



# Mahila Parishad — Celebrating 25 Years of Fighting Spirit



Undeterred by police action — Courtesy Mahila Parishad

Bangladesh Mahila Parishad was born on April 4, 1970 by progressive and democracy loving men and women of the time. The organization actually emerged through the preparatory process of the liberation war. Led by Begum Sufia Kamal, Mahila Parishad stood for and continues to fight for the equal rights of women in all spheres of our society. It is a secular and voluntary women's organization that has been active in stopping violence against women, rehabilitating prostitutes, lobbying for a Uniform Family Code, running legal literacy projects for women and a multitude of other activities. This month marked their silver jubilee. The Daily Star is proud to dedicate the following page to Mahila Parishad's 25 years of work for Bangladeshi women and to commemorate 25 years of fighting spirit.



Public protest rally on violence against women.

**D**URING the preparation period of our great liberation war with the initiative and united effort of the agitating women students, women workers and with the cooperation of the country's progressive social workers, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad was formed. Mahila Sangram Parishad Committee (Women's Movement Committee) which was formed in preparation for the 1969-70 movement, made its public appearance on the 4th of April of 1970 as East Pakistan Mahila Parishad.

In a socially, economically, culturally and politically backward society without any humane attitude towards women, for a women's organisation to be formed and thrive is a significant achievement.

Mahila Parishad's aim is to establish women's freedom, to establish equal rights for women in the family, society and nation; for that matter, in every aspect of life. "Women's Rights as human rights," this has been the slogan of Mahila Parishad from its birth. The 25 years of struggle of the Mahila Parishad, [MP] is the struggle to establish women's rights in Bangladesh.

From 1972-80, Bangladesh MP has made an effort to remove the custom of dowry in Bangladesh and to stop polygamy from the Bangladeshi society. It has tried to protest and prevent these by publishing thousands of leaflets, books, organizing women's meetings and gatherings and by various other methods. In

1978 a memorandum containing thousands of signatures collected in protest of the dowry custom was placed before Mrs Taslima Abed, woman's affairs advisor to the government of that time. Before that in 1977 a demand for woman's rights, respect and security in the familial field was placed before the women's affairs advisor Mrs Feroza Bari. The demand was aimed to establish Family Court with the initiative of the government to solve disputes between husband and wife in family life. In 1977 MP was the first to place before the government, women and the country, the demand and recommendation for a Family Court. A continuous stream of movement went on for these familial and social demands. The singular effort of the MP was joined by the movement of United Women's Organization. Alongside was the movement of the countrymen; for that matter, the whole nation's struggle, to establish a national democratic. As a result, the government, passed "Family Court, Ordinance 1985" in 1985. 1977-85 during this time a lot of other organizations had also come forward in the demand to introduce "Family Court." But MP has been the organisation that took the initiative.

From 1978-79 the Saleha murder was committed. A rich man's daughter house wife Saleha was brutally murdered by her husband Dr Iqbal. MP at that time singularly organized

## Bangladesh Mahila Parishad The Years of Struggle

huge women's gatherings against the Saleha murder and formed protest movements. In the parliament the Dowry Opposing Law was passed in 1985. Primarily from this time MP conducted the movement against the oppression of women in a more organized manner than before. In 1985 when oppression of women, murder of women especially rape of the girl child increased, the skillfulness of MP's resistance to oppression of women also increased. In 1985 when a three and a half-year-old child Sonia, was raped, MP called upon the people of the country with a message headed — "Let society's conscience wake." Women's oppression and social injustice protest committee was formed by the country's democratic, progressive intellectuals, lawyers, teachers, journalists, political workers and others. With its initiative, women's oppression resistance meetings were organized all over the country including Dhaka. MP has played a conscious and initial role in introducing Women's Oppression Prevention Ordinance and laws against rape and the trafficking of women and children. In the effort to stand by the oppressed and persecuted women, with the knowledge and experience from the movement against repression of women, a shelter and rehabilitation centre for the persecuted and oppressed women — "Rokeya Sadan" was set up. It has been running since 1985. From the bitter experience of the women's oppression prevention work, the need for change, refinement of current laws and introduction of new ones is strongly felt. To establish equal rights and respect in familial fields for all women living in Bangladesh, MP has drawn up a draft of the Uniform Family Code as an alternative to the Family Law. The main suggestions and recommendations of the UFPC has been drawn up based on the experience and views of lawyers, judges etc from different workshops. At present efforts are being made to publicize, create views of women's society and countrymen on this recommended code and place it before the government.

