

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA MONDAY MARCH 9, 2020, FALGUN 25, 1426 BS

Why is women's political participation still so low?

Only five parties have the required representation!

WHILE women should make up a third of any political party, as stipulated by the Representation of the People Order, except for five parties, no other political party in the country has the required percentage of women's participation. Although reserving 33 percent of the committee positions for women is a prerequisite for any political party to be registered with the Election Commission and this requirement should be met by 2020, with only nine months for the deadline to end, most of the political parties have not managed to meet the requirement. What is more, only four of the parties have women as their heads, including the Awami League and the BNP. Our reporter has talked to leaders of 25 out of the country's 41 registered political parties and found a rather dismal picture of women's participation in these parties.

What is most shocking is the fact that even the ruling AL has only nineteen women in its 74-member central committee, meaning that only 26 percent of the committee positions are held by women. While the BNP has 11 percent women's participation in its advisory body, the Jatiya Party seems to have no data on women's participation in the party. However, five parties, including Gono Front, Zaker Party and Jatiya Ganatantrik Party, have claimed that women constituted 33 percent of each of their central committees.

Given the situation, we need to find out precisely why our political parties have failed to achieve the goal set some 12 years ago. Clearly, the issue was not given much attention by our political leaders because of their patriarchal mindset which still makes them doubt the necessity of including women in the party, let alone in the various committees. According to women's rights activists, women members of our political parties generally do not have any decision-making power and they are always looked down upon by their male counterparts, which definitely discourage the educated and intellectually active women to come to politics. Such attitudes of our political parties must change if we are to bring more women into politics.

Forkan's extraordinary example

Others should emulate him

THAT one can in one's own way, small or big, be helpful to fellow beings, has been very eloquently demonstrated by Mohammad Forkan Ali. Here is an autorickshaw owner of Gazipur who does the most exemplary job of giving free rides to the poor and helpless and the physically challenged in his own autorickshaw bought with money borrowed from a cousin. He serves poor patients and victims of road accidents by carrying them to various hospitals from their homes and from the various accident location. And he travels long distances often to reach an accident site or a hospital.

Forkan was inspired to serve the needy after his own return from the jaws of death, having been given up as dead by the doctors and his relatives when suddenly, by an act of Providence, he regained consciousness. Forkan has proved too that kindness has no correlation with affluence, privilege or one's social standing. It has to do with the feeling of empathy for others.

At a time when most of us are engaged in a rat race with hardly any time to glance at our neighbour, here we have a man of very modest means using his only ostensible means of income to help others. When government healthcare has become a costly affair and ambulance service comes at a cost, Forkan's outstretched hands to the needy should be a lesson for the rich and the affluent to replicate his example. It doesn't have to be big or ostentatious, and such charitable acts can begin at home. If more people come up with such idea of helping the physically challenged in every locality, that might ameliorate the distress of many of the less fortunate in the society. By doing for others Forkan has practically demonstrated Cicero's wise words, "Not for ourselves alone are we born." We need more of such heroes in society.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

A 10-year-old's memory of Bangabandhu's speech

My father late Barrister Kazi Zahurul Alam, was one of the lawyers defending Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman during the Agartala Conspiracy Case. He was also very involved in the mass movement to remove the dictator Ayub Khan, and the infamous governor of erstwhile East Pakistan Monem Khan.

Even as a 10-year-old, I remember the excitement and tensions of that time. During the mass movement, the country was almost under constant curfew. On March 7, my father along with a few friends headed towards the Race Course. There were thousands of people present, the mood was jubilant, almost festive. There was also an air of rebellion, optimism and purpose. We could hear Bangabandhu's charismatic voice on the loudspeaker. Despite the thousands present, the crowd was organised without even a hint of chaos or disorder. My father was a young man at the time, barely in his early 30s. I was quite surprised to see the respect he commanded.

I felt proud and honoured to be present at that historic occasion. Overall, in my young memory, the thing that I mostly remember is Bangabandhu's charisma and his almost hypnotic command over the people present. Everyone was hungry to hear his words and instructions for the coming days. I consider myself lucky to be present at the most important day, perhaps in the history of our nation.

Joy Bangla, Joy Bangabandhu!

Arif Alam, Dhaka

Breaking through the biased barriers

MACRO MIRROR



FAHMIDA KHATUN

THE campaign for International Women's Day 2020 is #EachForEqual. This signifies how important it is for everyone to play a role in establishing women's equality. An equal society is an empowered society. Thus women's equality is not only a women's issue, but also an economic issue. For economic and social progress women's equal participation in every sphere of life is essential. The key areas for #EachForEqual campaign include technological innovation, sports, inclusivity in the workplace, freedom of income, empowerment through health education and highlighting creative activities.

