



A Hot Bargain for The Fifty Percent

Interviewed by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

DOWN the rows of red-brick houses of the Planning Commission, a corner looks bright as Ms Salma Khan, in a decisive way talks on the telephone at her desk and sends directives.

Ms Salma Khan, Division Chief, Planning Commission, started a new and challenging job of collaborating and integrating all government plans aimed at developing the toiling 'fifty percent'.

Therefore, The Daily Star's representative recently talked to her about the making of the woman. The following are the excerpts of the conversation:

The Daily Star (DS): How do you evaluate yourself as Salma Khan now?

Salma Khan (SK): Well, it is a very difficult question. I have tried to do my best to bring the issue of women's development to the forefront of our development agenda. In that way, I have succeeded to some extent, maybe, partly because of the place where I am working and partly because of my own commitment. Specially in case of job choices, there has been a limited scope for women. From that point of view, I derive a lot of satisfaction from the work I have been



kind of coincidence rather than normalcy. I also had a good network with various women's organisations and I tried to get support from them.

DS: How did you come to this position?

SK: Well, right now I am the division chief in the Planning Commission. I did not come to



Salma Khan is working for Bangladesh think tank Planning Commission.

able to do it. So, from that point of view perhaps I evaluate myself that whatever I have been doing and what I have done so far have helped quite a bit to achieve goals of women's integration in the development process — theoretically of course, because my job refers not to being involved with the implementations where we really have not done much. But as far as the policy formulations are concerned I have tried to instigate the issues in the national development plan.

DS: What are the bottlenecks?

SK: Well, bottlenecks are of various kinds. I would not talk about my own bottlenecks but usually the kind of constraints a woman go through starts with her family. I was rather fortunate that I did not face any problems. I had all the setups. So, I had that advantage over other women. But as far as job options are concerned, decision making level at the upper echelon, that is quite difficult for a woman. Because, the kind of attitude which is needed does not prevail. So, for me to be accepted as a policy maker or a decision maker, I think it was more a

this position as a woman, because there was no women's quota. There is no women's quota as you know except at the entry level. I did not start my career in the Planning Commission at the entry level. So, I had to compete for this position initially when I joined the Planning Commission. I faced more problems because I did not join the Planning Commission as a cadre civil servant. So, I had to face more problems at every stage. Naturally people from the cadre services were supposed to be promoted earlier. So, as I have reached this position this is what I would like to say about my long career and services rendered to the Planning Commission.

DS: Will you please tell us about your educational career?

SK: After graduating from the University of Dhaka, I competed for a scholarship. Then I was selected as a candidate for a Fulbright Scholarship immediately after my graduation from the Dhaka University. I went to the University of Chicago to do my Master's in Economics. Coming back, I started my career in the Planning Commission. I always had it in

Salma Khan, Division Chief, Planning Commission is one of the senior most women officer in the Government. An Economics Graduate from the University of Dhaka and University of Chicago and Diploma holder in Training Management and Planning from the University of Connecticut and University of London respectively, she has been involved with planning and development for more than a decade. She has been instrumental in initiating women's desk in the Planning Commission and mainstreaming women in development in the Five Year Plans of Bangladesh. She was awarded National Professor Atwar Hossain Gold Medal by the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh for her book 'The Fifty Percent' which is in second print now. She has two books and over forty articles on various economic issues published in different national and international journals to her credit. She was the recipient of prestigious Eisenhower Exchange Fellowship for 1992. She is an elected Member of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Therefore, The Daily Star intended to talk to her.

my mind that I would have a career. My mother also wanted that for all her children including her daughters. All my sisters after their graduation managed to have their own individual careers. But both of my sisters are in education line. Perhaps I also should have been in the education line. Completing my studies abroad, I applied for whatever jobs there were available. So somehow I was a bit ambitious initially to start a job. I thought to try the job in the Planning Commission, where I was put higher than the entry level. There was no women in the Planning Commission. I was the first woman, so when I was selected the people in the Planning Commission had some problem because they were not really prepared to accept a woman. They told me that there would be a lot of difficulties and asked me whether I was willing to face those difficulties. And I said 'Yes'. In that, I started my career in the Planning Commission in 1965 and continued for two years. Then my husband was transferred to Chittagong. So, like most women — and at that time as I was not very particular about career disciplines — I followed him in Chittagong.

