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What women want

HAMEEDA HOSSAIN

THE 1997 Policy for the Advancement of Women, formulated in consultation with a large number of representatives of women's organisations, made some radical recommendations to ensure equality in personal rights, as well as to property, land, and at work, etc.

Unfortunately, it appears that it had not been given the official approval by the cabinet at the time, and subsequently it went through several metamorphoses. In 2004, many of its clauses were reversed with a view to limit equality to traditional boundaries of gender relations.

In 2008, the caretaker government made an attempt to revive the original with a few additional progressive entries, but it went into rapid reverse gear in the face of a reactionary response from the religious right, and agreed to take on board revisions recommended by a committee of imams, many of whom represented religion-based political parties.

When the 1997 policy had expected to move forward in the pursuit of justice and rule of law, the revisions to the 2008 policy suggested by the imams' review committee stipulated that all rights be "in accordance with the Qur'an and Sunnah" and that any contradictions be resolved by religious experts. The revisionists proposed "discouraging early marriage" to water down a deterrent law on early marriage.

In March 2008, as fiery slogan shouting imams emerged from the Baitul Mukarram Mosque brandishing firearms in front of a sleepy and inactive police posse, their opposition was made explicit through violence. When the government buckled under, the 2008 Policy was buried.

Can we now take the Awami League's electoral manifesto promise of reviving the 1997 policy as a serious commitment to gender equality and justice, or was this no more than a sales pitch for women's votes?

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Dr. Hameeda Hossain is a women's right activist.



AMIRUL RAIY

Walk tall

NAIRA KHAN

I am not a feminist nor do I wish to be labeled as one. In fact I would even go so far as to voice my protest against such celebrations as "Women's Day" because it makes me feel as though all other days are "Men's Day."

Even Valentine's Day I feel was invented by men for men to redeem all the birthdays and anniversaries they forgot and Hallmark was assigned the task of making it logistically impossible to ignore it, let alone forget it.

Another such Hallmark invention would be Friendship Day -- an insult to all friendships wherebv you need to set aside a day to commemorate them.

Coming back from the tangent I seem to have strayed off into, my proclamation of not being a feminist was mainly because for the next few paragraphs I'm going to harp on about women's issues.

Well not so much women's issues as there is a plethora of issues therein, but rather about the tribulations faced by women on the streets of Dhaka city. As for women's issues, as long as we live in a male dominated world, there will always be room for improvement.

Having grown up in Dhaka city I find that there are some discrepancies in terms of the gravity with which the problems faced by women



in the streets on a daily basis are presented.

There seems to be a socio-cultural demarcation between women who take to the streets because they have no other option and those who are so apprehensive to do so that they don't mind their mobility being limited due to the lack of availability of their private vehicle.

A friend of mine labeled the latter as bubble-girls -- women who live in a bubble created by the paranoia of their parents and perpetuated by themselves. I was once a bubble girl myself. I was only able to break free from the shackles of my parents' stronghold by literally taking to the streets, using public transportation, and showing them that it is quite alright to do so.

The apprehensions seem to be three-fold: a) the state of roads and traffic conditions, b) the staring, c) the eve-teasing. To the extent that many believe the streets of Dhaka are completely unusable and women only deign to use them despite the conditions described.

In actuality, however, this perspective is rather extreme. Women can indeed walk the streets of Dhaka -- and average women do. In fact I think it's rather elitist to say that the streets of Dhaka are no place for women and women don't use them.

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Rights in the in-law enclave

MUNEERA PARBEEN

IT'S actually quite stupefying to think that women themselves also act against the rights of their own kind. A section of male readers could jump up at the previous sentence and breathe a sigh of relief. And yet, that remains the reality.

There are mothers and guardians who always, wishing to conform to society, hold back their female children from living life to the full. And by that I don't mean just partying, going out, and wearing fancy clothes. I mean living life to the full in its fullest meaning. From reaching out for their full potential.