This year also marks 25 years of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted by 189 member countries of the United Nations back in September 1995. The Beijing conference is of great significance as member countries set strategic objectives to achieve gender equality in 12 key areas. They include: women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanism for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women in the media, women and the environment, and the girl child.

Despite data limitations, available statistics can testify on how much progress has been made so far. According to Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR) 2020 of the World Economic Forum (WEF), out of 153 countries that the WEF looked at, no country has achieved gender equality as yet. By filling up 88 percent of the gender gap, Iceland is the

frontrunner in achieving gender equality. Interestingly, four Nordic countries are among the top five achievers. The list goes as follows: Iceland (1st position), Norway (2nd position), Finland (3rd position), Sweden (4th position) and Nicaragua (5th position).

Bangladesh occupies 50th position on the list and first position among the South Asian countries. Bangladesh is not only ahead of its South Asian peers, but is also ahead of Singapore (54th), China (106th), Japan (121st) and many

Education and health are the pre-conditions to attain this. Participation of Bangladeshi women in the labour force has increased manifold during the last five decades. From a mere 4 percent in 1974, female participation in the labour force increased to 23.9 percent in 2010 and to 36.3 percent in 2017, according to the Labour Force Surveys of Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS). However, there is still a gap of 44.2 percent between men and women in terms of participation in the labour force.

employment in Bangladesh is its informal nature with less pay and high job insecurity. In 2017, the share of female employment in the informal sector was 91.2 percent.

We also do not see many women in high paid decision-making and leadership positions. The WEF report found that Bangladesh stands at 139th place in case of female participation as legislators, senior officials and managers. And in case of professional and technical workers we are situated at 134th place. In case of wage equality between men and women for similar work Bangladesh sits at the 98th position.

Due to socio-economic, cultural and political surroundings, women cannot participate in income earning activities. Beyond institutional employment women need opportunity for self-employment. Women find it difficult to pursue their careers due to the lack of facilities for taking care of their small children, transportation, accommodations and overall safety. Child marriage is a serious bottleneck.

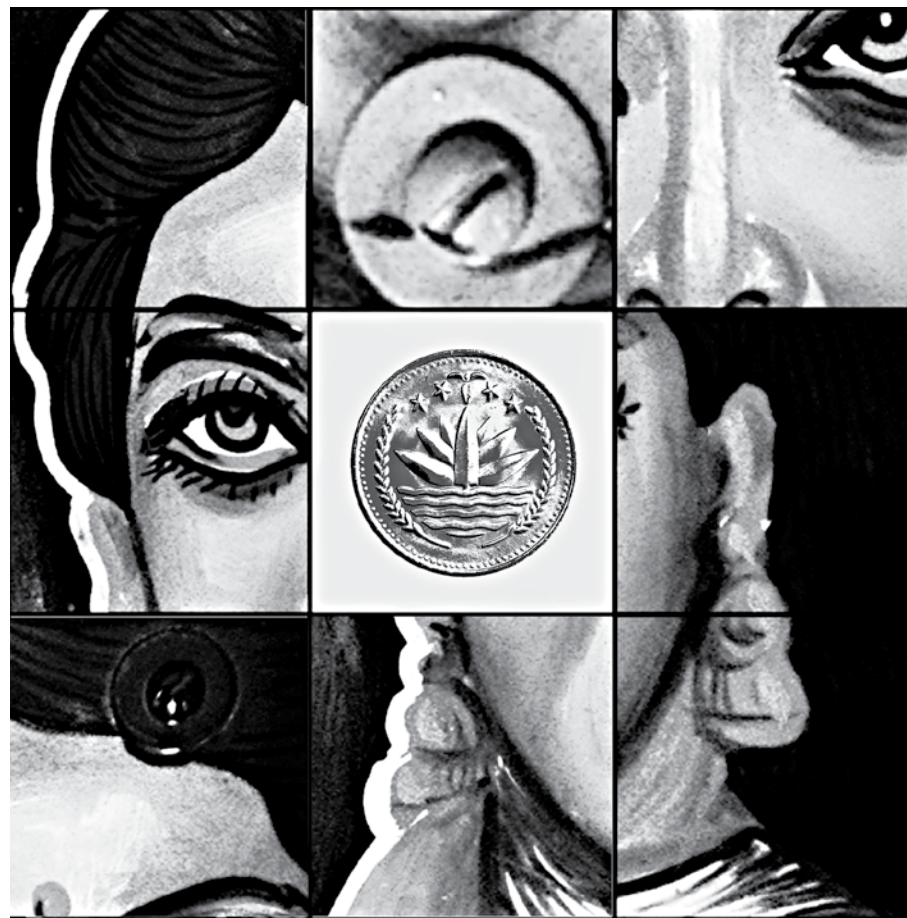
The other important issue for women is the future of work. The nature and skill requirement for future jobs will be different. Technology will take over many jobs. Women are already being displaced from technology dependent jobs. Their participation in the export oriented readymade garments sector has declined compared to the nineties as they lack technological skills. If women's economic participation and opportunity is to be maintained and improved they have to be given training for the frontier jobs.

