

SABINA Yasmin, the wife of the chief Imam of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib Medical University (BSMMU) Hospital Jame Mosque, had become accustomed to a life of abuse during her 15 years of marriage. Her husband, Hafiz Moulana Saiful Islam had started to beat her for a dowry of one lakh taka within a few years into their marriage. Often Sabina would run to her father to get money demanded by her brutal husband. When she failed, he would torture her physically and psychologically. All this she endured for the sake of her children.

But when the Imam asked her to agree to his marrying again, she put her foot down. Saiful left the house and started to live in the mosque refusing to give his family household and education expenses. Desperate, Sabina went to the mosque to ask for money for her children. Saiful refused and kicked her away. Undeterred, Sabina went again in the evening. This time she found Abdul Kader, the muezzin of the mosque. An altercation followed and Kader started to beat her, grabbing her by the neck, banging her head on the wall, and then tried to throw her out of the veranda. Her two children saved her from being pushed out of the veranda and were also beaten. All this happened in front of Sabina's husband Hafiz Moulana Saiful Islam. Later Sabina, her whole face bleeding, was taken to hospital in critical condition.

While the incident is deplorable it is no big surprise. Instances of religious leaders and their sycophants being obsessed with keeping women in their control through brutal repression are quite common. Women have been flogged in public for choosing their partners; they have been denied the right to work and earn, to vote, to choose when to have babies. They have been denied the right to protest against abandonment, polygamy, rape and domestic abuse. All this in the name of religion. Religious sermons at congregations invariably include how women should obey their husbands, how they should dress and how society must be saved from the 'un-Islamic' freedoms given to this 'inferior', 'unstable' gender. At the same time these moral policemen have remained silent on issues like acid violence, rape and dowry deaths. These crimes go against the principles of religion, yet they are never referred to, forget condemned, by these self-righteous clerics.

All this is old news. But a few weeks ago a news item published in The Daily Star last month had the most surprising story. The heading said 'Imams Launch Crusade against Dowry.' Fifty Imams from all over Brahmanbaria got together and announced that they would begin a campaign against dowry, labelling it a 'social vice that claims the lives of hundreds of girls in the country and destroys families'. The Imams said that they would nei-

Imams against Dowry?

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ther accept nor give dowry and that their campaign would target all the 3,137 mosques in Brahmanbaria. The meeting was organised by Brahmanbaria Islamic Foundation and the campaign included anti-dowry sermons at religious functions such as *milad* or *waz mahfil* where a large number of people can be addressed.

The members of this 'Social Revolution Against Dowry' have pledged to stop dowry negotiations during matchmaking. Moreover, they have decided to campaign to promote the idea that daughters and sons are equal and should get equal

opportunities for education. The speakers categorically stated that the prevalent dowry system was opposed to Islam and thus believers must resist it.

Nothing could be more encouraging and refreshing than the knowledge that there are religious leaders who are progressive minded and who preach the true essence of faith that aims to make society more just and peace loving.

An Imam is one of the most respected persons in a community and his views are taken as God's truth. So when an Imam says that taking dowry is 'unIslamic', immoral and has to be resisted, the impact on people is huge. Thus such campaigns as initiated by the Brahmanbaria Imams, if they can be sustained and emulated all over the country, could drastically avert dowry-related violence. Laws that make dowry a punishable offence are never enforced while the practice of dowry has been an accepted custom for centuries, one that is too lucrative for the groom's party, to give up. But if it is proclaimed as a sin in religious terms, it will soon lose its societal immunity.

Curiously, one of the few things both Muslims and Hindus of this country have been united about is the practice of dowry in spite of it being prohibited by law. This shows the cultural origins of this system and the fact that it has nothing to do with the basic principles of religion. Dowry is merely another form of persecution of women and amounts to plain and simple extortion. Women like Sabina, are victimised, sometimes murdered, because their families cannot pay dowry.

It is ironic that only a few weeks after the campaign launched by the Brahmanbaria Imams, right here in Dhaka City, an Imam had the audacity to brutally abuse his wife and get her beaten for failing to pay dowry. But campaigns as revolutionary as this one will take time to change an age-old custom and the general tendency to repress women. It is a small yet significant step that the Imams of Brahmanbaria have taken. One that may change not only medieval practices like dowry but also the distorted image of Islam as a religion that advocates the oppression of women.