

Origins of International Women's Day The status of our women

JOYCE STEPHENS

OVER the years, International Women's Day (IWD) has taken to the streets, sparked off a revolution, met cosily at luncheons and concerts, rubbed shoulders with Premiers, Prime Ministers and Mayors, demonstrated at the doors of newspapers and welfare institutions, occupied empty houses intent on gaining shelter for homeless women and has ushered in reform legislation.

The history of IWD dates back to 1910 internationally, but socialist women in the United States organised the first national Women's Day in 1908 and helped to inspire the international event.

The day has been variously seen as a time for asserting women's political and social rights, for reviewing the progress that women have made, or as a day for celebration. In keeping with its early radical traditions, Lena Lewis, U.S. socialist, declared in 1910 that it was not a time for celebrating anything, but rather a day for anticipating all the struggles to come when we may eventually and forever stamp out the last vestige of male egotism and his desire to dominate over women.

Born at a time of great social turbulence and crisis, IWD inherited a tradition of protest and political activism. In the years before 1910, from the turn of the 20th century, women in industrially developing countries were entering paid work in some numbers. Their jobs were sex segregated, mainly in textiles, manufacturing and domestic services where conditions were wretched and wages worse than depressed. Trade unions were developing and industrial disputes broke out, including among sections of non-unionised women workers. In Europe, the flames of revolution were being kindled.

Many of the changes taking place in women's lives pushed against the political restrictions surrounding them. Throughout Europe, Britain, and America women from all social strata began to campaign for the right to vote. There were many different perspectives on why this issue was important and how to achieve it. I

mention here only a few of these differences.

Some socialists saw the demand for the women's vote as being unnecessarily divisive in the working class movement, while others such as German Clara Zetkin and Russian Alexandra Kollontai successfully fought for it to be accepted as a necessary part of a socialist program. Other socialists argued that it was more important to do away with property rights in respect to the vote than it was to campaign for the women's vote which, if successful in England, would by implication mean votes for women of property.

There were other divisions within the English suffragette movement about the way the movement was

strations took place calling for the vote and the political and economic rights of women. The following year, 2,000 people attended a Women's Day rally in Manhattan.

In that year, 1909, women garment workers staged a general strike. 20-30,000 shirtwaist makers struck for 13 cold, winter weeks for better pay and working conditions. The Women's Trade Union League provided bail money for arrested strikers and large sums for strike funds.

In 1910 Women's Day was taken up by socialists and feminists throughout the country. Later that year delegates went to the second International Conference of Socialist Women in Copenhagen with the intention of proposing that

elected to the Finnish parliament, greeted Zetkin's suggestion with unanimous approval and International Women's Day was the result.

That conference also reasserted the importance of women's right to vote, dissociated itself from voting systems based on property rights and called for universal suffrage - the right to vote for all adult women and men. The voice of dissent on this decision came from the English group led by Mrs. Despard of the Women's Freedom League, a group actively engaged in the suffragette movement.

The conference also called for maternity benefits which, despite an intervention by Alexandra Kollontai on behalf of unmarried mothers, were to be for married women only. It also decided to oppose night work as being detrimental to the health of most working women, though Swedish and Danish working women who were present asserted that night work was essential to their livelihood.

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autocratically run from the top and about the sort of radical tactics adopted. Sylvia Pankhurst split with her more famous mother and sister over such issues, arguing that the main emphasis should be on connecting with and involving the mass of women, which meant also taking up the concerns of the sorely exploited working class women. She also argued that the suffragette movement should link itself with all other oppressed groups.

In the United States in 1903, women trade unionists and liberal professional women who were also campaigning for women's voting rights set up the Women's Trade Union League to help organise women in paid work around their political and economic welfare. These were dismal and bitter years for many women with terrible working conditions and home lives riven by poverty and often violence.

In 1908, on the last Sunday in February, socialist women in the United States initiated the first Women's Day when large demon-

stration Women's Day become an international event. The notion of international solidarity between the exploited workers of the world had long been established as a socialist principle, though largely an unrealised one. The idea of women organising politically as women was much more controversial within the socialist movement. At that time, however, the German Socialist Party had a strong influence on the international socialist movement and that party had many advocates for the rights of women, including leaders such as Clara Zetkin.

