

WOMEN ON THE MOVE

Leadership: In the Hands of the 'Weaker' Sex

Begum Khaleda Zia

DS: Madam, Prime Minister, in your 14 months in the office of Prime Minister, being a woman what do you feel about the people's response to your leadership?

Begum Khaleda Zia (KZ): The people's response to the political and economic programmes undertaken by our Government is very positive. I feel encouraged by such response.

DS: As the Prime Minister of Bangladesh, what do you consider to be the most critical problem of women at present?

KZ: Low rate of literacy among women and their economic dependence on others can be considered as the most critical problem of women in our country.

DS: Honorable Prime Minister, women are not born passive or subservient; they are conditioned to become so. What do you suggest be done about this discrimination against girls?

KZ: Spread of education among girls will help eliminate such discrimination.

DS: Do you feel that the religious laws are misinterpreted in order to suppress women in this male dominated society?

KZ: There may be isolated cases. But this can't be generalised.

DS: How can the status of women be improved in this country? And what steps is the

Bangladesh is the only nation in the world with women both at the head of the government and of the opposition. Though this may arguably be due to their relationships with powerful men, the fact remains that political power in the country is currently in the hands of two women. How they envision their role in the theatre of social and economic progress will have an impact on the future of all Bangladesh women.

Both these leaders talk about the critical issues of women in this country in an exclusive interview to *The Daily Star*. They were interviewed by *Rahat Fahmida*; while *Raffat Binte Rashid* assisted during the interview of the leader of the opposition



"We will improve women's position" — Khaleda Zia

present Government considering to achieve that position?

KZ: The status of women can be improved only through spread of female education and

creation of awareness among them about their rights as well as responsibilities. The present Government has taken a number of steps towards that

direction. Female education upto class VIII has been made free outside the Municipal areas. Compulsory primary education for both boys and girls has already been introduced in some areas. The programme will cover the entire country in phases.

Besides, various socio-economic development projects and programmes exclusively for women are now under implementation by the Women's Affairs Ministry and other agencies. Special provisions have been made to facilitate more employment for women in Government service. Sixty percent posts of the Primary School teachers will be reserved for women. Plans are underway to ensure greater involvement of women in development activities. Legal steps have also been taken to stop repression on women.

I firmly believe that the status of women in the country will improve significantly with the full implementation of these programmes taken up by us.

DS: Thank you for sharing your views with us.

Sheikh Hasina Wajed

DS: Women are not born passive or subservient; they are conditioned to become so. What do you suggest be done about this discrimination against girls?

Sheikh Hasina Wajed (SHW): Girls at a very young age are told of their limitations. Their 'dos' and 'dents' are clearly chalked out, whereas boys of the same age enjoy complete freedom. This has always been the social custom. It mentally prepares a woman for her passive role in life. But in this last decade of the 20th century this attitude towards woman should change. When a woman is given the chance to work, she always proves her best. In fact she is more confident about her capabilities than her male counterpart. We should not forget that a woman is also a mother, who makes sacrifices and takes risks for her children. Like the famous saying goes, give me a good mother I will give you a good nation. Our society should accept this fact and educate our women from birth so that they can take up an active role and



"Given a chance, women always proves her best,"

— Sheikh Hasina

come out of their imposed limitations.

DS: What place is there in Islam for equal rights for women?

SHW: I think menfolk are extremely insecure, they are afraid of their possible or actual loss of rights. This is the reason why they force the misinterpretation of religion upon women. I think religion is completely misunderstood. If you turn the pages of Islamic history you will see that the first and most courageous step to accept Islam was taken by a woman, the first martyr in Jihad was a woman. They even fought battles. Women have definitely left their mark and will leave more, if they can avail of the opportunities. They should not be passive, instead they should be given the chance to prove their potentials.

DS: How can the status of women be raised in this country? What steps do you consider essential?

SHW: If at the end of the day a woman brings home her earnings she will not be ne-

glected by her family in fact she will have a vital role to play," it was said by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the founder of the state. I think the majority of our population being women, they should be educated first, so that they can be economically self reliant. If a woman has her own source of income, even society will think twice before depriving her of rights. Only passing bills or making laws will not do, we should all take active part in implementing the law, educating them so that they can work. Otherwise we will always be oppressed. Punishment should be given to the ones who commit social crimes. Or else we will be assisting this dominance.

DS: For argument's sake, what do you feel is the benefit to society if the situation of women is improved?

