



PHOTOS: BANGLADESH POLICE & UN

# WOMEN WAGING PEACE

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*In a world besieged by war, the women of Bangladesh have been steadfastly working to establish peace in conflict zones*

When she first landed in earthquake-ridden Haiti, Rockfar Sultana Khanam, commander of the first ever all-female UN peacekeeping unit of Bangladesh, remembered the rousing words of her father: "Don't ever forget -- you are the Columbus of my family, and of this country." As she looked ahead at the unfamiliar terrain in front of her, she really did feel as if she were about to embark on a Brave New World, a prospect that excited and terrified her at the same time.

"For a moment, I had my doubt: would I be able to do myself, my unit and my country justice? Would I become a shining example for my gender, or a disappointment?" says Rockfar, reflecting back on her first UN peacekeeping mission in 2010, as a leader of a group of 160 personnel. "But the very next moment, I told myself: if a man can do it, why can't I?"

The rest, as they say, is history, or rather, herstory. Rockfar and her female colleagues from Bangladesh Police formed the second all-female UN peacekeeping unit in the world, and were deployed in Haiti to provide much-needed assistance after the devastating earthquake left at least 100,000 people dead, much of the country's infrastructure destroyed and the economy crippled. They were the first women from a Muslim majority country to have taken on such a challenging role.

The decision to send an all-female unit to Haiti, however, was sudden. "Preparations had all but been completed for an all-male Formed Police Unit (FPU), but after a meeting of the UN with Hillary Clinton, they offered Bangladesh the chance to send an all-female FPU. Bangladesh jumped at the offer, even though we weren't prepared for it," informs Rockfar. In fact, the women officers had to wear men's uniforms on the mission, as all the necessary gear for a male unit had already been transported to Haiti. "We even had to sport men's underwear... imagine that!" she jokes.

Despite the lack of preparedness and the fact that it was the first such contingent from the country, the women exceeded all expectations, claims Rockfar. Even when they were confronted with a daunting task they had no idea how to complete, they learnt on their feet, and soon became popular among the locals.

"The IDPs [internally displaced persons] would queue up to talk to my girls, because they performed their duties with such integrity and compassion. It might have been hard for them in the beginning, but they were moti-

vated, since they were the pioneers," says Rockfar, who is currently Assistant Inspector General (Admin) of Bangladesh Police. "We knew that if we failed, we would push Bangladeshi women peacekeepers back decades."

Till date, Bangladesh remains the only country to boast two of three all-women peacekeeping units in the world -- one in Haiti and the other in Congo. Bangladesh is one of the top contributors of female police officers to UN peacekeeping, having sent 860 female police over the years. Another 169 women police are currently deployed as peacekeepers to reduce conflict and gender-based violence, provide security and promote cohesion in war-torn and ravaged communities.

Bangladeshi women have made a visible impact in what still remains a male-dominated arena. In 2014, women made up 3 percent of military personnel and 10 percent of police personnel in UN Peacekeeping missions. Though the numbers have increased in the last 20 years, they are nowhere near the desired goal. Despite a resolution passed 15 years ago to ensure women's participation in conflict resolution and peace-building, following decades of activism by women's rights activists, the UN has struggled to mainstream gender in its peacekeeping missions.

Women's presence in peacekeeping is crucial in and of themselves, with women constituting half of the world's population. But women's participation also plays a pivotal role in addressing the specific needs of women and children in conflict zones, dealing with gender-based violence which often escalates during wars and disasters, making international assistance more accessible to local populations and empowering women in both host and home communities. The allegations of male peacekeepers exploiting or harassing local women are also a cause for grave concern for the UN and highlight the urgent necessity of incorporating more women in peacekeeping and making it more gender-sensitive.

Speaking about the importance of women peacekeepers, ASP Tamanna Yeasmin, who went on an FPU mission to Darfur in 2009, notes, "Women and children, who are already a vulnerable population in the countries we are posted, are even more so during times of instability. Understandably, local women are more likely to open up to us than to our male colleagues, which make it easier for us to identify threats against them and provide appropriate assistance."

The presence of women in mixed-gender peacekeeping units can also help make peacekeepers in general more gender-sensitive.

Shamima Begum, DC of DMP who is currently working with UNDP as a consultant, was the only woman in an otherwise all-male FPU of 126. But thanks to the changing perceptions on gender among male peacekeepers, she did not feel excluded during her mission; rather her male colleagues respected her as an officer and paid attention to her special needs. "I even played cricket and football with my team. Once men see that women can do the same work they can -- and sometimes do it better -- they learn to respect women not only in their own rank but also in their own families and communities," she adds.

Life is not always smooth sailing for women peacekeepers, though. In a country like Bangladesh, where patriarchal gender norms are still major hindrances to women's full participation in the social, political and eco-



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nomics spheres, it is challenging enough for women to defy societal expectations and take up jobs in male-dominated sectors, such as the police and armed forces. It is even more difficult for them to leave their families behind for a year to pursue their careers and serve as peacekeepers in foreign lands, where their safety cannot be guaranteed.

"Despite the attractive financial package provided to peacekeepers and the fact that it is

a great honour to serve, it is a struggle for many women to convince their families that they should go. While for some, there may be direct pressure from their husbands or families, others decide against it on their own, thinking: how can I leave my children or family behind?" says Shamima, who, however, was fortunate enough to have a husband -- also a police officer -- who fully supported her decision to go on two separate UN missions.

ASI Rehana Tarafdar (not her real name) was not so lucky. Her decision to go all but tore her family apart. "My husband was dead-set against my going. I think what really got to him, more than the fact that I was going away for a year, was that people would tease him saying he was living off his wife's money. After a month of tears, arguments and threats of divorce, I finally made him see light."

When Rockfar shared her intention to go on a peacekeeping mission, her husband asked her if she thought it was fair for her to deprive him and their children for a year. But he left it up to her to make the final decision and promised he would be supportive, even if he didn't agree with it. "To go or not to go: it was the most difficult decision of my life" she says. "On one hand were my children, who were only 4 and 8 years old at the time, on the other, was this incredible opportunity to lead my country and its women in the international arena".

"When I decided to go, my husband kept his promise," states Rockfar, adding that he

subsequently took on the role of caregiver, even cooking for the children for two weeks when the cook was on leave.

Irregular communication with families for those posted in remote areas and the fact that most cannot come back home for the whole time they are posted there can be difficult for mothers, particularly for those who have left behind young ones. As they must finance any and all trips back to Bangladesh on their own, those in lower-ranks cannot afford the luxury of visiting their families. Yet, the women peacekeepers know that their children are proud of the fact that their mothers are serving people in need and are role-models not just for them, but for girls all around the world. The sacrifices made at the individual level to serve as peacekeepers are well worth it, reiterate the women, as they have a rare opportunity to make an impact on a global level and work towards establishing peace at a time when the world is riddled with war.

The peacekeepers feel that Bangladesh needs to do more to ensure women's participation in UN peacekeeping, particularly promoting women in leadership positions and building their capacity so that they are better equipped to deal with difficult situations on the ground. With women still constituting only a small fraction of the total force in the police and armed forces, the country needs a long-term vision to increase women's participation in these male-dominated fields if Bangladesh is to continue to inspire the world.

