



## Empowerment: For breaking the Chains

by Zaheda Ahmed



**W**OMEN in Bangladesh in general have always been the victims of two major social factors — poverty and patriarchy. The breadth and depth of the former, i.e., poverty, can be etched in broad outlines with a few from the plethora of depressing statistics collected and released by various public and private organisations. That Bangladesh belongs to the league of the poorest nations of the world is common knowledge. What is not so well-known is the fact that this grinding poverty impinges the most on its womenfolk. Comparing nearly half of its population, women in Bangladesh carry a disproportionately heavy burden of its poverty. Whatever indicator one takes into consideration — education, health care, nutrition life expectancy or employment — our women are always found to trail behind men. Such 'gender gaps' are our ever-present facts of life.

So while most of our women, like their fellow male citizens, are poor, their social status, in comparison with men, is low. And here the role of patriarchy comes into the picture. It is a social system which, based on the idea of inherent male superiority, places men in authority over women. All the social institutions, ideas, customs and conventions like property, family, marriage and the like were invented, designed and shaped by the paramount necessity of men to preserve and perpetuate this institution. Hence power in the family and by extension in the society at large effectively belongs to men. Over the centuries this has led to the creation and perpetuation of gross gender inequalities in access to resources and opportunities so much so that any attempt at large-scale poverty alleviation in the end becomes a futile exercise if the issue of female emancipation is not dealt with simultaneously.

Under the circumstances it is widely accepted that any meaningful programme for human resource development would have to address that issue seriously. Female empowerment has to be the key to the success of that programme. Empowerment is the process which would enable our long-discriminated womenfolk to change the balances of power in social, economic and political spheres in favour of a more equal society. Such a redistribution of authority from the powerful to the powerless should give the great bulk of our women the freedom and ability to seek and gain equal access to family and community resources and opportunities. Equipped with these they would gradually be in a position to rearrange and refashion their lives as they think fit.

For a woman, one of the starting points on the road to power and freedom is education, more and better of it. Education, both formal and non-formal is one of the easiest, quickest and surest means of making her conscious of her rights as a free citizen, her abilities and potentials as a full human being. She would then be able to identify and fight, if and when necessary, the socio-economic, political and cultural forces that have cowed her, for so long a time, into such a state of insufferable bondage. It becomes far easier on the part of an educated woman to defy and break out of the cage built and articulated so carefully by that 'venerable' male institution called patriarchy. The chronic sense of female inferiority — a consequence of perpetual brain-washing, resorted to by the social establishment — loses much of its sting when a woman who happens to acquire the fighting tools through a proper education comes to confront it.

But education, though an essential weapon, by itself would never be enough to usher in the golden age of female emancipation. An educated woman, to be a full and

# WOMEN IN 1994

The Daily Star Special on December 29, 1994

Are women better or worse off in 1994? The picture is mixed: enrollment in primary schools has increased. On the otherhand in terms of human rights women suffered greatly. The Daily Star brings out this special feature at the end of 1994 covering major issues that impede or expedite women's emancipation.

## Where are We at the End of 1994?

by Shaheen Anam

**How else does one explain the public flogging of Hajera the murder of countless young brides for dowry and the nameless thousands who have not been lucky enough to have their cases reported in the Press.**

At the close of the year I would have loved to write that violence against women has shown a downward trend. That all the protests, the sacrifices, the reassurances from the law enforcing authorities have resulted in a slight decrease in the reported cases of violence. But alas! that is not to be. After a year of writing and watching the situation I most regretfully must write again that we as a nation have not been able to rid ourselves of the disease that has grown even more powerful over the year.

How else does one explain the public flogging of Hajera the murder of countless young brides for dowry and the nameless thousands who have not been lucky enough to have their cases reported in the Press. How does society live with itself when, time and again the rapist is allowed to go free and the victim is condemned, flogged, maimed and even murdered. Or when young women are routinely sent to foreign countries, even Pakistan as sex slaves.

Yet as every cloud has a silver lining, there are organizations and people in our society who refuse to accept such gross violations of Human Rights, who in spite of all odds dare to stand and protest. There is no doubt that it was the pressure created by women's organizations that brought to public attention the activities of village salish. Those involved in the Noorjahan case would never have been jailed if these organizations had not pursued the case so seriously.

