

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY SPECIAL

Political empowerment of women

DILARA CHOUDHURY

It is a common knowledge that women's political empowerment is at the top of the political agenda of both developed and developing nations and these governments are making serious endeavours in order to achieve that goal. Various international conventions have also been held in order to persuade the individual countries and augment their efforts in this regard. However, the *modus vivendi* and the outcome vary from country to country. Some countries have made remarkable strides while others are lagging behind. Unfortunately, Bangladesh, which is a signatory to all international conventions that propagate women's political empowerment by ensuring 30 per cent women in all decision-making fora, is one of the countries where women's presence in the power structure of the country is shamefully low. This is regrettable.

Bangladesh is a new democracy and is working hard to consolidate the system. Women's political empowerment is, thus, needed not only to broaden its democratic base but also to create women leadership so badly required to deal with the negative effects of globalisation. Sad fact is that the issue has been side-tracked for too long and, as a result, women's voice in the governance of the country has remained muted. It must be understood that the country cannot afford to ignore women's demand for power sharing any longer. If we do, it would be at the peril of the nation. Numerous steps must be taken in order to rectify the gender skewed power balance of the country. One giant step in this regard would be ensuring women's effective representation in the Parliament.

The issue of women's effective representation in the Parliament is as old as the country itself. Considered 'backward' women were given indirectly elected reserved seats following the independence of the country in 1971, which continued until April 2001. The history of indirectly elected women MPs from reserved seats is not noteworthy. Volumes have been written about their ineffectiveness and it is agreed that the system is dysfunctional.

As such, during the 1990s women's organisations and other civil society leaders began working for two crucial things. First, demand to increase the number of reserved seats and second, to have the

women MPs elected directly. It is easily discerned why these two criteria were considered crucial. The first was to create a critical mass of women parliamentarians, and the second was to endow each woman MP with a constituency. Both would be required in order to have an impact on the legislative process. A critical mass of women MPs could have enormous say in the legislation making particularly with regard to the issues concerning women. And that critical mass would only be effective if they have a direct linkage with their constituencies. It was noted that it was simply not possible to have any influence on the policy formulation if they were not aware

reserved seats. It is discerned that there was an agreement on the basic principles and only issues related to exact number of reserved seats and size of their territorial constituencies remained open for discussion. Hopes were raised when these principles were reflected in the election manifestoes of Bangladesh's two major political parties—BNP and AL.

However, in the post election period the hopes were dashed when BNP-led four party coalition government proposed a constitutional amendment, which supposedly would ensure women's effective representation in the Parliament and thereby enhance their overt

size of the district, and second, it suggests indirect elections. Both of which are against the principle of any representative democracy, especially the method of indirect election is not acceptable to majority stakeholders.

There are other propositions which call for serious consideration. One is in the form of a bill put forward by Mahila Parishad. The bill suggests increase of existing 300 seats to 450 seats of which 150 would be reserved for the women elected through direct election. There is another proposition that suggests for the increase of existing 300 seats to 400 of which 100 would be reserved for women who would be

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of the hearts and minds of their constituents. It was also agreed that only increased number of women's reserved seats without direct election would not enhance women's leadership quality, efficacy in legislation, especially legislation dealing with women's issues and their role as individual legislators.

Consequently, prior to the general elections of 2001 a consensus arose among the activists, women organisations and civil society leaders on above mentioned issues: increase of women's reserved seats and change in the electoral system i.e. introduction of direct election. The women's organisations were also unanimous in demanding the extension of reserved seat provision for more than 10 years. However, there was still some variation with regard to number of reserved seats, which were as follows: National Coalition for Beijing-five-64; Mahila Parishad-150; Federation of University Women-64, a bill by a then woman MP-100. FEMA after having detailed discussion and roundtables with women's organisations also demanded 64 reserved seats for women -- one from each district. Women's organisations and civil society leaders, thus, had no reservation about the virtue of direct election for the women from

political empowerment. It proposed to increase the present 300 seats to 450 seats out of which 50 would be reserved for women who be indirectly elected as before. Only notable change has been that unlike the previous 'winners take all' arrangement the seats would be distributed according to the strength of the winning political parties and thereby doing away with the 'vote bank' system. Barring this change the amendment would continue to perpetuate indirectly elected female MPs, about whose ineffectiveness volumes have already been written, and increase the percentage of women's seats from previous 10% to 11%. So in reality if the bill were passed we would be back to square one and prospect of a meaningful women's representation in the parliament would be blocked, at least, for one decade.