Alongside this, MP is trying to give legal assistance to women. This legal assistance has been given from 1984-94. Also, legal literacy training is being given in all the branches of the organization and in a limited way to grassroots women to make women aware of the existing laws on women's rights. Some special and complicated cases are conducted on behalf of women and the organization. For example, the much talked about Chatok Chora village's Nurjahan murder case. Apart from this, assistance and co-operation is given in various women's oppression and murder cases. To stand by oppressed women at any cost is the main job of MP.

From 1972-94 MP has played an enterprising and at times leading role in putting to practice the various nationally introduced women's right related ordinances and laws by giving suggestions to the government and putting pressure on them. By organizing women to build up a movement.

In 1984 the Bangladeshi government ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. But it needs to be mentioned that the government approved the document



"States should condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination." — UN Declaration

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excluding some important clauses/sections. In 1985 most of the women's organizations and society as a whole was not fully and accurately aware of all the contents of the document. In 1984 MP placed before the government, and the country the action plan of the document in a press conference. MP also tried to distribute and publicize the Bengali translation of the document. Among the people, MP has been gearing up a movement in demand for government approval and implementation of the CEDAW document. At present there is a Bangladeshi woman representative in the CEDAW committee. The CEDAW forum Bangladesh has been set up with the representative's efforts and the united effort of quite a few women organisations including MP. Its only aim is to realise full government approval of CEDAW with all its sections. MP is trying its best to play an enterprising role in the CEDAW forum. From its birth MP has been trying to press demands for Bangladeshi women's wide employment opportunities. MP strongly believes that education and the wider influence of education on women is one of the main conditions for women's awakening and progress. And that is why with the organization's own initiative it has been running an adult women and children's education centre. MP has tried to take initiative so that plans can be taken in the 5 Year Plan to involve women more widely in the country's development work. MP placed before the government and the Planning Commission definite written suggestions by publishing them in book form and introducing it in a press conference. The main demand was not to consider women as a part of the handicapped population as it was considered in the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd 5-Year Plans. Special importance has been given to government plans widely involving women as a part of the able manpower in the main flow of the country's economic progress. All the household work including rearing children which women are doing daily for 8-20 hours, MP has especially suggested and demanded for social and economical recognition of women's invisible and unap-

preciated work during the drawing up of the 4th 5-Year Plan. To make the pervading women's society conscious politically, MP has been demanding that women be more involved in the country's political process. With its own initiative the organization has given the theoretical training on this subject and has tried to play an organized role in the national democratic struggle. For this reason, the organization's role has been misunderstood often. Some people or organizations have thought MP a politically-biased group. MP believes that by isolating and alienating women's rights related movement from the country's struggle to establish national rights, the complete success can not be achieved.

MP played a conscious and active role against martial law. With MP's earnest initiative and effort the United Women Society was formed in 1986-87. In the field of agitation and struggle against the autocratic rule there was the sturdy role of MP.

The role of women in the country's policy making process and the view points of the people running the country on women's rights related work is particularly important. Today from the country's practical experiences the truth of this statement is again being proved. Apart from the world's practical experience and the review of various reports this truth has come out. Women's political standing is very important in realising the man-woman-equality in society and nation. From practical experiences collected from two decades, the slogans "Political Empowerment of Women", "Economic Empowerment of Women", "Women's Oppression is the Violation of Human Rights," etc have emerged. MP feels more power of the spirit by finding deep fundamental agreement of the organization's ethics based on these international experiences and slogans.