DS: Do you consider it as a setback?

SK: Yes, of course! That was the greatest setback.

DS: Do you think if you are transferred to another place your husband will accompany you?

SK: I don't really know. You have to ask him that. I can only tell you this much that now I have come to a stage of my career that perhaps I would go anywhere if it is that rewarding. This much I can tell that it is possible for me to create a sort of acceptable balance between the family and the career. Now, when I joined the Chittagong University in 1967 there were only eleven teachers and I was the first woman teacher in the whole university.

DS: Could you tell us of your experience as the first woman teacher in the Chittagong University?

SK: I was the only woman teacher in the university but in a very short time a few joined us. So it was just an incident that I was the first woman teacher. I would not say that no other women were available. There were plenty of women there. I got involved with the formulation of the

department. I became the Chairman of the department of Economics at a very difficult time in 1971 and continued till 1977. Then again my husband came back to Dhaka. But at that time I did not just follow him. We came to Dhaka in 1977 and obviously I was planning to join the university at that time. I have already made some correspondence before coming here. I was waiting for a vacancy to be created in the Economics department.

Meanwhile, I met my respected teacher Dr M M Huda at a party and I started discussing women issues with him, when I learned that he works in the planning Commission I asked him why don't we see women's issues reflected properly in the planning process.

He told me that woman like us should come forward and help the planning machinery in this respect. Fortunately enough, just after a week or so I received a call from him asking myself to join the planning commission. So, I joined the planning commission as Deputy Chief on a contract service because the whole thing was decided just on the spur of a moment. So my first job in the planning commission was to prepare the position paper for the cabinet division under the president what should be the structure of the women's division, what should be the role and responsibility.

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happened, President Ziaur Rahman also declared women's quota in job. But after my joining a desk was created, what we called social welfare. Along with social welfare I started developing women's issues. Even today of course there is no desk in Planning Commission called as women's desk or women's wing. I really got involved and interested and I found that there was so much to do.

DS: All in theoretical way?

SK: Not in theoretical way.

Though I was teaching even development economics in Chittagong University but I perhaps did not understand what it actually meant — what were the people of this country, what really meant to be their problems what we really meant by resource constraints, what kind of options we had open to us. But, when I joined the planning commission the entire macro picture of the country was available to me. This perhaps attracted me tremendously and gave me the urge to contribute something in my own small way. Perhaps it would not have happened if I had taken a job or similar jobs in other ministries. Some major ministries and Ministry of Women's Affairs have already identified along with Planning Commission 18 focal points. And they are all responsible for women's development in many foreign countries. It has been mentioned in UN document as

Five Year Plan of Bangladesh has made a major departure. Now about labour force contribution — it is not recognised and also not visible. A lot of it is not visible because they contribute a lot in subsistence economy, family based production. So, people sometimes even women themselves do not understand that they are contributing so much.

The only way women can make breakthrough is greater participation in politics and decision making level. Not only by government but by everybody, by private sector as well, by political parties. Why don't political parties involve more women except for only heading the party? Where women have more say. Instead of having a women's front in the party, why women's agenda is not included in the party manifesto. I don't think a single party, of course, I am not sure no party has given enough emphasis on women in their manifesto. Women are half of the voters, half of the population, they are the potential labour force of the country.

There is a biological difference between men and women. So we feel socially constructed discrimination should not be made, because there are capable women. If we have women police commissioners like our neighbouring countries or district administrators, people will have confidence in women's capability. And it would be much easier to integrate women in the mainstream of development. So this kind of labour segregation has lot of economic implications rather than marginalizing women and forgetting them in one sector of economy.

Quite often people think that women who are working, there is a family problem in our culture and children and family are neglected. I think this is a myth because in most cases women who are working and earning their family position is much more strengthened than others of the same class.

Even spousal communication becomes better. It's not only confidence of the society it is confidence of the family, confidence of other spouse. She is considered as a more dependable partner. So I don't think a woman who works outside her home has any problems managing her family.

DS: In the successive plans we found that specially in the Fourth Five Year Plan there are so many good wishes. But in



Salma Khan is attending a session of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

So I prepared a paper to formulate the women's division under the President's secretariat and on the basis of that paper as a matter of fact eventually the Women's Affairs Ministry was created. At that time another important thing

one of the very significant departure in the third world country as far as women's development is concerned. In the evaluation of convention in the elimination of discrimination against women, this was mentioned that The Fourth



the implementation process it doesn't yield anything. Please comment.