SHW: The existence of women in our male dominated society was always suppressed. I personally don't consider the female race as lacking in strength or spirit. Actually women are indispensable to

men. A little boy, you see, needs his mother, from the day he is born till he grows up. A young boy needs the friendly help of his sister. He even needs the constant love, understanding and reliability of his dear wife. Finally in his old age he requires his daughter or daughters-in-law. In fact superiority of men in society is all the time in need of female assurance. In our country, half the population is women. To keep them weak or oppressed is not desirable for the benefit of the country. Therefore for the sake of our nation, society and even our men, women should be allowed to open up and venture out, so that they can be a part of our developing nation. We should all work towards this kind of atmosphere.

DS: How do you counter the charge that working women are neglecting their religious duties?

SHW: Imposing religious restrictions upon the female group has never led any nation to prosperity. If you read the Holy Quran you will see it says in the first line of Sura Nessar clearly that man and woman were given equal rights. A woman should work to achieve what is legally hers. Moreover, laws should be made by the state to protect their rights. She never fails to perform her religious duties even after a hard day at work. Her neglecting religious, being a working woman is absurd. If you see the political activists of parties practising religious laws, you will find out they are also involved with the outside world. This proves that work would not take you away from your beliefs. The Awami League in all its activities tries to ensure a better future for women. In our economic programme it is mentioned in article 11 that according to UN announcement women's and children's rights would be strongly protected. We always believe in taking practical steps regarding these social problems. If we ever get an opportunity we will see to it that women are able to prove their capabilities we will see to it that they take up active roles in developing the nation. For a healthy baby you need a healthy mother who will be able to answer all his or her inquisitive questions. Therefore, you see, an ignorant mother will produce an ignorant child. For an educated future generation it is essential to have not only an educated mother, but also healthy mother who would be able to give birth to a healthy child.

DS: Thank you very much!

A Tale of Seven Villages : the Shoptogram Story

by Dr Meghna Guhathakurta

Throughout her life, Rokeya had outrightly condemned hypocrisy. When faced with the challenge of having to choose between middle-class respectability and doing what she believed was right, she never hesitated to choose the latter.

WHEN one tries to talk or write about women in Bangladesh, one is faced with rather a peculiar dilemma: should one talk about the bleakness of the situation which the majority of women face in a society which legally, socially and economically places them at the feet of the proverbial husband; or should one gleefully talk about the bright prospects of a country which currently holds the unique position in the world of having women occupy two of the most coveted posts in the career of any politician, i.e. that of the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition!

If one were to take the first option, then one risks the possibility of either boring or depressing the reader, or perhaps both. The second option risks the possibility of entering a male-dominated arena where

women exist only as figure-heads and do not constitute the substance of politics.

I therefore shall steer clear of either options. Instead I shall try to take on a third dimension by focusing on women's strength, which rises against all odds, to struggle, to organise and to resist. What better way to illustrate this dimension than to talk of the Shoptogram Nari Swanirvar Porishod and its founder Rokeya Rahman Kabir.

The Shoptogram Nari Swanirvar Porishod began its journey in 1976 in a village in Faridpur. But much before that, it was born in the mind of

Rokeya Rahman Kabir, a college teacher who became displeased with her teaching environment, and abandoned her 19-year long career as a history teacher, to savour life at the grass-roots in her ancestral district.

Rokeya brought with her the only resources she knew of at that time; her boundless energy, stalwart determination and moral courage, which helped her to stand her ground and fight her many enemies and critics, and at the same time, helped her gain many friends, especially those whom she came to help: the downtrodden women of the village.



Rokeya Kabir

(a) to identify the social and economic sources of women's oppression and to determine their resolution. (b) to conduct income-generation schemes on the basis of collective groups. Such activities include petty trading, inter-district trading in rice, wheat, cloth etc., cultivating leased out land, and sericulture. (c) to provide information on health and family planning. (d) to provide basic education, especially numeracy. (e) to help in-state links between various groups through which landless women may coordinate their demands.

Shoptogram's main obstacle is the rural power structure and in some instances the women's husbands. However, Shoptogram's continuous effort at the grass-root has to a large extent succeeded in overcoming such opposition. Here the organized group of women had a crucial role to play. The women realised that if they had to look after their own welfare, then they must join forces against the dominant power structure. In many instances there have been attempts on the part of the rural elite to stop women from undertaking petty trading; as it was deemed disrespectful for women.

In one such case in the village of Shoptodangi, the women went en masse to the village *matbor's* residence and demanded angrily: "Why are you not letting us buy jute? If we don't do business, what will we eat? Will you feed and clothe us?" The *matbor* cowered in the face of such open outrage and conceded, "Sisters, you may take up any trade in this village." (Mukhopatro, No 6, 1st year, 1992. Shoptogram Nari Swanirvar Porishod.)

Such instances of combined resistance abound in the history of the organization. It has been especially significant in

the cases of resisting male violence against women, so much so that in the areas where 'Shoptogram' operates, there has been a tendency for family violence to drop.

