



Women and the Incomplete War of Independence

by Azfar Hussain

MOST of our movements aiming at the independence of Bangladesh had ignored women's issues and interests. True, one can readily refer to a long history of our struggle, investing it with glory, and at times, with glamour, and also point to numerous sacrifices we had made in the past. But, the blank space gleaming and glistening with a variety of absences does not escape one's notice, when one takes a look at our written histories which remain characteristically silent on women.

Despite women's active participation in our struggle for independence spanning a thousand years, women have not been, or tellingly marginally, represented in all kinds of narratives including history and literature, and of course, in socio-economic and political spheres. In our glorious Language Movement, women participated yielding a remarkable effect, emitting an astonishing energy. In the '69 mass movement, the participation of women was overwhelmingly remarkable in scope and on scale. Then, the War of Independence fought in 1971 exacted whatever it could mostly from women — who gave their everything for a dream, namely, Bangladesh. But, written histories and subsequent politics have only paid them back with nothing but silences and absences — with deprivation of women's spaces. This story is well-known; but, it is hardly heeded.

Looking back at the War, of Independence fought twenty four years ago, one can reformulate that very question which was and is: how far

allities assumed to be automatic. One of the pronouncements of a Hemingway character comes to mind: "O no, you cannot bring it automatically; it has to be caught here and now." Thus, the issue of an exploitation-free society merely becomes rhetorical without women's realities concretely imaged, particularly envisaged and definitively addressed. For, none but women constitute the most exploited, the most suffering segment of our society. Our War of Independence perhaps did not lack the spirit, but it certainly lacked that essential particularity, that sense of *haecceitas*, and the imagism of the here-and-now — related to women.

The lack, just referred to, now brings us to the typical position of women within the traditional structures of family and kinship as well as the broader social and political arenas. Over the last twenty-four years, the position of women has not remained static of course; it cannot be. For, one sees a certain degree of women's participation in production and market-activities — women, though differentiated by class-position, have certainly been on the move. But, the move has not always been one of progress; in fact, it has been more retrogressive, contrary to the spirit of liberation. Political institutions, remaining so far incurably androcentric and male-dominated under the consistently increasing pressures of perverse capitalism and imperialism, have turned out to be the most fierce but fairly familiar enemies of women at all levels — familial, social, economic.



When the infinite servitude of woman shall have ended, when she will be able to live by and for herself... woman will discover the unknown. — Rimbaud

did the War keep women's issues and interests in view? There are other questions. Was that famous six-point programme simply accommodative of women's emancipation in particular? Did those programmes, manifestoes, discussions, rallies, gatherings, upsurges, movements and protests of various forms and furies geared towards independence accommodate space for women? The historic seventh March speech delivered by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman — on which I wrote only yesterday — did not utter a single thing about women's questions. Yet, it was historic; and justly so, for other reasons; though not for women themselves. If one even quickly surveys political, economic and social moves and narratives of the last twenty-four years, one would not find it difficult to see how impoverished they are by their focus on women.

True, our Liberation Movement, as it was then envisaged and carried forward, was no doubt a glorious historic event which yielded one of our most priceless accomplishments, namely, Bangladesh. But, then, one of the telling fissures in the movement lay in the fact that it did not take into account, or address, women's questions. One may argue that building an exploitation-free society itself constituted one of the destinations of the movement, and that, such a society automatically brings forth women's issues. Really? I think here lies precisely the problem — the problem stemming from things and re-

Indeed, our mainstream middle-class politics has characteristically shaped its swing towards its class-power away from people, particularly away from women who remain victims of both realities and rhetorics. True, politicians sometimes only strategically speak full-throatedly of women's issues. But, then, look at the programmes of our major political parties, and you would experience the horror of absence — yes, these parties adequately lack well-drawn-up women's programmes!

In fact, the whole question of women's emancipation is broadly a politico-cultural question which can never be adequately addressed through male-dominated political institutions, movements and wars. Given the incompleteness of our War of Independence and its inherent philosophical-theoretical-spiritual fissures in so far as women's questions are concerned, and given the unmitigated rule of male-dominated political institutions constantly jazzed up by capitalism and imperialism which have only enhanced commodification of women in the name of women's participation in the market, and also given the monstrous rise of fundamentalism today, there is no alternative to building, on an increasing scale, political organisations of women themselves throughout the country, with their unswerving focus on bringing about a full-scale cultural revolution. That might be one of the ways of rethinking women's questions on this International Women's Day.

Our Struggle Against Poverty Discrimination and Violence We are For Equality

International Women's Day

International Women's Day will be observed today throughout the world, in accordance with a resolution adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1977.