MP has demanded direct election for the reserved seats. In this decade's experience, this demand has received more widespread support. Though it is said that the country's main political parties in view of their party's own interests have not accepted

this demand. But still the argument is strengthening day by day. This way MP has tried to play a conscious and earnest role in women's economic empowerment, political empowerment.

In the preparation period of the 4th World Conference on Women in Beijing, a non-government national preparation committee has been formed in Bangladesh too. In forming this committee, creating review reports on the position of Bangladeshi women and in creating programmes and other important work, MP is playing a very active role.

But it is true that during this long period of time the organization has not been able to spread out to all the districts, thanas and villages of the country. It has not been possible to extensively form the organization among the women who are already involved in the country's socio-economic activities. About 7 lakh (700 thousand) women are involved in the country's garment industry. The women who have engaged in the country's industrial activities and earned self-reliance and economic freedom by ignoring the male dominated village family and society and many other obstacles. MP has not been formed among them, yet.

Apart from this, MP has been unable to grow with a strong foundation among the new progressive, mentally conscious group of women who have grown because of an active involvement in education. There is a need for a large number of workers and organizers to conduct MP's widespread multifaceted activities. Among the organization's dedicated workers and organizers some have financial difficulty or time constraints. There is also a mental block when working for such complicated and time consuming work as establishing women's rights, creating a modified life in the light of changed ideas and values, introducing new laws, changing the ideas and views of a backward society, changing long-prevailing familial, social customs. Since the formation of MP, in the 70's the socio-economic and political situation has changed considerably. Under the circumstances there is a need for young women leaders to come forward. In spite of various weaknesses and limitations, it can be said that the way MP has been trying tirelessly with dedication to establish equal rights and respect for women in the family, society and nation for the last 25 decades has earned it the confidence of the wide section of the people of the country and women's groups. By running the Shodan, giving legal assistance, trying to develop progressive mental awareness and values resisting society's blind faiths, religious fanaticism and communalism, MP is being united with the country's educated and conscious society. Also, this needs to be told, that during the 25 years of MP's women and development work, MP has always received the support of the country's intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, for that matter, the society's progressively conscious people. MP has been trying to increase awareness against all types of superstition and religious fanaticism from its birth. From the experience of the country's women's movement, MP has seen that the society's superstitions, religious fanaticism and backward mentality always stand as a big obstacle against the minimum earning of women's freedom and fundamental human rights. Before

Begum Rokeya, from the time of Raja Ramohun till now, it is the same experience in this field. Recently in the name of religious misinterpretations, i.e. Fatwa, hindrance has come against women involved in economic activities in various parts of the country. All the women's organizations including MP are coming forward against these activities. MP has always taken and will take a forceful stand against these Fatwabaj, superstition creators and all types of women and social progress opposed activities. This is the way MP has tried to stay active from its birth.

By analyzing and reviewing all the active efforts, adopted activities and policies of MP's 25 years, this can be said, that in post-war Bangladesh in establishing women's equal rights and respect in family, society and nation in developing women's movement even in a limited way there was a notable role of MP. In the fu-

ture this rôle has to be taken forward in a more organised fashion in uniting and taking forward the women and the organisation. MP is carrying on women's awakening and women's freedom movement by being one with the fundamental flow of the century's women's movements. By keeping a deep consideration of the country's actual requirements in the light of the world women's movement and on the basis of adopted actions, in the future this movement has to be made more forceful against fanaticism, Fatwa, for that matter any religious fanaticism. MP will continue its uncompromising struggle with honesty and dedication in developing scientific, progressive, and liberal ways of thinking. MP's struggle is the struggle to create a humane society with man-woman equality. MP's struggle is the struggle for human freedom.

Translated from Bangla by DENEB ZEENAT LATIF.

