The Private Self

An Intimate Portrait of Sheikh Hasina

by Schrezad Joya Monami Latif

"We need proper Islamic education, the true meaning of the rights of women in Islam needs to be publicised, giving fatwa and having people accept mistruths is a terrible thing."

SHEIKH Hasina, along with our Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia, is probably the most talked and written about woman in the country. The current political turmoil in Bangladesh has made her the hot bed of criticism, both negative and positive. The Daily Star, side stepping the current hot issues at hand, was interested in finding out what Sheikh Hasina the leader and the politician felt about Sheikh Hasina the mother, the homemaker and the woman.

Our hour long interview with the leader of the opposition was punctuated by the incessant ringing of the telephone, and visiting MPs and AL workers who each helped themselves to the toast biscuits on her desk, and indicated to me that I should do the same. She was friendly, open and talkative and throughout, her interest did not waver, inspite of all the hoopla around the office. She sat serenely in a biscuit colored, hand embroidered silk saree, all her attention on the interview.

The problem of illiteracy kept cropping up. Sheikh Hasina felt that was the most important issue women in Bangladesh were facing, and stressed that with education would come birth control and job opportunities. "If a woman can earn her own income, she cannot be exploited, she can stand on her own two feet." She insisted that creating opportunities for women's work is our biggest challenge as well as combatting the inherent societal prejudice against women, which let us face it, will be no easy task.

"Women, I feel have to be more organized, show more solidarity. We need to build a revolution with women. Show society that we can do it. We must create job opportunities for women. In most fields, women have proven themselves to be better than men, more capable".

But in Bangladesh, the little progress that has been achieved in creating job opportunities for women are being hindered by fatwabaj. It was pointed out that along with illiteracy, this fatwa phenomenon is the biggest problem facing women in our country, and this revolution with women idea would make them furious. Sheikh Hasina agreed, and nodded her head vehemently, explaining in detail.

"They (the mullahs) have taken the law into their own hands this country's rules of law are being tampered with. The fatwabaj are hindering progress of the country. Fatwa cases as well as cases of murder or torture because of dowry should be given quick and severe punishments, then they would not be repeated."

Sheikh Hasina felt that there should also be proper education about Islam. In our religion there is nothing against women working outside the home. She cited Bibi Khadeja, the first woman to accept Islam and the Prophet's first wife, who was a keen businesswoman; and Bibi Ayesha, the Prophet's youngest wife who spent half of her life in the battle fields. Neither of them were hindered from any work. This current trend of trying to keep women locked up, she felt, was very wrong. "We need proper Islamic education, the true meaning of the rights of women in Islam needs to be publicized, giving fatwa and having people accept mistruths is a terrible thing."

Dowry is another social evil that is dominating Bangladeshi society. Although it is something completely against Islamic Law. "The way I see it, men are selling themselves for the price of dowry." Sheikh Hasina said, an ironic smile twisting her face. Not only is the practice of dowry against Islam, it now permeates most of rural and urban Bangladesh and has contributed heavily to the rise in female headed households. "Some of these dowry cases need severe punishments, but so few murders get any justice or fair trials in this country, and because they don't people don't seem to care," her voice was laced with bitterness.

But surely, I was quick to point out to her, as opposition she could do something? "We in the opposition have no say, our actions yield no benefits, but we try."

In South Asia, three heads of state are women and in Bangladesh we have the distinction of having our politics led by two women. Yet, our women leaders in the South Asian Region have, much like Margaret Thatcher when Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, forgotten their gender. Sheikh Hasina admitted that there is little scope for her to look at women's issues separately in the political arena. But as a woman she felt the definite need for a program for women. "Without the political commitment of a government, we cannot develop, and we cannot develop if we leave behind half our population, either." At this point we returned to the most important issue for her — the need for women's education and subsequent empowerment.

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Sheikh Hasina's private life has never been talked about as much as say in the West Hilary Clinton's or even Benazir Bhutto's is. When asked what she had to give up in her home life to acommodate a full time career as a politician, she looks down at her hands and says in a mellower voice, that perhaps she could not raise and care for Joy and Putul, her son and daughter, as she had wanted to. She had to send them to boarding school and that hurts her. She never stops missing them, though, or worrying about them. "I know they hurt too, and there are times when they need me and I cannot be there for them, but they understand that I'm working for my country; that if my people weren't so needy with a 86% rate of poverty, then I wouldn't have to work so hard. I'm trying to bring a democratic system into the country."