March 8 is significant because of the historic strike that took place on this date in 1857 by a group of female garment workers protesting their working conditions. Half a century later on the same day in 1908, a march was held in New York to commemorate that demonstration. Two years later, in 1910, the Socialist Women's Conference in Copenhagen proclaimed March 8 as International Women's Day.

Since The Daily Star's birth in 1991, it has been working towards the advancement of equal rights of women. At The Daily Star, we feel proud to bring out this special feature on March 8, 1995, to commemorate women throughout the world. Those who fought, rallied and shed blood and tears so that women may be equal to society, and as integral part of it as men are; and those women who have kept the fight alive are topmost in our minds on this very special occasion. This year more than ever, The Daily Star would like to (re) express its dedication to women's rights in Bangladesh and the world.

Any Cause to Celebrate?

by Shaheen Anam

International women's day is once again upon us, questioning us as a community at what have we attained in terms of improving the status of women in the last one year. Do we have an answer? Can we honestly say that we have been able to fulfill a fraction of the pledges we so solemnly made at rallies and meetings a year ago.

In so saying, I do not want to underrate our achievements. Yes, there are some reasons to celebrate, however few they might be, it is important to highlight and publicize them if only to get inspiration and hope. Noteworthy among the achievements that will have a positive impact on the lives of women is the rising awareness in the community of the importance of educating female children. The Government along with the NGO community has made a concerted effort to enhance the enrollment of girls along with providing incentives such as stipends and scholarships. The mandatory registration of marriage, the lowering of registration fees and the fine imposed for defaulters is also a commendable step, though we have not heard of any policy or plans for implementation of these laws. The election of women to Union Parishad seats whereby now out of 9 seats 3 are occupied by women is perhaps the beginning of women entering into public life from the grassroots level, moreover 13 women were elected as Union Parishad Chairmen (chairwomen?).

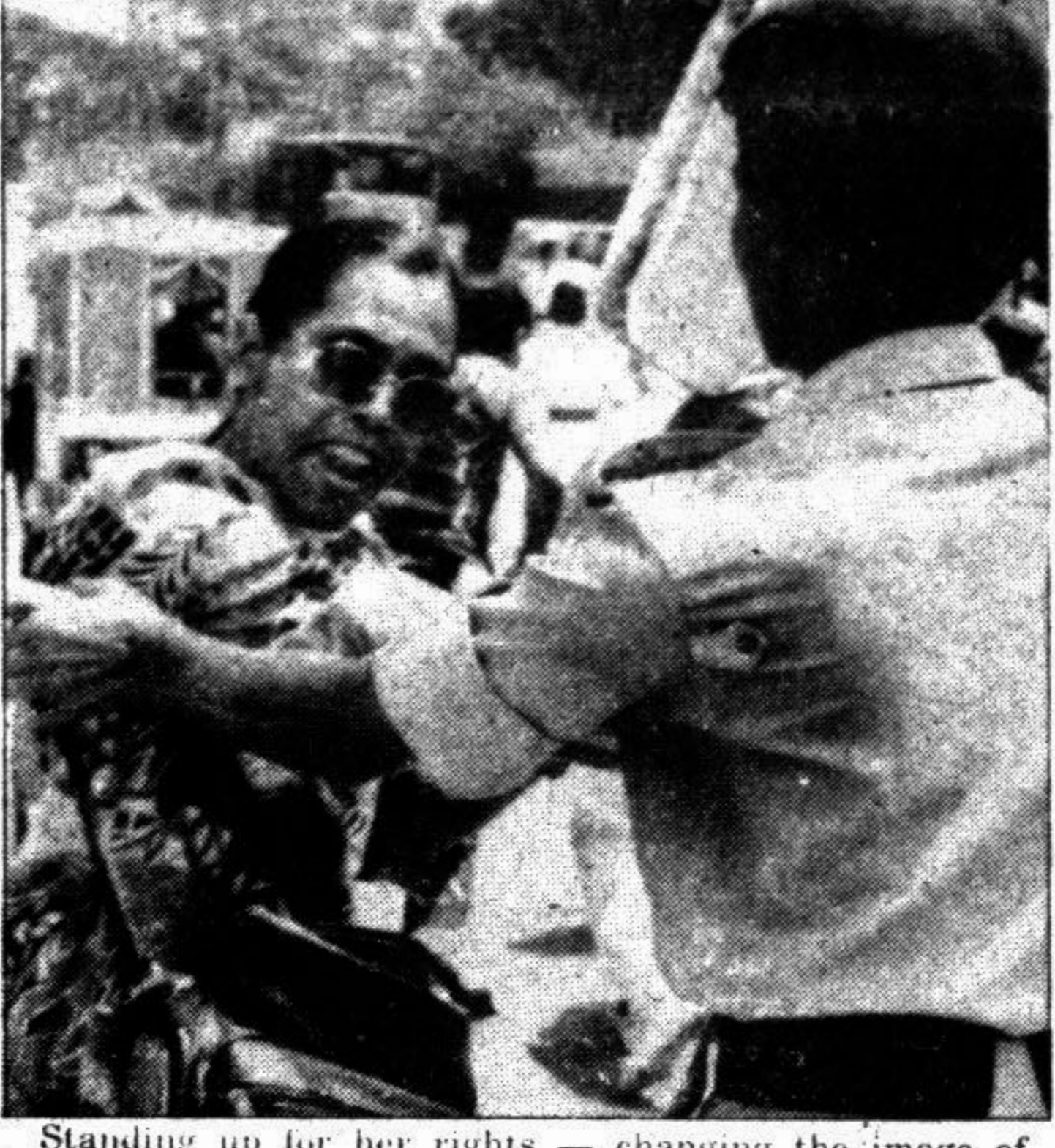
We all know that one of the most visible changes occurring in the last decade is the involvement of women in public life. This involvement has become more pronounced over the year as more and more women have joined together in the struggle towards the common goal of gender equity. In so doing, the role of men in this struggle has been redefined and the concept of Gender and Development rather than Women and Development has gained ground. Women's movement for gender equity and social justice through women's organisations and NGOs have certainly enhanced the status of women, not only in the community but in the family as well. The targeting of women for special programmes such as credit, basic literacy, income generation, marketing facilities etc. has changed the lives of over 200 million rural poor women and pulled families and communi-

