

MAHMUDA IMAM

**T**HIS year, we are going to observe 100 years of International Women's Day. During the 19th and early 20th century women worked in large numbers in factories across the industrialised nations in deplorable working condition and for pitiful wages.

In 1857, 15,000 women workers in garment factories demonstrated and marched through New York City demanding shorter working hours, better wages and voting rights. They were attacked by baton-wielding police. It was in this context of radical socialist ideology and the suffragette and labour movements that the idea of International Women's Day was conceived.

In 1910, at the Socialist International meeting in Copenhagen, Clara Zetking of Socialist Party of Germany proposed that March 8th be declared as International Women's Day in recognition of the need to address women's issues globally. Today, we celebrate it as a day when we pledge anew our commitment to ensuring the equality of women in all spheres of life.

From those early events it took nearly half a century for the United Nations to declare 1975 as International Year of Women. In 1979, the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was created. CEDAW is a human rights document for women. The Bangladesh government has reservations about Articles 2, and 16 (c), which are the heart of CEDAW.

The new millennium has brought some new ideas about women's role in society. Today, women have made significant strides in politics, media, business, law, science, medicine. Yet, a large number of the world's women remain poor and vulnerable. Many women live in a war zones as internally displaced people and refugees. They face, death, starvation, trafficking, sexual abuse, lack of education and health care, and poverty.

It is not to say that the state and status of women across the world have not changed for the better. A hundred years back women

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

# A hundred years

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were not allowed to vote, now, in a number of countries, women are heads of government. Bangladesh is an example in this regard. In a country which has had a female prime minister for the most part of the past two decades, women still remain captive to patriarchy at all levels. The reason is obvious; while the faces have changed at the top, the system has remained unchanged. Thus, the struggle is and will be to bring about essential changes in the system.

In Bangladesh, women have come a long way since 1905 to establish their rights. The inheritors of Begum Rokeya's dream have been struggling to create equal space for women in the public sphere over the past several decades.

Women's empowerment cannot be complete without political empowerment. The Union Parishad is an impor-

tant area for empowering, mobilising and transforming local people for their development.

Participation of women in local government bodies is a crucial factor for women's development, particularly at grassroots level. It is encouraging that many female UP members want to build their career in politics, which is a positive trend for women leadership in rural Bangladesh.

Most of them express their willingness to participate in the election, and are preparing themselves for contesting in general seats and for chairmanship to overcome their marginalisation. This led to creation of the position of vice-chairman in Upazilla Parishad in the recent elections.

The contribution of the government and NGOs to women's development is notable. It has directly or indirectly pushed women's political empowerment process forward at grassroots level. Women members have to face socio-cultural and institutional challenges. As a result, they do not get support from their male counterparts. It requires changes both in structure and in the mindset of people.

To eradicate discrimination from the society, free women from exploitation and deprivation so that they can enjoy their rights, power, authority and dignity.

The writer is an activist and Member Gender Trainers' Core Group.

SHEGUFTA YASMIN

**T**ODAY, women all over the world are celebrating "International Women's Day" with full freedom and spirit. But do all the women enjoy real freedom and spirit in their homes? Do we ever think of the psychology of those who are unprivileged? We only talk about those women who are successful and come forward as news headlines. But what will happen to those who are not in our everyday syllabus?

Lots of women are silently facing mental torture in their homes. They can't consult with anyone, and can't go to a psychiatrist for fear of infamy. If a woman loses her mental balance, her family and

## Free women from their psyche

ble for their failure? Who will they ask for their freedom from all these obligations?

In foreign countries a woman can go to a mental doctor if she even feels depressed at the death of her pet; but in Bangladesh a woman doesn't dare to go to the same kind of doctor for discussing her depression after her husband's second marriage or divorce! Many mothers don't have the right to choose subjects of study or grooms for their daughters; they don't have any say in selecting the menu

their names. We will find that most of them are suffering from frustration because of their husbands' or in-laws' behaviour. They don't dare talk with anyone around them,

which is why they seek solutions from doctors.

Age after age, poets and writers have blamed women for their dishonesty or frailty. Now it's women's turn to condemn men (with apologies to Shakespeare): "Frailty thy name man"! If a girl is beautiful then she becomes a victim of eve teasing; and if she is not beautiful she is ignored by the social system. Many girls gave their lives because of eve teasing. We see that the



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*Let our society and men think in new ways to evaluate our women and their thoughts and deeds on this auspicious day. Then every day will be women's day. Let us free women from their obsession with guilt.*

society will criticise her more. Everyone will hold her responsible for her situation and think that it is a self-made problem.

Those around her think they have every right to insult her, blame her for not being beautiful or being worthy to be chosen as a bride, for not managing her in-laws, for not attracting her characterless husband, for not being able to produce a son, for delivering premature baby, for not bringing assets from her father's house, for not saving her marriage from divorce etc.

But she does not have the right to protest; she can only suffer internally or take the help of a psychiatrist. Why this injustice against women? A girl's journey of accusation starts from her childhood and ends with her death.