The bill is a big disappointment for those who had been working for meaningful power sharing arrangement. Since the bill has not yet been placed in the Parliament there is still scope to scrutinise and analyze the propositions that were already on the table. Let us look at the merits of these propositions. One woman indirectly elected from each district is not a feasible proposition. First, there is a great variation about the

directly elected. Thus, according to these propositions the ratios are 'two is to one' and 'three is to one', respectively. These two propositions should be studied seriously as the Election Commission could easily create territorial constituencies of additional reserved seats for women by amalgamating and combining, two in one and three in another case, contiguous constituencies out of the 300 general seats. That way all major issues like increase of number of reserved seats for women, method of direct election, non-encroachment upon or prejudicing any one else's interest, avoidance of legal complexities and mainstreaming of women in politics can be ensured.

As the bill proposed by the BNP-led government is not well received, serious dialogue with regard to the proposals by all stakeholders must be continued. Things like the size of the population, difficulties in working with male MPs from the same constituencies must be thrashed out. Most importantly, the opinions of the key players i.e. the women politicians who have previously contested the elections, whether they have lost or won, should be consulted.

One thing should be uppermost in the minds of our political leaders that women's political empower-

ment is now an imperative for the overall welfare of the nation. We have to understand that women can transform politics. We need to internalise how women's desire for broad social reforms, their tradition of sacrifice within the families and their sense of duties and responsibilities can help change the very nature of politics (defined by men) of "fierce competitiveness, hierarchy, formality, ritualism, rigidity and emphasis on self-interest" (Bystydziński, 1995). We need to consider that large-scale entry of women would not only broaden the parameters of governance but also would help mitigate the confrontational politics of our country in the context of women's special qualities in maintaining social relations and their negotiation and compromise skill. There is an urgent need for deeper appreciation of these dimensions so that the country can break free from the typical mould set by patriarchy, which propagates that women's particularistic morality, intellectual inefficacy, physical vulnerability, and high degree of emotionalism make them unsuitable to govern. It is time that we have a deeper look at women's political culture and internalise women's involvement in politics, especially at the grassroots level and community work.

Without appreciating women's input into politics there can never be an abiding faith that their inclusion in the political process indeed is beneficial and it can help bringing about a change in country's masculine dominated political agenda. If there were no such faith then the matter would be treated trivially. As mentioned earlier, we can neither afford to treat the issue trivially or ignore it. It has been declared that 21st century is woman's century. Without women's input no country big or small would be able to deal with the problems that have besieged our planet. Sooner we realise this fact the better it is for us.

In conclusion, I would once again emphasise that women's effective representation in the Parliament is a giant step forward in their overall political empowerment. Let us seriously scrutinise all the propositions and recommendations and bring the necessary electoral reforms that can make a qualitative change in women's political empowerment in Bangladesh.

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Our demand today: Freedom from fear

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THE documentation unit of Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK), more familiarly known as ASK in the year 2003 recorded 249 incidents of acid throwing, 374 incidents where women were tortured for dowry, 46 cases of fatwa in which women were subjected to insulting and torturous treatment, and, last but not the least, 1391 incidents of rape. Even though there is some overlap between the victims of acid throwing and the victims of dowry related violence in the above description, it omits deaths by grievous hurt, suicide, pre-mediated murder or crimes like trafficking and abduction. It may be noted that these statistics are based on the news reported in the national dailies and no one has doubts that there are many more cases that have not been reported. We perhaps have no disagreement in saying that the scale and forms violence against women has taken in the recent years are unprecedented. It has crossed all borders. Women are now targets of violence irrespective of their age, the time of the day and whether they are alone or in company, whether they are at home or in the street. However, the above accounts are enough to make one feel ashamed or at least embarrassed as the member of a society which allows such blatant violation of rights and such violence against a particular section of that society.