ties out of abject poverty. It is estimated that currently women's incomes contribute between one fourth to one half of family incomes. Women's articulation of protest against injustice and discrimination towards women has continued. There has been cases of success and failures too.

Where our achievement has been very low or even negative has been our inability to curb violence against women. Our newspapers run stories of rape, dowry deaths, kidnappings almost everyday. We all know that what remains unreported far outnumbers the reported cases. The fundamentalist attack against women and the illegal activities of the village salish in pronouncing fatwa against young women for alleged immoral acts has added a new and more sinister dimension to the whole issue of violence against women. Though reported cases of fatwa have decreased to some extent, it is nonetheless very much prevalent in village life where young women are par-

and attitudes which often contribute to denying justice to women. Enacting more laws somehow marginalizes the issue and takes it away from the real problem which is that of implementation.

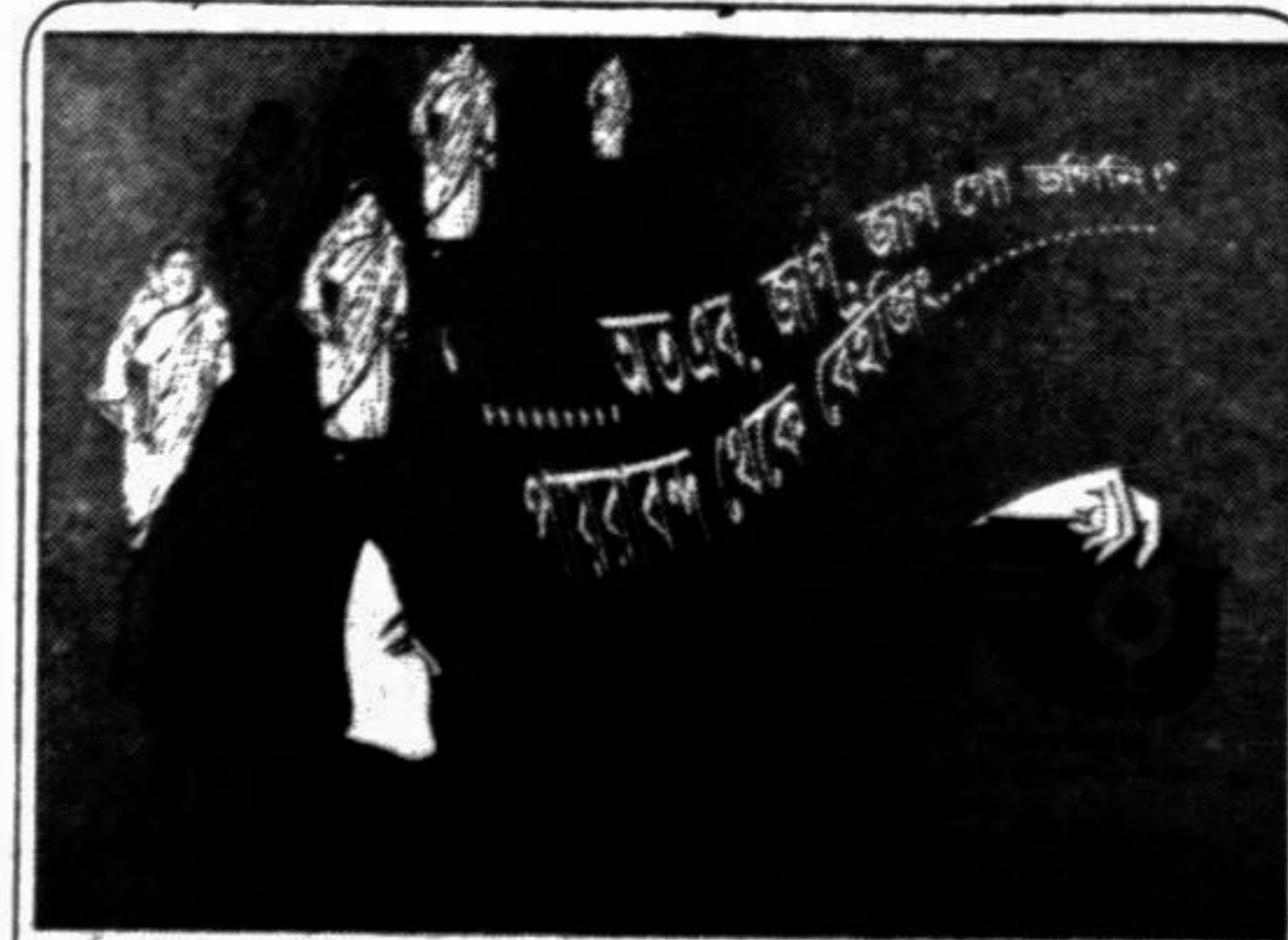
There is of course the other kind of violence, and that is gender disparity. The fact is that in Bangladesh women fare worse than men on almost every measure. They are less educated; the female literacy rate is only 23% compared with 44% for males. They get less health care; medical expenditure in a typical household is lower on men than on women. Perhaps one of the most unacceptable of them all is that they get less food: women on an average consume 20% fewer calories than men. They get paid less; wages are a little more than half that of men.



Standing up for her rights — changing the image of submissiveness and docility.

Perhaps the most disturbing of all is the high rate of maternal mortality. Bangladesh is the only country in the world where there are less women than men. Some of the standard responses one gets from those in authority is "gender disparity cannot be removed overnight" or "the reasons are poverty, illiteracy, tradition etc. Yes, these are factors, but the point is why is it that women in particular always have to pay an uneven price of certain historical and social realities and the more fundamental question is what is being done about it?"