SK: Yes, you are very right. We are concerned about implementation level. Not only in women's development, the results of implementation have been dissatisfactory in all areas. In most of the major areas of development we have not



Salma Khan with the vision ahead.

been able to achieve our goals. In women's development, of course, it is very important that we have to strengthen our national machinery and to ensure NGOs better performance. In the 4th 5-year plan we have already suggested the creation of a NCWD chaired by the Prime Minister. Preliminary works have already been done and in a month or two it will be approved by the highest authority and once that is done perhaps many of these implementation problems specially problems at the coordination level, living with different ministries and agencies of government responsible for women's development would be to some extent materialized.

DS: It is apparent that the donors have given emphasis on women. But we have learnt they are not allocating their sources as far as they are expected. What is your view about that?

SK: You are very right. Actually we find that most of the donors have sort of WID officers. They often talk a lot about women's development and integration and quite often say that the government is not doing enough. But surprisingly, when the resource allocation is made, you see that a very small

per cent is allocated for women's development. In other ministries also we see that very limited percentage of their total allocation goes for women's development.

DS: Do you consider by simply signing the UN convention, the empowerment of women can be achieved?

SK: No, Not at all. I am a member of the committee which is responsible for monitoring the implementation. When we sign the document it is a preliminary stage to achieve something more. Signing the convention Bangladesh government has already reformulated some of the laws. As you know punishment against dowry prohibition act has been enacted. Since the convention has been ratified, it is a commitment of the government. So we can try to create an atmosphere, not only through government's intervention but also through social mobilisation.

DS: You are an elected member of the UN committee for the elimination of all kinds of discrimination against women. What's your feeling?

SK: I was nominated from Bangladesh. The election was held in January 1991 in New York. The executive committee



Salma Khan with the vision ahead.

includes 23 members and at the time, six positions were vacant. Each candidate is elected for a four-year term. Most of the member countries who have ratified the convention complete in the election. They put up their candidature. So Bangladesh also put up my candidature. Fortunately, I was elected securing the second highest number of votes. I was the first elected candidate from the Third World countries. I have already attended the first session in January. Each year they have one session in Vienna and another in New York and next session will be held in New York. Incidentally it was also very interesting for me because in that session periodic report of Bangladesh was considered. But once I am elected I have to work in my own individual capacity. I do not represent my country. So I have to be very objective. This membership not only has given me a tremendous exposure to world forums which deal with women's discrimination but also I have got the unique opportunity to know about the women's development nearly in all UN countries, the development.

DS: Thanks for showing your views with us

THIS was how a 21-year-old Afghan working woman expressed herself when two foreign journalists asked her about her reactions on the triumph of the Afghan Mujahideens early last year. "As far as I am concerned," the anonymous Afghan woman went on, "We have lost our freedom." Her reactions, coming at a time when most of her countrymen along with their international backers were celebrating their victory over the hated Najibullah regime, may appear puzzling to many outsiders. So what follows is only a brief explanation and certainly not an apology for the ousted regime.

For most of the last two centuries landlocked Afghanistan had been an unwilling and unhappy pawn in the international chessboard where the principal players were imperial great Britain and Russia later to be joined by the United States also. In Victorian times remote cities like Kabul or Kandahar and battle-grounds like the Khyber Pass captured the headlines while that super imperialist of a writer Rudyard Kipling's "Kim" and "The Man Who Would Be King" captured the imagination of the citizens of the ruling powers. While the super powers were busy playing, as the British called it, the Great Game, the land and its people, inevitably, suffered. This was why, although a nominally independent kingdom till the late 70s, Afghanistan could not, properly speaking, overcome its feudal and tribal character and step into the modern age. While winds of change began to

"All Our Hopes have turned to Dust"

by Zaheda Ahmad

blow, however slowly, over many neighbouring lands, Afghanistan remained frozen and fossilised, so to say, into its old state of political and socio-economic underdevelopment. No wonder, the country occupied and still does, a very low place on the scale of human development judged even by third world standards.

