

DHAKA MONDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2009

The way forward to our rights

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IN anticipation of the elections, women's groups had outlined their priorities for political commitment: first, for an end to impunity for war crimes, including rape, for extra judicial killings, for violence against women, particularly domestic violence and sexual harassment, for corruption; second, for legislating equality and freedom; third, for equal access to opportunities and resources; fourth, for affirmative action to protect women's rights and eliminate gender discrimination, irrespective of religion, ethnicity, profession or class; fifth, for democratising state and community institutions for meaningful participation; sixth, for fair conditions at work. These concerns had emerged from their long struggle for recognition of full citizenship, for equal rights in the public and private sphere, for social, political and economic participation and for gender justice.

Some incremental gains have of course been made, say in education or work opportunities, but these are only piece meal solutions, and have not resulted in a transformation of gender relations. Can we now expect more positive advances, given the promises made by the majority party, a larger number of women in elected positions, a growing constituency of women voters and the dynamism of women's rights activists, who have in the course of their struggles made common cause across differences of religion, ethnicity and social exclusion? State interventions are needed to lay the ground rules



for equality in women's public and private lives, and to eliminate social blocks to change within the family, in the community, in the market and in public life. There can be no excuse for governments to give in to political conservatism or expediency.

The AL's 1997 National Policy for Women's Advancement had covered considerable ground in providing for women's personal rights, as well as

rights to property, land, and at work, etc. Since the party's manifesto as well as the PM's election speech reiterated this commitment, the government now needs to move beyond rhetoric to list priorities and sequential timelines for implementation. In the same spirit with which the party engaged in wide consultations with women activists in 1997, it should again hold consultations with women's and human rights

groups, so that law making is not restricted to a five minute raising of hands in the Parliament.


Two immediate initiatives could win kudos from women's rights activists and be important steps in promoting rule of law. A draft bill on domestic violence is almost ready for adoption and this could be tabled in the first session of Parliament. The second initiative would be to formally adopt

the UGC sponsored draft code on sexual harassment as policy in the universities and work place. This could also lay the foundation of a law on sexual harassment. Opposition may be likely from the party's male hierarchy and its cadres, some of whom have enjoyed impunity for their own acts, but their reservations must give way to the social good.

Amongst the structures that need to be set up, a priority would be a Gender Equality Commission to examine areas of discrimination and recommend reforms in laws, policies and programmes, to ensure the promotion and protection of women's rights. The Commission could recommend ways for Bangladesh to meet its commitment to reform of national laws in conformity with CEDAW articles, and for their implementation. Examples of the useful work of such commissions in South Africa and Rwanda can guide us.

Several countries have adopted an Equal Opportunities Act to ensure equality in access to education, health, employment, and other opportunities as well as to resources. Indicators for education and even health have no doubt improved, but we need to take longer strides in quality education, in reproductive health and rights, and be provided security of livelihoods. Finance and economic ministers never fail to sell plans for economic growth and foreign exchange earnings, but they forget that this has been due to women's labour in shrimps, garments, construction, etc., therefore economic

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Dhanmondi 27



Sat Masjid Road



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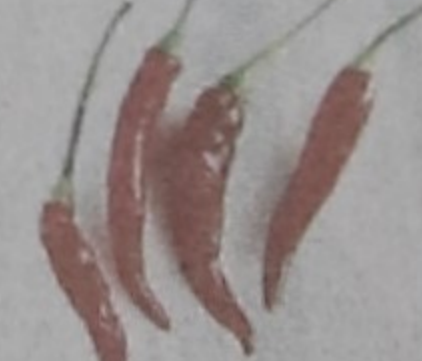
Mirpur 10



Mohammadpur



Azimpur



Nasirabad, Chittagong



Power House More, Khulna



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meena
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