In December last year I went to visit the people in Mahalchhor of the Chittagong Hill Tracts whose houses in August have been burnt to ashes in a spree of arson. Where men and women have been beaten, tortured and women raped. There I was told by a woman that as soon as she heard that a group of Bengalis had attacked their village, without thinking of anything else she just jumped into the river in fear. She kept on swimming until she became very tired and felt as if she would drown to death. At that point, she remembered that she had left behind her daughter who may have

been caught by the enemies. She swam back to her daughter in that extremely exhausted state only to find that her daughter was being beaten by a group of people. Some reported her to have been actually raped but the mother denied that in an interview with us. Just think what made the woman jump into the river before anything was done to her. It is the constant fear a woman has to live with.

In November, in a polder area of the remote part of South Bengal, a Hindu widow, who could be easily identified to belong to the poorest of

Bangladesh she feels really persecuted each day with either actual or threat of violence. We all are very well aware of what happened to Simi Banu, to Fahima and Mahima, the child Trisha and Rumi. Not all of them were killed or raped but all of them have been subject to various forms of violence just because they belonged to a certain sex and the consequences they met with were mainly induced by fear in their minds.

Until very recently, violence against women only meant the very gross, identifiable physical assault

of the above mentioned incidents have been recognised in law to constitute violence against women. Even then simple wife battering has no recognition in law as yet. That is why we hear of so many false dowry cases. The reason being, women can seek no legal remedy if she is battered for no other cause than dowry unless the battering leaves injuries to be classified as grievous hurt. Whatever has happened to Simi Banu inducing her to commit suicide cannot be litigated under the violence against women Act. According to the latest news all the

measures an absolute condition.

But unfortunately the usual tendency is to enhance the punitive measures rather than seeing that implementation procedures are made women friendly. Once the punishment is made too high or as severe as death penalty, judges become reluctant to go for conviction. To convict an accused to death the judge needs to be absolutely sure that the accused has actually committed the crime that for well-known obvious reasons is often not possible. The result therefore rests on very low percentage of conviction compared to the numbers of complaints received. This in turn results in frustration in the minds of the victims and the legal aid providers, finally creating a general sense of distrust in the system of justice. This, to my opinion is the worst adverse effect we may have from not having a well-thought definition of violence against women eventually leading to wrong remedial measures and frustrating results.

To bring fundamental change to the situation, we must be able to create a condition where women will have full confidence in the society's sense of justice towards them by recognising the more basic elements of violence against them, by making more sensible laws and by actually punishing the perpetrators for the prevention of those crimes and by establishing a society where women will have not to fear violence at every minute of their life. Awareness to violence against women will have to be joined by respect for their safe and respectful life as well as their freedom from fear. One will have to know that women are not violated only by rape and murder. It may very well be done by hurting their sense of respect as well as by diminishing their confidence; by not only killing them physically but by killing their will to live and love for life. Only by doing so can we think of appropriate systems of assistance to them.

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the poor, asked me if Hindu women could continue to live in Bangladesh in the face of daily harassment or the threat of harassment they live under. In some of the southern districts, we have reports of several incidents where Hindu houses have been invaded by groups of young men of the Muslim community with the demand for food and entertainment by women of the family in whatever probable form. There are incidents where young men come and demand money for their picnic and if refused, the substitute has to be the young girl of the family to join them for purposes not difficult to imagine.

