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# Sultana's Dream



ST. EMANUEL, UNO

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that women of Bangladesh have made remarkable progress over the century since Rokeya's time. Seen from that point of view, the situation of women is much closer to the standards drawn by Rokeya in 'Sultana's Dream' than as depicted in her 'Oborodhbashini' (The Confined).

This can be credited to the relentless work of the women's movement and the sincere efforts of many NGOs to help women break the barriers to become visible and to establish women's rights as human rights; to make the world recognise the important productive

roles of women in agriculture and in industries, both formal and informal, in the export processing area as well as in the social and reproductive fields. Marketing and wage-earning sectors are not deprived of women's vital contributions. Recognition of the women members' contribution in micro credit schemes by the Nobel Committee can be considered a landmark. This is a clear reflection on the quality of the rural grassroots level women and their potential to lead the country ahead. The increased number of women coming to ASK for remedy against wrongs is an indicator that women are no longer willing to suffer family violence without question.

On the other hand, the quality of leadership provided by Sultana Kamal over a period of half a century in the socio-cultural-political arena of Bangladesh not only for women's advancement, but in general, is yet to find a parallel. Considering the legacy and tradition of such leadership, it does not come as a surprise that another woman, Jahanara Imam, also led the movement for the trial of the war criminals. All these can, perhaps, be taken as examples of the partial realisation of Sultana's Dream.

However, women of Bangladesh have other stories to tell too. A woman, after recovering from labour, found her child to be missing. She was told that she gave birth to a baby girl but the baby was still-born. Immediately it flashed in her memory that her husband warned her a number of times that if she had a girl he would not accept it. Moreover, that he would even consider divorcing her. In a frantic search, with the help of the attending nurse and her other family members she was able to locate her daughter with a foster family. The baby had been handed over to an adoption home by the father to be given away, and a couple had adopted her. When the mother met the woman who adopted the baby and wanted her back, the adoptive mother was on the verge of breakdown because her husband had given

her an ultimatum that if she failed to produce a child she would be thrown out on the street.

The above depicts the story of two women; one was threatened to be abandoned if she gave birth to a baby girl, the other if she failed to produce a baby. We would perhaps be justified to say that the story is not an uncommon one. Let us take the story of the highly qualified lady doctor who was asked to come back from London to respect her grandmother's dying wish to see her, and was then forced to marry against her will only because she decided to marry a person of her own choice. In the process of forcing her to submit to the marriage arrangement she was drugged and placed in solitary confinement under the pretence that she was mentally deranged. So much for women's empowerment and equality! These examples bring us back to the ground reality that many women still have to struggle to free themselves from the shackles of oppression created by patriarchal values. Again, these examples are not to be seen as exceptional occurrences.

Despite women dominating Parliament and the cabinet, women still cannot consider going out after dusk or travelling alone over long distances. No woman considers throwing acid on a man who refuses her, whereas men do it frequently to women, an outrageous phenomenon peculiar to Bangladesh.

It places a demand on people to seriously reflect on such treatment of women at this point in history. Just to think that this is the 21st century, the new millennium when human civilisation has been marked to have reached its prime, when the moon and Mars and the deepest depths of the oceans are considered to be probable tourist destinations by travellers, yet justifications for discrimination against women are put forward at policy-making levels without any qualms.

It is rather disheartening to see how hesitant the state is to withdraw reservations from clauses 2 and 16(c) of the

CEDAW. We know clause 2 directs the deletion of all discriminatory laws against women, to be replaced by laws based on equality, and 16 (c) deals with the rights of women within the family - her right to be treated equally, to decide on marital relationships, her freedom to choose partners - which are so basic to one's autonomy.

We have also, to our utter dismay, witnessed the drama of the Chief Adviser's declaration of the revised Women's Development Policy, and the quick trip of four of his advisers to the Islamic Foundation Office to pacify the anti-women, anti-democratic forces who took to agitation at the announcement of the Policy. The irony is, it is the women who should have been agitating and protesting as the new Policy does not make any pledge to give women equal right to inheritance, for which women have been struggling for almost a century now. On the contrary, it was the reactionary, fundamentalist forces, which through their show of power made the Government run to them, and claimed the right to amend the Policy according to their own principles. The recommendations given by the Committee that was formed with the members of the religious group in fact demanded scrapping of all clauses of the Policy committed to equal treatment of women. We are still waiting to see the cabinet pass the Domestic Violence Act criminalising violence against women within family bounds, where either the male members or other members following male connections consider it their right to discipline the female members of the family by any means, even if violent.

The Citizenship Act has been amended to give rights to the children of women marrying foreigners, but the right to their husbands has not yet been granted. The Constitution pledges equality in all spheres of public life for women without committing anything of the sort to their private life. Hence we still are governed by discriminating

family laws in our personal relationships, in matters of property and marital rights.

The list can grow longer and longer, but I consider that I have been able to respond to those who continue to wonder why women of Bangladesh want more rights for themselves. Nevertheless, I would like to make it clear that Bangladesh is a country of contradictions insofar as the question of women's rights and empowerment is concerned. Neither the perception nor the impression prevail about Bangladesh that it is a country dominated by medieval anti-woman thinking, where women have no rights or say, where leadership by women is not accepted by the people and the social-sexual division of labour and seclusion of women are the norms. However, neither is it the picture that we have women faring well in vital and important positions in numbers appropriate to half the population of 15 crore.

We therefore have to be aware of the many different dimensions of the issue of women's empowerment in Bangladesh and the hindrances posed in the path to women's advancement. Women's empowerment cannot be sought in certain positions only, but has to be sown and nurtured in an atmosphere of everyday individual freedom and autonomy, the power to make decisions in their personal, social, cultural, economic as well as public life. This is not to say that these are realities in the life of all men of the world, but at least their rights are not denied because they belong to a certain gender, which is still the case for women.

Women have waited for centuries to see their dream realised. To achieve this will require a serious political will on the part of the government as well as the people. Now is the time to make our dream come true.

Sultana Kamal, a human rights activist, is former advisor to caretaker government.

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