

Liberty and equality ...

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While milestones have been reached in primary education, and maternal and child health, much remains to be done on women's higher education, health, and wealth that could allow them to get off the list of "foolish people." With sound higher education matching those of their male compatriots, and good health, women will be able to enter politics and the decision making foray in meaningful numbers. Over the last four decades, feminist movements in the country have successfully raised awareness on violence against women, child marriage, female poverty, and other issues that directly affect women and their equal citizenship rights. Many of these have been or are being addressed by the government with vigour and sincerity. But the fundamental right of liberty and equality in fair representation in higher education and governance has been eluding Bangladeshi women for

far too long. Reserved seats for women in governance are a far cry from equal citizenship as they do not give women opportunity to change or influence laws or take part in national decision making. Seats without defined constituencies are zero sum games. In most cases female representation in decision making bodies of public and private institutions are equally meaningless.

Before reaching its fiftieth independence day, Bangladesh must guarantee full citizenship rights to fifty percent of its population through ensuring their absolute right to representation in governance bodies and the liberty to seek legislation that guarantees equal opportunity. If women are to be treated as equal citizens, they need not only justice to ensure their rights, but also a strong voice in the legislature. This can be ensured through several means, namely, using the criteria of proportional representation where 50% of the seats will be set aside for women to contest through a

rotation formula in direct election; use of 40:40:20 model where 40% of seats would be open to men, 40% to women and the remaining 20% left for the gender neutral, encouraging the third gender to participate; or reserving 33% of seats for women to contest through the rotation formula to reach at least the 33% benchmark that the feminist movement has been seeking since independence. Political parties and trade bodies must follow the same formula in order to allow the female population of the country and the third gender to be ready to contest, and the Election Commission must set it as a pre-condition to elections on the basis of equal citizenship.

If women are to be empowered they need legislation that guarantees equal opportunity in higher education and nutrition intake as well. To ensure capable and competent women's participation in the decision making process Bangladesh needs to ensure full and unconditional support to

them in getting higher education. In 2012, percentage of female student enrolment was 35% in the University of Dhaka and 33% in Jahangir Nagar University; this is hardly an indicator of women's equality in higher education as dropouts would lower the number of women graduates even further. Ensuring higher education through special incentives for women is the immediate action required. State run higher educational institutions must take affirmative action to encourage more young women to get higher education. For the present, establishing adult education centres preferably within universities for women who have been forced to drop out of higher education for social and familial reasons is the only alternative available to raise the number of educated women. Only then the 'lost generation' can be participants in the decision making process of public and private enterprise. Private and public sectors must also see to it that women

have equal access to healthy, adequate and nutritious food in order to maintain good health. Ensuring women's good health is part and parcel of effective leadership; not only as women but as mothers of future generations of leaders.

Participation in political activities requires financial commitments. Women, without equal and unconditional right to wealth can never gain the status of equal citizenship. The State must therefore ensure that every woman has an equal right to wealth inheritance and equal pay for equal job in every sector.

A woman cannot fight the fight without knowledge, a sound body and mind, and without the means to obtain her legitimate share of funds and finances. Without education, good health, and wealth, a woman will always remain in shackles and cannot be truly liberated or empowered.

The writer is a former ambassador



Women's power: March to Versailles

শুভ নববর্ষ ২০১৬

২০১৫ সাল জনতা ব্যাংকের
অনলাইন ব্যাংকিং কার্যক্রম বাস্তবায়নের
এক অনন্য সফলতার বছর

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