Inspired by the actions of US women workers and their socialist sisters, Clara Zetkin had already framed a proposal to put to the conference of socialist women that women throughout the world should focus on a particular day each year to press for their demands. The conference of over 100 women from 17 countries, representing unions, socialist parties, working women's clubs, and including the first three women

encourage the women, definitely it is creating a very odd situation. This mostly takes place in many sophisticated offices where fashionable women usually don't work to support the family or to remove poverty. Whereas most of her male colleagues are to support family as well as help poor relatives. These points also need to be considered. The women who really need job to survive must be given job in preference to others. Those who are born and brought up in affluence without facing any discrimination must not be rewarded to hood wink the society.

Women empowerment entails a wide range of aspects including financial and decision making capacities of women. It is absolutely necessary for the overall development of a country. Leaving a gigantic portion of population away from the executive and decision making process it is not possible to go ahead. Again an educated mother is necessary to form an educated nation with political and social consciousness. The move of women empowerment has been on from different corners. But how far it is going on properly remains a question. Women's empowerment and freedom of women have become a common terms nowadays in every corner of the globe. Many seminars and symposia and

Joyce Stephens has been an activist over many years in the left, union and feminist movements.

MD. MASUM BILLAH

THE whole world observers International Women's Day on March 8 every year with a view to raising awareness of women; making themselves aware of their rights and enhancing their empowerment. To keep pace with this ongoing global process Bangladesh also observes the day chalking out elaborate programmes. In Bangladesh women's representation stands 22 percent in NGOs but at the national level it is only 10 percent. As fifty percent of our population is women their active involvement in the development process is a must to lead the country forward. More than 60 million people of Bangladesh live below the poverty line and among them 74 percent are women. Necessarily it indicates that to alleviate poverty, reaching the women is a must.

Some steps taken by the government deserve appreciation. These include free education for girls up to intermediate level, stipend, maintaining quota for women candidates in service. At the NGO level women are always encouraged different ways. For instance, at present BRAC's Education Programme runs 34000 non-formal primary schools where all the teachers are female and 70 percent students are girls. Another 928 schools for indigent children have 56.7 percent girl students. BRAC has so far given health and hygiene training to 24 lakh girls in rural areas as twenty five thousand mothers die every year due to the complications while giving birth to children. Bangladesh started working to bridge the gender gap after the World Conference on Education for All in 1990 and earned significant improvement in the enrolment of primary education reducing the ratio of boys and girls to 51.1: 48.9 in 2002. In spite of all these efforts in the government and non-government sectors women still feel insecure in roads, markets, educational institutions and work places. They become victims of acid throwing, dowry and ill behaviour. Religion has given equal rights to both men and women. It has put a lot of emphasis on female education but we try to misinterpret it and suppress the women. But until we ensure women's full participation, we hardly can expect real development.

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meetings are taking place frequently in metropolitan cities and other towns. Actually for whom? Is it for all kinds of women or the deprived ones?

I cannot but cry when I see the poor and deprived women work in the street lying their children on the ground beside. The ladies who arrange seminars and symposia on International Women's Day must go to the oppressed and suppressed women of the society who really need to be freed from the shackles of social bondage. Of course the society has already started experiencing very uneven situation particularly in the job market. It is discerned that often meritorious male member is denied a suitable job whereas the same job is given to a woman who really lies far below by merit. Though this is done to

bettement of the society and country. We must give them proper opportunities to discover their sleeping potentialities and abilities.

Islam emphasises education and due respect of women. But what happens to our womenfolk in rural areas? They have been deprived of their rights of due share in every step. Parents consider them as burden of the family. Dowry emerges in the poor family as a curse. To save the rural women from these chronic social diseases some NGOs invite them to come out of their home and engage themselves in economic activities to stand on their own feet which would consolidate their position in the society and elevate their position in the family. Can we go forward without including half of our population in the development activities?



Below the poverty line: Whither status?

PHOTO COURTESY NAWAZISH AHMED

encourage the women, definitely it is creating a very odd situation. This mostly takes place in many sophisticated offices where fashionable women usually don't work to support the family or to remove poverty. Whereas most of her male colleagues are to support family as well as help poor relatives. These points also need to be considered. The women who really need job to survive must be given job in preference to others. Those who are born and brought up in affluence without facing any discrimination must not be rewarded to hood wink the society.