Women also face strong bias against them which stands in the way of equality. The very recent findings of the Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) is alarming! It found that globally, 90 percent of men and women are biased against women. The report indicates that social beliefs and norms obstruct gender equality at work, education and politics. The GSNI reveals that more than 40 percent of people think men can be better business executives and in case of job scarcity, men have more right to a job. More strikingly, 28 percent think it is justified for a husband to beat his wife. Though Bangladesh is not among the 75 countries that the UNDP studied, the scenario here is probably not so different.

No wonder the WEF report says that we have to wait 99.5 more years to realise gender equality. The next generation will face the same challenges in terms of gender equality. So, the road to women's empowerment and equality is going to be long and tedious.

But we can bring about changes in society by celebrating the achievements of women and by protesting against injustice to and inequality against women. This is the core message of the International Women's Day.

Dr Fahmida Khatun is the Executive Director at the Centre for Policy Dialogue.



COLLAGE BY KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

Due to socio-economic, cultural and political surroundings, women cannot participate in income earning activities. Beyond institutional employment women need opportunity for self-employment. Women find it difficult to pursue their careers due to the lack of facilities for taking care of their small children, transportation, accommodations and overall safety.

other advanced countries. Bangladesh's achievement is remarkable indeed!

However, by looking beyond the aggregate index, one can find its weaknesses. Bangladesh takes 141st place in case of economic participation and opportunity, 120th position in educational attainment, 119th in health and survival, and 7th in political empowerment. Bangladesh sits just after Iceland, Norway, Nicaragua, Rwanda, Finland and Costa Rica in terms of political empowerment. This is also something to be proud of! However, with only 8 percent women in the cabinet, Bangladesh stands at 86th place and with only 20 percent female parliamentarians Bangladesh is situated at the 124th position. What dragged Bangladesh's position upward in case of political empowerment is having a female head of state for a long period of time.

In order to empower women and achieve gender equality, women's economic participation is necessary.

To some extent, economic diversification has given women the opportunity to be involved in various new activities. However, Bangladesh's economy is not being able to create employment opportunity for all. Unemployment among the youth aged between 15 and 24 years is 10.6 percent. Unemployment rate among male youth is 8.2 percent and among female youth it is 15 percent. Moreover, unemployment among the more educated youth is higher than the less educated youth for both males and females.

With structural changes in Bangladesh's economy the share of agriculture in gross domestic product has declined while that of manufacturing and services has increased. However, the majority of women are still engaged in the agriculture sector. In terms of total share of female employment in all sectors, 59.68 percent are in the agriculture sector, 15.4 percent in manufacturing and 23.45 percent are in the services sector. The other feature of

Love in the Time of Coronavirus

BLOWN' IN THE WIND



SHAMSAD MORTUZA

WITH the number of coronavirus cases crossing 100,000 mark, the official death toll standing at—and forever climbing over—3,652 (live update, worldometers, March 8), and the US flashing 8.3 billion green bucks to shoo away the spread, the outbreak of COVID-19 is no longer a "told-you-not-to-have-that-bat-soup-or-fox-meat" gossip. By now, corona (literally meaning "crown") is far from novel. Its presence is a lived reality. You can wash your hands and anoint them with sanitisers as much as you want, but (like Pontius Pilate who attempted to wash off his symbolic guilt after the killing of Jesus) you can never wave away the fear of being inflicted by this deadly viral flu.

Last month, I was inside a busy lift in Clock Tower in Mecca. There was this Chinese man in his *ithram*. He sneezed once or twice—and the native Saudis accompanied by their family members and shopping bags started saying *La hawla wala Quwwata illa Billah*. Even with my little Arabic, I could sense that they were trying to ward off ills and evils. The Chinese man must have felt very small. The ride must have been awkward for the scantily dressed man who tried to cover up his mouth while resisting himself from yet another mortification. Nobody said the customary "bless you" or "Alhamdulillah". This is a different time where we are all shivering in fear behind our masks. In the olden days, it was believed that evil spirits would leave your body with every sneeze; hence the custom of thanking or praising God. During the Plague in the middle ages, Pope Gregory I suggested saying "God Bless You" after sneezing to protect someone from death. But the "*la hawla...*" struck a different chord in me: we live in a world at a time where there is no sympathy for others; every (wo)man for her-/him-self. At that micro moment, I realised that the Chinese Umrah pilgrim was seen as a potential virus-carrier, and therefore, a threat to local security, comfort and lifestyle. The indefinite ban on Umrah is a manifestation of such fear. Fear is being racialised; fear is being Otherised.