In a situation like this, women, characteristically, were the worst sufferers. A poor, ignorant and a fanatically male-dominated society subjected its womenfolk to all conceivable forms of oppression and maltreatment from which a modest attempt at deliverance was made by the regimes that followed in the wake of political changes of the early 80s. A whole new range of government decrees and measures were introduced aimed at giving women right to primary education, to work, to property, freedom of choice in marriage, freedom of mobility and the like. It was, as if, a breath of fresh air was bet in into the dungeon which many of the Afghan homes had come to resemble through centuries of social conventions and practices.

With the change of the former regime all these are gone now. The groups that have succeeded the old regime, although warring among themselves most of the time, did manage to agree on one thing — the establishment of a funda-

mentalist state. Promptly they had reintroduced, among many other things, all the old restrictive practices which violated or limited a women's basic human rights. It is not simply a case of covering the head or putting on a burkha — it is that women there have no say in their own future. They are excluded from the newly formed councils of government and are unlikely to be allowed to vote in the

promised elections if and when they take place. A short-lived era of limited but very welcome social liberation had come to such a cruel end.

But what is even more cruel is that Afghanistan is not the only country where Muslim women are denied their basic human rights by oppressive fundamentalist regimes. Whether it is Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Kuwait or Iran, the lot of women is more or less similar — gender-based persecution is the norm rather than the exception. In Saudi Arabia, for example, discrimination against women is sanctioned by Saudi law and practice — they are denied freedom to travel and equal access to employment

and education. "Moderate beating" even though discouraged by custom, is permitted by law. A father or a husband may keep a woman confined to home for long period an end, women, accompanied by a male relative, cannot-travel within or outside Saudi Arabia. They are debarred from employment in most public or private enterprises except in those few cases where gender-segregated work environment is available. Except in the case of health care women are not allowed to have any vocational and technical training. Access to higher education is severely restricted and doors of some professional schools are permanently closed to women.

As Saudi government policies in relation to women are based on its interpretation of religious laws, challenging those policies is looked upon as defiance of religious authority, an unpardonable offence under Saudi law. Anyone who dares take a stand against such religious laws is deemed to take a political position in opposition to the politico-religious establishment — a behaviour that is sure to elicit swift and severe retribution from the government. To take just one example, in 1991, a 23-year-old Saudi woman named Nada had to flee from her country to escape punishments for her actions and statements regarding the deplorable position of Saudi

women. The position of women in fundamentalist Iran which occasionally gets international press coverage is equally grim. There also public regulations of private behaviour — ranging from dress to diet — still continue to impose severe limitations on the freedom of women to organise their private lives. To keep an eye on any transgressions of the state imposed strict code of conduct women volunteers are enlisted to spy on ordinary citizens. Only this past week Iranian authorities had arrested 500 women in Tehran alone for their alleged "crime" of putting on "un-Islamic" dresses in public. Instances like this, to be sure, are quite common in revolutionary Iran.

This then is the pattern in all these countries where, state power characterised by extreme intolerance, fanaticism and bigotry, is ruthlessly exercised to preserve and maintain the rule of an ultra-orthodox politico-religious establishment. Male chauvinism, to be sure, is another enduring feature of such societies. Women are held in perpetual bondage but majority of their men, properly speaking, are not free either.

Fundamentalism, by its very nature, breeds an atmosphere of fear, violence and terrorism where ordinary citizens are cowed into obedience by the powerful state. Such an all-per-

vasive, backward-looking and primitive culture of violence rejects all the decent and finer values in human nature. Nearer home, during our War of Liberation, these fascist, obscurantist forces masquerading as the saviours of religion, gave proof enough of the destructive capacity of the fundamentalist virus. At that time we thought we had learnt the lesson and had destroyed the virus in our society for all time to come.

But not really. Otherwise how could these forces rise from the ashes, regroup and actually make a successful comeback? Successive governments for political reasons have aided their rehabilitation. Today they are back, to their old favourite game, among other things, of women-bashing. Programmes intended to improve the hopeless and helpless condition of women here are looked upon as activities designed to make "rebels" out of otherwise docile and submissive Bengali women. Two known reactionary dailies frequently carry reports of such activities as "spreading the deadly poison of feminism among our simple rural women folk" who are then bound to flout all authorities including that of the mullahs. In that case, our domestic peace, social stability and religious and moral values would be endangered. Obviously, these forces, true to their character, consider female emancipation as inimical to their class interests.

But for us, the question is, how long are we, the patriotic, progressive forces, going to allow them gain further strength and spread their poison?