The key point of woman empowerment is economic emancipation. With a view to consolidating the message of woman empowerment we must try to stand beside those poverty stricken women. When they have economic power they will be evaluated by the members of their in laws' families. We must explore the hidden talents of women of all classes and utilise these for the

The changing attitude of Asian women has become the subject of research by the social scientists. Many well educated women have lost faith in marriage and are staying single and childless to pursue their academic and service career. The number of unmarried women in their 30s and 40s sees its climax in Asia. Better education and financial independence have given rise to abhorrence and negligence to marriage and divorce. Married ones are reluctant to bear and raise children. Several wealthy Asian states apprehend continuing decline of their required population because of the changing trend of women these days. Singapore sees increasing divorce rate both among the recently married and long time married couples. Taiwan and Singapore have already started to introduce cash rewards and tax breaks for the couples to have children. More maternity leave has already been announced as an incentive to more children.

The curse of dowry haunts the family of poor working class. They cannot give their marriageable daughters in marriage due to poverty. To find a husband for their daughter they are to dangle before them the recipe of dowry. So, dowry originates from poverty. When poverty disappears, the so-called custom of dowry will automatically vanish. In this respect one of my colleagues raised a very thoughtful point. There are many affluent parents who get satisfaction to give something as presents to their sons-in-law. Is it dowry? Does it bring any undue financial pressure on either of the families? He points out that it rather intensifies the ties of the two families. Whereas the poor parents fail to give their daughters in marriage due to poverty. Their would be son-in-laws are also poor. They themselves cannot get married due to poverty. Some of them get married taking some dowry from their father-in-laws to run a small business or any sort of income generating activities.

Marriage is not a forced matter. Parents must give their daughters in marriage. No poor boy would come to get any poor girl married until and unless he is offered any financial benefit. So, what does it mean? Poverty is the main reason of establishing dowry system among the poor working class. However when a husband tortures a wife for having more dowry from the in-law's family, that is absolutely a crime. It needs punishment.

Our ninety lakh garment workers belong to very poor working class. They live below the poverty line. Their parents have surrendered the hope of their marriage following the normal rituals of the society. Sometimes they fall in love with their fellow workers and out of emotion and hope they get married. But after several months their bond gets loosened and ultimately many of them get separated. So what we should do? Marriage law should be enacted properly and girls should know their rights in the society. Do these poor working girls know what is the significance of International Women's Day? Who will stand beside them? Yes, the privileged women of the society must go to them and stand beside them in their weal and woe otherwise the Day will lose its actual significance.

Poverty alleviation programmes must be made available to all the poor girls. Arrangements of educating them must be made in the true perspective. With the increase of financial power and by virtue of education, women will be able to consolidate their position in the society. Social attitude towards women will also change with the spread of education as we see educated women encounter less discrimination. Let us wish and hope that International Women's Day reaps a good harvest towards women's emancipation from poverty.

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Empowering women through ICT

PARVEZ BABUL

TODAY (March 08) is the 96th International Women's Day (IWD). Pursuant to the declaration by the Socialist Party of USA, the first National Women's Day was observed across the United States on February 28, 1909. But in the 2nd International Conference of Socialist Women, held in Copenhagen in 1910, it was resolved to observe an annual women's day as a uniform international action. The date was nominated in recognition of the United States' Garments workers' demonstration, which was held on March 08, 1857. The purpose of the demonstration was to increase the wage and reduce the working hours of the Garments workers. Government of Bangladesh started to observe the International Women's Day since March 08, 1984.

International Women's Day stands for equality between women and men. During International Women's Year in 1975, International Women's Day was given official recognition by the United Nations and was taken up by many governments throughout the world. International Women's Day is a time to reflect on progress made to call for change and to celebrate acts of courage and determination by ordinary women who have played an extra ordinary role in the history of women's rights.

In our country also women are being seen in frontlines to fight against hunger, poverty and environmental degradation. So, on this day, let us think about empowering women also through ICT (Information and Communication Technology). Because it is an essential part like other goals for winning the fight in the lives of women. It will increase resources in their hands to be self-reliant and empowered and reduce discrimination against them. It is a part of placing their issues at the forefront of policy action.

Micro-credit for self-employment empowers women's decision-making capacity. Likewise, an amount of money, which women need to be ICT experts and to establish ICT firms, will help them earn more money and to be more empowered. 2005 has been declared as the Year of Micro Credit by the United Nations.

This is why Government of Bangladesh as well as the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should start to distribute small loans among interested women to encourage them to be self-reliant by learning and working in ICT sector. The third of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the United Nations is to achieve gender equality and empower women. It seeks to rectify the disadvantages through policies and programmes which build women's capabilities, improve their access to economic and political opportunity guaranteeing their safety. So, ICT will definitely play a supportive role to reach this goal soon.