Often, fear is craftily grafted in our

cultural imaginary and institutionalised machinery through popular media. Take the case of 2013 apocalyptic action zombie horror film featuring Brad Pitt, *World War Z*, for instance. The film documents a zombie plague that started as a mild outbreak in China (Ah, surprise! Surprise!), where the dead comes back to life with a ravenous hunger for human flesh. The zombies or the undead spread out into the world through various routes: refugees, black market organs, or human trafficking. Many countries ignore the news; not Israel who starts zombie-proofing their borders. American

unwittingly prophetic, is widely in circulation: "It was around that time that a Chinese scientist named Li Chen moved to the United States while carrying a floppy disk of data from China's most important and dangerous new biological weapon of the past decade. They call it Wuhan-400 because it was developed in their RDNA laboratory just outside the city of Wuhan." Chinese government of course has denied any such possibility; instead it credits Wuhan Institute of Virology, a level 4 biosafety laboratory, as one of the first institutions to sequence coronavirus. Films and fiction such as WWZ or

has little tolerance for the Other. The dehumanisation of its own citizens goes against the constitutional democracy that India once cherished. Roy writes, "A democracy that is not governed by a Constitution and one whose institutions have all been hollowed out can only ever become a majoritarian state... This is our version of the coronavirus. We are sick."

One wonders: how can we even talk about films and fiction at a time when we are all sick? Or, returning to my title, loosely borrowed from Garcia Marquez (whose 93rd birthday anniversary was on March 6), how can we love with so much literal and figurative sickness around us? And how will humanity survive without love, the flower of a seedy hope? Unfortunately, the loving embrace of leaders chanting *Howdy/Namaste* does not comfort us. It does not promise any probing into "internal affairs" involving minority reports.

Theodor Adorno, the eminent exponent of Frankfurt School, famously wrote: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." The false consciousness, the fascist myth that gave rise to the holocaust, for Adorno, creates a trap of total society from which there is no escape. Literature, once credited to mirror society, is now located in a hall of mirrors. The only ideology that persists is that of an authoritarian state which insists on silence. The insularity of such ideology is now metastasised into various shades of digital pixels, sound-bytes, tweets, FB and Instagram posts, talk-show spectacles, shared and targeted news, sponsored ads and so on. Provocative lies are duplicated to pit one group against the other. Such narratives can make a cow inhale carbon dioxide and exhale oxygen; they can allow a group to claim that it is the antiseptic cow-dung and urine, which have kept coronavirus at bay in India; or they can vilify their neighbour by claiming that its economic growth is befooled up by Indian cows!

We all know how the narrative of dehumanising the Rohingyas across the border has cost us. We embraced our neighbours with love at a time when there was a sickly massacre beyond our border. Are we prepared to show more love in the time of the "coronavirus" that Roy talks about?

Shamsad Mortuza is a Professor of English, University of Dhaka (now on leave). Currently, he is Pro-Vice-Chancellor of ULAB. Email: shamsad71@hotmail.com



A couple wears masks as they embrace, following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus on Valentine's Day in Hong Kong, February 14.

PHOTO: TYRONE SIU/REUTERS

bureaucracy is the last to respond with huge counter strategy, weaponry, and the eventual creation of vaccine to give mankind a ray of hope. The subliminal message against illegal immigrants is far from subtle. The afflicted immigrants are the walking deads that threaten any territorial order and civility.

After the recent outbreak, social media is rife with many conspiracy theories. An example of a sensational literary coincidence is available in Dean Koontz's 1981 thriller *The Eyes of Darkness*. The novel recounts a Chinese military lab located in Wuhan (the epicentre of the current epidemic) that creates a virus as part of its biological weapons programme. One passage, which has proved to be

The Eyes of Darkness use narrative fear to springboard into an exploration of human nature and organisational bureaucracy. At the same time, it examines, albeit promotes, fear as signs of discrimination such as classism, nationalism, and even genderism. The idea finds footing in a recent statement of author and activist, Arundhati Roy. In an article in *Scroll.in*, Roy flays the mayhem in India where the Muslims are being labelled as traitors for protesting against Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 as well as the trivialisation of Muslim migrants from Bangladesh who are being dubbed as terrorists. Save some glorious exceptions, there is a growing lynch mob mentality under state patronisation in India that