Every year we celebrate International Women's Day, every year we hope that the coming year will usher in the dawn of a new beginning. It is very important to hope and dream but perhaps we have to do more than hope and dream. It is now perhaps time to pick up those reports, it is now time to hear the voices of those women who bear a disproportionate burden of deprivation and discrimination and resolve to change it once and for all. Change not in any vague terms, but change that is visible and quantifiable.



Whats On Today For International Women's Day

The Daily Star along with the Beijing NGO Forum urge all of you interested in uplifting women's status and eliminating the oppression against women to participate in International Women's Day

1:00 PM

In observance of International Women's Day Taranga is going to organise a symposium. Ms Rowshan Jahan, Director of Women for Women and Ms Maleka Begum Khan, former President of Bangla Craft are going to take part in the discussion. The symposium will be held in BGS Conference Room, Rd-23, House 39J Banani.

Welcome Address: Shamsun Nahar, Discussion on International Women's Day: its Genesis, Ethos and Current Situation by Raushan Jahan

Discussion on the Importance of International Women's Day in the Area of Women's Employment in Bangladesh by Maleka Khan

4:00 PM

Amnesty International will hold a discussion on women's and human rights, at the Press Club. The keynote speaker will be journalist and human rights activist Baby Maudud. Other speakers will be Ananya Editor Taslima Hossain, Executive Director of 'Utsab' Bangladesh Mahbuba Mahmud Lina; Gonoshahajo Sangstha Women's Development specialist Maleka Begum, A.I. Bangladesh Executive Committee member Faridunahan.

2:00 pm

The International Women's Day rally will begin at the Shahid Minar and end at the TSC roundabout.