## "Demanding Uniform Family Code"

by Sufia Kamal

President, Bangladesh Mahila Parishad

**F**ROM the ancient period of time laws and rules were made to keep the peace and security of the state, society and family. These laws and rules are mainly adopted to establish a fair social system, justice, peace and discipline with the aim to govern the state and society. But the particular laws and rules of same nature may not continuously exercised by the society and state for a long time. Because everything is changeable in this world. And due to this, time to time laws and rules also been changed and be change in accordance with the new demands of the society. Hence, Human Rights specially relating to women never been existed, exercised and established in the society. Though the women have achieved some rights by themselves though struggle and movement. But still now there are so many discriminatory laws existing relating to the wages of women. The women are getting less wages than the men. Though they are working as same as men and sometimes more than the men. The daughter is not entitled to get the equal share as her brother of their paternal property. On the grounds of evidence, two female witness are equal to one male witness. "The bill of family law amendment" has been created some women

rights. But these rights are not sufficient to establish women in the society with proper status, honour and dignity. And it is the demand of society to establish the women rights completely. As a human being and citizen of the state, a woman holds all the human rights and it is the universal demand of world women community. Not only that it is also the demand of the state, society, family and human being. This demand is a demand of dignity, status and honour of human being. The woman is not only a woman, she is also a human being — for long 23 years Bangladesh Mahila Parishad (Bangladeshi Women Association) is working intently in the villages and cities of Bangladesh to establish this demand or slogan. To achieve these rights, women should run forward with strong confidences and determination according to law. All mothers-sisters and well-hearted human being whether they are male or female should move towards to achieve the dignity and status of human rights. It is my great hope and confidence that our long struggle and movement to establish human rights should come enforce by our combined struggle, movement, activities and labour.

Courtesy: Mahila Parishad



## The Shade of a Banyan

by Rekha Biswas

**O**n a pleasant autumn morning, I was sitting and thinking — the story dates back almost 14 to 15 years from today, I was a college student. Living in Mymensingh city, studying in Ananda Mohan College, involved in the Student Union. As a woman, no special feelings had been aroused within me as yet. Back then, I did not have the mentality to think about the pain and suffering in a woman's life. The gathering of the Mahila Parishad of Mymensingh district — place: town hall, I don't remember the date anymore. We, the female students, went after receiving invitations. We were shocked. Was the existence of the female sex so weak? Were we existing in such anguish, such neglect in society? We knew of the situation through books, stories, dramas and poems of Tagore and Nazrul. This was the first time we confronted the situation in reality. Seeing the disrespect shown towards women made me utter a few lines of the angry, rebellious poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam.

I then put two and two together and understood that Bangladesh Mahila Parishad was working towards women's emancipation. It felt good to read their announcement letters. In my limited experience, I collected many colourful memories — I gained immense knowledge from these memories — knowledge that they help me follow the correct path in life. I gave Mahila Parishad very little, but in return, they gave me a lot. They spread love within the people, gave them the mentality to tackle their problems, moreover, they gave people the ability to overcome limited self knowledge barriers. A memorable incident in my life is going to Cuba in 1981. I got this opportunity through the Mahila Parishad. I learnt about the lives of women in different countries. I saw the struggle of a woman, be it in family, be it in society. The struggle for the emancipation of women is a long and hard one. This struggle is thoroughly involved in the social evolution. I feel, that of all the revolutions, the emancipation of women bears a deeper meaning. If emancipation of women does not evolve, then the emancipation of mankind will not be fully possible. Not only in the minds of men; but century-old ideas are rooted deeply inside a woman's mind. Therefore, if a revolution is not created, inhuman activities, such as oppression of women will continue. We never say that pulling a woman out of her family and placing her under the wild blue yonder is granting her freedom. Instead, we say that a woman must establish herself in her family with self respect. As women, our duties in this field are limitless. I am grateful to the Bangladesh Mahila Parishad for arousing this sense of duty in me. I sincerely hope, that Mahila Parishad spreads like a banyan tree, that it continues to provide shade for millions of tired and weary people for years to come.

Translated from the Bangla by Sasheen M Ekramullah