She likes to cook the kids their favorite dishes and feed them with her own fingers

when they are home, eventhough "they are all grown up now." (Putul was recently married and lives with her husband abroad.) She laughs and says that perhaps she is spoiling them, but she sees them infrequently and wants to pamper them all she can when she has them to herself. Much of her home life (housework) is naturally dependent on others. "Sometimes I notice that people are not doing their jobs properly and I get down on my hands and knees and clean the bathrooms myself." Her public and private lives create what Sheikh Hasina called her

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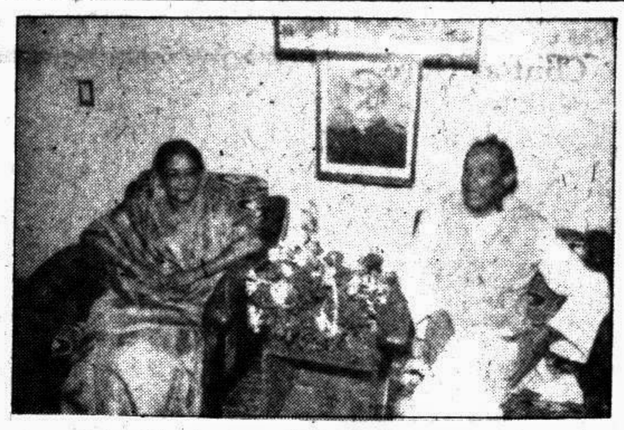

A candid moment — with her husband Wajed Mia

able interview time debating on who it was. Sheikh Hasina kept saying it was on the tip of her tongue.

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There are obvious disadvantages to being a woman in her field in a strongly patriarchal society, such as ours. But Sheikh Hasina is most indignant about the vibrant hues put on her public political disagreements with Prime Minister Khaleda Zia. People are always saying "oh look, they are two women so they are bickering. When we fight over a political cause, which is natural since our ideologies are so different, people will say it's just the arguments of two women." She also felt that the situation in our country was worse than in the West. There, in similar multi party governments we often see the leader of the opposition questioning the PM or the house leader and these people will be having heated debates, and not have to see their discussions belittled and discolored so that the public can scoff at them and make sexist comments and innuendos. "And if we don't argue then people will say, oh its the two women not speaking to each other. This is forever done by a certain quarter of society. Women are on the move, women are working and surpassing men in fields, men are inherently jealous of this, they cannot tolerate it," according to Sheikh Hasina.

Sheikh Hasina added that the masses, she was sure, had definitely accepted both her and Khaleda Zia. "We've shown them that there is nothing we cannot do that men do. Men have grown up in the shadow of their mother's achal, learned to walk holding their sister's hand; after that, they need their wives, their daughters and it goes on. They neglect us but they have to keep coming back to us."

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My interview with Sheikh Hasina went by quickly and before I knew it, I was being ushered out of her office. It was nine in the evening but the Leader of the Opposition's appointments were far from over. Next on her list was a wedding reception she had to attend and "be sociable at." She smiled at me tiredly, "my work is never finished."

Book Review

Change has been a Long Time Coming

by Rashida Ahmad

JUST how far has women's development progressed over the last twenty years? To what extent has making gender issues a central concern in the development agenda succeeded? These are the questions tackled by Professor Rounaq Jahan in her recently published book The Elusive Agenda : Mainstreaming Women in Development (Zed Books, London/ University Press Ltd, Dhaka).

It appears in many ways that the situation of women in developing countries has deteriorated over the last two decades. The inequalities between developed and developing countries have grown. The gap between rich and poor within these countries has widened. Poor women, the world over, are increasingly subject to crime, violence and economic exploitation. Women's economic responsibilities have clearly increased, yet the terms and conditions of their work have not improved. Work done by women is widely regarded as cheap labour. There is concern that global open-market policies are perpetuating women's economic exploitation.

However, on another level, some progress has been made. Understanding and awareness of the gender issue has been greatly raised in developing countries. The strength of women's movements in these countries has grown. Not only have women at grassroots level become more active and participatory in demanding and ensuring their own rights, but they have also increasingly become involved in human rights', environmental and peace movements. These are progressive steps. The transformation of society through the awareness of the need to include women in the development process cannot be lightly dismissed.