3:00 pm onwards

Beijing NGO Forum, keeping the World NGO Summit in view, plans to observe the day through interaction with and collective participation of people from all walks of life. Apart from bringing to the forefront various issues and concerns of women they will stage a play to pay tribute to Begum Sufia Kamal and her life's achievements. They play will focus on Begum Sufia Kamal's participation in women's struggle and its history and is to be the highlight of the meeting.

Songs, dance and short plays will also be presented to focus and emphasize various crucial aspects of women's struggle for emancipation. The topics that will be brought to the forefront are:

1. Agriculture
2. FAP, Flood Action Plan
3. Violence and Oppression
4. Uniform Family Code
5. Fundamentalism and Fatwabaj
6. Population Control
7. SAP
8. Labour and Garment Industry Workers
9. Education
10. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)



Positive Assertions for 8th March

by Farida Akhter

SINCE 1990, the international women's day is being celebrated by the women's organisations jointly. The first initiative was called 8th March Sammilito Udjapon Kamity, which involved the women's organisations and NGOs. Together they celebrated the day by organising big colourful rallies of women.

Despite the displacement of the meaning of 8 March — a day of protest of the working class women, the collective act of middle class elite women in making the day visible is no little achievement. Certainly such colourful rallies make some people aware of the issue. The act plays a positive public education. Women carry banners and festoons with slogans and demands. Nevertheless, they are fairly effective to remind the society about the concerns and demands of women. Given the predominance of patriarchal culture the significance of such events cannot be marginalised.

But the next day, of course, everybody forgets the event. It was just a women's day. "Oh, women were dancing!", "What were dancing about?" These are the people's lay chit chats. They do not bother more than a show on the street. Still, people generally know that women are demanding their rights as human beings and they often explain their situation with examples of violence caused to them. "Violence" is the mirror through which women project

their situation in the society. But women as a class poses the question of violence as it is committed against them independent of other crimes caused by the society. This is alright, but we must not overlook the paradigm within which women's questions are framed. "Violence" is acceptable to patriarchal culture since women are sympathised with, as long as the society does not have to take initiatives for changes.

Since 1994, 8th March is being celebrated under the banner of Beijing NGO Forum '95 Preparatory Committee, Bangladesh consisting of over 200 organisations. The preparations towards the Fourth World Women's Conference is reflected in this celebration. This year again, the combined celebration is organised by the Beijing NGO Forum '95 Preparatory Committee. The celebration of 8th March worldwide is bringing forward the messages for the Beijing conference.

Bangladesh is making all preparations for the Beijing conference. The NGO preparatory committee is working towards a status report on women. On 8th March, therefore, it is not only a celebration but also passing on messages to the broader society about the issues and demands of women. This year, 8th March is to assert our demands and not to pose ourselves only as "victims of violence".

Are you going to talk about violence against women?" asked a bureaucrat to a group of women activists. This is a kind of preconceived notion about women's groups, as if they have nothing else to talk about. To a government bureaucrat talking about violence is prohibited not because they want to hear positive and assertive statements from women but because by having more evidences of violence they lose faces at an international level. The government somehow takes a defensive attitude towards this very crucial issue and therefore, pretends that violence does not exist at all. "The government has taken all necessary measures to stop violence against women". So there cannot be any more reporting.

While we see the violence, we also see the possibilities of systemic change. The women's movement is united and acting with much wider spectrum than what it used to be before. Women are fighting not only against patriarchal relations in their own families, but also against patriarchy as a global phenomenon — at social, economic and political level. Women's movement sees violence in a broader social context and therefore talk about all forms of violence.

The government by not ratifying the CEDAW conventions totally, is contributing to many violence. They also should recognise the demand of the women's organisations for en-

acting Uniform Family Code is to reduce discrimination and violence against women on the basis of religious prescriptions of inequality. The Constitution is contradictory towards acknowledging women's rights. Women are equal in the social or public sphere, but not in the sphere of familial relations. As citizens women of Bangladesh are not therefore equal to men. The political parties miserably failed to recognise the fundamental violence against women, stamped into the constitution. But women are not expected to talk about the systemic violence in the constitution, interestingly, physical violence is only recognised by patriarchy but not the "violence" against the equal rights of women. Here is an example where patriarchy implicitly holds that women do not have "souls" or "minds"; therefore any violence against mind — against "right", is not recognised.

On 8th March, our deepest regret is to note that both the head of the state and the opposition leader being women have totally disregarded women's issues and did not acknowledge the contribution of the women's movement towards change for a better society, a society where the leadership of women is more guaranteed and respected at all levels of life.

However, I would like to salute my colleagues in the movement, because together we are committed to bring forth a positive change



Constant violence on campus making life on campus insecure. The police offer little security. — Star photo