How can ICT help women? ICT can benefit women in many

The Prime Minister has already declared ICT as the thrust sector. The ICT policy aims at building an ICT-driven nation comprising of knowledge-based society by the year 2006. According to the ICT policy, to implement the target areas, we should work hard from now and take necessary initiatives earlier. On the other hand, more female IT professionals should be encouraged to join in.

ways. It can facilitate their participation in different sectors and different regions. It can provide the information women need to improve their own well-being and that of their families. The introduction of computers into offices has improved the quality of work and scope for women in data entry, analysis, programming, clerical and administrative occupations. More over ICT allows them to exchange views, opinions

due to the bandwidth limitation. Despite the rapid fall in the cost of the Internet services, it is still high for the general people and students. That is why it is necessary that, (Access to Internet exchange should be at par throughout the country. (A high-speed national data network for the country connecting all important cities, district headquarters and important upazilas should be established. BTTB's upazila



Learning ICT: Towards a brighter future!

and information so much, which may not be possible through other media.

ICT has a strategic link with poverty reduction. The Internet, email and mobile phones top the list of new tools. ICT can directly empower women as well as the poor people by offering access to services historically unavailable to them because of high cost or lack of infrastructure, particularly in rural areas. Now buying-selling or renting ICT equipment itself is a source of income. Mobile phone has already ushered in such income among many a rural woman in Bangladesh. The computer training institutes in our country should set the course curriculum in accordance with the need and demand of our country. Access to the Internet is still very limited for several reasons, like poor tele-density, poor electricity, poor affordability of computer and knowledge about the Internet. Public safety. So, ICT will definitely play a supportive role to reach this goal soon.

level Internet project should be implemented.

(Technical assistance from internationally reputed companies should be sought to build proper networking infrastructure throughout the country. The relationship with International Telecommunication Union (ITU) should be strengthened for reducing digital divide. (Proper use of Global Information Superhighway should be ensured. (All schools, colleges and universities should be brought under Internet network. This is an emergency programme to be initiated earlier. As a result women from rural areas will be able to get access to use of Internet as well as to be trained up on ICT. Access to ICT at university level has achieved a very limited success. The ICT penetration in primary, secondary and higher secondary level is not satisfactory at all. Only a limited number of urban schools and colleges have ICT facilities for education purpose. There is a huge mismatch between the market demand and the courses offered. We do not produce adequate num-

ber of qualified ICT professionals in our educational and training institutions to cater to domestic demand. The migration trend of quality ICT professional is alarming. So, we should:

- (Implement education programme in software engineering, computer communication and multimedia with curriculum that incorporates the latest technology. (Introduce 'basic computer skills' as a compulsory subject for all students at Intermediate and Graduate level. (Polytechnics and other training institutes should offer diploma in ICT. (Unemployed girls, women and youth should be encouraged and given priority for ICT training courses vis-a-vis market demand. (Diploma and trade courses should be introduced in distance education system through ICT network under Open University. (A national specialised training of teachers centre should be established for solving the problem of acute shortage of quality teachers in ICT. (Female students and teachers of university and colleges should get free or subsidised access to Internet. (All universities and higher educational institutions should be networked for better access to knowledge and information. (Primary and secondary level education should be emphasised for long run return in ICT industry. (More training institutes on ICT for the girls and women should be established. Poor and meritorious students, unemployed girls, women should be given free of cost training, accommodation, training materials etc. (After completion of training, bank loan may be offered to them on easy terms to set up cyber cafe or computer, training institute in urban and rural areas. ('JAWS' talking software can be given free of cost from the educational institutes or Govt. offices to the visually impaired female and male students as well as the normal software to the disabled students. (Govt. of Bangladesh, BTTB as well as the mobile phone companies in our country should encourage more unemployed women to run business of phone, FAX, computer compose, etc.

ICT policy Honorable Prime Minister has already declared ICT as the thrust sector. The ICT policy aims at building an ICT-driven nation comprising of knowledge-based society by the year 2006. According to the ICT policy, to implement the target areas, we should work hard from now and take necessary initiatives earlier. On the other hand, more female IT professionals should be encouraged to join in accomplishing the policy and to reach the goal of ICT also as a part of opening and building up their career.

Parvez Babul is an NGO activist.

Will a Muslim woman ever be more than what she wears?

This is nothing short of the racism of lower expectations -- they expect Muslims to be extreme, they expect Muslim women to be covered. The Guardian newspaper, which I reported for from the Middle East, committed a grave error in reporting Shabina's story. It did not interview a single Muslim woman who could have told them there is more to being a Muslim than a jilbab and that such a jilbab was over and beyond what is deemed modest.

