



The Unfinished Revolution: Women's Empowerment in Bangladesh

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PICK up any newspaper in this country and you will find stories about the impressive achievements of girls in school, women's success as entrepreneurs, court decisions upholding women's rights and the government's progressive policies on women. You might even read about the feats of the Bangladesh women's soccer team!

But alongside the good news you will also read that somewhere in this country a girl has been driven to

deeply ingrained in our culture, customs and religious practices. The fact that women have enjoyed the top position in government for almost twenty of the forty years of Bangladesh's independent existence – a stretch of female political leadership not seen in any other country in modern history – appears to have made little difference to discriminatory attitudes towards women.

The struggle for the independence of Bangladesh galvanized women as

thwarted women's struggle for equality and rights. Notwithstanding the adverse environment, the women's movement and human rights groups in Bangladesh continued to champion the cause of gender justice through those years.

In the 1970s and 1980s international development organizations did not consider gender equality or women's empowerment as falling within their remit. It was not until the 1990s that the expansion of democracy globally, the growth of

between women and men in public and private life.

Gender inequality is not a product of scarcity. So, while investing more resources in service delivery and creating more economic opportunities can and do have a positive impact on women's lives, they are not in themselves enough to address the root causes of women's disempowerment.

Take girls' education. Thanks to considerable investment Bangladesh has achieved gender parity in enrolment in schools ahead of the deadline set by the UN Millennium Development Goals - undoubtedly a commendable achievement. But dropout rates for girls remain high.

Parents pull adolescent girls out of school and marry them off because dowry demands increase with the age of the bride, and because young unmarried girls face a high risk of sexual harassment. In other words, patriarchal values are holding back progress on girls' education.

Maternal mortality figures in Bangladesh have fallen by 40% in the last decade. Health experts are calling for more investment in trained birth attendants, emergency obstetric care, information and contraception.

Human rights advocates and women activists want to see more emphasis on women's voice, choice and control over their reproductive and sexual health. Who decides when a woman should get married, when she should conceive, how many children she should have, how she should space them? Who decides whether and when she should go to the health centre?

Tellingly, in the United States maternal and infant mortality came down dramatically only after universal suffrage was introduced. It was only when political bodies became more representative of women that they began to vote for more funds to be spent on child and maternal health services. It was only with the emergence of the feminist movement that women's reproductive and sexual rights were recognized in western countries.

Increasing numbers of women in Bangladesh are entering the labour force as economic growth, access to micro-credit and industrial sectors such as garments open up work opportunities for them. There is no doubt that when a woman earns wages, she gains a higher standing in her family, more self-esteem and a greater say in how she leads her life.

It is equally true that most women are on the bottom rung of the economy, in poorly paid, unskilled work where they have no social protection, no health and safety regulations and no job security. Many are in the informal sector where they are subject to exploitation and sexual violence.

Some women are going abroad as migrant workers but as the recent incidents in Jordan have shown, they can find themselves trebly vulnerable - as women, as foreigners and as low paid, low skill labourers.

The added irony is that there is no true picture of women's contribution to the Bangladesh economy. Much of women's work being in the informal sector or in the realm of the family and so unpaid, it is not captured in economic data. Yet, without this work the formal economy would grind to a halt.

Whether at home, in the factory, on the street, school or in the community, gender based violence is the most widespread way in which women's basic rights are violated in Bangladesh. Flourishing in an environment of legal impunity and social tolerance, it affects both rich and poor women, but poor women are more vulnerable because they have fewer options to avoid violence or find redress.

"Mobile courts" were recently empowered to prosecute sexual harassment and stalking of women. Yet, only last month a former freedom fighter was killed whilst trying to protest the harassment of his daughter – a tragic irony in the fortieth anniversary of the liberation war.

Following public outrage over the case of a 16-year-old rape victim who was flogged on the orders of the village elders, two years ago the High court declared all forms of extra-

judicial punishment - including fatwas or religious judgments - illegal. There has been also a court decision that no one can be forced to cover their heads or stopped from participating in sports or cultural activities. While these judgements are welcome reaffirmation of the supremacy of the rule of law over social custom and religious prejudice, the frequency with which women's groups and human rights advocates have to resort to the courts underscores the limited impact of judicial decisions in changing deep-seated patriarchal values.

While forty years of independence has not in itself led to gender equality, it has created the space for women's groups throughout the country to emerge as a powerful voice in civic discourse. Thanks to their collective pressure and courageous leadership, successive governments have adopted various laws to prohibit certain forms of discrimination and violence against women.

Impressive in content, the laws have been hampered by poor enforcement. For instance the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1980 looks good on paper but has not been very effective in curbing the widespread practice of dowry or the frequent incidents of dowry-related violence. Who can blame the legal system? How can criminal law protect women when personal law actively discriminates against them? The Constitution of Bangladesh proclaims equal rights for women and men in all spheres of public life. But in the private or personal sphere religious laws prevail. Whether under Sharia or Hindu or Christian laws, women are treated as unequal to men and are severely disadvantaged in matters of marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. How many women will complain of domestic violence when they know that abusive husbands have the law on their side and can throw the wives out of the marital home and take custody of the children? Is it any surprise that domestic violence thrives with impunity?

In March this year the government adopted the National Policy on Women. It draws extensively on international obligations, standards and commitments, and is an important step in the right direction of women's empowerment. But unfortunately on the crucial issue of family and inheritance, it shies away from challenging religious personal law. We do not live in a religious state, so why should religious laws govern our lives? The state of Bangladesh was formed on the principle of secularism. It is high time to end the legal hypocrisy that denies that principle. For several decades the women's movement has been advocating a Uniform Family Code. As in the case of the trial for war crimes and crimes against humanity, the government needs to show leadership and seriously consider such a Code. A Uniform Family Code would put all women in this country on an equal footing with men, as well as with each other. It could also reaffirm the international human rights standards that this country has ratified as a sovereign state.

Admittedly, laws alone will not end gender violence. But full legal equality will go a long way to empower women to speak up, support them when they seek justice and give them the redress they need. Ending legal discrimination will also set a new tone for social values, attitudes and practices.

The one lesson to draw from Bangladesh's experience of the past forty years is that women need access to health, education and jobs but they also need agency - the capacity and the possibility - to make decisions and strategic choices about their own lives. Much greater effort must be made through law, policy, public awareness and citizen engagement to remove the structural imbalances of power between men and women.

Gender empowerment is the missing chapter in the unfinished revolution for freedom and justice in Bangladesh.

The writer is Director General-elect of the International Development Law Organization (IDLO) and former Secretary General of Amnesty International.

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suicide by stalkers; village elders have lashed a woman for violating social mores; a man has battered his wife to death because her parents did not pay enough dowry. Given the widespread nature of these practices you may also know a victim or perpetrator.

Four decades of political freedom have brought impressive gains for women in many areas but true equality and respect for women's human rights remain a far off dream in the face of horrific levels of gender injustice and inequity.

The subjugation of women is

much as men. Their sacrifice and contribution in the creation of the new nation was no less crucial than that of men. But the liberation movement failed to generate the kind of social and economic transformation or legal reforms that would have set aside the prejudice, patriarchy, poverty and religious conservatism on which gender inequality thrives.

On the contrary, the reversal of democracy and the resurgence of reactionary religious forces in the years following our independence

social justice movements and particularly of women's movements world-wide forced gender equality and women's empowerment on to the development agenda at national and international levels.

Nevertheless and in contrast to women's groups and human rights advocates in Bangladesh, most development organizations in this country have taken a "technical" approach of improving women's access to services and credit, rather than a more "political" one of challenging unequal power relations