If a son gets a bad result in an exam, the mother is rebuked; if a daughter is involved in any affair, again the mother is held responsible. But the father takes all the appreciation for the children's success. Maybe that's why Francis Bacon said: "A wise son rejoiceth the father, but an ungracious son shames the mother." Who says that only women are responsi-

for lunch or dinner!

If a woman loses her beauty in middle age, her husband loses attraction for her and goes to another lady. Is it her fault? How will she fight against time? Our TV commercials fire their upset minds by showing ads of beauty creams which keep someone ever young or transform someone from being black skinned to being white skinned and being appreciated by everybody. Through these ads our women feel that maybe they are somehow responsible for the failure to attract their husbands.

It seems that women are here only to serve men. In Bacon's words: "Wives are young men's mistresses, companions for middle age, and old man's nurses." Here, in man's court man is defender, man is judge, man is punisher and women are only sufferers.

"You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try" (Beverly Sills). If we go through the letter section of any magazine or newspaper, we will find that most of the letters written by women are about mental problems, and they don't usually disclose

number of women committing suicide is higher than that of men. This proves how vulnerable our women are.

Examples of sufferings for not being beautiful according to the society's requirements are found in the literature of many languages. We don't want any more Sharatchandra's Gyanda, Tony Morrison's Pecola etc., who face lifelong sufferings and mental torture for their lack of beauty.

Let us remember the famous lines from Kazi Nazrul Islam: "Prithibir ja kichu mohan chiro kollankor, Ordhek tar koriache nari, ordhek tar nor." If women are the shareholders of half of entire good deeds of men, then why will men not be the equal shareholders of women's failures? Let our society and men think in new ways to evaluate our women and their thoughts and deeds on this auspicious day. Then every day will be women's day. Let us free women from their obsession with guilt.

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## The Prof. Yunus saga, an unsavoury act

SHAMSHER M. CHOWDHURY, BIR BIKRAM

**T**HE removal of Nobel laureate Prof. Mohammad Yunus, pioneer of micro financing, from the management of Grameen Bank by the government recently, and the manner in which it was done, was a direct assault on the collective conscience of this nation. More than the Nobel Peace Prize that he and his globally recognised Grameen Bank were awarded in 2006, the name of Yunus and his innovative scheme had become synonymous to bringing millions, mostly women, out of abject poverty and socially empowering them.

The impact of this phenomenon was not confined to Bangladesh alone but had also touched an equally large number in many parts of the globe, especially in Africa and Latin America. Countries like China, Vietnam and a whole range of others had found it fitting to emulate the scheme, and for the right reason. It has been replicated in parts of the United States as well.

The nervous defense by the country's finance minister, in the presence of a couple of key advisers of the government, of the government's action to Dhaka based foreign diplomats further served to testify to the weakness of the government's case. The comments of the US ambassador following the "briefing" proved that none was buying the government story. If anything, it made the government look frivolous. Worse, it had the unsavoury stench of vindictiveness.

The finance minister was at least honest in admitting that the whole bizarre drama did nothing to lift the country's fast sinking image at home and abroad. As subsequent events suggest, he was right.

The finance minister also admitted that he had no choice! Isn't it the same Mr. Muhith, who in 1971 during our glorious liberation war had chosen to go with his conscience over duty and switched allegiance to Bangladesh while serving in the Pakistan Embassy in Washington DC?

The finance minister's comments to the press raised some ethical questions. He made a public disclosure of his "discourse" with Prof. Yunus that was reported to have taken place in the days and weeks preceding his unceremonious removal. That communication between two individuals was not necessarily meant for public consumption, especially when Prof. Yunus was not present to either vouch for or deny its veracity.

The finance minister also blamed the media for making a big fuss over a Norwegian TV documentary that first attempted to vilify Prof. Yunus and his micro-financing scheme. He has chosen to forget that the government assault on Prof. Yunus started with that now highly questionable and apparently motivated TV documentary.

Public reaction to the removal of Prof. Yunus was fast and furious, both in Bangladesh and outside. This was only to be

expected. Former Adviser and Cabinet Secretary Dr. Akbar Ali Khan called the removal as being completely illegal. He also had genuine concerns about its impact on the future functioning of the Nobel Peace Prize winning Grameen Bank. Norway's minister for development cooperation described the act as an outcome of "internal political struggle" in Bangladesh. The minister was dead right.

Such was the view of all those who had responded on line, as evident from the March 4 issue of The Daily Star. Its editor, in a commentary, questioned the moral and legal grounds of the government's actions and its motives. The sense of shame was writ all over.

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Everyone, however, was in accord with the editor that Prof. Yunus stands vindicated, a victim and a hero at the same time.

What the Yunus drama has done to the government's image is of no concern to me here. What bothers me most is the damage it has done to the image of the nation. The people of this country deserve better. They put their trust on good and inclusive form of governance. Today, that trust lies in tatters.

The scene is the same in the outside world, notwithstanding the claims of the country's foreign minister. The comments of the Norwegian minister and those of leading US Congressional leaders, and those of the international media, are cases in point. Can any person or institution be safe when someone of the stature of Prof. Yunus becomes a victim of a grudge? And that is the real and far-reaching danger for us as a nation.

The writer is a former Foreign Secretary and Ambassador. He is presently the Vice Chairperson of BNP.