MONA ELTAHAWY

Shabina Begum, a 16-year-old Muslim schoolgirl who won the right on Wednesday to wear a jilbab to her school in the British town of Luton told the British newspaper *The Guardian* that she felt like screaming with happiness when she heard the court decision.

I felt like screaming with anger and frustration when I heard about Shabina's case because once again a Muslim woman is in the headlines only because of what she wears. When will this madness end?

Shabina's school did not prevent her from wearing a headscarf. Unlike French schools which have banned the hijab outright, Shabina's school went out of its way to accommodate the needs of students who are nearly 80 percent Muslim, speak 40 different languages and who are from 21 different ethnic groups.

Students could wear the regular uniform or they could wear a shalwar kameez. They could wear a headscarf as long as it conformed to certain criteria. In order to satisfy the needs of the diverse background of its students, the school consulted with pupils, parents, schools and leading Muslim organizations when it was formulating its uniform policy. And yet this was not enough for Shabina who wore the shalwar kameez from the time she enrolled at the school when she was 12 until September 2002 when she suddenly decided to wear the jilbab, a long loose fitting one-piece item that covers the body from head to ankles.

Her school refused to allow her to attend until she resumed wearing the approved uniform. Shabina took the school to court but her case was rejected by High Court judges last summer. The school had argued that allowing her to wear a jilbab would impact on the rights of other Muslim girl pupils who opposed allowing the jilbab as they felt that it would create a hierarchy of belief at the school.

Her school was right. What has become of our faith that it has turned into a competition over who can cover the most? Who convinces young Muslim women that they must cover more and more, going far beyond what is deemed the modest clothing that Islam requires of men and women?

Shabina switched to a school that allowed her to wear the jilbab and her case went to the Court of Appeal which on Wednesday agreed that her initial school had a right to set a school uniform policy but that it had failed to consider Shabina's rights under the Human Rights Act.

The Guardian reported that Lord Justice Brooke, vice-president of the civil division of the court of appeal, ruled that Shabina's school had: unlawfully excluded her; unlawfully denied her the right to manifest her religion; unlawfully denied her access to suitable and appropriate education.

Lord Justice Brooke has committed the simplest mistake that a non-Muslim commits -- he accepted that an especially strict interpretation of mod-

est dress, was a requirement for Muslim women. To this day, Muslim scholars issue various interpretations about Muslim dress. After the 9/11 attacks, some Muslim scholars in the America even told Muslim women they did not have to wear a headscarf if they felt in danger from anti-Muslim attacks.

Shabina chose to go beyond a uniform that was deemed acceptable for the other Muslims and denied herself the ability to continue attending her school. She claimed that her school's refusal to allow her to attend classes in a jilbab was a result of post-9/11 bigotry. I assert that Lord Justice Brooke's ruling is a classic example of liberal guilt over the ugly Islamophobia that many Muslims have faced since 9/11. Instead of standing up to a growing conservatism among some Muslims, many liberals will simply give in rather than appear prejudiced. Sadly, most of the points they give in on have to do with Muslim women.

This is nothing short of the racism of lower expectations -- they expect Muslims to be extreme, they expect Muslim women to be covered. The Guardian newspaper, which I reported for from the Middle East, committed a grave error in reporting Shabina's story. It did not interview a single Muslim woman who could have told them there is more to being a Muslim than a jilbab and that such a jilbab was over and beyond what is deemed modest.

Interestingly, Shabina was represented by Cherie Booth, the wife of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Some Muslims might see something to celebrate in this and say, "Look, the wife of the British prime minister is defending a Muslim girl's rights." There is no need for celebration.

I wish Cherie Booth had defended a Muslim girl's right to complete her education against a family who was pulling her out of school early to get married, which happens even in Britain. I wish she had defended a Muslim girl against violence at home -- a suffering that is too often ignored by the Muslim community in the West because it would prefer girls and women suffer in silence than bring shame to the community by speaking out.

And what does Shabina think she has achieved? She told the Guardian that the Court of Appeal verdict would "give hope and strength to other Muslim women" and that it was a victory for all Muslims "who wish to preserve their identity and values despite prejudice and bigotry."

My response to Shabina is thanks but no thanks. I wore the hijab for nine years from the age of 16 to 25 and do not feel my identity lies in a piece of cloth. I gain my hope and strength by sharing the excitement of ambitious young Muslim women like my sister Noora who loves her university studies. Noora wears the hijab but she knows that it is what is in her head, not what is on it that is more important.

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