The power which underlies 'Shoptogram' is in fact the strength of its women members. True, the strength has always been there. Shoptogram has merely provided a support-system through which the innate strength of women could be channelised and utilised for their own welfare.

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Thoughts on the economic and legal status of women Necessary but not Sufficient

by Salma Sobhan

Some years ago — in 1975, to be exact — I had concluded in a study on the legal status of women in Bangladesh that even where the laws were adequate the main emancipating factor for women was economic independence. I said then "If we compare the status of the tribal women of Bangladesh with non-tribal women, we see that tribal women, even in the patrilineal tribes, generally enjoy higher esteem than the latter. And this was so, even though women in these societies took little part in *samaaj* activities, and were not, as a rule, educated. It was chiefly the fact of their economic emancipation and their being regarded as equal work partners that would appear to contribute towards their liberation. And to the extent that women in the patrilineal tribes did not enjoy such economic independence, one finds a higher incidence of laws that lower their status: bride price, loss of custody of children and polygamy... and whatever the economically under-privileged may be allotted, whether biological (childbearing) or political (administration and judicial) this economic dependence has a very profound effect on a person's psyche.

Two years ago I found myself writing less enthusiastically about the automatic liberating power of economic independence. One had seen that "... conditions of life can be improved without an improvement in status taking place." True the 15 years since I had written about the legal status of women had seen a great increase in women's visible economic activity. The theme of women in development had come to the forefront in discussions on planning. But one had seen that

bringing women into development, even where this made them economically productive didn't necessarily make them mistresses of their destiny.

As a result of, we now identify choice as a key factor in women's liberation. But while freedom of choice is indeed vital, women need, not only their choice but also to determine the nature of the choices open to them. It is, of course, argued that the foremost requirement is massively to bring women into the job market for while women's paid labour remains expendable in terms of development and their labour will be treated as commodities. But the example of the 'developed' world demonstrates sufficiently that even where women's labour is seen as vital to the economy and their economic independence brings with it a measure of liberation,

where women's economic contribution is seen simply as a resource to be exploited when needed by the state, their status is undermined. There is growing awareness about the role that values should play in determining goals of development.

It also is increasingly recognised that a fundamental change for the better will not come about as a result in, say a change in the laws or an increase in economic participation of women. There must be a concomitant change in the development values of a society if these other changes are not to be subsumed within the system. Women need to be able to discriminate about the eventual goals of any development process with which they are associated.

The legal rights that women enjoy need to be vali-

dated not only vis a vis their relationship to the rights enjoyed by men but also when measured against the backdrop of human rights. It is the marginalisation of women's legal rights and failure to see these in their wider and central perspective that have led to various changes in the vocabulary of the women's movement. Thus it is now part of the development vocabulary to speak of gender equity. Though this use developed as part of the exercise to prevent the marginalisation of women in the development process, many women activists point out that the tendency to use gender as a synonym for woman has meant that the marginalisation remains. But this is not, however, the point at issue here. Certainly marginalisation will contribute to perpetuating a lower status for women in relation to men. But we are seeking not only equality but a higher status for all within a different perspective. The assertion is for the right of women of equal access to and control over resources and opportunities. But this is within the context of a system which enables women to participate fully in a people rather than "growth" oriented system which takes into account sustainable ecologic and economic development and an equitable distribution of benefits.

So for economic activity to bring about the empowerment of women they need to be part of the dialogue that determines what the goals of development should be. And women's legal rights need to be seen part of the general demand for human rights.

The writer is a renowned bar-at-law. She works with a few non-government legal aid organisations in the city.



Wondering what the fate holds!



Always
Second
Best

Women are Vulnerable
Children are More Vulnerable
The Girl Child is the Most Vulnerable

	BOY	GIRL
NUTRITION	• under five years eats better	• 16% less calories
	• 5-14 years, eats better	• 11% less calories
HEALTH	• eats first	• eats last
	• complaints listened to	• taught not to complain
	• brought to clinic	• illness seldom reported
MORTALITY	• under one year, more deaths	• under one year, less deaths
	• 1-4 years, less deaths	• 1-4 years, 27% higher
	• 5-14 years, less deaths	• 5-14 years, maximum deaths among rural girls
EDUCATION	• 70% in primary schools	• 50% in primary schools
LABOUR	• little child care responsibility categorized as economically active	• more child care responsibility categorized as economically inactive
	• better wages	• less wages
	• few domestic workers	• large number of domestic workers
	• child prostitution, little vulnerability	• child prostitution, much more vulnerable

This page will give you varied articles on a wide range of gender issues and the current problems. The regular contributors for this weekly feature page are — Dr. Hamida Hossain, Salma Sobhan, Shaheen Anam, Tahmina Rahman, Dr. Sajeda Amin, Meghna Guha Thakurta and many other eminent writers.