A Muslim activist woman in one of the remotest villages said in her speech in a meeting that for "liberation" she had always dreamt of a situation where she will be free to speak and move, to work and to enjoy a peaceful life. She said she had known the British period and the Pakistani rule and wasn't surprised that people were exploited then. But now in the independent

on women, like rape, maiming, serious injuries by sharp objects, acid throwing or murder. That too remains subject to minute scrutiny and proof beyond reasonable doubt to result in conviction. Simple injury, unidentified assaults, regular battering without marks, sexual harassment other than rape, verbal abuse or psychological torture were not recognised as criminal offence or violence against women offering legal remedy. Neither torture nor assault within the four walls of home or by a close family member, particularly husband, considered to be family or private matters, was to be interfered by the state. Till today, marital rape has no legal cognisance. The women activists had to continue long and arduous campaigns to convince the society, the law makers and the state that violence against women has many faces and many forms and that it does not only manifest itself in rape and murder.

It is only since the 80s that some

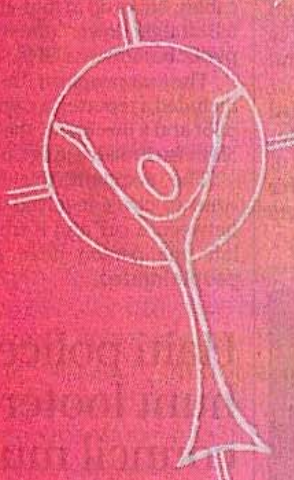
perpetrators of violence against Simi Banu are out of jail on bail now, and they are threatening her sister of the same consequence if they don't stop action against them. Rumi's family had to leave Khulna to a safer place in one of the villages to avoid threats from the accused of harassing Rumi. But in countries like Australia, USA or UK, the law bars entry of the perpetrators in the areas where the victim normally lives or has to go on business like education, shopping or visits. Here in our country the laws either by definition or by default not only bar mobility of the victim or the victim's family but also make their life insecure for ever once the woman has been chosen by the perpetrators to be their victim. Our laws or the lawmakers do not take into consideration that to provide effective assistance to the victims of violence against women they need to create a certain environment and there have to be workable, easily implementable legal measures and to make strict application of those

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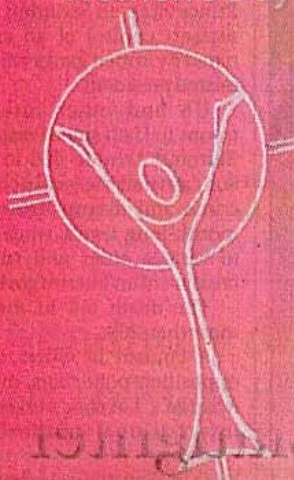
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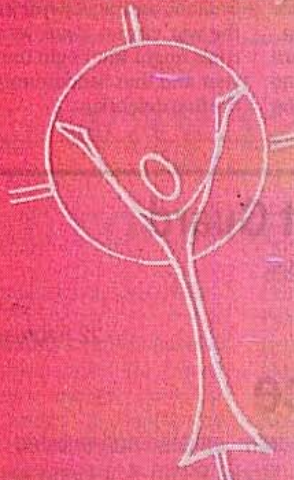
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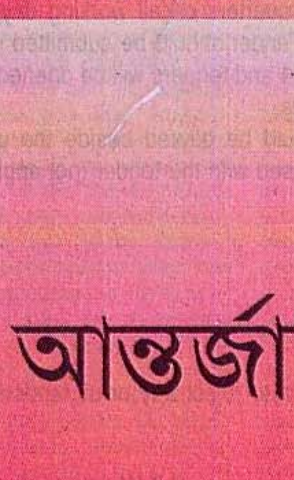


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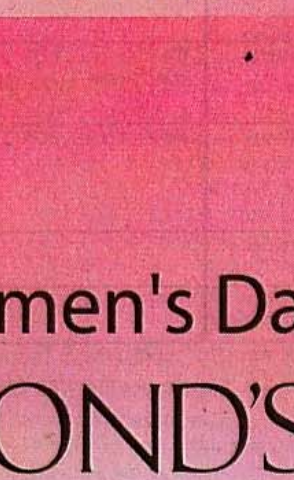


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