To rid the society of an ill requires the commitment and will of the civil society. Why is it that all the protests against the illegal activities of the fatwabs have been from the women community. Except for some valiant journalist and columnists the civil society has been noticeably silent over the whole salish issue. The society is also suspiciously silent over reported cases of domestic violence.

Since the first few months hardly a day has passed when we have not read or seen reports of death or serious assault of a young woman by her so called relatives. It is usually the husband, the person who once vowed to love and protect her who deals her the fatal blow. The reasons are routinely for dowry and sometimes because the wife has protested her husband taking on another wife. Sadly enough, all our political parties are conspicuously quiet over the issue.

Domestic violence is not the only kind of violence that is reported. We also read of rape, mutilation, trafficking of women and forced prostitution. Women in general become victims whenever there is an increase in lawlessness in the society. Nothing highlights the abuse, indignity and worthlessness of women than the fact that she has to sell



claiming her a characterless woman who had to be flogged 80 times. This, they claimed was the Shariat way of meting out justice. She could not produce a witness to the rape and was therefore judged guilty.

Farida Rahman, BNP MP asked in Parliament what measures the government was taking to stop the illegal activities of the village salish. She got no satisfactory answers and neither have we. If a brave member of Mahila Parishad had not pursued the case all those guilty of flogging Hajera and the rapist himself would have been sitting complacently meting out similar justice to others. They are now on the run and wanted by the police.

Yet, of all the different kinds of violence against women, the most lethal one is domestic violence. It is lethal because of its silence. It is still seen as a domestic or familial rather than a societal problem and therefore respecting the sanctity of the family no one wants to talk about it. Ironically, even little Hajera might get justice but the young wife or thousands others like her who routinely get slapped, abused, starved will never be able to tell anyone their painful experiences. No reporter or writer will ever see their silent tears or hear their deafening cries.

I have written this many times before, and I do so again, shouldn't we bring this whole issue of domestic violence out in the open? Isn't it time that society took a serious look into the institution of marriage or the so called sanctity of the family.

In Bangladesh women have made great strides over the past few years. The necessity of involving women in the development process as full partners is now understood and supported by both government and the civil society. The growth in female labour is testimony that women can work and work successfully in most fields. The brilliant examination results of young girls is gradually removing stereotyped images of what women are capable of. The phenomenal success of Grameen bank borrowers and the mobilization work of many NGOs prove that women do play a critical role and contribute positively to the family, community and society. There

## Women and Political Anachronism

by Rashed Mahmud Titumir

his article *Political Parties and Women's Agenda* says: "The illusion that has been created by the presence of female leadership in government or opposition is the result of past to political mishaps. Thus the existence of women leadership in Bangladesh is not the result of a conscious political process."

Over the past two decades, statistics measuring women's political participation have barely moved. Women account for only 10-11 per cent of Asia's parliamentarians and a mere four to six per cent are members of national cabinets.

In the light of statistics on women's political participation worldwide, Najma Chowdhury in her article *Women's Participation in Politics: Marginalisation and Related Issues* says, "It hardly needs to be underscored that the objective of gender equality or equity in the political arena in Bangladesh is extremely farfetched."

Women ministers tend to be associated with the cabinet that is regarded as feminine. Meghna Guhathakurta notes in her article, "The Women's Agenda and the Role of Political Parties," that there exists almost no fundamental difference in the types of programmes envisaged for women by the political parties of Bangladesh.

"Only the Awami League unequivocally emphasised the equity principle, whereas the BNP and Jatiya Party either bypassed the question of equality, or only hinted at one aspect of it, e.g. in terms of political right and economic wages, neither of which disturbs the status quo," argues Meghna.

She says that the programmes envisaged by these parties are piecemeal in nature and lacking in an underlying analysis of the women's situation in Bangladesh.