But why do such contradictory trends exist in the field of women's development? Why has there been progress in some areas and not in others? This is the focus from which Prof Jahan's book, develops — why is progress so elusive?

"We still need to learn a lot of lessons from the last two decades, and more importantly, to ask where do we go from here?" says Jahan, a former Chairman of Political Science at Dhaka University, who is presently a Senior Research Scholar at the Southern Asia Institute, Columbia University, New York. The main task in order to answer this question, according to the author, is to objectively assess gender Women in Development policies.

"In order to review the numerous policies that exist we need a framework, which has been lacking in the past.... What is progress? Should it be measured in terms of efforts or results?" As Jahan points out, many NGOs and donor agencies measure success in terms of effort, but few have field-based data on the impact of these policies on women's lives. "How should we judge the measures recommended by donor agencies and governments — by intention or impact?"

Thus, the main objective of the book was to formulate a conceptual framework, within which the evaluation of the roles played by the major bilateral/multilateral donor agencies and governments can take place.

The Elusive Agenda, which involved over two years of research, is based on information and data provided by four leading agencies — CIDA, NORDA, UNDP and World Bank — and comparative field studies collected from Bangladesh and Tanzania.

The book begins with an attempt to clarify what exactly comprises the "Women's Agenda", from the perspective of women themselves, and how it has changed over the last two decades. Rights, Entitlement, Investment, Poverty, Reproductive Labour, and Security are the some of the issues which Jahan specifies.

Jahan goes on to suggest an analytical framework, and to establish indicators, specifically for the assessment of WID policies, in the light of these issues. The performance of donor and government agencies, in terms of objectives, approach, strategies and measures of progress is discussed and evaluated.

The need for formal policies, mandates and research, especially theoretical research, is stressed by Professor Jahan. Future priorities, according to her, must include clarifying objectives, establishing measurables, goals with timetables, and greater financial planning for policies and programmes.

She concludes that despite some headway, the fundamental objective of transforming social and gender relations is far from being achieved. One reason given is that so far the easiest options have been taken up, for example, issues of health and education have been addressed rather than the more difficult question of land rights or economic exploitation. Perhaps her book can be seen as one step along the long path that still exists towards true gender equality and the advancement of women's development.

Japan's First World Women Still Suffer Discrimination

by Mari Yamaguchi

FORGET the "glass ceiling". Many Japanese women can't even find the door to a job, and at home many are stuck with household chores and caring for aging in-laws, a government report said Friday.

The annual Prime Minister's Office report on women said well-educated females are still generally restricted to serving as clerical assistants for male colleagues. Compared to other industrialized nations, Japanese women seldom hold responsible posts in government or politics, it said.

Although hiring of women rose during the economic boom years of the late 1980s, many of their clerical jobs were cut after the recession struck.

As a result, the number of employed women fell last year for the first time in 18 years, the Labor Ministry said in a separate report earlier this week. The number of women job holders dropped 90,000, or 0.3 per cent, to 26 million, while the number of homekeepers surged by 420,000, or 2.7 per cent, to 16 million, it said.

The Prime Minister's Office said most male executives don't consider women as candidates for career-track jobs.

But an increasing number of women who want to avoid traditional housewife roles have begun to stay on the job longer, even though that means accepting the "glass ceiling," or subtle discrimination in salaries and promotion, said Mariko Sugahara-Bando, director of gender equality at the Prime Minister's Office.

As a result, women no entering the job market are having trouble finding even clerical and menial jobs, the report says.

It noted that no Japanese prefecture has a woman governor. Only 6.8 per cent of the seats in Japan's Parliament are held by women, compared to 38 per cent in Sweden and 33 per cent in Denmark, it said.

According to government statistics, average entry-level salaries for female workers are 92 per cent of their male counterparts. But when women reach age 50-54, they receive only half as much.

The average age of marriage has risen to 26.1 and the typical Japanese women bears only 1.46 children, below 2.01 in the United States and Sweden's 2.11, the report noted.

"In Japan, men are still believed to be the bread winners who should be given priority in employment," Sugahara-Bando said. "It is regrettable that few managers realize it's time to find truly talented female staffers.

She said women are becoming more aware of their rights as the result of an equal opportunity law enacted in 1986, even though the law does not impose any penalties for violators.

For example, several female employees in Osaka requested court arbitration earlier this year over charges of wage discrimination by their employer.

