangladesh gets stronger. We must raise both the ceiling and the floor in education, development, empowerment and progress of our women to live the true spirit of *Amar Sonar Bangla* envisioned for this great nation!

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