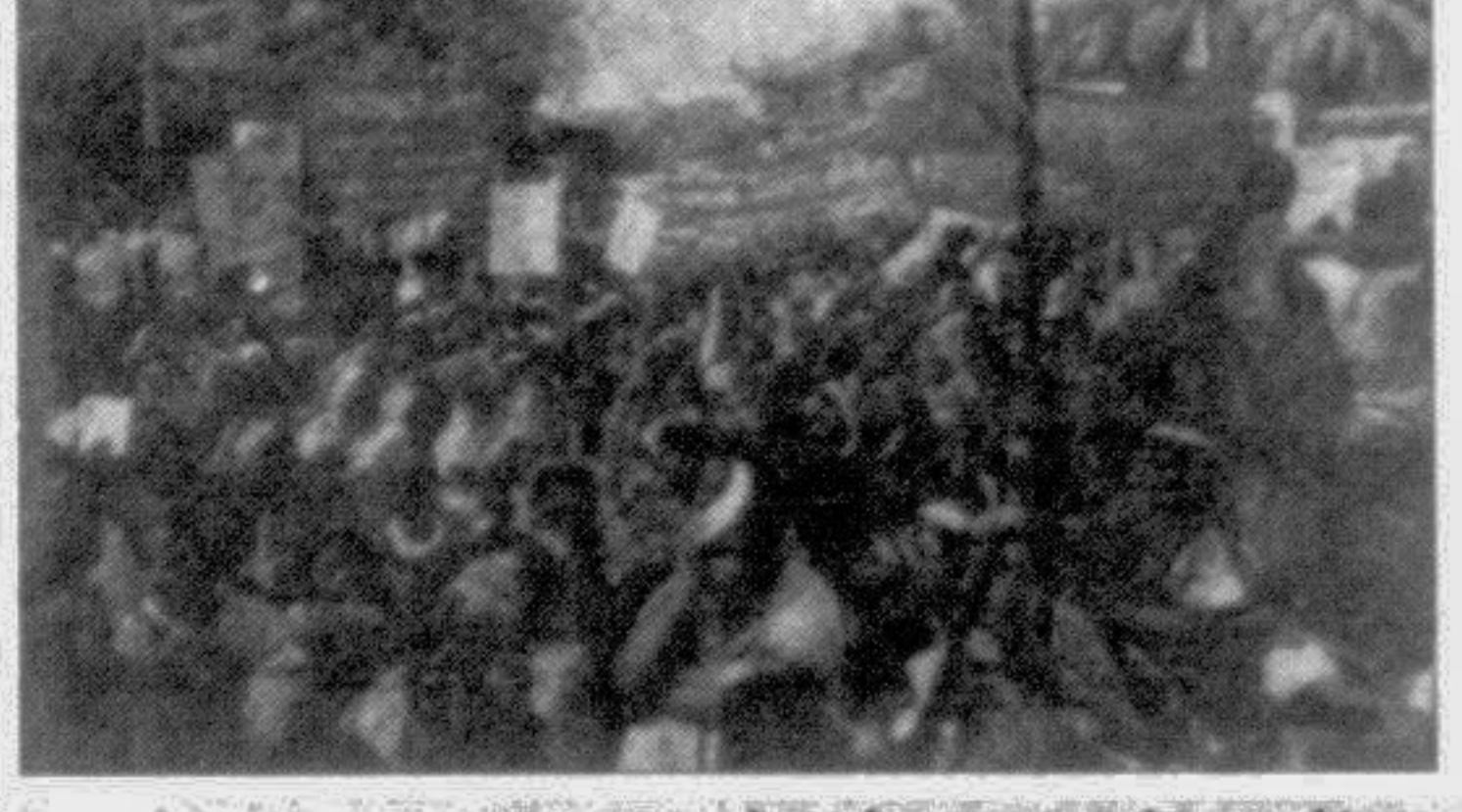
Begum Selima Rahman MP points out that men are hesitant to make room for women in political leadership as a normal course of action. She adds that except under special circumstances women's leadership in politics on a competitive basis is not easily accepted by the society at large.

"It is true that in Bangladesh the path of politics is indeed very rugged for women and they have to cross many hurdles to come to this field," says Sarwari Rahman. She believes that women have to overcome difficulties stemming from social constraints, misinterpretations of religious injunctions and conservative family tradition to come forward.