And earlier this week, a 21-year-old apprentice geisha in Kyoto took the rare step of suing a geisha house owner, demanding compensation for alleged harsh treatment and withholding of earnings.

Japan's rapidly aging society also keeps women from gaining ground at the workplace, the report said.

It said 90 per cent of Japan's 900,000 bedridden elderly people are cared for by their daughters or daughter-in-laws.

Sex Scandal Gives a Voice to Taboo Topics

By Teena Gill Bangkok

A sex scandal involving one of Thailand's best-known Buddhist preachers, Phra Yantra Amoro Bhikku, has sparked off a debate on the position of women in Buddhism.

The scandal has provoked discussion on hitherto taboo subjects like the prohibition against the ordination of women as bhikkunis, or monks, and the failure of Buddhist moral codes to prevent widespread prostitution in the country.

He, has denied the allegations but refused to undergo DNA tests to prove that he was not the father of his former disciple Chantima Mayarangsi's daughter.

Traditionally, the conservative Theravada form of Buddhism, which has dominated Thai society and the sangha (monasteries), portrayed women as inferior to men and incapable of achieving higher levels of spiritual enlightenment. Some Buddhist texts even claim that women are born women only because of their bad karma (deeds in past lives).

Says Dr Chatsunmarn Kabilsingh, lecturer at Bangkok's Thamassat University: "Women are depicted by the Buddhist sangha, and Thai society, as being temptresses and obstacles to the enlightenment of male monks or bhikkus."

The Thai media has been awash with opinion pieces and talk shows attacking the deeply-entrenched attitude of male superiority within the Buddhist religious order.

Some have suggested that the scandal is only a small indicator of the deep-rooted gender biases within the Buddhist clergy which can be redressed only by allowing women to enter the monkhood.

Amoro Bhikku, a charismatic monk with a large following, was accused last year by a number of his women followers of having had sex with them and even being the father of a five-year-old child.

Pointing to the hypocrisy of singling out women as being responsible for sexual misdemeanour, she says that monks like Phra Yantra prove that the male clergy is not "infallible" as is often assumed.

Kabilsingh has been fighting a lonely battle to interpret the gender biases of the Theravada Buddhist text, the Tripitaka, which is believed to have originated in Sri Lanka.

"All the major Theravada texts," Kabilsingh says, "were only written down approximately 300 years after the death of the Buddha and incorporate the sexist, male-dominated values of northern Indian society of that time."

Today, women wanting to be ordained into the sangha face many hurdles. The closest they can come to participation in the sangha is by becoming nuns or mae ji.

However, as Khunying Kanitha Vichiencharoon, a womens' rights advocate, points out, "the term mae ji is nor recognised by Thai law, let alone by Thai society and their position is even lower than that of a laywoman."

There are 20,000-30,000 nuns in Thailand who receive no formal ordination and have no rights. They are also denied material benefits given to male monks, such as free transport.

Khunying is now fighting a legal battle to get the term mae ji recognised by Thai law and move a step towards a more equal status with the male clergy.

The first attempt by women to enter the monkhood occurred in 1932 when two sisters, Sara and Chongdi Bhasit, got themselves ordained despite much opposition from the Buddhist clergy. They were arrested and made to appear in court, and under relentless pressure from the sangha, decided to leave the order.

Since then the only avenue open for Thai women to enter monkhood has been by going to other Buddhist countries such as Taiwan, China and South Korea where the prevalent liberal Mahayana tradition allows women's ordination.

Some Thai nuns do not share the enthusiasm for becoming monks. They point out that what matters ultimately is the development of spiritual potential and not the label one is known by.

Others maintain that the issue is crucial to Thai society as ordination of women would improve their status in the country.

One of Thai Buddhism's major social functions through its network of temples and organisations is its support for poor, rural youth who can join the monkhood and receive financial help, and basic education in religious schools and even in universities.

For many young boys monkhood has become a path to upward social mobility especially as they are given the freedom to leave the monkhood whenever they desire to pursue other careers or to get married.

Khunying says there is a pressing need for similar facilities for poor girls and young women who often end up in prostitution. The entry of women into monkhood, she feels, will raise their social and economic profile and give them new options.

At the moment, says Kabilsingh, the most important issue is to get power out of the hands of the male sangha, which has monopolised official Buddhism for more than 700 years, and to allow ordained male and female monks, nuns and lay-people equal access to Buddhism. — GEMINI NEWS

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