Take, for instance, the entire in-law mechanism in a society as ours. Mothers-in-law, whatever they might believe in theory, are not known for their support for the emancipation of the women under their immediate control.

I know there are a lot of mothers-in-law who are better and more just. But I talk about the majority of those who are not. It's not unusual in our society to find that mothers-in-law are one huge force that actually takes pleasure out of belittling a woman's personal rights.

A woman, once married, and especially if she is compelled to live in a joint family, is more or less subjected to the control of her in-laws. It is the "duty" of the daughter-in-law to look after the house, nurse and care for the elderly, cook, clean, entertain, and hold up the family status without a word of protest. In other words, her only function in life is to obey the tyranny of her in-laws.

Extremely upsetting to think about, but nevertheless the real picture. And society has taught us to conform to the uncivil practices nurtured by many, so much so that we are even scared to talk about it in public.

A false sense is instilled in us while young, that by holding up pretensions -- as all is fine at home when it is not -- we try to buy "respect" (izza) from our fellow society dwellers.

Many a mother-in-law will point out that certain tasks are only a daughter-in-law's responsibility and duty. And these usually include all the difficult tasks in the house with meticulous detail. Most of them serve to a large extent only the needs and comforts of the in-laws.

The situation is worse if the mother-in-law has herself been ill-treated by her own mother-in-law in her time. She will bide her time till she gets her a daughter-in-law in the house, to sort of take revenge for the own wrongs she suffered.

"But I had to do all these in my time and I never uttered a word!" she will point out

time and again to her victim.

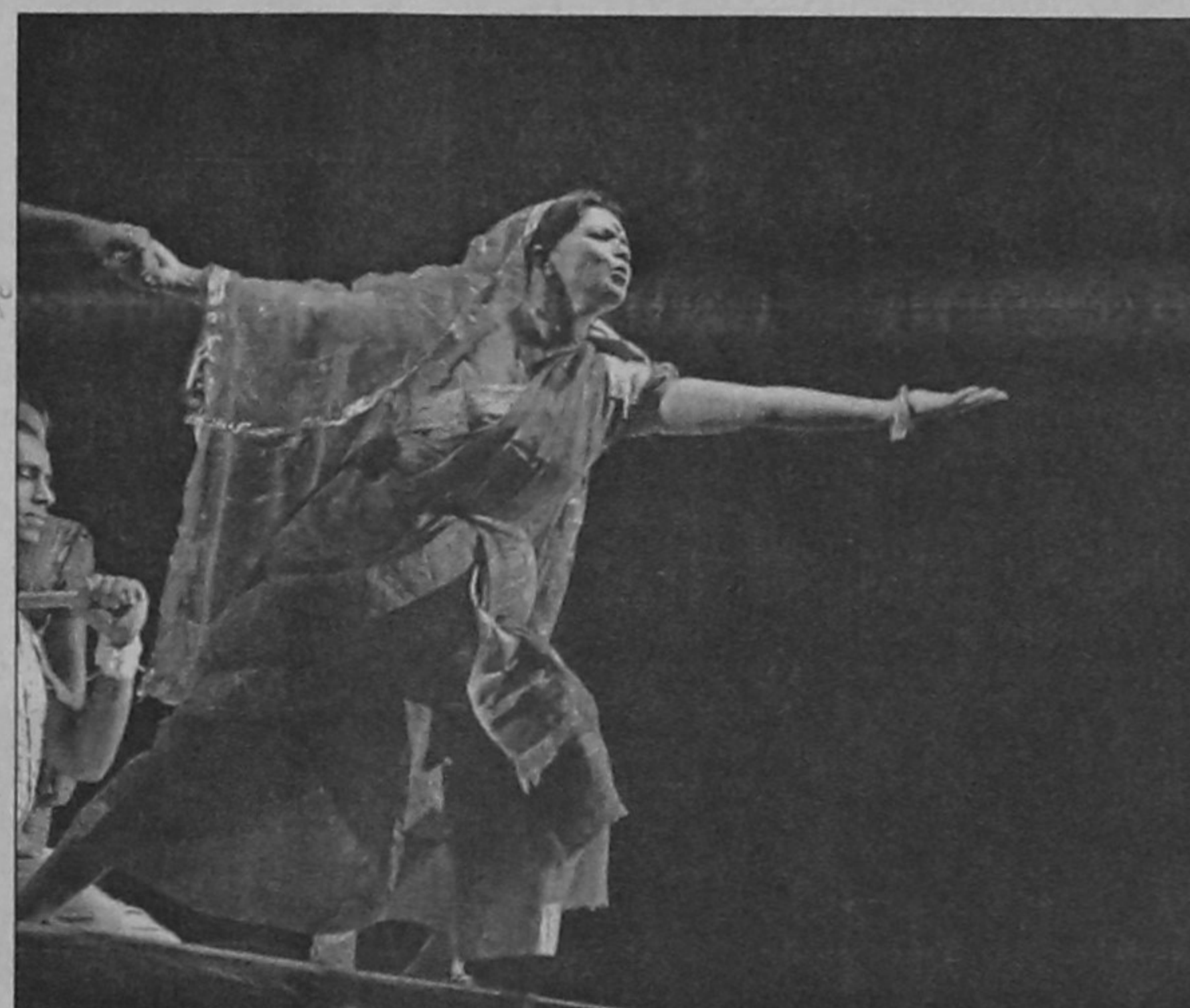
She will never stop to remember though, that torturing daughters-in-law, physically or mentally, is wrong. They remain as wrong as they were when the same was done to herself when she was a young bride.