Politics is a pivotal arena where public policy issues are formulated and shaped. The issue of women and politics is indispensable to the question of discriminations that women face in every sphere of

## Voices Unheard in Parliament

by Hameeda Hossain



**A**s women's groups joined the struggle against military rule in Bangladesh in the eighties, they also began to articulate their own concerns about violence, about inequity in laws, about state policies which strengthened discriminatory social practices. Although there were no wide eyed illusions that the revival of an elected parliament would bring about a total change in gender relations, it was not unrealistic to expect more respect for the rule of law and increased representation for women's concerns.

In parliament specific questions relating to women's situation have probably been raised no more than four times. None of them have even attempted to address the serious issues of inequality, of women's rights and gender violence. Notable amongst the references has been a private member's bill submitted by BNP member Farida Rahman to amend the existing Muslim Family Laws Ordinance (1961) only in regard to the procedure for polygamy. The Bill has remained in stasis because it is considered to be politically inopportune. In a more recent reference the same member questioned the Home Minister about the frequency of fatwa related violence against women. Having taken several days to prepare his answer the Home Minister side stepped the whole issue and gave statistics about the number of rape cases reported in the press. The uninformed debate on the need for stricter laws did not take into account that existing laws were not being enforced effectively. An even more important issue of how retrogressive social forces were being encouraged through political manipulations was totally overlooked. Much earlier Motiya Chowdhury had submitted a question regarding the exchange of women for cattle. While the Minister evaded a direct answer, the House showed little interest and the whole question pertaining to our value systems, to our respect for human rights was lost.

It is curious that while incidents of fatwa related violence against women have shocked the world, they have not inspired much response from the major political parties, nor have they resulted in prompt action by law enforcing agencies. Notwithstanding politically appropriate references to 'integration of women into development' or to 'women's public representation' government policies and action have not seriously addressed the issue of violation of women's rights. Nor indeed has there been any sensitivity to political perceptions articulated by women's groups.

Women's groups have articulated the need for legal reform of personal laws, and have been engaged in working for consensus for a uniform family code, which could bring about gender equality in personal laws and minimise discrimination between different communities. Instead of skirting around procedural changes, what they want to see in place are structural changes to end polygamy, to deter marital violence and desertions. Changes in property rights are seen as enabling women and men to share their responsibilities equally. The Muslim Family Laws Ordinance was enacted in 1961 as a partial gesture to women's demands. It certainly needs further reforms in keeping with present realities. To transfer political rhetoric into reality requires that laws uphold minimum human rights standards.

A second concern articulated by women's groups is with the non-enforcement of laws. Registration of births and marriages is not enforced, leading to underage marriages, to desertions and to difficulties in marital settlements. The lack of enforcement is attributed to an inefficient system in which kazi deputed to perform these duties are either uninformed or wilfully negligent. This calls for a reorganisation of the system of registration within a more effective administrative structure or for a proper trained personnel.

Cases of violence against women reported to the police are not acted upon promptly or honestly. Law enforcing agencies have maintained themselves not as responsible to the citizens but above public censure. This has allowed them to evade their responsibilities. In many countries domestic violence has been recognised as a crime, and in even our neighbouring countries special women's cells attached to police stations have been constituted to facilitate women's complaints. The presence of women social workers in these cells acts as a monitor on the police and provides sensitive support to women in their encounters with law enforcement.

These measures are of course necessary but not sufficient for social change. A more serious concern has been raised regarding our value systems and how women's subordination is perpetuated through the existing education system. In this context the absorption of madrasah system of education to implement the free primary education policy is not likely to be conducive to changing gender values or attitudes. In fact human rights education needs to be incorporated even into main stream of education so that there is greater respect and tolerance.

How far can women move towards a political contract to their demands given the current trend of appeasement of socially retrogressive forces? How can women bring about a political reorientation within the parties and within the administration? The strength of numbers has of course always been important in the electoral process, and a major task that lies ahead is to mobilise women, to build alliances to push their agenda into the political discourse. Parties are not likely to take onto their platform anything that is not politically advantageous and this is a lesson we need to act upon. One way would point to a more effective use of the democratic space through the media, through information and education of women voters to ensure a responsible constituency. A second process is to make the government responsive to state guarantees of equal rights as expressed through Bangladesh's ratification of international human rights instruments (UN Convention for Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women), and in the Constitution. The State has to be held responsible to its avowed principles. Political rhetoric cannot be accepted as a substitute.

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