There will be few from the same household to come to the support of the victim, because people usually take the easy route out by up telling themselves that "that's the way things are in our country/society/culture/religion."

No one bothers to think whether the things done are right or wrong.

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AMIRUL RAIY

Breaking new ground



HANA SHAMS AHMED and QUAAZI ZULQUARNAIN ISLAM

WOMEN'S sport has taken quite a beating from obscurantist groups in the recent past. And it doesn't help when the media helps to accidentally bolster the view of the bigots by publishing sexualised literature about women's sport. In a magazine piece that talked about women participating in the 2008 Olympics, a woman athlete was described as follows: "She participated at the summer Olympics as a Javelin thrower, and although her performance was not particularly one to remember, her physical splendour remains as a flag for people to reminisce on."

But it is not just self-appointed morals police who object to women taking part in sport, there is an overall attitude in society that sport is somehow only the realm of men. Even something as simple as a woman jogging or cycling on the streets receives a bigger share of "eve teasing" than does a woman who is doing something more "acceptable" like going in a rickshaw with the hood up or sitting behind a man in a motorcycle.

Somehow a woman taking charge of her own body is a culturally unacceptable thing to do. Trying to be physically fit, taking part in something that is healthy and liberating, is somehow sinful. Research conducted by Women's Sports Foundation (WSF) on Muslim women in sports revealed that Bangladeshi women

"led sedentary lives with little priority given to exercise and physical activity as it conflicted with their role as a mother and home-keeper." What the report does not reveal is that it is not by choice that women lead such "sedentary" lives.

True, though, that the days of girls having to take up sewing classes in school, while the boys go out to indulge in fitness activities like football and cricket is long past. In fact, cricket itself, which had very little existence for women even in the last decade, has evolved dramatically. The WSF researchers would have been pleasantly surprised if they had visited one of the women's cricket training camps. It's a super-charged environment, just like any men's cricket camp, and the women are just as competitive.

Last month, as a matter of fact, saw a new chapter in Bangladesh women's cricket when the first Women's Club Cup tournament kicked off. The Bangladesh Cricket Board (BCB) Women's Wing organised this tournament involving eight clubs with girls from all over the country participating. The Bangladesh national team has also played several international matches at home and abroad. Now they are eyeing one-day status in the hope of participating in the World Cup.

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Hameeda Hossain

Things I Won't Tell
My Daughter
Tazreena Sajjad

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